

## Valerie Stahl von Stromberg

### Noticing

Have you ever noticed...the pleasure of noticing things? And how noticing something is not always, as one might have thought, a moment of recognition? Just as often, if you think about it, what happens in the act of noticing is a sort of void of recognition. What you notice is that something is happening that you can't identify. The senses become keener. It's disorienting. And it's exciting—in the way that experiences tinged with fear can be, as long as one doesn't finally encounter anything truly fearful.

The first images I saw by Valerie Stahl von Stromberg seemed to be allegories of just this sort of encounter—her “Corner Series,” 2001, which dramatize the collision of people turning the same corner from opposite directions. One can speak of allegory here, in part, because her technique underlines a tension between the image and its subject: The photographs appear posed, not records of adventitious encounters at all. Later, her photo essay on the Venice Biennale for the online magazine *KultureFlash*, 2003, went beyond reportage or social observation to become a reflexive, self-referential commentary on the art experience in all its contingency. The weather can be as important as the art object—as long as perception is heightened, as long as you notice something.

A sense of the non-relational encounter remains a recurrent feature of Stahl's work, as affirmed by the very titles of some of her new images: *women that don't look like my mother from behind* and *boy that looks like my ex-boyfriend from far away*. Such pictures, apparently, concern what one might call negative recognitions, moments in which one notices a correspondence that can only be articulated as a non-resemblance. For all their banality, such moments are not very far from what Walter Benjamin once called “profane illumination.” In the series “to remember to forget,” with its constellations of seemingly unrelated images, the quizzical relationships among things within each image are extended to the groupings of disparate images.

To the extent that one can speak of a method behind the variety of Stahl's work it can only be described as one of availability, of flexibility. While there may be parallels with the blurring of artifice and accident in the work of a photographer like Philip-Lorca diCorcia on the one hand and with Wolfgang Tillmans' deft dodging of visual hierarchies on the other, her images seek neither diCorcia's monumentality nor Tillmans' elusiveness. Her noticings neither impose themselves nor flutter off. They are simply there. Again and again one is drawn to contemplate them, not to fix their meaning, but to dwell a bit longer in the moment of noticing.

—Barry Schwabsky