

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Art
INCONVERSATION

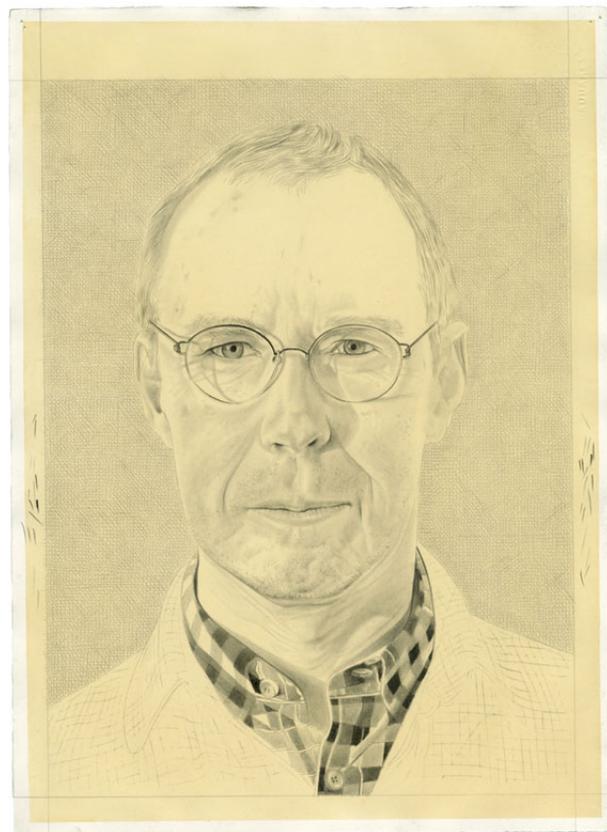
November 5th, 2014

STEEL STILLMAN with Marcia E. Vetrocq

With solo exhibitions in Brooklyn and Amsterdam and the publication of an artist's book, the photographer Steel Stillman is going public with a deceptively quiet and often disquieting body of work that has absorbed him for many years. Stillman—well known as an interviewer for *Art in America*—recently changed roles to talk about his own work with his friend and one-time editor, Marcia E. Vetrocq.

Marcia E. Vetrocq (Rail): We began this conversation late last spring, during your exhibition at Show Room | Gowanus (May 16 – June 15, 2014), and at this moment we're anticipating your Amsterdam exhibition at Galerie van Gelder, which opens at the end of this month. The title of the New York show and of the artist book that you published concurrently—*Incidents (1969–2014)*—strikes me as both precise and enigmatic. I would use those same words to describe your work. Let's start with the significance of that span of years, which pretty much runs from your mid-adolescence to the present moment.

Steel Stillman: Yes, I was 14 in 1969, and that was when I was given the first of the two or three Kodak Instamatics that I owned as a teenager. Those Instamatics and their successors—several generations' worth of point-and-shoots—have provided most of the source images for the *Incidents* series. From the start, I never wanted to be a capital-P photographer, with big lenses and fancy equipment, and preferred instead to use pocket-size cameras and have my



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

film developed and printed as snapshots at the local drugstore. What excited me about photography as a kid—and what still excites me—is its translation of life into images, however complicated those terms are, and I've generally wanted to keep my uses of it anchored in vernacular conventions. Point and shoot. Figure it out later. So the dates in the title refer to the oldest source image in the show and to this year, when many of the latest pictures were finished. 1969 – 2014 describes the arc of my photographic consciousness.

Rail: So the source elements reach as far back as 1969. When did you begin to work on the photographs that populate the *Incidents* series?

Stillman: Around 2008 I came across some photocollages that I'd made in the mid-'90s—small snapshots that I'd taken in old houses a decade earlier when I lived in Vermont—over which I'd painted opaque black shapes, first on sheets of Mylar and then on the snapshot prints themselves. These works became a starting point for the *Incidents* series, and I've since reused those Vermont interiors as source material. But on a more profound level, the roots of the *Incidents* series go back to the late '70s and early '80s. During those years, I was continually experimenting with different ways of working on the pictures accumulating in my snapshot archive. I'd draw and paint on them, add words, crumple them up, re-photograph them, stage new scenes—anything to break them down or open them up. It was all quite physical, un-programmatic and analogue—I didn't get my first computer until late in '99. I was looking for ways to insert new meaning into what otherwise might seem ordinary pictures of people, places, and things. From my own most personal photographs, I knew that behind any given snapshot's surface deep reservoirs of affect and association may be hidden, to be animated by the stories and histories we each project. I was looking for ways to make pictures that were empty and inviting enough that viewers might find aspects of their own lives in them. During those years I made several bodies of work with this idea in mind, all based on snapshot sources, though at times the results were so abstract that viewers might not even know that photography had been involved.

Rail: Were you working in mediums other than photography at that time?

Stillman: I was. In the '90s for a series called *Transparencies*, I made a lot of ink drawings on Mylar, often traced from my own or, occasionally, found photographs. While these drawings were made to be backlit and photographed, their subjects, which had started out being recognizable enough as interiors, landscapes, or portraits, became formless inky puddles in the late entries to the series. These were followed by small black and white panel paintings of silhouetted architectural motifs, paintings of figurative shapes on Plexiglas, occasional wall paintings, and several other series, few of which were obviously derived from photographic sources, though, in fact, all had been. When I found myself painting arrays of black dots on clear glass, I realized I'd gone far enough, and that I needed to bring back recognizably photographic content. People were looking at my work as though it were some kind of late-modernist abstraction, when my intention had always been to maintain a link to the world of

images.

Rail: So the *Incidents* series begins with a return, with a reconsideration of earlier photocollages. Unfinished business or a new direction?

Stillman: Well, core business in the sense that what photography is—and how photographs attract and lose meaning—has always been a central motivation. The hunger to bring explicitly photographic imagery back was also a hunger to return to ideas and subjects I'd repressed during my forays into other mediums. I felt an urgent need to reconnect the drawn and painted grammars I'd been developing to the snapshot sources that had spawned them. In a sense, I wanted to go home so that I could set out on another trajectory.

Rail: You returned to personal material, to early snapshots. What had you been shooting back then? Moments around the house? Family members? Friends? Vacations?

Stillman: All of the above, and then some. I began taking art classes late in high school, and from then on, especially as an undergraduate at Middlebury and SVA, I took snapshots in increasingly deliberate and wide-reaching ways. Of course, the '70s were the heyday of structuralism and semiotics, and I was trying to determine just what kind of language photography was. I was inspired by teachers like Nancy Shaver and Haim Steinbach, and began connecting photography to literature and film. I'd read a little of J. L. Austin, who is sometimes referred to as an ordinary language philosopher, so I began to think of snapshot-taking as a kind of ordinary language version of photography. And I realized I could use that unobtrusive vernacular to penetrate all aspects of daily life, as though I were Virginia Woolf or Alain Robbe-Grillet, but with a camera. In an interview I read at the time, Walker Evans described photography as a form of collecting, saying that the photographer was like a squirrel gathering nuts to edit later. When I read that, my course was set. I began taking snapshots of everything, much as we all do today with smartphones—not just of friends and family in places I knew, but also of strangers and scenes in libraries, movie theaters, hospital rooms, mobile home parks, etc.—knowing that the resulting images would be the raw material for everything I did afterward, and that I had time to figure out what those next steps would be.

Rail: Did that insight into the potential of the vernacular lead to the choice of “Incidents” for the series



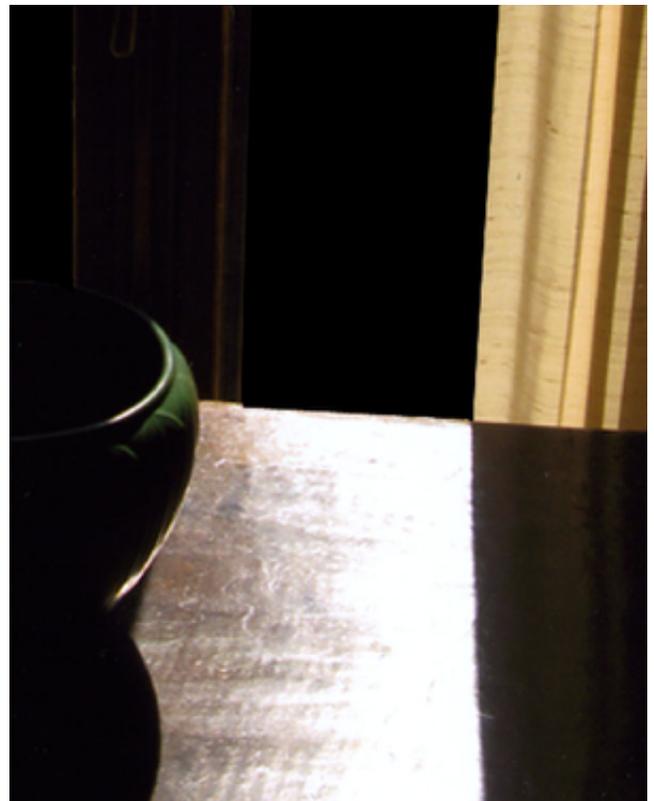
Steel Stillman, "On the Stairs IV," 2014. Archival pigment print, 20 × 16".

title? That word so perfectly conjures something “out of the ordinary” in both senses of the expression.

Stillman: I settled on that word only a year or two ago. Until then, my working title for the series had been “Untold Facts,” which I liked for the double meanings of “untold”—“vast” and “unrevealed”—and for the perhaps too obvious irony of referring to photographs as facts. Gradually I settled on *Incidents*, which seemed more subtle. An incident is a seemingly minor occurrence that takes place as part of a larger set of circumstances. I’m trying to suggest that understanding my images requires looking at them not just individually but also in relation to one another, as though each were a moment or scene in a novel or film. I also like the fact that in an incident, etymologically speaking, something falls. To me, this captures something of the fortuitous nature of photography: the apparatus records what it wants to record, despite our best intentions.

Rail: When a viewer first arrived at Show Room, the initial impression was that *Incidents (1969–2014)* was a show of black and white photography. But several prints have color, and the color felt all the more powerful—and perhaps stranger, too—for being so restricted. Did you eliminate color from certain source images?

Stillman: In the case of some source images, yes. Others were originally black and white. The color—when you see it—is always as it was in the source. My photographs are not really manipulated. They’re just cropped, layered with black shapes, and printed. Any color correction that’s done is simply to re-approach the original image. In a sense, I’m using these snapshots of mine as found images, and sometimes I want to preserve the color characteristics of the source print. Looking across the history of photography, as you know, the images of each decade, more or less, have their own time signatures. And color is part of that. The red in “Asa” (2014), for instance, despite its intensity, is actually a little blue-ish, which is typical of Ektacolor prints from the ’70s and so different from the deep reds of Kodachrome from the ’50s and the pop-like colors we see today. Because the images I use for the *Incidents* series span many decades—others, though they’re not in this show or the book, come from earlier in the 20th century—I want that sweep of historical time to be part of their subject.



Steel Stillman, “Green Bowl,” 2014. Archival pigment print, 10 × 8’.

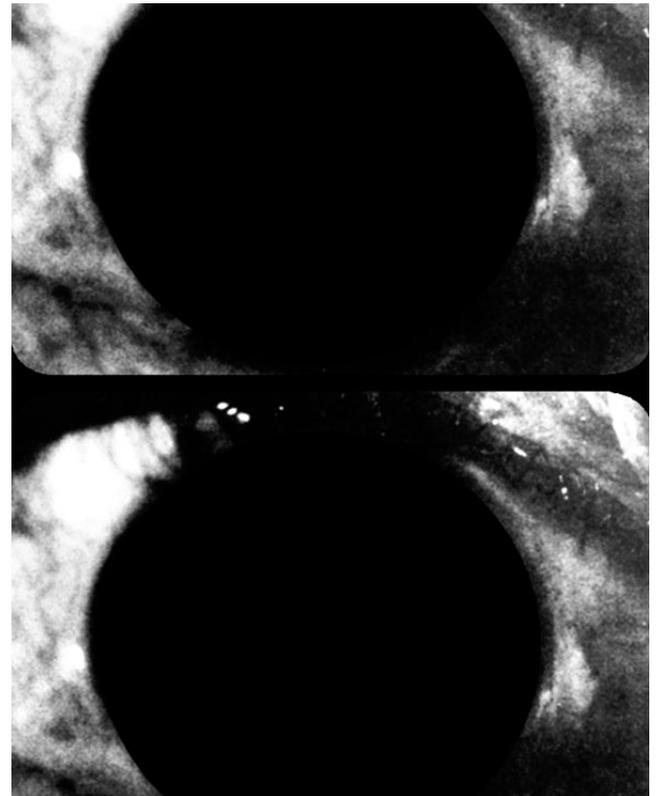
Rail: Although the outcome is a digital print, it’s my understanding that most of the time you’re working with a print and not a screen image.

Stillman: Yes, I much prefer looking at 8-by-10-inch proof prints on the wall to sitting in front of a screen. Being able to see them from across the room, or out of the corner of my eye while working on something else, provides space for distraction and thought. For me, the computer is like a contemporary darkroom, and though I once knew my way around darkrooms, I never liked being shut in with all those chemicals. Much of what I do in the studio is editing and decision-making, sifting and sorting, and making adjustments, over and over again. The snapshots I use are mostly 3.5 by 5, or 4 by 6 inches. When I decide to work on one, I look for it in my files, and then make a small tracing or freehand drawing of an element in the image using black marker on Mylar or vellum. I'll then separately scan the snapshot and the drawing—which by that point is usually just a black shape—and sandwich them together in the computer before making a print to put on the wall. These images go through multiple iterations, as I tweak the cropping and adjust the size of the black shape. One important characteristic of the final pieces is that the black shapes often have a rough, bitmapped edge, which comes from the fact that the tracings were minuscule—in some cases less than an inch along any side. When they're blown up and printed out, that digital edge gives me the sense of looking back through time, from the digital era to the grit and grain of the analogue photo-world beyond.

Rail: The tracing that you do over an area of the snapshot seems to be a way of getting your hand directly into the process.

Stillman: Yes, I've never been able to draw on the computer, but I quite like it that these traces of my hand have survived the machine. For me, drawing has a special relationship to photography. The word, of course, refers to drawing with light. In my mind photography exists on a continuum between drawing on the one hand and writing on the other. In many ways the *Incidents* images are hybrids of all three. When I was beginning to work on the series, I experimented for a while with using colored shapes instead of just black ones, but I discovered that color was a distraction, separating each image from the rest. Using just black for the drawn shapes provides continuity, an almost hieroglyphic and textual through-line for otherwise disparate images. One of the pleasures of doing an exhibition or a book is that each provides the opportunity to present a provisional larger whole for which individual images are just incidents.

Rail: How did you select the pictures for the New York show? You were working from a sizeable series.



Steel Stillman, "Buster V," 2014. Archival pigment print, 10 × 8".

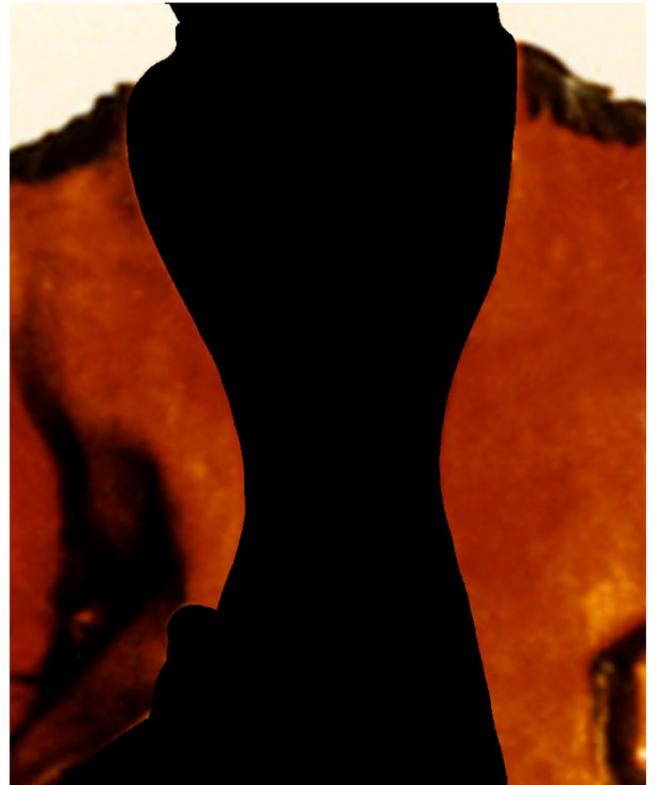
Stillman: In my studio I often display works in progress in a loose grid format, as though the walls were oversized contact sheets. I like to have a lot of images on the wall, along with variant versions, as a way of winnowing things down. Over the course of a year or two, the images I used for Show Room had fallen into a line, one after the other. I sometimes tell people that the images in *Incidents* are like stills from a film that doesn't exist, and working on the installation was like structuring a film montage. The first few images of the show set the scene; next came the suggestion of a character, then a landscape, then again a room, and so on.

Rail: You once mentioned that some of the individual photographs you exhibit have companion images, or adjacencies. Do you think in terms of situations as often as you think of the singular image?

Stillman: That's good—situations. I'm usually starting with just one image in mind. But if I'm lucky, several others of the same motif will show up and work out. Take the three "Bedroom" pictures (2014) at Show Room, which together suggest a camera panning through a darkened room. There are actually five images in the full "sequence," each a different cropping of two or three source snapshots. Other examples from the show are "Buster IV" and "Buster V" (2014), which are based on close-ups of the elderly Buster Keaton's eye from Samuel Beckett's *Film*, a short movie about a man who is both watcher and watched. When I shot the underlying source images in the mid-'80s, I hadn't seen *Film*, but I'd read about it. I went to the library with my little camera and re-photographed stills from the screenplay showing Keaton's eye in various stages of opening and closing. There are five finished pieces in my own "Buster" sequence. Each was made by vertically stacking duplicate snapshots of a film still and constructing a black frame line to join them. I adapted that formal architecture from one of Warhol's *Disaster* paintings, because it seemed to put the eyes back in motion and freeze them at the same time.

Rail: You begin in your archive. Do you have a sorting system? How do you pinpoint what you want?

Stillman: I have tens of thousands of images in file drawers and boxes in the studio, and most of it is a randomly organized chaos. The decision to work on a given image is usually impulsive and intuitive. It's a bit like writing. I'll need a new character or setting, and I'll remember a picture and go looking for it. The hunt can take days, and sometimes fails, but I'm often rewarded by the discovery of other options.



Steel Stillman, "Asa," 2014. Archival pigment print, 10 × 8".

Rail: So the selection of a snapshot can be serendipitous. At what stage do you develop an intention for a composition?

Stillman: I don't think of what I'm doing as composing. When I have an image that I know I want to work with, that's all I know. It's like an itch, a kind of latency in the source snapshot that I need to probe. That's why finished pieces take so much time and trial and error to make. I usually have to figure out what the source image means to me, knowing that no viewer will ever perceive it as I do. I regularly find that I need to obscure or cover up what feels most personal or revealing to make space for viewers to enter. Sometimes my tinkering will result in something new, an image that translates its source in a way I could never have planned but am grateful for.

Rail: How do the black shapes—these “occlusions,” as you once described them to me—function? They are present in the image in a way that something removed by cropping is not.

Stillman: The black shapes and croppings originated in the effort to protect people's identities and to obscure the particulars of certain settings, but their real value is in the forms and configurations they create. They are acts of removal that result in other things being seen. My hope is that severing the source images from their original histories opens them up to diverse interpretations and possibilities. Ultimately, the images in the *Incidents* series highlight the limits of photographic information. If much of what photographs mean is not visible in them, then I'm trying, by analogy, to represent the unseen.

Rail: I'm intrigued by your process of working from a personal archive with the aim of eradicating the personal. The photographs promise and thwart a sharing of intimacy. There's a sort of vexed eroticism as well. I'm thinking of the soft-edged nude, the trio of bedroom interiors, and particularly the work called “Velvet Dress” (2012). That dress—waiting to be worn or just slipped off?—is absolutely monumental in the field. And it becomes a sort of “readymade occlusion”—the dress is both the subject that we see and the black blocking shape.

Stillman: One of the conundrums I've faced over the years is that photographs are never entirely fictions, constructed though they may be. So I'm constantly adjusting how much of my real life I want to reveal in relation to the broader topics I'm trying to raise. “Velvet Dress” is a great example. It seems to conjure the kinds of desire or fear that play out in domestic spaces. I continue to be drawn by the way the



Steel Stillman, “Thighs,” 2014. Archival pigment print, 20

camera isolates and frames this kind of moment or setting without telling you too much. I came of age artistically at the time of the Pictures artists, when questions about the nature of photography, its uses and archives were much in the air. But having grown up in a house without television, and having been drawn instead to books—novels especially—I felt somewhat remote from my peers’ preoccupation with mass culture. Photography, it seemed to me, pervaded every corner of contemporary society, and nowhere more deeply than private life. I realized that many of the canonical 20th-century novelists had focused on domestic themes, on the lives of individuals and families, and on the mechanics of perception and memory, so I decided I would try to work as I imagined writers did, by re-shaping the particulars of lived experience—in my case, snapshot photographs and all they might mean—into artworks.

Rail: Since you’ve alluded to both film stills and the novel, let me ask about the artist’s book that you developed concurrently with the exhibition. Were you thinking of film or the novel as you were designing the book?

Stillman: The design and layout of my book were modeled on the 1960s Grove Press screenplays of Alain Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, which were small, cheaply made paperbacks with full-bleed black and white images. Though of course there’s no screenplay, my book features nearly all the images in the exhibition, with each being seen once in three different formats—full frame and two successive enlargements. The line of photographs through the book repeats the line of photographs through the show, but is interrupted by a counter-rhythm of new images that run in the opposite direction, from the back toward the front. I call these other images “inserts,” borrowing the term from film, where it refers to secondary shots that cover the main action from a different perspective. My inserts are pictures of things that are hidden by the black shapes in the *Incidents* images—so they’re sort of clues to what is occluded in the photographs—or they’re blow-ups of parts that were cropped out.

Rail: There may not be a screenplay, but you did put a brief text at the end of the book, which does “favor” the forward trajectory. Tell me about the origin of that text and the decision to follow it with the words “THE END.”

Stillman: I wanted something at the end of the book that would turn viewers/readers back into it, and



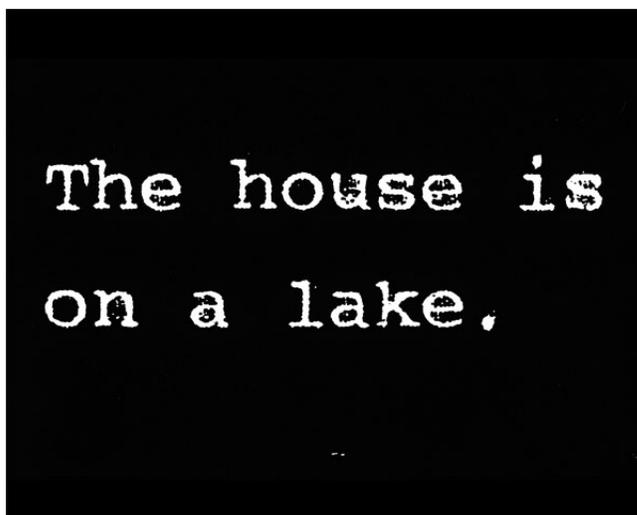
Steel Stillman, “Bedroom V,” 2014. Archival pigment print, 10 × 8’.

lead them again to the beginning. A few years ago, I wrote 25 or 30 short, semi-fictive, memoir-ish texts. The last one was based on a dream I had about William Burroughs. In the dream, Burroughs was an older man, living on lower Second Avenue, where he had built shelves at waist height all around his apartment. On these shelves he had arrayed cuttings of texts and images, and he would shuttle about from shelf to shelf, slowly constructing his works. Some years earlier, when I was living in Vermont, I'd constructed shelves in much that fashion around several rooms in my house, and had laid things out on them in just that way. There was something about my own fragmentary way of making and montaging images that made me feel that the dream text would fit with the book. I don't know much about Burroughs beyond his use of the cut-up and other chance procedures, but I remember waking up from that dream and feeling a connection had been made. If my way of working had been good enough for him, I was surely on the right track. I must have been in need of validation at the time. [Laughs.]

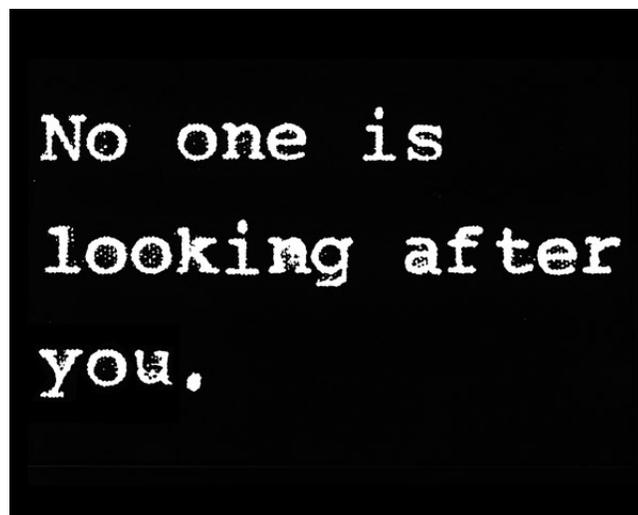
Rail: It sounds like the selection of 21 photographs for the Show Room exhibition and the artist book evolved over a lengthy, ruminative period. You've just finished preparing for a second show of works from the *Incidents* series at Galerie van Gelder in Amsterdam (November 29 – December 27). How did that process differ? How did the concept for the second show evolve so soon after the first?

Stillman:

The show
in



Steel Stillman, "The house is on a lake," 1992 - 2014. Archival c-print, 30 × 37.5".



Steel Stillman, "No one is looking after you," 1992 - 2014. Archival c-print; 30 × 37.5".

Amsterdam, *On the Stairs*, will have fewer works, perhaps a dozen—I haven't finalized the edit. But I've been looking at most of them together as a group in the studio over the past year or so, and, like the pieces at Show Room, they've settled into a loose montage of their own. All except one ("Thighs," 2014) will be different, and two of the works will be text pieces from an ongoing series called *Sentences*, which I first worked on in the early '90s but have never exhibited. These are 30-by-37 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch blow-ups of short typewritten sentences that describe something either visible or invisible in an unseen photograph. The two *Sentences* in *On the Stairs* will be "The house is on a lake" and "No one is looking after you" (both 1992 – 2014). I think of the *Sentence* pieces as surrogate photographs, and their visual style—white letters on a black field—is intended to recall the title cards in silent films. I'm excited about

blurring the line between reading and looking, a desire that making the book only heightened. Obviously the text pieces will narrativize the installation to a degree, but my hope is that the images will also animate the words. The show's title comes from two images that are based on snapshots of staircases in Colonial-era houses in Virginia. Although I visited Colonial Williamsburg as a kid, my works feel more connected to the upstate New York and New England houses that my friends and I grew up in. The two "On the Stairs" (2014) images, like much of my work, arise from the impulse to stitch together a world that no longer exists, or perhaps never did. The fact that we are on the stairs suggests that we are somewhere in the middle, neither up nor down, here nor there, but connected and watchful nonetheless.

CONTRIBUTOR**Marcia E. Vetrocq**

MARCIA E. VETROcq is the author of *Hisachika Takahashi: From Memory Draw a Map of the United States* (Hatje Cantz, 2015).

Get the *Rail* delivered to your doorstep.
Start Your Subscription Today!