

# Defining the Moment, for

By PHILIP GEFTER

**T**HE annual "New Photography" show, which the Museum of Modern Art first mounted in 1985, was long viewed as a showcase for photographers who were in some way representative of their time. The curators maintained a steady watch over the field, seizing on emerging work that illustrated some vital new frequency in the medium. As the years added up, then, it was possible to read the shows collectively as a shorthand history of contemporary photography itself.

But seven years have passed since the last "New Photography" show, a hiatus resulting from the museum's temporary move to Queens during the redesign of its Manhattan home. This week, the series will pick up again with "New Photography '05," presenting the work of four photographers from different parts of the world. In the interim, great changes have swept the field: the expanding size of prints, the advances in digital technology, the integration of other mediums. So how, given all that has transpired, does the curator make her selections? How does she distill the ever-shifting, international landscape of photographic imagery to just four representative artists?

The short answer, perhaps, is that she didn't. "The purpose of the series is not to survey what's going on," Eva Respini, the assistant photography curator, who organized the show, said during a recent conversation in the museum's

## After a hiatus, MoMA's 'New Photography' show returns, providing . . . what, exactly?

photography department. Instead she looked for work that "is compelling, fresh and less familiar."

"We discussed these criteria in terms of approach, technique, themes and artistic practices," she said. "The ideas behind the work, the execution of those ideas and quality of the finished work all needs to come together to make a compelling photograph. Without making a definitive survey, and without sacrificing the quality of the work included, I wanted to represent a variety of techniques and concerns, as well as artistic backgrounds." (Despite the name, "New Photography" does not favor young photographers. Of the 56 photographers shown since 1985, the youngest was 27; the oldest, 62.)

In "New Photography '05," as in previous shows from this series, the four bodies of work vary widely in subject matter, in look and in the ideas that drive them. There is no single defining recurrent.

Carlos Garaicoa, 38, who lives in Havana, photographs the decaying architecture of Cuban cities. Then he makes large prints, on which he draws imaginary additions using thread affixed

to the photographs with pins. "What you have is this wonderful conversation between photography and what looks very much like an architectural drawing that floats on top of the photograph," Ms. Respini said, adding that his work addresses architecture as a metaphor for utopian ideals, "in particular, the failure or success of the utopian ideals of the Cuban government."

Phillip Pisciotto, 35, the only American in the exhibition, makes portraits of family members, friends and acquaintances throughout the Northeast United States. He photographs his subjects in intimate settings with their personal effects, at moments that seem charged with meaning. His exacting attention to the exposure of the picture produces rich color saturation in the final prints.

Robin Rhode, 29, grew up in Cape Town and lives in Berlin. His photographs are based on performances in which he draws in the street or on a gallery wall and then interacts with the drawing. In one sequence of stop-action photographs, he draws a skateboard in chalk and then performs a jump on an actual skateboard. Ms. Respini said she saw his work in terms of photography's relationship to time, a link to Eadweard Muybridge, who experimented with stop-action photography in the late 1800's. One of Mr. Rhode's videos will be shown as well, marking the first time video will be included in the "New Photography" series.

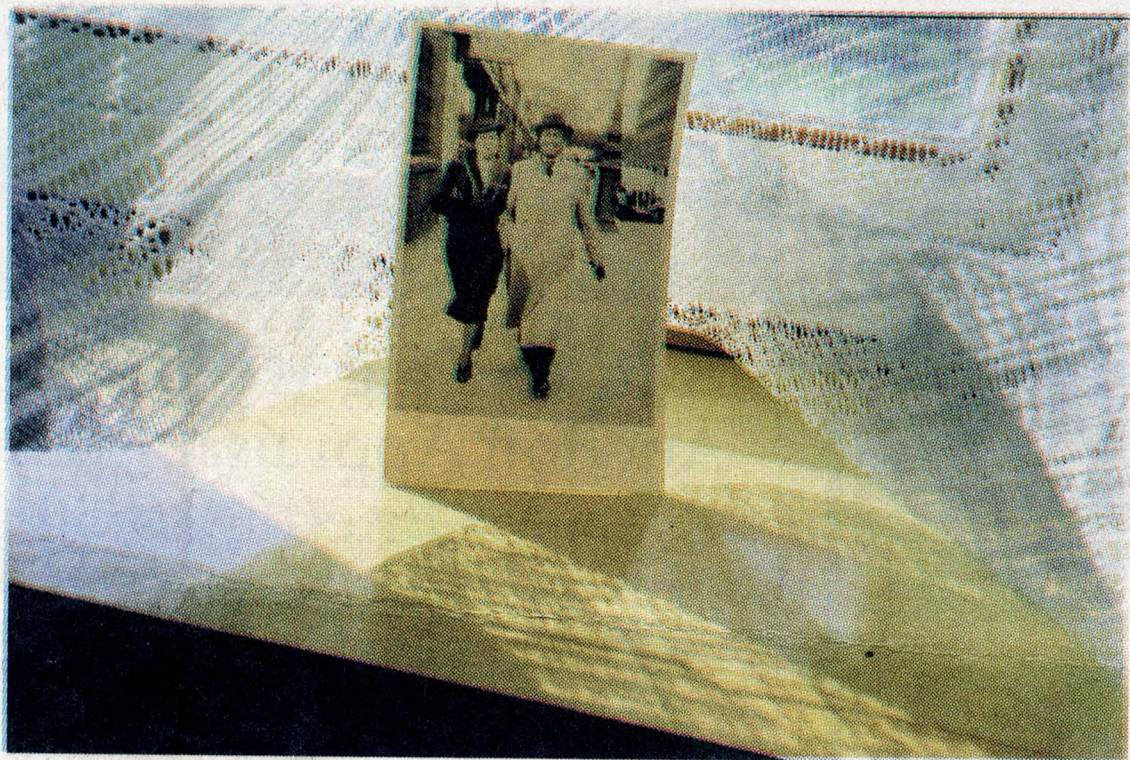
Bertien van Manen, 63, lives in Amsterdam. She spent the last three years photographing family pictures in the homes of people throughout Europe. The photographs within the photograph appear in context, taped to the refrigerator or framed beside the bed. Many are familiar: snapshots of weddings, funerals, birthdays. Others are windows into a family's place in the world: someone's grand uncle during the liberation of Auschwitz, a relative at a Madrid demonstration against Franco.

The project, titled "Give Me Your Image," touches on a sense of European history, but, also, Ms. Respini said, "it really becomes about preserving the memory of these photographs that, I think, is slowly disappearing with the digital age and digital cameras."

Choosing these photographers was a collective effort, Ms. Respini said, a result of conversations with and recommendations from her colleagues in the photography department. "I went through all my files for the artists that I had seen in the last several years," she said, "and I think all my colleagues are doing the same thing. It's really bringing to the table what we're doing all the time. 'New Photography' is just the opportunity to be able to formalize that discussion."

With seven years of backlog, how many artists did she consider? She couldn't say. But she could chart the travels that brought her and her colleagues in contact with the four chosen. She had seen Mr. Garaicoa's work at the Moscow Biennale last January. And Mr. Rhode's work was shown this year at the Venice Biennale. As for where they go after being featured in such a high-profile showcase, she said she didn't dwell on that. "I think if you start thinking about the show as a telescoping of artists that may rise or





Above, "David Chicoine 'Chick,' Portland, Maine, 1999," by Phillip Pisciotta; left, a work from Prague in the "Give Me Your Image" series by Bertien van Manen; and below, Robin Rhode's "Board," his skateboard series from 2003.

may make very significant contributions to contemporary art," she said, "it can cripple you in the choices that you make."

When asked about the influence of MoMA in defining standards of photographic practice and anointing individual artists, Ms. Respini said that it was important for curators to present work they believe in: "I feel the responsibility in any show I do at MoMA — responsibility to the artists to be true to their work. Not because of the weight of the museum, but because you're showing it in a public forum."

Nevertheless, the status of the show as a predictor of success is hard to deny. Would photographers like Judith Joy Ross (in the first "New Photography" show in 1985), Philip-Lorca diCorcia (who was featured in 1986), Thomas Demand (1996) and Rineke Dijkstra (1997) have become so significant in the photography landscape without it? It's hard to say. Bertien van Manen, for example, has already had considerable success with five published books and exhibitions around the world.

Still, the show's sanction is a big lift. In that sense, the original template for "New Photography" might have been the landmark 1967 show "New Documents." Organized by John Szarkowski, then director of photography at MoMA, it in-

troduced Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, who are now regarded as among the most important photographers of the 20th century.

"New Documents" had an umbrella theme, introducing a generation of photographers who, according to the wall text, "directed the documentary approach to more personal ends."

"Their aim was not to reform life, but to know it," the text continued.

Despite that defining idea, Mr. Szarkowski has always insisted that "New Documents" was a show of three individual photographers and denies that he had anything to do with making their careers. "I think anybody who had been moderately competent, reasonably alert to the vitality of what was actually going on in the medium, would have done the same thing I did," he said earlier this year.

But different curators are likely to arrive at different conclusions about what's going on in the medium at any particular moment in time. The photographers chosen for "New Photography '05" certainly reflect something about the knowledge, judgment and taste of the museum's photography department. The question is whether they represent this moment in photography as well.