

BILL DANE

THE SUBVERSIVE MOMENT

The photo manuals tell you all the rules.

"Don't aim the flash directly at shiny surfaces. Arrange your subject groupings with the most important activities in the center. Wait for the action to reach its height before making the exposure . . . "

The books aren't wrong, but neither, for that matter, is Bill Dane. He just appears to be violating all the rules of correct photography. If the subject is monumental and serious in intent, an all too human figure invariably intrudes, deflating the effect, as in the image to your right. Dane's flash, planted firmly on his camera, sends back glaring reflections from glossy surfaces, destroying one illusion, but at the same time reminding us that photography itself is an illusion, not a transparent window on the world.

One might imagine Dane as one photographer among many in a crowd, waiting for the momentary appearance of a "great personality." The figure appears--all cameras fire in unison--except Dane's. His reflexes appear to be curiously skewed. While all the other photographers get the standard "shot," Dane gets the special, perhaps awkward, but very personal photograph, the photograph that turns our "personality" back into a person.

Dane's subversive moments invert our perception of sacred objects and holy rituals. Grand works of art are wilted to an embarrassingly human scale, and the very act of looking at art takes on an almost furtive air. The pyramids, those deathless monuments to the Pharaohs, are reduced in Dane's photograph to backdrops for a light show, while the bombastic, overwrought decor of public buildings and hotel lobbies, designed to make you feel really important, is reduced to its reality of flaking plaster.

If the mighty images fall to Dane's camera, the trivial, banal, and mundane, the objects seemingly beneath our notice, are silently raised up and given a momentary stature and respectability in isolation. Who might have thought that a map of the United States made anonymously but caringly from bits and scraps of old signs in

a back corridor could possess such clumsily powerful force--or that plaster sculpture from a movie prop room could assume such poignant intimacy.

To photograph is to confer importance, and by conferring importance on that which is usually passed over or ignored, Dane shows the world to be a far stranger (though no more explicable) place than we may have imagined.

Bill Dane has been a lifelong Californian. Born in Pasadena in 1938, he studied political science and art at the University of California-Berkeley (B.A. 1964) and took an M.A. in painting there in 1968. He still lives in Berkeley. In 1970, he had his first and last painting exhibition in San Francisco. Shortly thereafter, a studio fire wiped out almost all of his paintings, and speeded Dane's decision to change media. For some time previously, he had been growing restive at the prospect of spending a solitary life in the studio producing large paintings which most probably would be seen only by a tiny audience. Dane had been making photographs for his own use for some time prior to 1970, but he realized in the early '70s that the camera would allow him the freedom and pleasure to spend his time in real life and in a peopled environment.

In 1971, Dane met John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who introduced him to Gary Winogrand, the highly respected documentary photographer. Through Winogrand and Szarkowski Dane became acquainted with the work of the photographers he most respects: the early twentieth century French photographer Eugene Atget, and two Americans, Walker Evans and Robert Frank. All these photographers work within the documentary tradition, though their styles, subjects, and general approaches vary considerably. From the confluence of these sources, Dane began to forge his personal aesthetics.

Making photos may have been a parallel and less formal mode of working in the early 70s, but Dane was also involved at that time in conceptual "mail art," mailing images to a finite audience of

friends. With surprising rapidity, he put photography and the mails together. He wanted contact with an audience he could control, and began to print his photographs as oversized post cards. Thus, he was free to make images as he wished, and could "create another show every night--with a stamp,"

He established his photographic career rapidly. In 1973 he received the first of two Guggenheim fellowships; the second came in 1982. He received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1976 and 1978. Dane used these to travel and photograph throughout Europe, Africa, Central America, and the Far East. His photographs of those areas, included in this exhibition along with photographs made in the United States, seem to indicate that, no matter what the culture, humanity, at least the humanity of the cities we see here, seems to be motivated by the same gestures toward activity, ordering and decoration.

Dane still continues to send post cards to friends, relatives, and colleagues. It is his way of testing images while carrying on a continuing exhibition for people whom he wishes to see his work. He mails between 800 and 2,000 such cards every year to 125 to 200 people, with some individuals having received thousands of cards over the last decade.

In the last few years, Bill Dane has received substantial recognition for his photographs and has had one person exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Oakland Museum, California, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, among others.

If Bill Dane's work has gained greater recognition, it certainly has lost none of that quirky, erratic sensibility. Dane is prepared to examine every aspect of our world, no matter how sacrosanct, from a personal and wonderfully subversive point of view.

Thomas H. Garver  
Director

Photographs in the exhibition, except as noted, are lent by Bill Dane, courtesy Jeffrey Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. Blocked quotation is from a review of Bill Dane's photographs by Hal Fischer, Artweek, February 6, 1982.