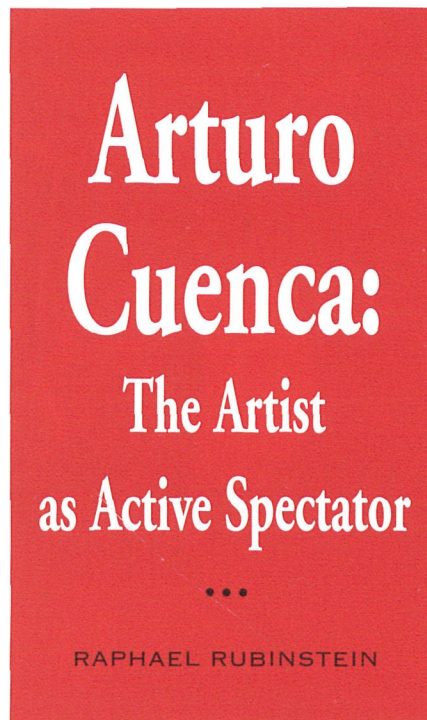


TERRITORIES

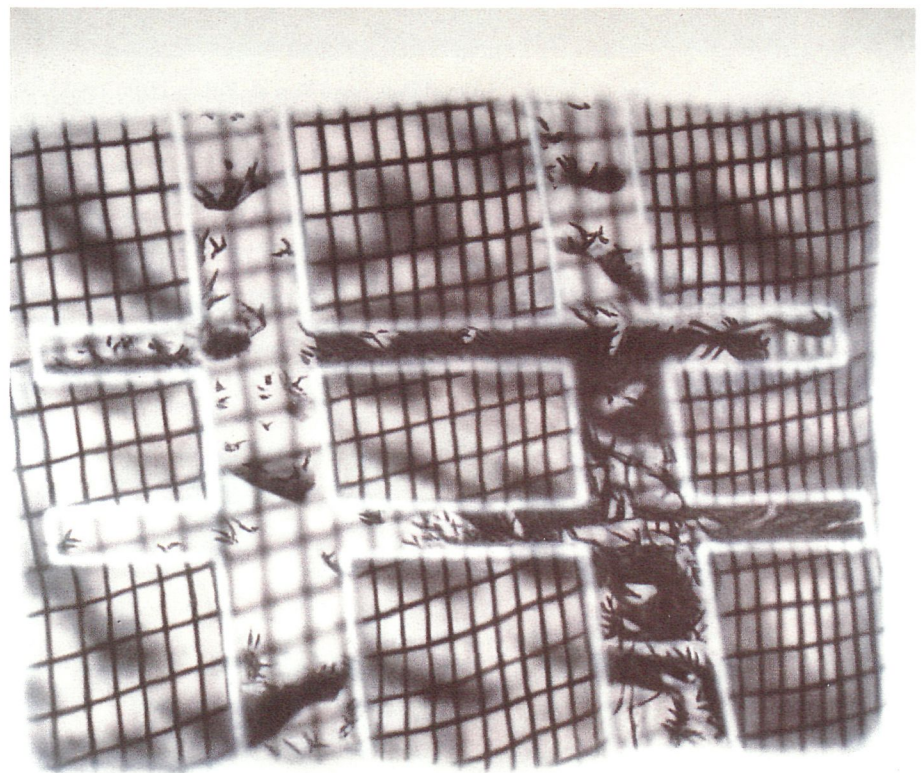
When I first looked at Arturo Cuenca's work, one of the things that came to mind was the work of Michelangelo Antonioni. (I also thought of the paintings of Gerhard Richter, of which more in a moment.) I thought in particular of Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966), a 1966 movie based loosely on a story by Julio Cortazar, in which a London fashion photographer accidentally photographs a murder. His pictures of a man and a woman kissing in a public park turn out to include, at the edge of the image, a gun and a corpse. In the climactic sequence of the movie, the photographer makes a series of enlargements in order to understand what his camera had inadvertently recorded.

I connect this movie to an early work by Cuenca, *Conocimiento II* (1983). In this photograph, the artist montages two images. The first shows the back of a woman's head. She is sitting on a bench in a park in Havana, watching a distant figure. The second image, which appears within the space of the woman's head, is shot from her point of view and shows us what she is looking at. We even see her fingers blocking out part of the scene. Where Antonioni used his photographer-protagonist to explore exterior appearance, Cuenca shows us both interiority and exteriority. *Conocimiento II* exhibits properties that are present

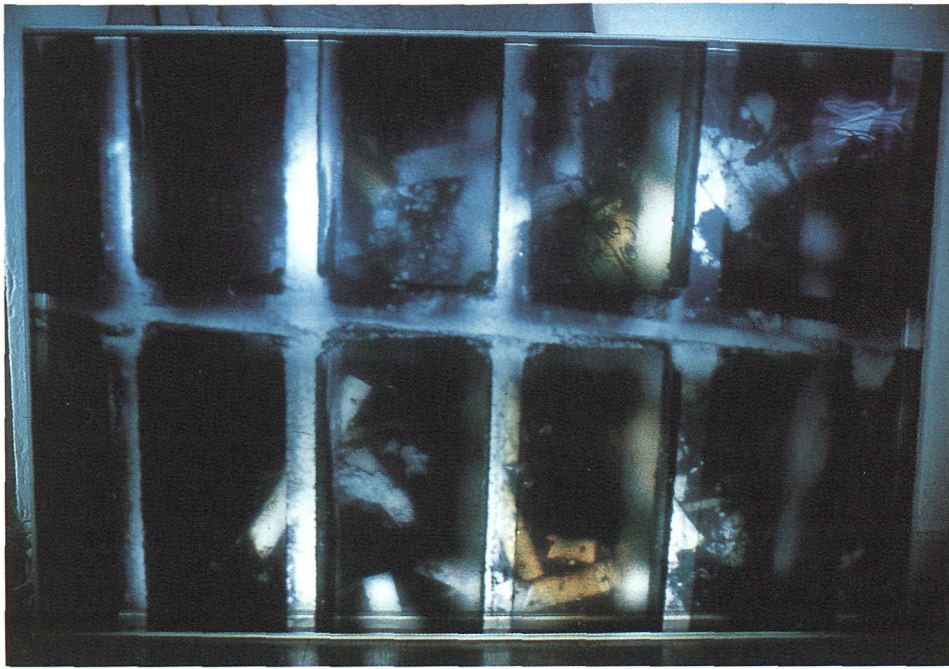


throughout Cuenca's work: disorientation, the posing and resolution of philosophical problems via the medium of photography, a visual style that is at once elegant and austere.

Conocimiento II also reminds me of the famous tracking shot at the end of another Antonioni film, *The Passenger* (1975), in which the camera becomes unexpectedly autonomous from the main action and leaves on a seven-minute voyage out of the room (where Jack Nicholson's character is lying on the bed), through the window, and to the



Arturo Cuenca, #All, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70 inch.



Arturo Cuenca. *Grate as focus*. 1995. Duratrans and Duraclear on Acrylic light box (2 layers), 40 x 60 x 8 inch.

plaza outside. When the camera finally returns to the room, Nicholson is dead, having been killed off screen. Whodunit?, we ask. But Antonioni has shown us something far more unusual and fascinating than just another cinematic murder – he has taken us on an exploration in search of the nature of film and reality.

It turns out that the similarities that I cite between the work of an 83-year-old Italian filmmaker and the work of this 40-year-old Cuban photographer are not completely coincidental. It is not surprising to discover this cinematic influence, because part of what Cuenca does is to search for ways to introduce temporal movement into still images. Look, for instance, at one of his central techniques, the manipulation of focus. In *Fire + Focus = Dead* (1995) he establishes a compressed narrative by

overlying several versions of the same image, each with a different focus. In *Modernbund (Modern Agony) II* (1995), the view of a cemetery in New York is in focus only within the letters of the title (which is a play on the words *modern* and *moribund*). One thing that this image suggests is that appearance is deceptive, that it is only *through* different views (quite literally), through certain necessary concepts, that we can comprehend reality.

It is important, in this regard, to remember Cuenca's roots in conceptual art. Like conceptual artists in 1960s, Cuenca turns to the camera as a means of verifying, exploring and deconstructing reality. But Cuenca uses photography for far more than this: he gains access to emotional depth and compositional intricacy, realms largely closed to 1960's conceptualism. In most

photographic work, one is forced to choose a single focus, but a founding point of Cuenca's work is his innovative combination of several focuses within a single image. Cuenca introduces these multiple focuses not just for the sake of narrative, but to create movement (physical and mental), similar to the kind Antonioni created with a moving camera.

It is in relation to focus that Cuenca's work is reminiscent of the work of Gerhard Richter. (Although, due to the relative isolation of Cuban artistic life at the time, Cuenca was unaware of Richter.) Richter based his gestural compositions, especially his abstract paintings of the late 1970s, on out-of-focus images of small sketches he had made. Taking Antonioni's and Richter's concerns a step further, Cuenca makes images that use not only varying focal points, but also varying points of view. What is important about these works is not so much what each view shows us, but how the views relate to one another. This is especially true in *Homeless: Objective and Subjective Images*, a series of works in which Cuenca combines two images: a photograph he has taken of a homeless person on the streets of New York, and a photograph from the subject's point of view, (in some cases a photograph taken by the homeless person). Earlier works in this series combine the two images through photomontage, but the works in this particular show are transparencies mounted on Plexiglas. In one work, we



Arturo Cuenca. *Herald's Culture Maskera*, 1995. Computer generated images. 7 layer on light box.

see an old woman propped up against a milk crate while she smokes a cigarette, and we also see the scene from her point of view. The format of the work – two sheets of Plexiglas simply leaning against the wall – brilliantly imitates the position of the woman in the photograph. (In this work, as in most of Cuenca's images, a determining factor is the urban experience of New York City, in particular the midtown area where

Cuenca lives and works and where he shoots many of his images.)

At one point in *Blow Up*, a woman chases after the photographer, trying to get the roll of film he has just shot of her. "Give me those pictures. You can't photograph people like that!" she cries. This is precisely one of the issues Cuenca confronts in his *Homeless* photographs, but rather than repeat the familiar dilemma of the photojournalist

who asks, "Should I take a photograph of an atrocity and not intervene to stop it?" Cuenca approaches the issues in another way. Recognizing that we relate to the homeless almost as if they were objects, he attempts to give them subjectivity and humanize them for the viewer. This is, I think, what Cuenca means when he defines the role of the artist as an "active spectator."

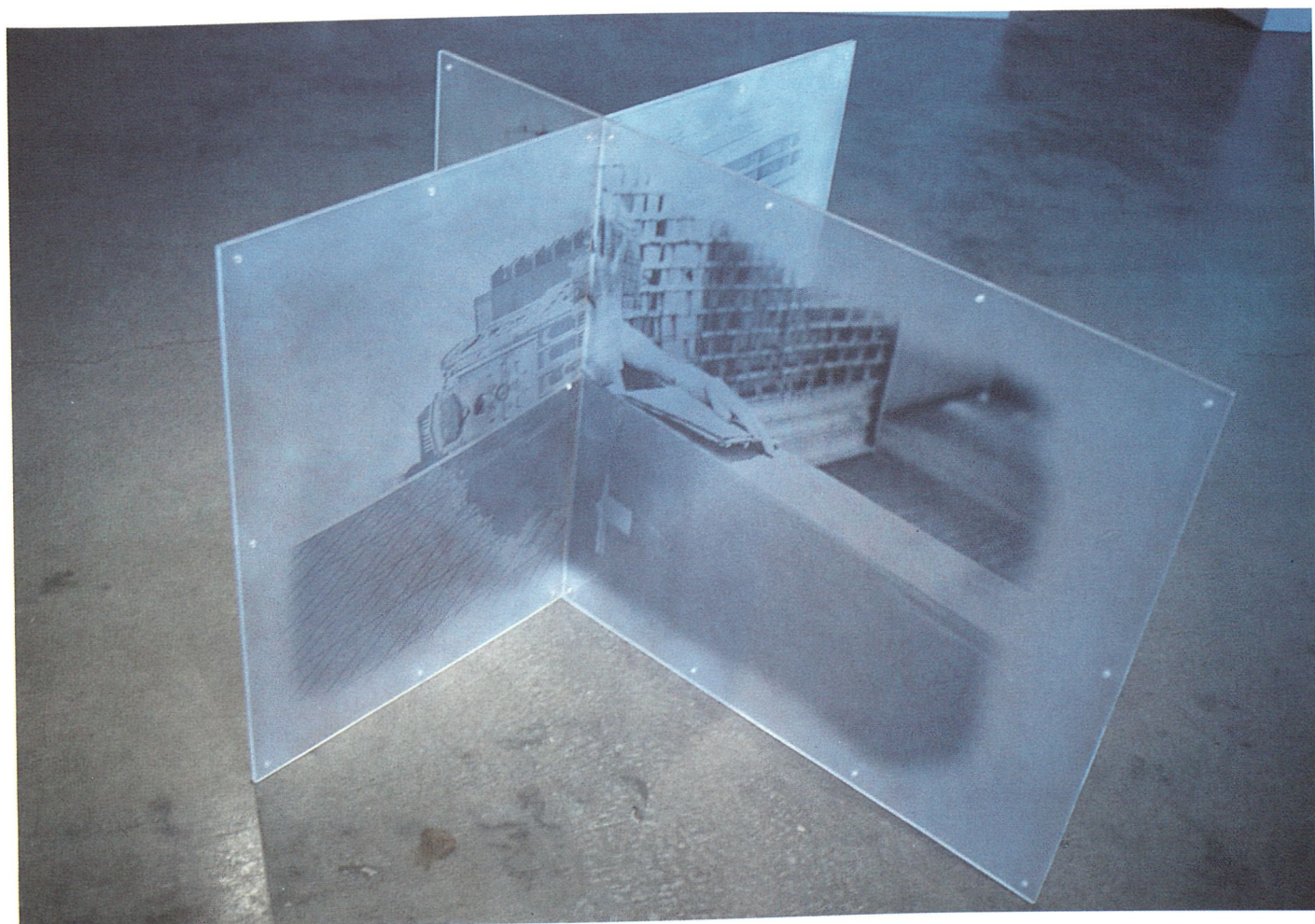
Cuenca's work is a critique not so

much of photography as of certain simplistic ways of thinking about the world. His works are simultaneously allegories and painstaking depictions of reality – the reality of experience, not of image. In his recent book on Andy Warhol, John Yau draws a distinction between artists (such as Warhol) who are concerned with appearances, and artists (Jasper Johns, for instance) who recognize duration, thus becoming more complex and true. Cuenca, I believe, belongs to the latter group. In a Cuenca photograph, an image is never simple. It always contains more than one point of view, and in order to understand the

work, the viewer must differentiate – and then juxtapose – conflicting points of view. In making the viewer do so, the image opens up into a temporal dimension. The question we ask is not “What do I see?” but “How do I see?”

“The objective of my work is knowledge,” Cuenca says. We could add that he is also involved both with the study of how knowledge is secured, and with ethics – the ethics of looking (and of giving others things to look at). It is as a result of his quest for knowledge (and knowledge about knowledge) that this philosopher-with-a-camera is never satisfied. Cuenca continually alters and

expands his medium. Whereas he once hand-colored his photographs, he now alters the images with a computer. Moving away from photomontage, he has begun to use overlays of as many as eight transparencies in order to communicate complex messages, as in his recent light-box pieces, such as *Dreaming-Left-wing-New York* (1995). This artistic restlessness pays off in works that never settle for the familiar. Yet, just as importantly, he never chooses the easy road of mystification. In Arturo Cuenca’s work, reality is present in all its terrible clarity and tumbling opacity.



Arturo Cuenca. *Homeless, objective and subjective images*, 1993. Kodalite on Acrylic, 40 x 60 x 60 m.