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## **Vaughan Grylls : through the looking glass : Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 29 September-1 December 1985.**

Grylls, Vaughan

Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of  
Wisconsin-Madison, 1985

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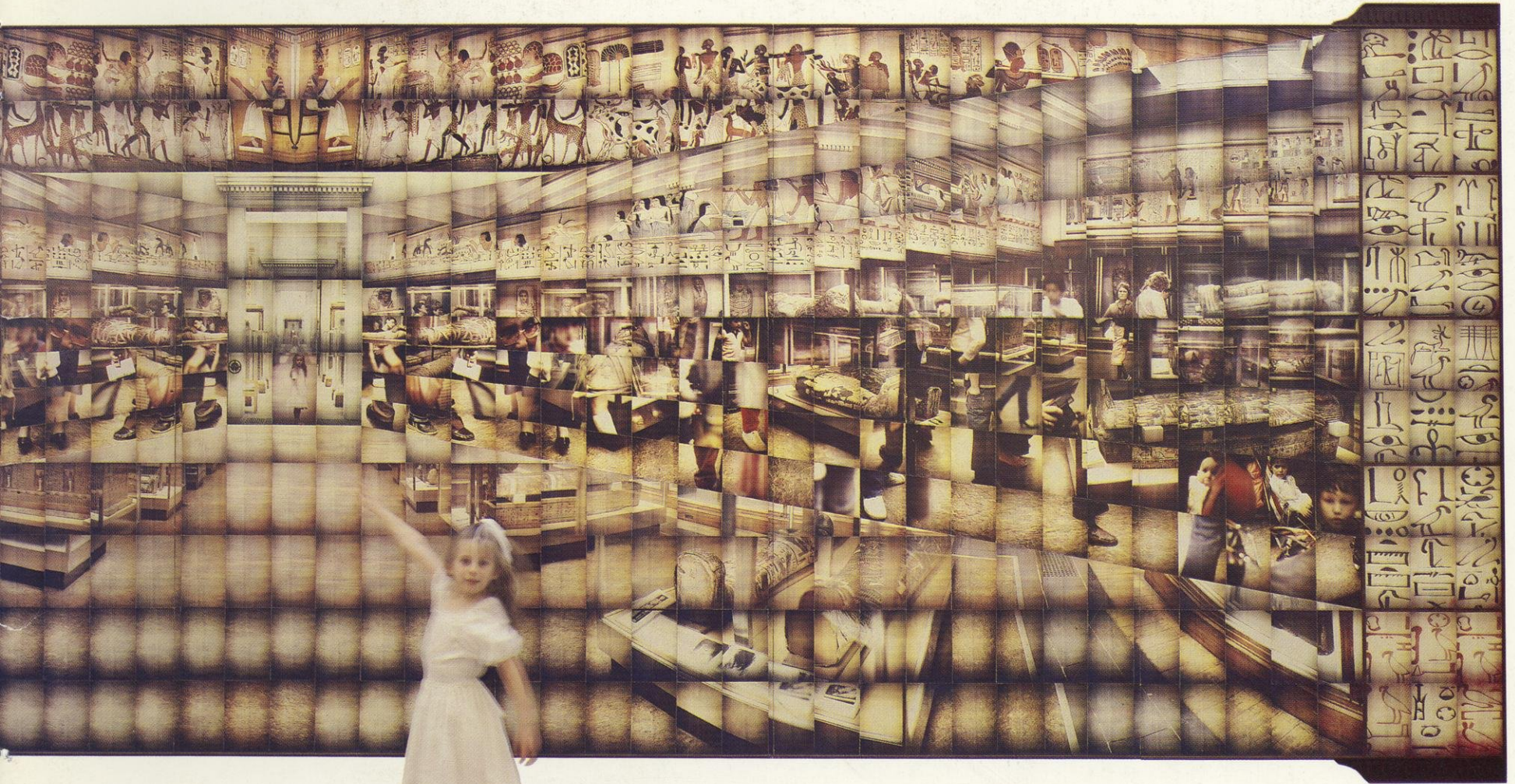
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V A U G H A N

G R Y L L S







Print Room

V A U G H A N

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**G R Y L L S**

## Through the Looking Glass

Essay by John Carlin

Catalogue Annotations by the Artist

Elvehjem Museum of Art

University of Wisconsin-Madison

29 September - 1 December 1985

Cover: Vaughan Grylls and his daughter with *Britain Through the Looking Glass*,  
(catalogue number II).

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## FOREWORD

Individual works of art are never produced in a vacuum. They begin somewhere in an artist's complex personal life and point to an as yet undefined artistic future. Periods of formalistic and conceptual development are unavoidably present in every artist's life and, in retrospect, are clearly discernible. What is a rare delight, however, is to become aware of such a development while it is in the very process of formation and to experience it for one's self. When I first met Vaughan Grylls, a little over a year ago, and had the opportunity to see his "photocollages" for myself, I sensed that I was witnessing just such a development unfolding.

The present exhibition of Vaughan Grylls's work, entitled *Through the Looking Glass*, is the first solo exhibition of his work ever presented in the United States. The exhibition is not intended to be a comprehensive retrospective, but sets out to explore the most recent and, to date, the most exciting period in this artist's career. Beginning in 1977, with the piece *Hagia Sophia*, Vaughan Grylls began to explore the visual and intellectual possibilities inherent in the combining of multiple photographic images into one whole. In the collage of 1977, individual photographs of the ancient church in Istanbul were assembled on a gallery wall. The intent was to represent in the gallery the overwhelming visual impact of the church interior on a visitor to the building, as well as the visual and mental process necessary for viewing and remembering a space so vast and so abundant in rich detail. Neither the mind nor the eye can grasp in a single glance the entirety of a space so exceptionally immense; physiology dictates that the visitor actually see in "visual frames" which are then stored in the mind and reassembled as required. Most of us unconsciously reassemble our stored up "visual frames" in a haphazard fashion in dreams, or casual memories or for a utilitarian purpose, i.e., trying to remember or reconstruct a happening or a place. Vaughan Grylls, the artist, however, selectively and deliberately combines these "visual frames" into powerful aesthetic images.

Since this initial experiment in 1977, Vaughan Grylls has aggressively and creatively continued to explore the numerous intellectual and visual possibilities inherent in this technique. Immediately after *Hagia Sophia*, the artist began to assemble the individual photographs into a permanent collage by affixing them to a firm backing, usually plywood, rather than bringing them together each time on the gallery wall itself. In fact, some of the earliest photocollages even take the idea of a wall and its flat two-dimensional character literally, as, for example, *The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem* in which the individual photos that make up the collage represent and imitate the building blocks of the wall itself being physically stacked one upon another in neat horizontal rows.

Very quickly, however, Vaughan Grylls reaches beyond this formalistic and somewhat technical exploration and begins to charge both the content of his pieces and the technique itself with meaning and intellectual ideas. For example, in *Britain Through the Looking Glass* the artist creates an illusionistic space that projects behind and beyond the immediate pic-

ture plane into the Mummy Room of the British Museum, in the distant center of which a little girl stands looking back out at the viewer. The multiplicity of individual images and discontinuous nature of the assemblage combine to form a fragmented, almost shattered window into the real—but at the same time fantastic—world beyond. It is the very technique which the artist employs that gives the scene its mysterious and haunting quality.

In the last two pieces in this exhibition, *Invitation to the Ball* and *Spread Eagle*, the artist has come around full swing under the impetus of his creative drive. The *Invitation to the Ball*, unlike the earliest works where the numerous photographic images were coalescing into a whole, is actually composed of two component parts, the collage and the video. The rectangular outline of the plywood back, which in previous works had served as a confining border for the individual pieces, has here become more fluid. The very outline of this photocollage undulates like a flag in the wind and thus takes on political meaning related to the general content, while in the video, in an analogous manner from the point of view of both form and content, the camera moves and changes frames in time to the strains of a lilting Strauss waltz.

*Spread Eagle*, of 1985, has completed the circle and returned to the separate photographs assembled into a group on a wall, as in the *Hagia Sophia* piece of 1977. However, unlike the earlier work, in which the artist was exploring how to create a sense of a visual reality, namely the interior of an ancient church, too large to grasp except through visual and intellectual fragmentation, here, what is presented to the spectator by the artist is not a visual reality, but his abstract and complex personal understanding of a country which plays such an important role in his life, but where he is only a visitor.

Vaughan Grylls is a very important British artist today and the Elvehjem Museum of Art is delighted at the opportunity to be the first in the United States to present an exhibition of his work.

Several people contributed to the successful organization of this exhibition, however, special thanks must be extended first of all to the artist himself for all his invaluable assistance with photography and other details too numerous to count. The Elvehjem would also like express its special gratitude to John Carlin who wrote the scholarly catalogue essay, and to Earl Madden from the University of Wisconsin Publications Office who designed the catalogue as well as to the Publications Office itself which has been exceptionally generous with its time and assistance.

The Museum staff has diligently assisted the project in all aspects. Stephen C. McGough, Associate Director, edited and oversaw the overall production of the catalogue; publicity was coordinated by Kathy Parks, Assistant to the Director and other essential details were handled by Carlton Overland, Curator of Collections, and Lisa Calden, the Museum's Registrar. Sandra Pierick's expertise with a word processor was also essential to making it all happen.

Russell Panczenko  
Director



## ARTIST'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

David Daniell for his help in photographing *The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem* in 1979 and for his assistance with *In Flander's Fields* in 1979 and with *Site of the Assassination of Lord Mountbatten* in 1980;

Julia Munsey for her assistance with *Nuclear War in the USA* in Anaheim, California in 1981;

Paul Landfair for his assistance in photographing *Site of the Assassination of President Kennedy* in Dallas, Texas in 1980;

Geoffrey Mundy for his assistance in photographing *Dachau Railway Station* in Germany in 1981;

Jocelyn Paynter for her assistance in photographing *Britain Through the Looking Glass* and *Greenwich Mean Time* in London, England in 1983 and for her help in making these works;

Stephen Heath for his design advice and help in constructing all the works in this exhibition made in England;

Stephen Farley for his studio assistance with *Invitation to the Ball* in Williamstown, Massachusetts in 1985;

Bruce Wheat for his assistance in videotape editing *Invitation to the Ball* at Williams College, Massachusetts in 1985;

John Cauman for his editorial advice for my piece in *Zeitgeist* magazine in New York in 1985;

Ernie and John LeClaire for the cover photograph of this catalogue;

Angela Miller for suggesting the title for the last work in the exhibition;

John Carlin for his catalogue essay and for suggesting the title for this exhibition;

My wife, the artist Gillian Daniell, whose advice and encouragement are the most important factors in the realization of my work;

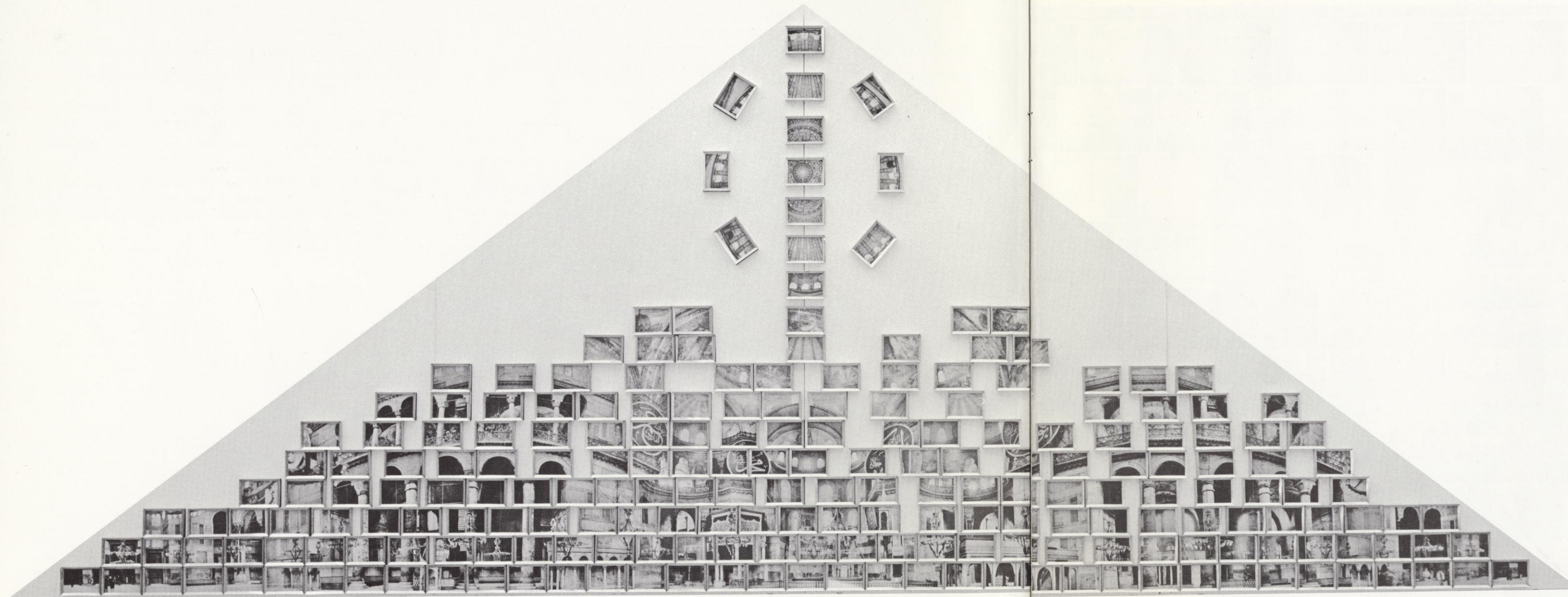
Williams College, Massachusetts for bringing us to America;

The Elvehjem Museum of Art, and in particular, its new director, Russell Panczenko for giving me a generous opportunity of showing, for the first time, a survey of my work in this country.

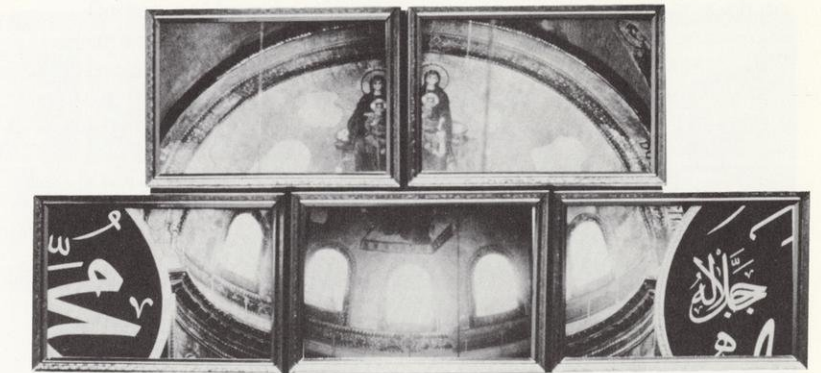
Vaughan Grylls

September 1985



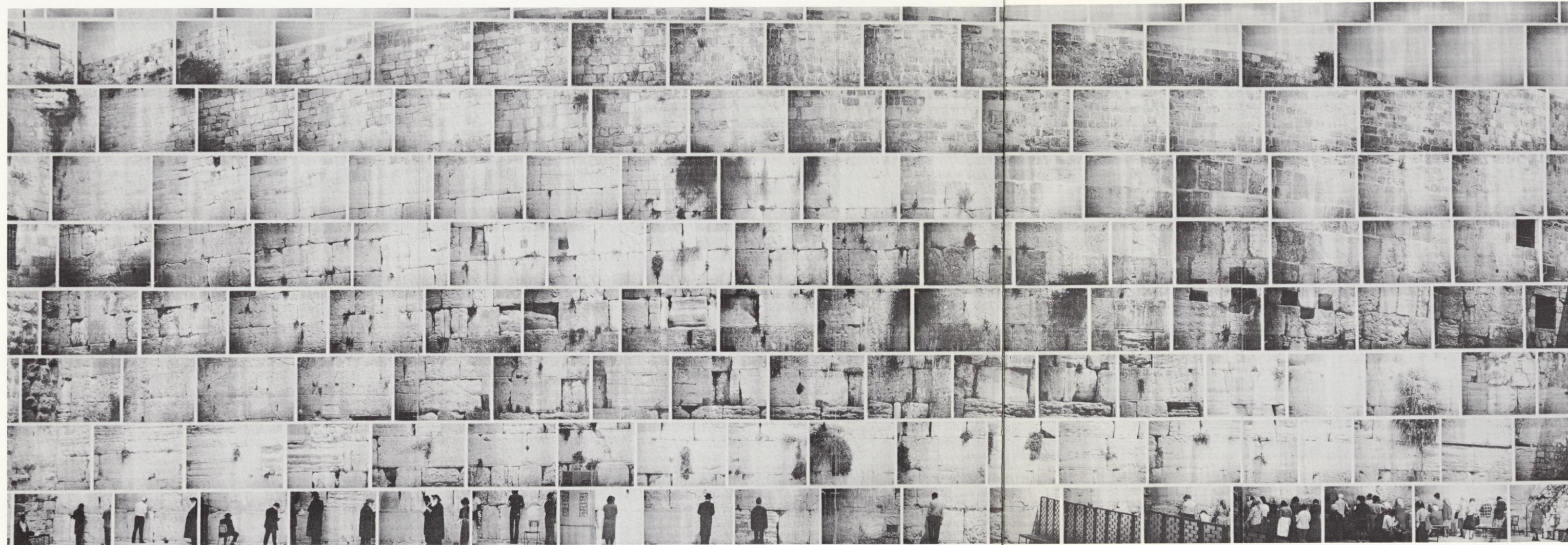


1. *Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 1977/78* 6' x 16' Metal-framed photographs on wood



This was my first attempt at a photographic mosaic. The previous year I had been to Russia and this may have influenced me in realizing this piece. Hagia Sophia was built in the sixth century and was the principal building of the Western world and Byzantium for a thousand years. Byzantine culture and outlook were a seminal influence in the development of the Russian state. I attempted to photograph the whole of the interior of the building in its complexity. I used a 35mm camera with a telephoto lens on a tripod and took one photograph at a time—a system I have now used for over eight years. The camera was set up in the center of the church, directly underneath the dome, and swept through 360 degrees. The bottom part of the piece is arranged pictorially, the top schematically. The cheap gilt frames are similar to those on sale in both Soviet souvenir shops and in Istanbul. These, however, were purchased from a Woolworth's supplier in England.

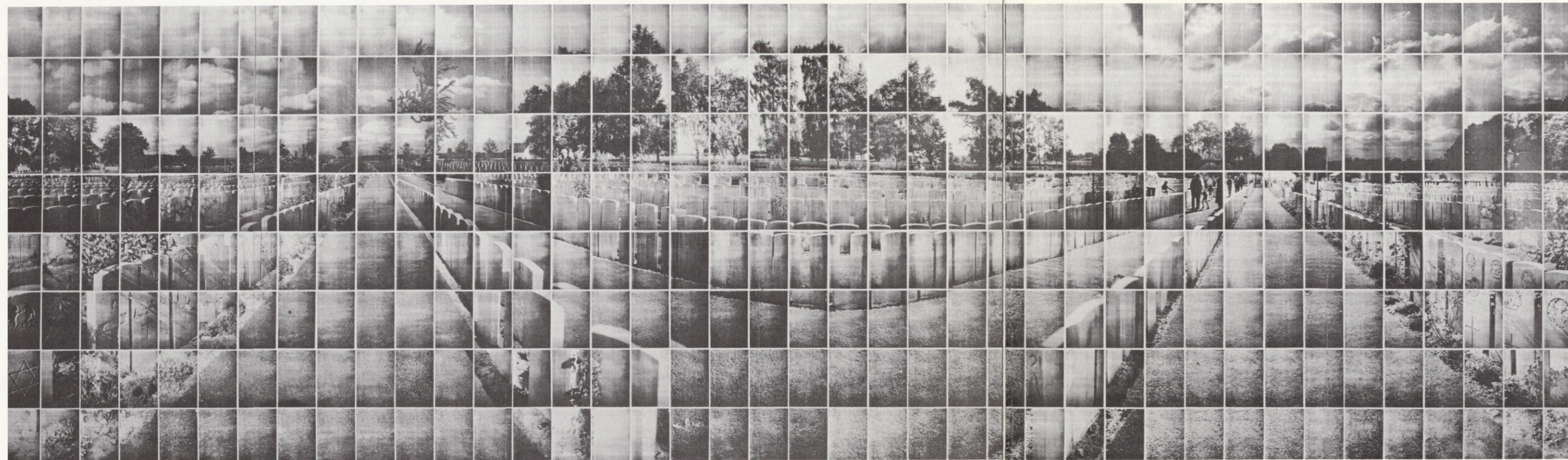




This piece attempts to examine a cultural and religious icon that has had a far-reaching influence on political events today. The Wailing Wall is all that is left of Herod's temple, built on the site of the Temple of Solomon. Herod's temple was destroyed by the Romans in the first century and this section of the wall was left to remind the Jews and, I think, posterity of the extent of Roman power. Following the diaspora, the Wall assumed a special political/religious significance for Judaism, which it has retained to this day. The Wailing Wall provides an apt metaphor for political impasse: because it stands in East Jerusalem, that section of the city non-negotiable in political bargaining. Notes of prayer are slipped between the masonry by those gathered at the base, men to the left and women segregated to the right.

2. *The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem, 1979* 6' x 16' Photocopy collage on wood





3. *In Flanders Fields*, 1979 7'6" x 25' Photocopy collage on wood



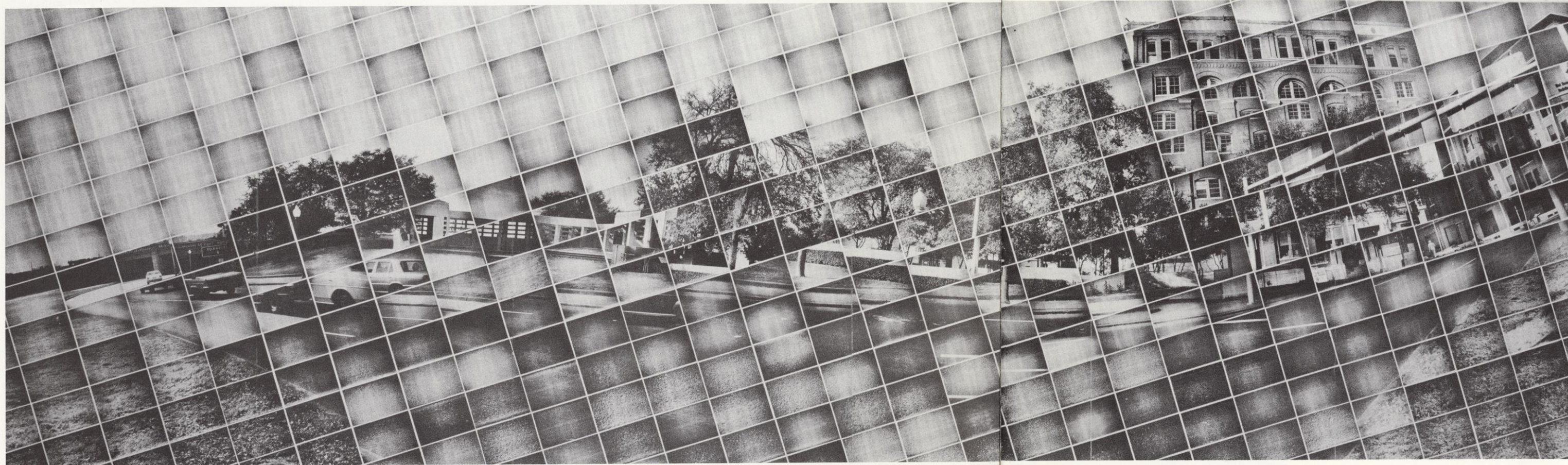
The subtitle for this work was "Still Life," and it came about as a result of a planned visit to see where my grandfather and also my wife's grandfather died as a result of the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917. This is not so much of a coincidence as it would appear, as this part of the Western Front saw the most appalling carnage that the British Army has suffered before or since.

*In Flanders Fields* was laid out straight with no cropping of the photographs, unlike *The Wailing Wall*, in which the photographs were fitted together more pictorially. Here, the intention was to subordinate the look of the piece to some form of unbending order of events, externally imposed.

The complete work took approximately four hours to shoot on a late September day. The weather changed during the sequence and I finished just in time to escape a thunderstorm, the threatening nature of which may be seen in the top right hand corner of the piece.

I hoped that the segments of people, including myself, seen moving around between the gravestones, would say something about the temporary nature of living.





4. Site of the Assassination of President Kennedy, 1980 7'6" x 25'6" Photocopy collage on wood

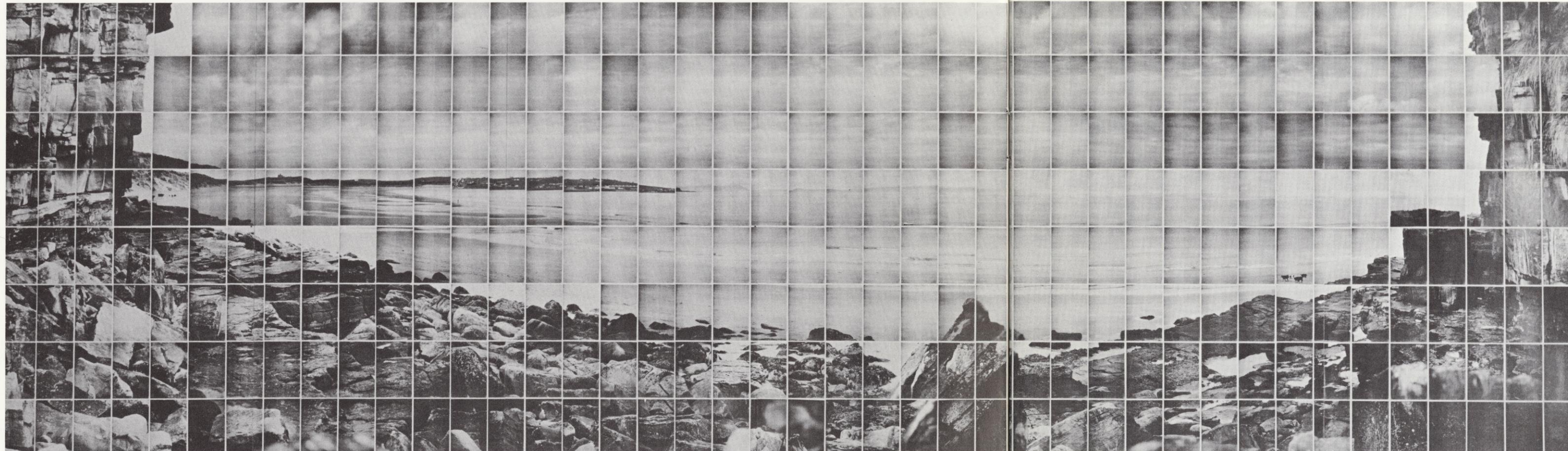


It has been said that everybody who was old enough at the time can remember what he was doing when he heard of Kennedy's assassination in Dallas. In my case, this is true. However it was the nature of the remembering that interested me. A jumble of newflashes, sonorous pronouncements, larger-than-life events. This piece, I suppose, was an attempt to recreate some of that.

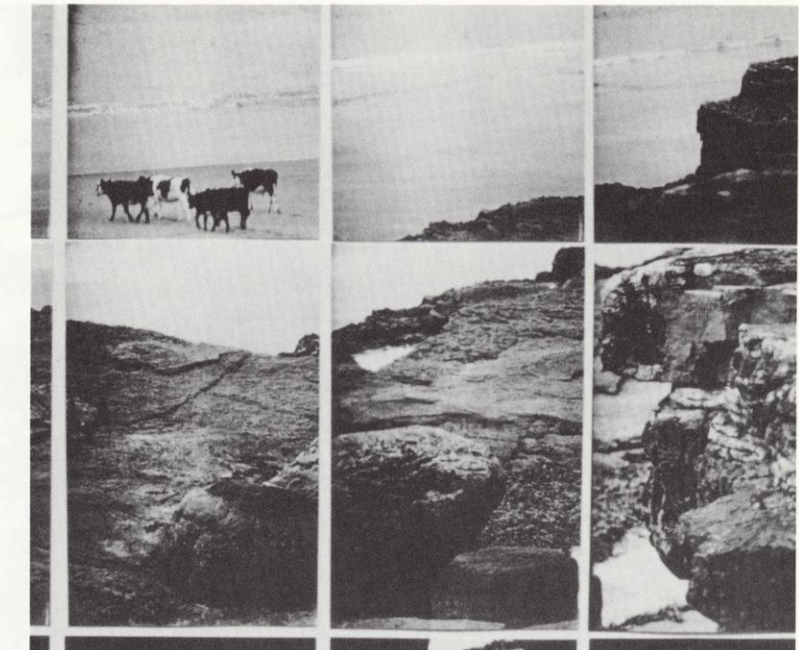
This is the site where Kennedy was assassinated as he was being driven through the city in a presidential motorcade in November 1963. He was sitting in the rear of an open-topped car with his wife Jackie and the governor of Texas. The car was travelling right-to-left in the picture. Three shots are believed to have been fired from the extreme right-hand window immediately below the top floor of the prominent building on the right. The bullets hit Kennedy when the car was in the left-center-foreground, and the only reference to this may be seen in the small white squares set in the roadway.

The investigating Warren Commission later confirmed that Oswald was the sole assassin, although considerable doubt has been expressed since. It is believed that a shot came from the left of the grassy knoll near the concrete architectural screen, and that the assassin escaped in the resulting confusion. I have attempted to represent these intersecting angles of fire in the structure of this work.





5. Site of the Assassination of Lord Mountbatten, 1980 7'6" x 25' Photocopy collage on wood



Whereas Kennedy embodied the spirit of America for Americans, Mountbatten, for the English, was the quintessential Englishman. His checklist of attributes was formidable—war hero, World War II Supreme Commander, last Viceroy of India, elder member of the Royal family, rich, handsome, charming—his murder at the hands of the Irish Republican Army in September 1979 sent a shock wave through the British nation.

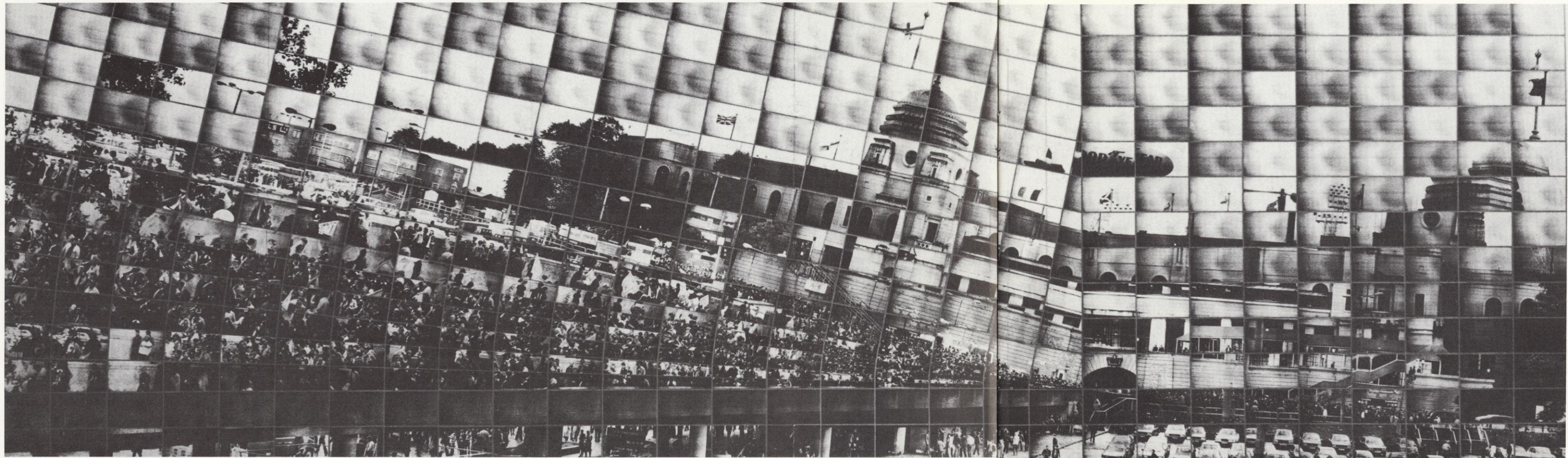
If the site of Kennedy's assassination was humdrum, the site of Mountbatten's assassination was quite the opposite—Donegal Bay on the west coast of Ireland.

I found the setting of his murder incongruous, yet I also saw incongruity in the fact that a distinguished relative of the Queen of England should have been living in Southern Ireland at all, let alone a few miles from the border with Northern Ireland, an incongruity unnoticed in Great Britain.

On the left of the picture, standing on the horizon, is Classiebawn Castle, Mountbatten's summer home. The fishing village on the promontory is called Mullaghmore. Lord Mountbatten kept his boat "Shadow V" in the harbor there. A bomb was secreted aboard the night before the assassination. At 11:45 a.m. on August 27, 1979, Mountbatten and his family were aboard "Shadow V" off the headland when the explosion took place. The boat disintegrated. It is believed that the assassins sat in a car on the high ground above the village waiting for the boat to round the headland. They detonated the bomb by remote control when "Shadow V" sailed into view.

Although the sea had seen the catastrophe while the land remained unaffected, I tried to give the work poignancy and truth by reversing these elements so that the land as rock and framework for the event would appear in turmoil while the sea would remain impassive. I took the photographs of this unhappy postcard view on the first anniversary of the assassination.





6. Nuclear War in the UK, 1982 7'2" x 24' Photocopy collage on wood

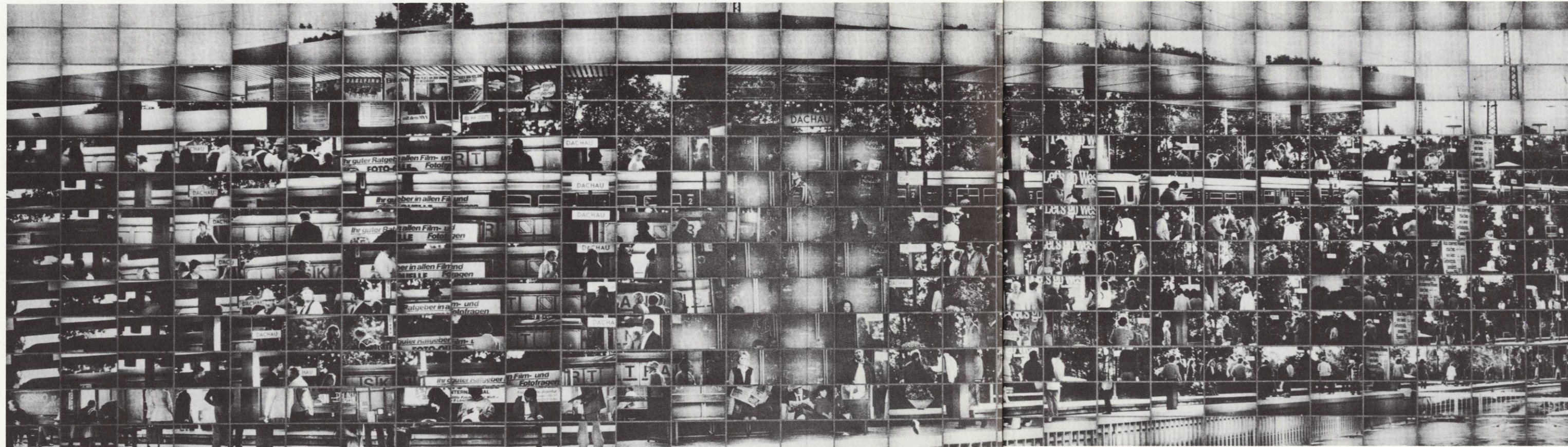
This piece forms the left panel of the triptych on nuclear war.

In 1956, when I was a child, my father said to me one day something to the effect that if the Russians threatened us with rockets, we should say, "Go ahead and see what you get in return." He was a man of mild character but extremely belligerent with regard to the Soviets. His remarks were occasioned by the death knell of British imperial power—the unsuccessful attempt to seize back the Suez Canal from the Egypt of Nasser. I dwelt on his words and was thus very alarmed at the time of Cuba a few years later when he reiterated the same sentiment. More recent events in contemporary Britain may bear some responsibility for this work.

The subtitle of this piece is "The England/Scotland Soccer Match." I took the photographs at Wembley Stadium, London, in 1981. Once every two years the fans descend on the metropolis, drinking a lot of beer before this ritual game and once inside the arena, unable to reach the men's room, urinate into their pants (or kilts, as the case may be). Afterwards, depending on their mood, they may continue drinking amiably or smash whatever they happen to find in their way.

I wanted to depict escapism-organized distractions, institutionalized civilian violence, control and chaos, nuclear bunkers. For this work, I photographed the soccer fans being channelled in and out of the stadium along an elevated walkway.



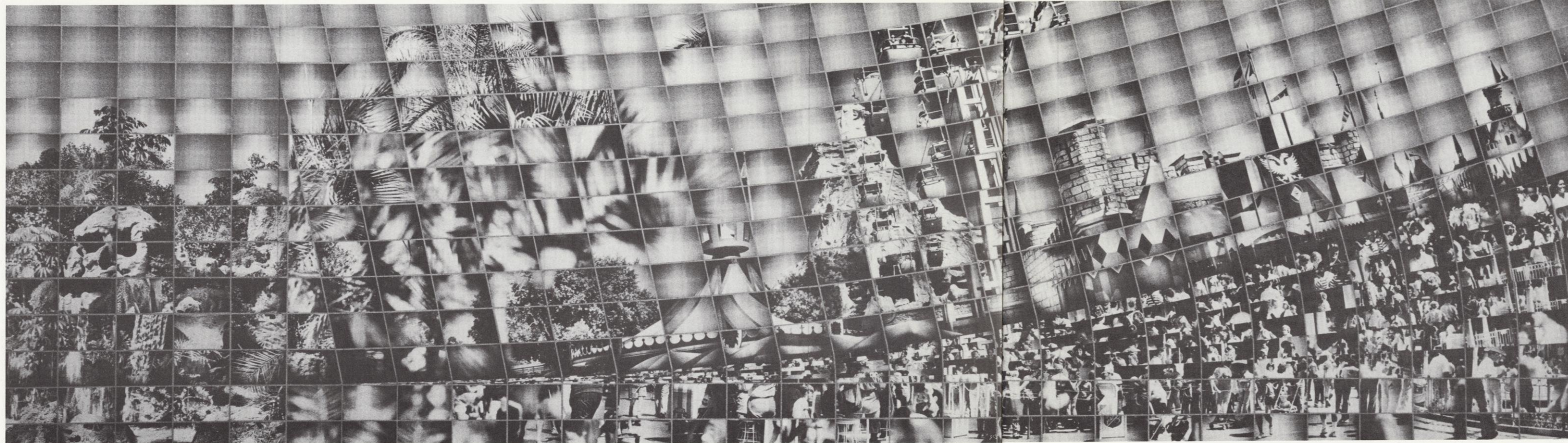


7. Dachau Railway Station, 1982 7'2" x 24' Photocopy collage on wood



This piece forms the center panel of the triptych on nuclear war.  
 The stupefying banality of this commuter station just outside Munich and the obscene events which took place in the immediate vicinity, I find impossible to describe.  
 The mushroom roof of the station with its graffiti-covered central column on which "Auslander Raus" (Foreigners Out) is scrawled, is my attempt to metamorphose holocaust past, present, and future.



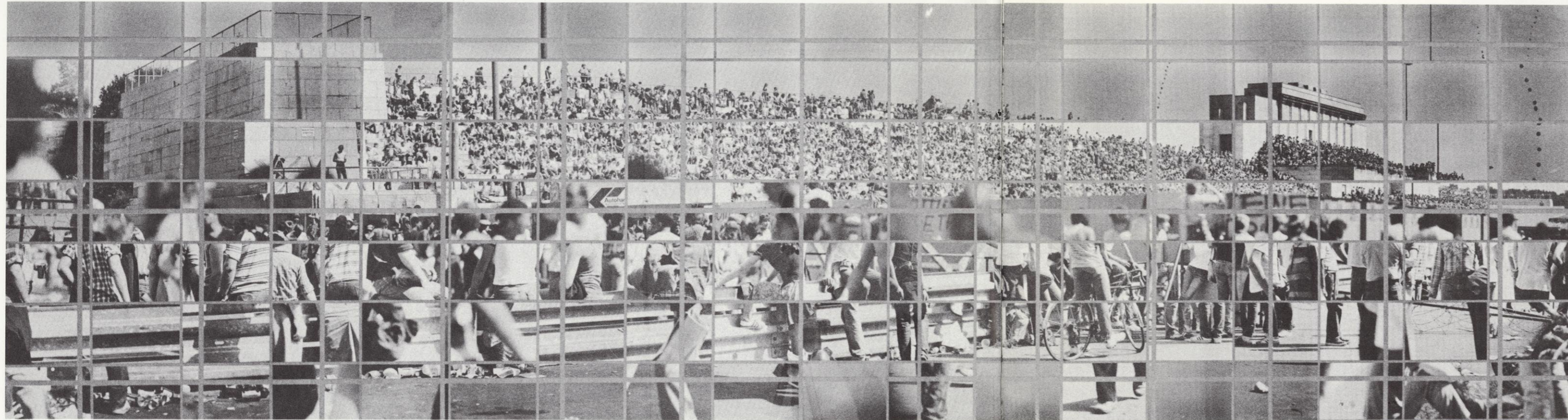


8. *Nuclear War in the USA, 1982* 7'2" x 24' Photocopy collage on wood

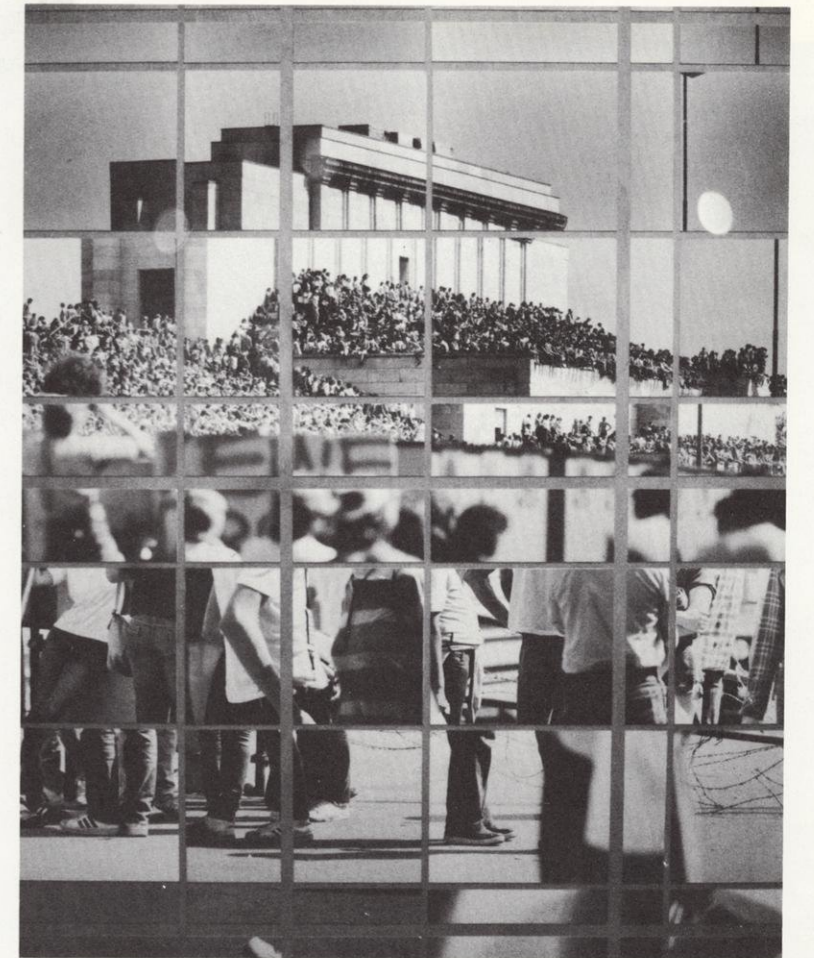


This piece forms the right panel of the triptych on nuclear war.  
 I took the photographs for this work in Disneyland, California, in August 1981. As with *Nuclear War in the UK* and *Dachau Railway Station*, subconscious collective escapism is, I suppose, one of the issues I have attempted to deal with. I found Disneyland at once cheerful and sinister. Some years ago, an American friend told me that many of his countrymen think of "abroad" as a sort of Disneyland. Yet this place could not be more American. There is also a jokey obsession with death. Almost an attempt to exorcise it.  
 I have tried to show people being swept into their own creation.



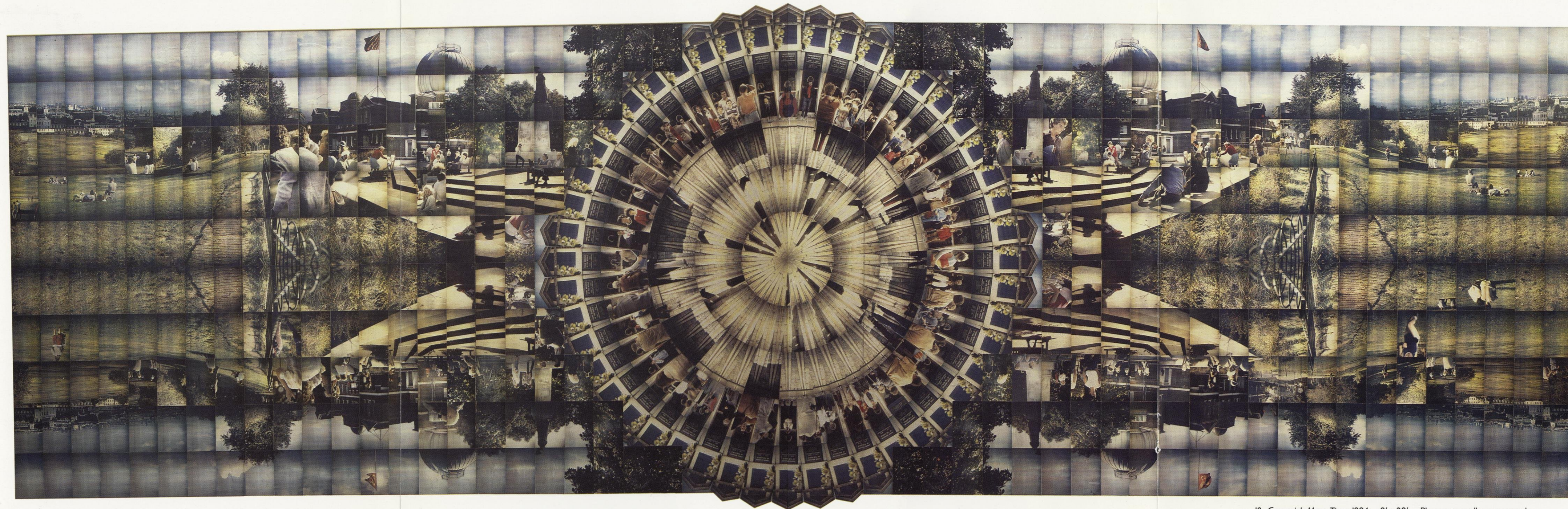


9. *Germany Today—Nuremberg Stadium, 1983* 2'9" x 8' Photocollage on wood



The pop concert taking place in Hitler's stadium was held for young Germans and GI's. I had intended to photograph a deserted stadium—it is almost never used—and I could hardly believe my eyes or ears when I turned up in Nuremberg one day in September 1982 to see massed blue jeans and to hear heavy metal.

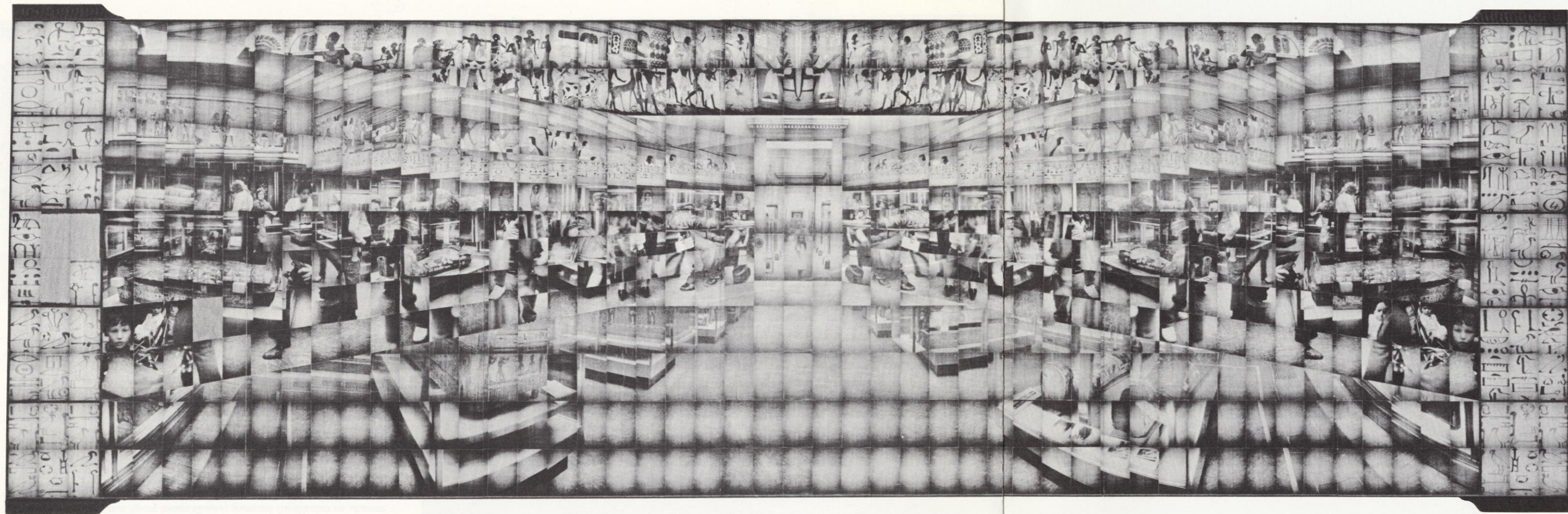




The subtitle for this piece is "Portrait of the Artist's Wife." It was photographed at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, London. In the center, vacationers stand astride the Prime Meridian of the World, the GMT line from which all time and distance on the Earth has traditionally been calibrated. They stand half in the East, half in the West, taking note of Great Britain's geographic and historic place in the world, and maybe its present strategic one. The four panoramas flanking the center represent the four corners of the Earth. They show the view from the Royal Park of Greenwich and feature Inigo Jones's and Christopher Wren's distinguished buildings standing by the Thames River. I have photographed different aged people for each of these panoramas, and like *Britain Through the Looking Glass*, these are intended to represent our life cycle. In the 12:00 noon position of the center circle is a photograph of my wife flanked by photographs of my daughter and myself.

Both *Britain Through the Looking Glass* and *Greenwich Mean Time* were an attempt to express my personal feelings about family and life in the country we were to leave in 1984.



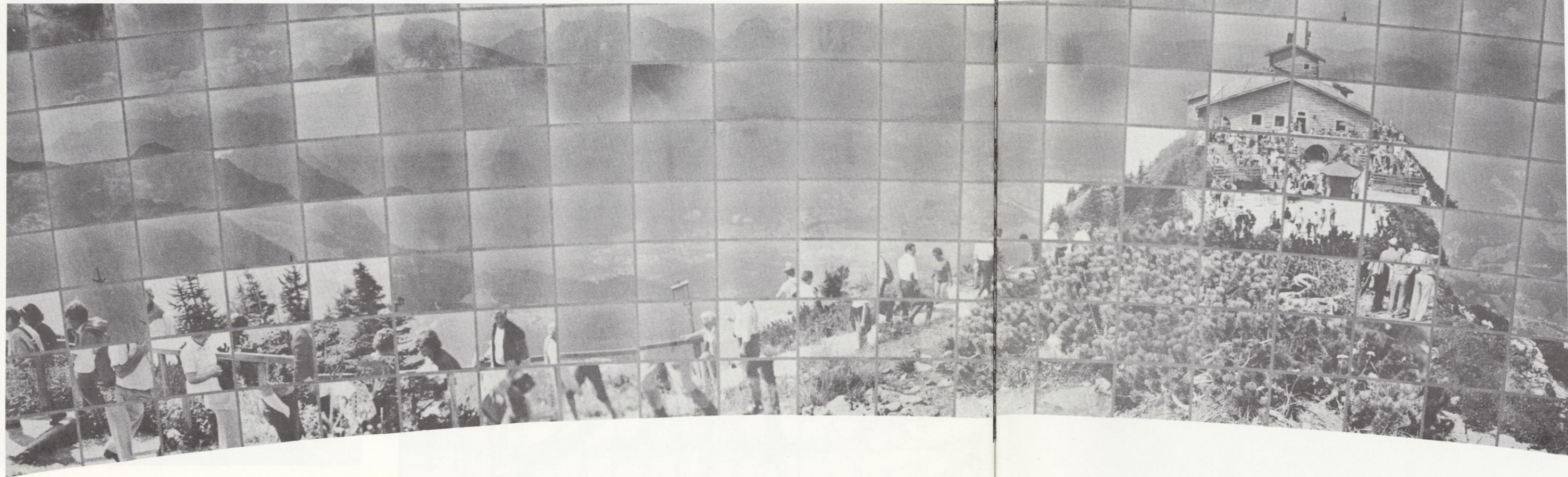


II. *Britain Through the Looking Glass*, 1984 8' x 28' Photocopy collage on wood



The subtitle for this piece is "Portrait of the Artist's Daughter." It was photographed in the Mummy Room of the British Museum from five different positions. The Mummy Room contains the Museum's most popular exhibits. This fantastic collection of bodies from an ancient empire, presented here by a later empire, is the most comprehensive in the world outside Egypt. It was mostly acquired during Great Britain's Victorian heyday. The child at the center of the work is my daughter dressed as the principal character in Lewis Carroll's timeless story.





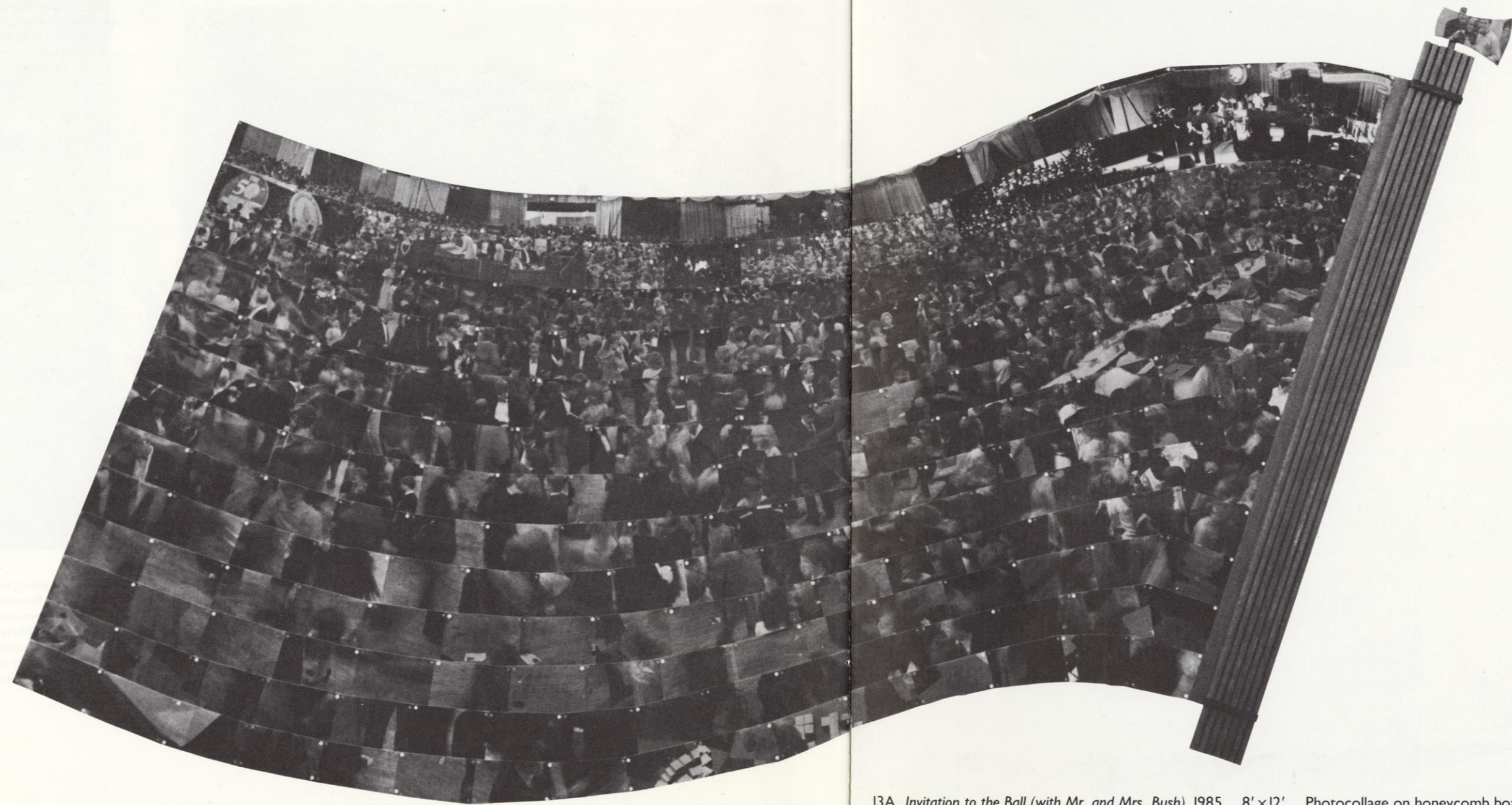
12. *Germany Today—Hitler's Eagle's Nest, Berchtesgaden, 1983* 3' x 10' Photocollage on wood



While the young relax at Nuremberg, their elders head for Berchtesgaden. High in the Bavarian Alps may be found a suburban villa. It was built as a tea room cum love nest for the Fuhrer and Eva, a personal gift from Reichsmarschall Göring. Many fit, elderly vacationers make the climb to what is now a fast-food restaurant.

In the valley below stands the former barracks of the Waffen SS and what remains of the villas of Göring and friends.





Our invitation to the Ball arrived in the form of a telephone call from the Inaugural Headquarters in Washington. Our ticket request had been processed and approved, we would be pleased to know: could we present ourselves at the Washington Convention Center the day before the big event, and having shown a driver's license, collect these special invitations?

...Although radio and television announcers insisted throughout the day that the outside ceremony was to go ahead in spite of the weather, the following morning, Inauguration Day, brought the expected turnaround. The official swearing-in ceremony moved inside the Capitol. We watched the ceremony at a hotel bar jammed with young Republicans; I had a camera in one hand, a Bloody Mary in the other.

But the big event was yet to come: the Inaugural Ball for Young Americans. That evening we arrived at the ballroom half an hour before the event was due to start. People were pushing to get in; it was rumored that the King and Queen would arrive and depart early.

13A. *Invitation to the Ball (with Mr. and Mrs. Bush)*, 1985 8' x 12' Photocollage on honeycomb board





13B. Invitation to the Ball (with Mr. and Mrs. Reagan), 1985 9 minutes Videotape

The security guards were concerned about our video equipment. Luckily I had a letter of introduction from our local congressman. This did the trick, and almost like magic, we suddenly found ourselves inside.

I scanned the confusion. Before us unfolded a scene not unlike a high school production of *Gone With the Wind*. We had no time to lose. Where was I to set up the camera? A press and television stand at one side of the ballroom and a balcony running around the perimeter were packed with people and equipment. We made our choice and headed for the balcony. Pushing through the guests we zeroed in on a space at the front between a CBS and an MTV crew. An MTV cameraman turned to us and said, "Who are you?"

"BBC. From London," replied my wife.

The cameraman looked at the Portapak. "Kinda little camera for you, isn't it?"

"We're a small country," replied my wife. "And the pound doesn't buy as much as it used to."

On a stage below, the emcee was warming up the proceedings.

"And all you gals out there, do you want your husbands to look after you when you get married?"

"Yes!" they chorused.

"And do you want to go out and work?"

"No!"

"And does everyone want hubby to be the boss?"

"Yes!" they all screamed.

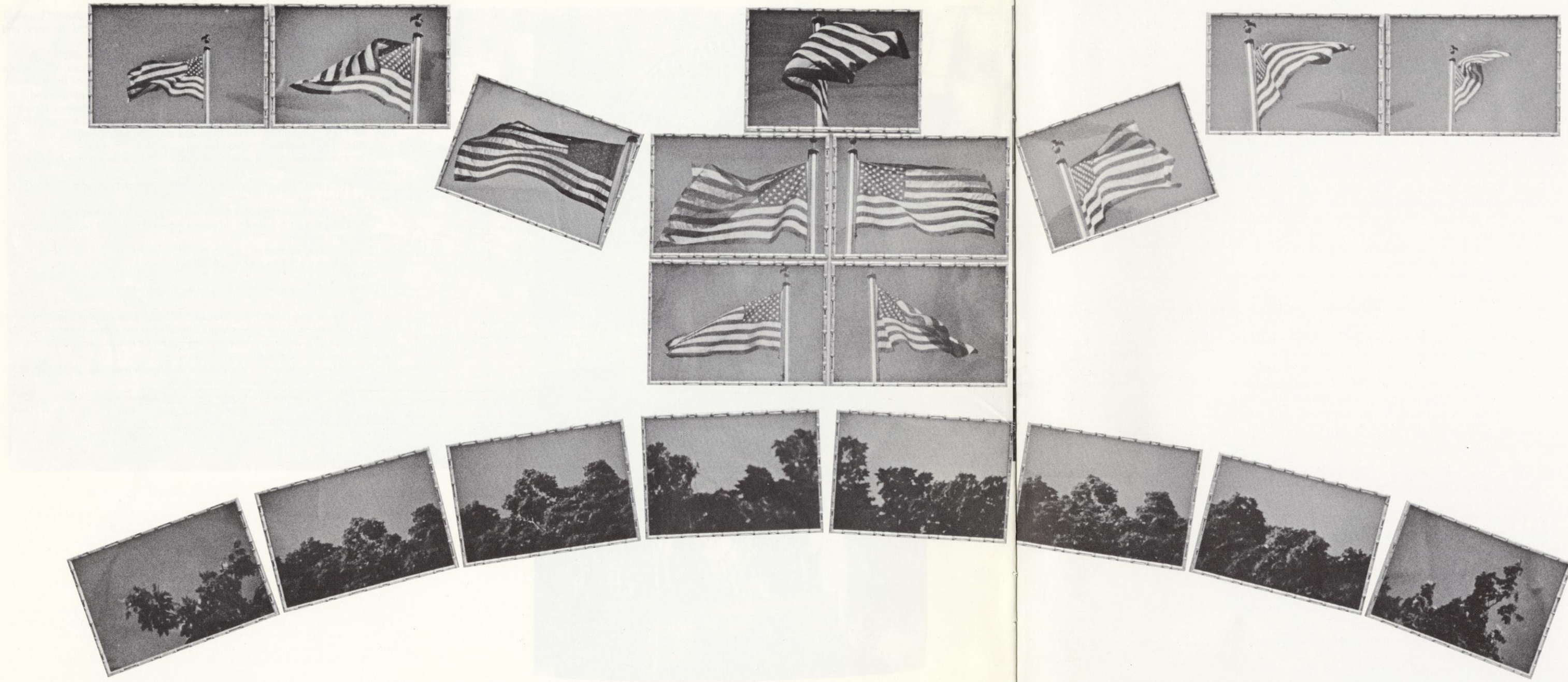
The Marine Band struck up "Hail to the Chief." The television lights went on and a phalanx of Secret Servicemen moved onto the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States and Mrs. Reagan!" shouted the emcee.

Ronald Reagan moved to the mike, said something simple, and taking Nancy's hand, led off the first dance of the new age.

My heart throbbing, I hit the button, "The Blue Danube" welled in my ears, and before me the most powerful man in the world and his wife waltzed while I danced the camera to the music.





This is the last work in the show and the second I have made in America.  
I had intended my big bird to overfly the jungles of Central America instead of the maple trees of New England, but a fine Spring day in western Massachusetts yielded this more economical statement.

14. *Spread Eagle*, 1985 7' x 14' Framed Cibachromes under glass



## AFTERWORD

### Doubletakes

Wit . . . may be . . . considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. . . . The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises.

—Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*

### 1. *Where Do We Come From? Where Are We Going?*

Vaughan Grylls is an artist who is not a lot of things. Above all, he is not a photographer or a journalist, despite his choice of photography as a medium and historically charged scenes as his subject. Photojournalism represents the world as an endless parade of images from which we are tacitly separated. Grylls's work mimics journalistic representation but in such a way that its artificiality becomes apparent. His work is salutary simply on a moral level for attempting to make us aware of objects and events whose horror has dissipated into the familiar. Commuters waiting for the train in *Dachau Railway Station* (Catalogue No. 7), for instance, underscore the irony of learning to live with the incalculable obscenity of recent German history.

But even in exposing horror in the ordinary, Grylls does not editorialize. He is not simply pointing out injustice, or even irony, just the complex and contradictory ways in which vision and memory are used by the human imagination in order to live with ourselves and each other. In this respect Grylls's work forms a picture of the mechanism of meaning more than any particular event or image in and of itself. If that were not the case, his image of Dachau Railway Station would be an editorial cartoon, however deadpan, not a full-bodied work of art capable of existing independently of the image it represents. The manner in which Grylls is able to combine the legibility and moral imperative of responsible journalism with the intellectual and visual complexity of fine art is the true measure of his genius.

### 2. *Born to Pun*

It is hard to see the full complexity and wit of Grylls's work without knowing something of his background and intellectual development. He came of age in the post-Pop era. Like many artists of his generation, Grylls absorbed the post-Modern lessons of Pop Art but qualified its purposefully one-dimensional handling of vernacular imagery. The importance of Pop to later artists was its successful figuration of the shift from symbolic to semiotic representation in the period after World War II. From the Renaissance to the Modern period most visual art had rested upon a direct relation between the painted image and the object to which it

referred. Post-Modernism replaced this relation with an arbitrary one of signs deliberately arranged on the surface of the picture plane. One of Grylls's earliest "pun-sculptures" plays upon this notion. The artist, riding a bicycle into a blank gallery wall, turns toward the viewer and says, "Deep down most people are shallow, sir."

Because semiosis became a dominant mode of representation in Western art after 1960, linguistics and language theory began to have a direct influence on vanguard art. Marcel Duchamp's attempt to put art in the service of the mind made him the immediate precursor of the tendency toward conceptual rather than what he termed "retinal" art. Grylls's early work not only makes direct reference to Duchamp, but it also relies heavily on making light of semantic philosophers like Wittgenstein, Searle, and Austin, who dominated British thought prior to the influx of structuralist theory in the seventies.

The most successful of these early pun-sculptures is "A Case for Wittgenstein," done in 1969. It consists of three interrelated objects. I will let the artist describe them in his own words:

I . . . bought two white vinyl suitcases and wrote 'I brought this in case' on one. I then photographed it and made up a silkscreen incorporating the photograph underneath printing 'A CASE FOR WITTGENSTEIN—BY VAUGHAN GRYLLS' in typeface reminiscent of that used on cheap newsprint in newsstands. I then bought some cheap newsprint and screened this announcement on several sheets of the stuff. Before I threw away the screen I applied the image to the front of the second suitcase.

The piece is clever but somewhat unsatisfying when photographed alone. It works much better displaced into a pseudo-newspaper photo of the artist proudly holding the three objects like the lucky winner of a local bingo contest. The accompanying article reads: "The sculpture is at once witty, corny, and pretentious. As a pun-sculptor who thinks himself serious, I believe I am a suitable case for consideration." The title of the article is "Vaughan Grylls, a case in point." Incorporating various levels of self-participation into the sculpture made it a quasi-performance piece, and notably for Grylls's future development, a wry appropriation of photojournalism.

Duchamp also bought department store items, gave them punning titles, and cheerfully exhibited them in an art context. Yet, whereas Duchamp's readymades often relied upon symbolic, sexual, or alchemical subtexts, Grylls's piece is purely a language game. This is borne out in the physical presence of the sculpture, not just the punning text. The suitcases are *empty*. Like all good post-Structuralists, Grylls cleverly posits a parable in which containers dominate what they contain. The image here,



like the earlier bicycle pun, is literally all surface. And that is precisely what puns are all about, whether used by Alfred Jarry, Marcel Duchamp, or Groucho Marx. Puns simultaneously exalt the power of language and reveal its inadequacy. The result is that words can be given any meaning, but in a certain sense this negates their ability to mean anything at all.

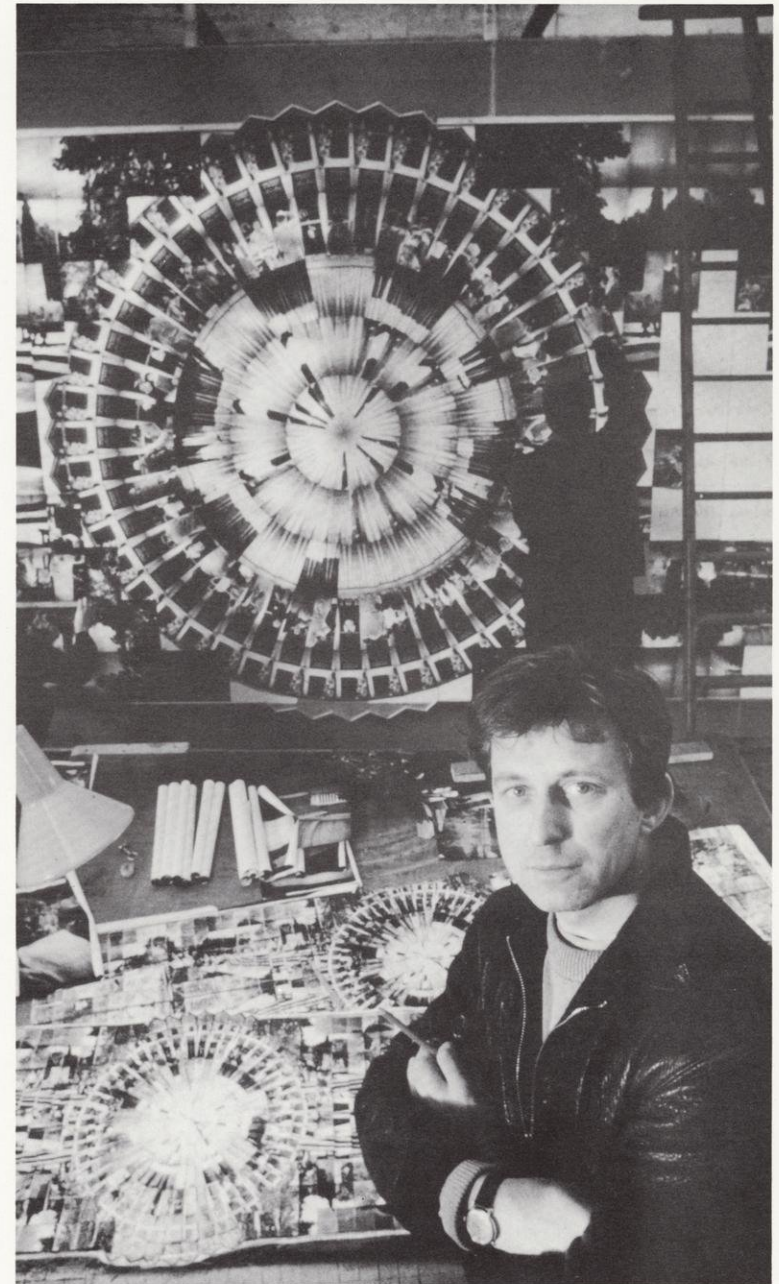
### 3. Pictures of an Exhibition

In exploring the limits of language through language, Grylls was part of the overall tendency toward Conceptual art in the 1970s. What linked artists as disparate as Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Victor Burgin, Ian Burn, Jan Dibbets, Hans Haacke, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, and Ed Ruscha was a reliance on verbal texts to give credence to deliberately non-visual objects, processes, or events. The problem with Conceptual art from the standpoint of display and conservation was that it often did not exist, and when it did, only as a prop for surrounding ideas. Yet, almost inadvertently, these props developed their own distinct visual style. Although Conceptual presentations were largely intended to be neutral, as time went by these displays, printed texts, and photodocuments became an artistic medium all their own.

In some ways the Conceptualists appropriated an aspect of Media culture ignored in Pop Art. Instead of vernacular designs from comics, ads, and consumer goods, the Conceptualists appropriated the methodology of corporate presentation—crisp letters, forthright anonymous diction, and descriptive photodocumentation. Grylls has stated that one of the major early influences on his work was a photography exhibition organized by Kodak in the late sixties. He was fascinated by how much effort and professional skill was employed in the service of something so void of genuine ideas or an apparent point of view. Grylls explains, "I was interested in presentation. I looked extensively at every display I could—bank foyers, hotels, companies, trade fairs—I didn't care where they were or what they were about." This is clear in the series of "Displays" that Grylls organized with Nicholas Wegner at The Gallery, London from 1973 through 1975.

The first completely successful Display was *Drug Abuse in Maine*. It consisted of three screens connected into a Y shape covered with material handed out from a "police oriented drug bust in Maine." The Gallery manipulated the material to some extent, but not more than in typical corporate displays. The only deliberately wrong note in this low-key farce was a photo of Times Square that somehow hooked into the proceedings.

The next exhibition was a clear premonition of Grylls's recent photomurals. Entitled *The Floods in Egypt*, it displayed photos taken by the artist of flooding in Tunisia, with printed information collected from the Egyptian Embassy in London. Although this display was somewhat cavalier, it began Grylls's preoccupation with photographic representations of specific sites, that grew more profound and less one-dimensional as the decade wore on.



Vaughan Grylls in London studio, 1984



Other shows included "ready-mades" borrowed from existing displays, installations by invented artists, and just about anything else that could get a rise out of art critics while seeming perfectly ordinary and mildly entertaining to the general public. One of the most controversial shows, *Contemporary Art*, was also the most prescient in its blank appropriation of existing artists several years before Mike Bidlo and Sherrie Levine would make their names exclusively using those of others. *Contemporary Art* re-presented works by Andre, Beuys, Buren, Kosuth, Merz, Nauman, Sonnier, and Weiner reproduced in a standard format from magazine illustrations and then mounted on the wall in a 2' x 2' grid pattern.

#### 4. *Selfless Portraits*

After the high jinx of pun sculptures and deadpan displays, Grylls turned to more mature reflections on the role art and representation play in the "real" world, not just the hot-house environment of avant-garde art. The transitional pieces in this regard are a series of self-portraits done between 1972 and 1974. The first shows Grylls on TV peering out from behind an old copy of the *Sunday Express* announcing the declaration of war on Germany in 1939, which itself carried a reprint of an earlier front page declaring war on Germany in 1914. The second shows Grylls peering out around a framed photo of President Kennedy holding a photo of his baby daughter. Both pieces set into play a self-reflexive circuit of personal and universal cross-references. This continued in a series of self-portraits collectively titled *Drawing a Lesson from History* done in 1974. This installation consisted of large photographic blow-ups of the artist wrapped in a bedsheet to look like a Roman senator. He posed himself in front of a number of neoclassical buildings in Washington, D.C. and Roman ruins in the deserts of North Africa. The pictures were photographic enlargements of photocopies of photographs. This gave them an obviously false sense of being antique.

The polemical self-portraits from 1972-74 are linked by an odd sense of the artist as an intruder in his own picture. He is never the focal point of the image, and he hovers on the periphery, usually overshadowed by some vaguely emblematic object. The pictures often look as if he has wandered in front of the camera and frozen like a hapless tourist. Of course that was not the case. Grylls's oblique presence in these pictures indicates a deliberate attack on post-Renaissance concepts of selfhood. In other words, these are not really self-portraits per se, but pictures of the artist in relation to something else. He exists in the frame in an anti-illusionistic way, reminding us of his presence, but for the most part trying not to get in the way. Above all the artist advertises ideas and execution, not his physical being.

In this light Grylls's use of photography is more than a choice born of convenience. Photography is better suited to depersonalized means of expression than any other. Not only does photography eliminate traces

of the artist's hand, but it mechanically inserts itself between the artist and his subject. Grylls does not use the medium as a neutral tool. He constantly calls attention to its implicit ideology and its hidden role as a purveyor of illusion and false presence. For instance, in the *Self-Portrait of 1973* Grylls holds a photograph in his clenched hand. This photograph within a photograph shows President Kennedy framed by a painting behind his head and the photograph he holds of his daughter Caroline. The impact of the arrangement is twofold. First, it is somewhat humorous, juxtaposing an aspiring artist with the most famous and celebrated American leader of the post-war era. The second level is more poignant. It is not a picture about Kennedy's presence-but his absence. Notice the date, 1973, the end of the worst years in recent American history with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Watergate combining to seriously challenge this country's sense of values and individual responsibility.

From this point on Grylls fully exploits the potential of photography to bring the absence of the past into the present. He uses photography as a medium which has irony built into its essence. The camera is something that lies between the observer and the observed, yet somehow leaves the impression of having permanently brought them together. This lets Grylls collapse not only spatial relations but temporal ones as well, a theme which preoccupies his recent work.

#### 5. *Breakdowns: History in Frames of Reference*

In 1976 Grylls produced the first of the photographic panoramas that have been the major focus of his work for the past decade. The first few pieces photographed in Russia are in some respects tentative first steps. They display vestiges of the installation at The Gallery but with a more committed relationship to their subjects. In *Red Square* Grylls photographed a panorama of the site, framed the individual photos, and then linked them sculpturally into a Russian star. The piece also begins Grylls's understandable preoccupation with nuclear Armageddon. He writes, "I felt when I was setting up the tripod that I was the exact target of the missiles of the 'free world'." This concern would find complete fruition in Grylls's major work to date, the triptych on nuclear war comprised of *Nuclear War in the UK* (Cat. No. 6), *Dachau Railroad Station*, and *Nuclear War in the USA* (Cat. No. 8).

After the ornamental displays of the three Russian pieces, Grylls turned completely to flat wall pieces. The first such work, from 1977/78, is of *Hagia Sophia, Istanbul* (Cat. No. 1). This piece, like *Red Square*, suffers somewhat from its ornamental patterning. Grylls admits, "the bottom part is arranged pictorially, the top schematically." This first photomural presented compositional problems that Grylls worked to his advantage in subsequent pieces. In some respects his progression from piece to piece over the past five years can be seen as a series of solutions to the same problem. The initial solution, displayed in his subsequent photomural *The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem* (Cat. No. 2), was to photograph something



already flat; to put a photograph of a wall on a wall as it were. This economically focuses the viewer's attention on the essential features of the piece rather than on its decorative embellishments. As Grylls's murals grew more and more thematically complex, the tension between the flat installation grid and the vista created by the photographic image became a central compositional principle.

Another notable aspect of *The Wailing Wall* is its scale and color. The enormous size of this piece and of later photomurals may seem similar to commercial billboards, but Grylls says his inspiration was Cinemascope, particularly the epic kitsch of *Ben Hur* which he claims to have sat through six times soon after its release. This might account for Grylls's use of the oversaturated colors created by photocopying color prints, an effect that resembles the lurid colors of Hollywood blockbusters from the fifties and early sixties.

What follows is Grylls's own description of how he constructed *The Wailing Wall*:

I wanted to try and convey something about the size and age of the "Wailing Wall" in relation to human beings, and so the camera would have to be used as an implement of reconstruction. In other words, the wall would be rebuilt in photographs. The same size format as the Sancta [Hagia] Sophia piece was used (16 ft. by 6 ft.): luckily the proportions were about in this ratio. After having calculated the exact size of the "Wailing Wall," I used the wall of a factory building in Leicestershire to ascertain that at a certain distance just outside the religious compound that is directly in front of the wall I would have to use a 400mm telephoto lens if I wanted to make each photograph in the composition the size approximately of an A4 sheet of paper. There was a particular reason for this size—35mm colour transparencies would be converted into colour Xeroxes.

This, I thought, would be an ideal cheap way of working out the reassembly before embarking on full-scale colour printing. In point of fact the colour prints were never made, as the colour Xeroxes, after they had been plastic laminated, looked so impressive in the final assembly that I decided to keep them. They introduced a degree of interference and distancing that I feel conventional colour photography does not easily supply.

*The Wailing Wall* was photographed over a period of about four hours and the line of the photographs made to follow the line of the masonry. Each photograph was then cropped at each end so that each row of photographs lined up pictorially with the line above and beneath it. However the discrepancies that occurred in the horizontal were retained, and this visual jarring produced a degree of abstraction. I wanted, of course, to create the right interplay between abstract and representational qualities in the finished work. If this were not done, the photographs would become

merely records, rather than objects in their own right, as would the whole work itself. Because in this case it was a flat surface that was being photographed, the required effect had to be accomplished by the final editing: In future pieces I would use focus and depth of field to create an interplay between a work's pictorial quality and its picture plane to achieve the same point, i.e. the work's objectivity, or more accurately, "object-ness".

I bother to cite this lengthy passage because it sets out Grylls's method and intentions at the onset of his long relation to historically charged photomurals. It clearly articulates his awareness of the relation of style and subject upon which the work will inevitably be judged. The statement also makes obvious Grylls's direct manipulation of what appears to be a realistic photograph. Grylls also made this apparent in a recent conversation when he stated outright that his work is "designed to appear as if it looks like it really is—but in fact none of them do." This point is essential in understanding Grylls's specific input and his distance from the journalistic stance he seems to imply.

*The Wailing Wall* appears to configure into a grid, but ends up in a slightly asymmetrical arrangement, perhaps due to the cropping required to fit individual pictures into the overall scheme. There is also a narrow tier of images along the top that gives a sense of structural closure to the picture.

The subsequent pieces, *In Flanders Field* (Cat. No. 3) and *Site of the Assassination of Lord Mountbatten* (Cat. No. 5), employ perfect grids that contrast with the depth of field created by both images and which are obviously lacking in *The Wailing Wall*. The next piece, *Site of the Assassination of President Kennedy* (Cat. No. 4), also uses a regular grid, but which is skewed slightly to a 20° angle. This panorama begins Grylls's obvious interpolation of objects out of sequence and elaborate manipulation of focus to add deliberately to the overall visual complexity. On many levels this is Grylls's first completely successful piece. It sets the stage for his remarkable work of the early eighties.

*Nuclear War in the UK* and *Nuclear War in the USA* combine the regular and skewed grids of the earlier pieces to great effect. They are, respectively, the left and right flanks of the triptych on nuclear war. The skewed grids create a funneling effect in both pieces that are filled with crowds tumbling into *Dachau Railway Station*, and the vestigial mushroom cloud created by the manipulation of images at its center.

All of Grylls's later work to some degree relies on the juxtaposition of a regular grid pattern to variations within the overall image. *Germany Today* (Cat. No. 9) uses a de Stijl-like pattern which ironically alludes to Albert Speer's fascist architecture. *Greenwich Mean Time* (Cat. No. 10) spectacularly juxtaposes a regular grid to the large circular image at the center of the piece. Here, form completely meshes with concept. The circular image is not merely visually provocative. It directly refers to the concept of time that is the picture's theme.



Grylls chooses iconic scenes with common associations to make his re-presentation of them obvious. Just as grids are juxtaposed to photographic vistas, archetypal scenes are juxtaposed to the artist's manipulation of them. This reveals the arbitrary nature of "realistic" representation. Grylls shows that the associations that develop around iconic scenes do not exist within them but are functions of cultural ideology. This is particularly obvious in Grylls's crafty use of morbid titles to undercut the entertainment value of realistic photography. But there are also clues built into the pictures themselves that clearly make their subject the nature of representation more than the representation of familiar scenes charged with caustic irony. By fracturing these iconic scenes into hundreds of small pieces that *almost* fit together, Grylls makes obvious the impossibility of mimetic reproduction and the artificiality of photo-reproduction. It is clear, as Grylls says, that "there's more here than meets the eye."

One underlying theme is the way in which death is sublimated and evaded in our society by rewriting history. This is not a novel theme, but Grylls presents it in a completely contemporary fashion. His meditations on death do not create epitaphs for a lost sense of self (as did Wordsworth's poetry at the beginning of the Modern period, and Eliot's at its end) but for a collective sense of loss. This continues the theme of oblique self-portraiture discussed above. Grylls often pictures himself among the crowds in his recent work. He is part of the mob, implicated in the same inextricable forces.

In this respect Grylls's theme is not just physical death but spiritual death as well. By this I mean death in life. Most of his recent pieces concern how people are manipulated by cultural, historical, and personal forces beyond their control. What makes this such an effective theme is that people are controlled in the work as they are controlled in life, and we in turn are controlled by viewing the work.

Grylls has stated that this theme is a personal protest against the insidious measures of control perpetuated in democratic societies by the myth of personal freedom. He said in exasperation after a recent talk, "... these people are prisoners of their own creation and they're grinning about it." When I asked Grylls whether his sensitivity to this issue allows him to transcend it he replied, "I'm part of this configuration, but I also have the freedom to stand apart from this—even to see myself being controlled."

This exposes what may appear to be a contradiction in Grylls's work. On one hand he deplores the myth of individuality; on the other he obsessively exposes the quiet horror of depersonalized collective existence. Yet Grylls cleverly turns this contradiction to his own advantage by arguing that the myth of individuality exists *because* we live a depersonalized collective existence. In this respect his work is not just about political control or ironic self-negation, but also how the language of visual imagery fundamentally affects everyday life. In this respect Grylls's work, above all else, is about the hidden ideology of visual imagery and how that controls our understanding of the world around us.



Detail 1



Detail 2



Much of this subtlety is lost in translating thirty-foot wall pieces into book form. Reduced in scale for illustrations, Grylls's work seems more decorative and straightforward than it does actual size. To recreate this essential aspect of his work to the extent possible here, I will conclude this essay by detailing two of Grylls's most important recent pieces, *Dachau Railway Station* and *Greenwich Mean Time*.



Detail 3

*Dachau*, as I have mentioned above, is the center of the triptych on nuclear war. Its visual format is different from that of the other two. It employs a regular grid and is less composed than *Nuclear War in the UK*, or *USA*. It is the only piece in the triptych whose title does not refer ironically to the visual image and is included in the picture. Finally, this is the only section of the triptych in which the artist includes himself (see detail 1). He is seen as part of the overall group of people and does not stand out in any way. Grylls's features are somewhat blurred as are those of many of the other people in the picture. Soft focus generalizes their features and intentionally depersonalizes them in the way they have been depersonalized by commuting and by echoes of past and future horrors.

The overall configuration is structured like a railroad timetable with lines of commuters waiting for each consecutive train stacked on top of each other. A clock in the far right of each tier indicates the time of each train. This image of stacked commuters waiting implacably for their transportation to work is meant to refer to both the alienation of modern life and to the stacking of prisoner's bodies piled up and burned at Dachau. The unstated irony is the slogan the Nazi's affixed to such "camps": "Arbeit macht Freiheit" (work makes freedom). In this respect the piece depends entirely on the juxtaposition of passive commuters to the awful history that transpired on the site they now inhabit.

The larger implications of forgetting the lessons of recent history hover over the commuters in the form of a vestigial mushroom cloud created by manipulating the focus and intensity of certain images within the scene, notably the graffiti "Auslander Raus" (foreigners out) at the center of the composition (detail 2). Other less obvious clues abound. In detail 3 a man is shown holding an umbrella to look like a sub-machine gun. In detail 4 a woman knitting is meant to refer to knitters who frequented guillotining during the French Revolution for their afternoon entertainment. This detail also brings to the fore an oblique reference to photography, one of many that Grylls likes to sneak into his work. The interrelation of people photographed by Grylls and those previously photographed in advertising imagery is prevalent throughout the piece, notably in detail 5. The cigarette ad, "Let's Go West," cleverly questions layers of reproduction by juxtaposing a male model lighting a cigarette on the far side of the slogan to commuters in similar poses on this side of what becomes another ironic commentary on historical and political divisions. One final detail (6) juxtaposes a floral arrangement with a lone foot and by extension a funeral ornament to a fragmented form of life.





Detail 4

The same preoccupation with history and the inability of humans to control their own fate recurs in *Greenwich Mean Time* with even greater complexity. It is by the artist's own admission a culmination of all his work prior to moving to America a year ago. It specifically relates to *Britain Through the Looking Glass* (Cat. No. II), which is a companion piece. Both meditate on the relationship of Britain, historically and geographically, to the world at large. *Through the Looking Glass* is subtitled, *A Portrait of the Artist's Daughter*, and *Greenwich Mean Time*, *A Portrait of the Artist's Wife*. In both, personal history is integrated into universal history. They are conscious meditations on the artist at mid-life, in the words of Ad Reinhardt, "looking forward to looking back." Both pieces are based on an asymmetrical relation between mirror images. *Looking Glass* is divided in half along the central vertical axis occupied by Grylls's daughter, a dead ringer for Alice. The left and right sides of the piece repeat the same image of a mummy display in the British Museum with slight variations in placement and color.

*Greenwich* not only repeats the same picture, in reverse, from left to right, but also from top to bottom. The four corners of the piece, surrounding the central artichoke-like image, repeat the same view of Greenwich Park. The only difference in the four views is among the people who populate the scene. One reason for this quadruple reflection is to represent the four corners of the world and Britain's implied importance as its center. The irony here is that centrality is no longer a sign of

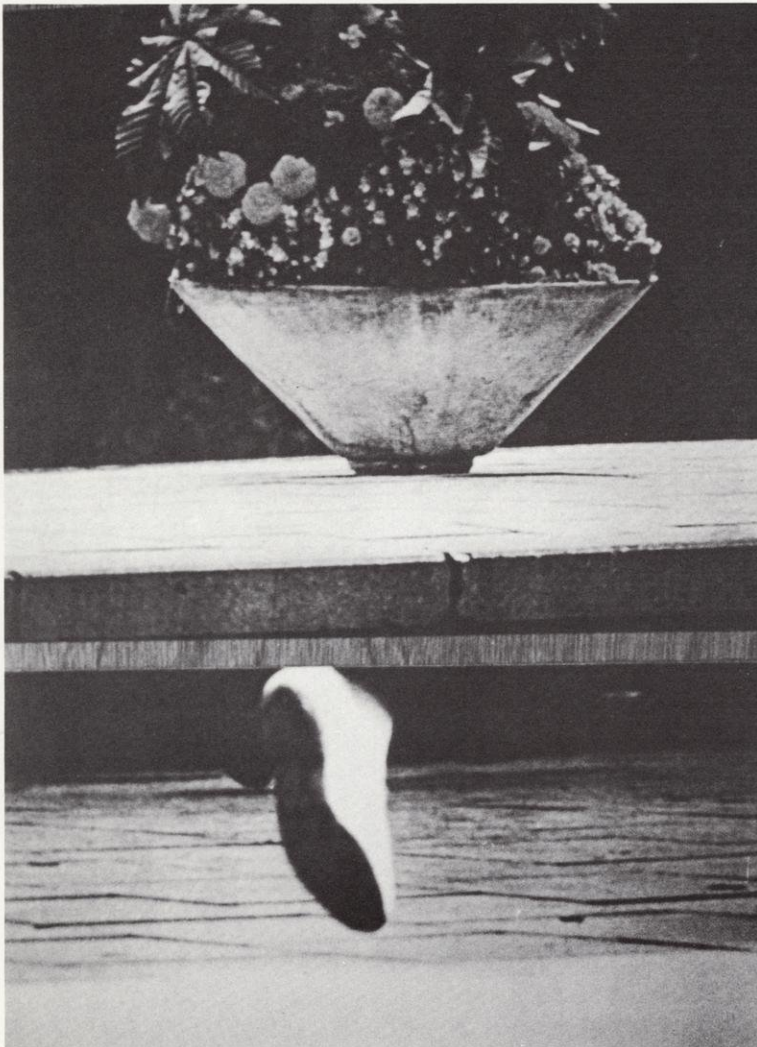
power but of vulnerability. The larger central image is a target, ground zero for the Eastern and Western bombs to meet. The image can also be read as a gigantic clock face and the flanking imagery as a slightly thick watchband. These geographic and temporal allusions combine to create an ambitious reflection on Britain's role in the world theater. Grylls's attempt to link these universal themes of time and power to personal themes and artistic creation is even more ambitious. Not only is this the first of Grylls's wall pieces to use explicit circular imagery, it is also the first to balance his typically bleak irony with a sense of hope and renewal.



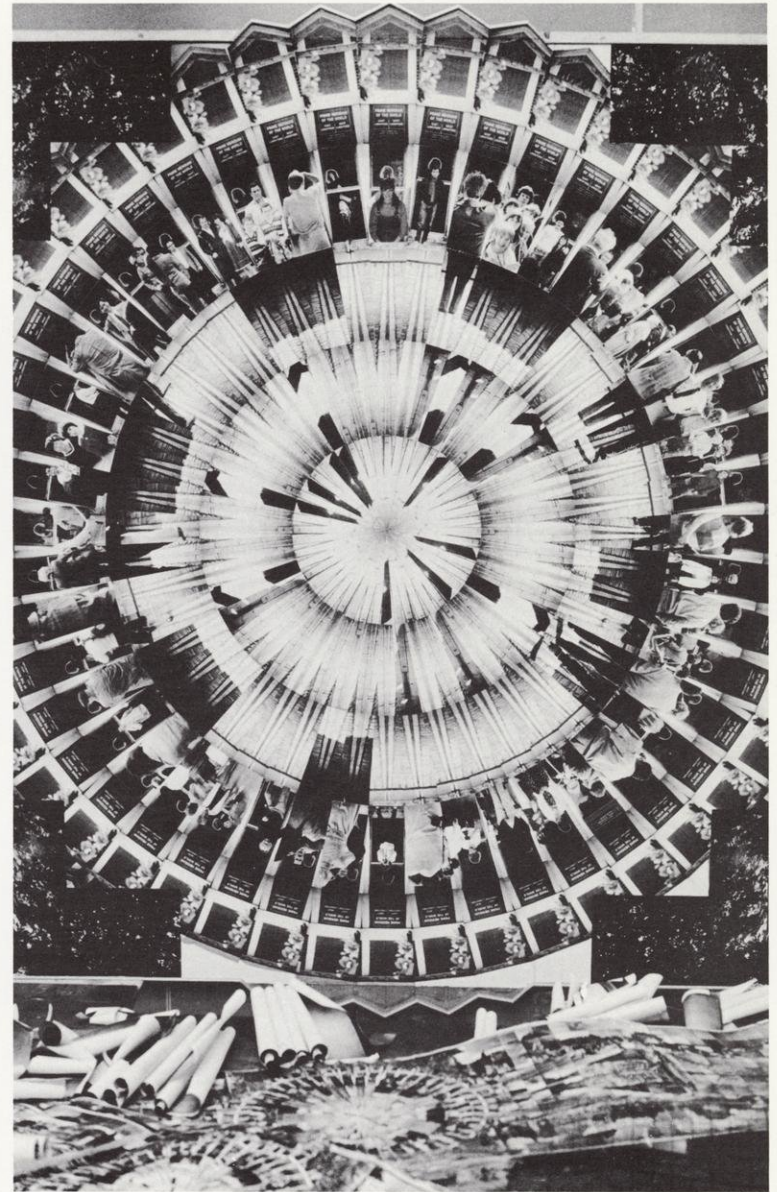
Detail 5



This sense of rebirth is borne out in the polyphony of sexual imagery in the piece. It abounds in Grylls's manipulation of this unlikely tourist attraction where people straddle the Prime Meridian uniting the eastern and western hemispheres. The most obvious sexual image is that of the V created to the left and right of the central image by a concrete wall receding toward the top and bottom of the framelike legs. This "vaginal orifice," as Grylls terms it, is being penetrated by an iron fence distorted by the camera into a phallic image. What makes this image doubly interesting is that it resembles a "grill-work," obviously a pun on the artist's



Detail 6



Detail 7





Detail 8

own name. He subtly inscribes an emblem of his own sexuality into what at first glance appears to be a panorama of a British park. The picture also puts the viewer (albeit male) into a sexually provocative role, staring into the central image made up of forty-eight pictures of the meridian combined into a mandala-like circle, which is also an explicit vaginal symbol. The combination of the viewer's gaze, the artist's machinations, and the potential penetration of this "target" by foreign missiles adds a new dimension to Grylls's concern with ideology and political control. For the first time, sexuality is overtly added to the list of dehumanized experiences endemic of modern life.

Another interesting aspect of this sexual dimension is its role in a piece credited as a portrait of the artist's wife. A family portrait occupies the 12:00 position on the central "clock face," while a woman appears in the symmetrically opposite position (at 6:00, detail 7) photographing Grylls photographing others. She reappears in detail 8 smiling with the artist in the park without his wife and daughter. Her significance lies in establishing a tension between the otherwise symmetrical relation of top to bottom which Grylls has likened to that of bride and bachelors in Duchamp's "Large Glass."



Detail 9

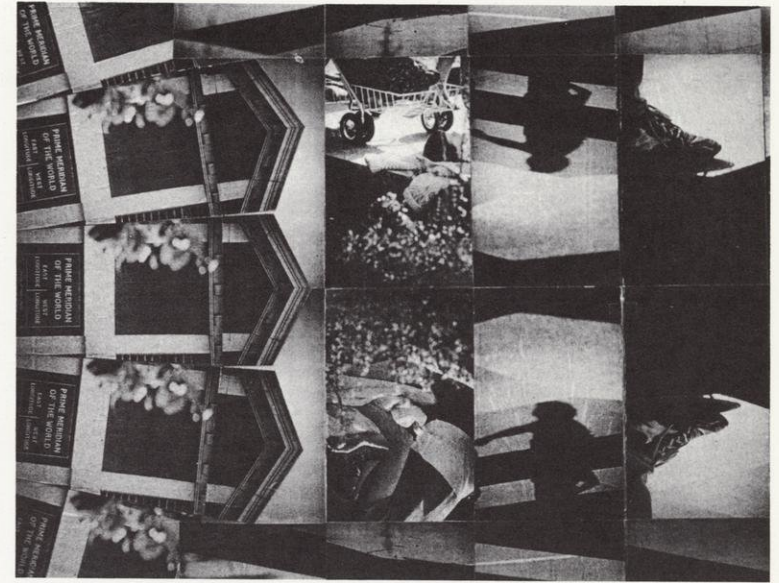


In the final analysis, Grylls resolves this tension by affirming the unity of father, mother, and child seen in detail 9. He does this not only by placing a "halo" around his head but also in the overall composition. The family trinity is deliberately echoed in the three arches at 3:00 and 9:00 that form the focal point of the "legs" that flank either side of the central circle. Directly behind each group of arches a pair of clasped hands links the top and bottom of the circle. The area that these arches point toward is particularly dense and central to the picture's theme (see detail 10). There is a black figure in the middle which Grylls likens to the death shadows at Hiroshima. The shadows point toward a baby carriage on the top and a mother and child at the bottom. To the right of these shadows is a sneaker which I assume deflates the life and death symbols with simple sexual innuendo. These three interrelated images form a microcosm of the entire piece—upstanding themes linking life and death into images of procreation and self-renewal constantly stepped on by vanity and personal desire.

#### 6. Let's Go West

It is too early to calculate the effect that Grylls's recent move to America will have on his work. Yet one thing is clear. The move deliberately opens a new chapter in his career. The two pieces he has done in this country, *Invitation to the Ball* and *Spread Eagle*, both abandon the visual density and panoramic scale of his British work. This embrace of simple schematic arrangements and positive ironies is a sensitive response to the contradictions of contemporary American politics.

It is too soon to fully analyze work of such recent origin. But it is apparent that Grylls's American pieces perfectly balance those done in Russia a decade ago. I would not put it past Grylls to have subtly framed his ambitious meditations on recent European history with images of the Russian star and the American flag. Together they define the glass we are made to look through regardless of what we see.



Detail 10





Studio assistants collaging, "Britain Through the Looking Glass," from working drawing, 1984









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