

JOHN NEFF

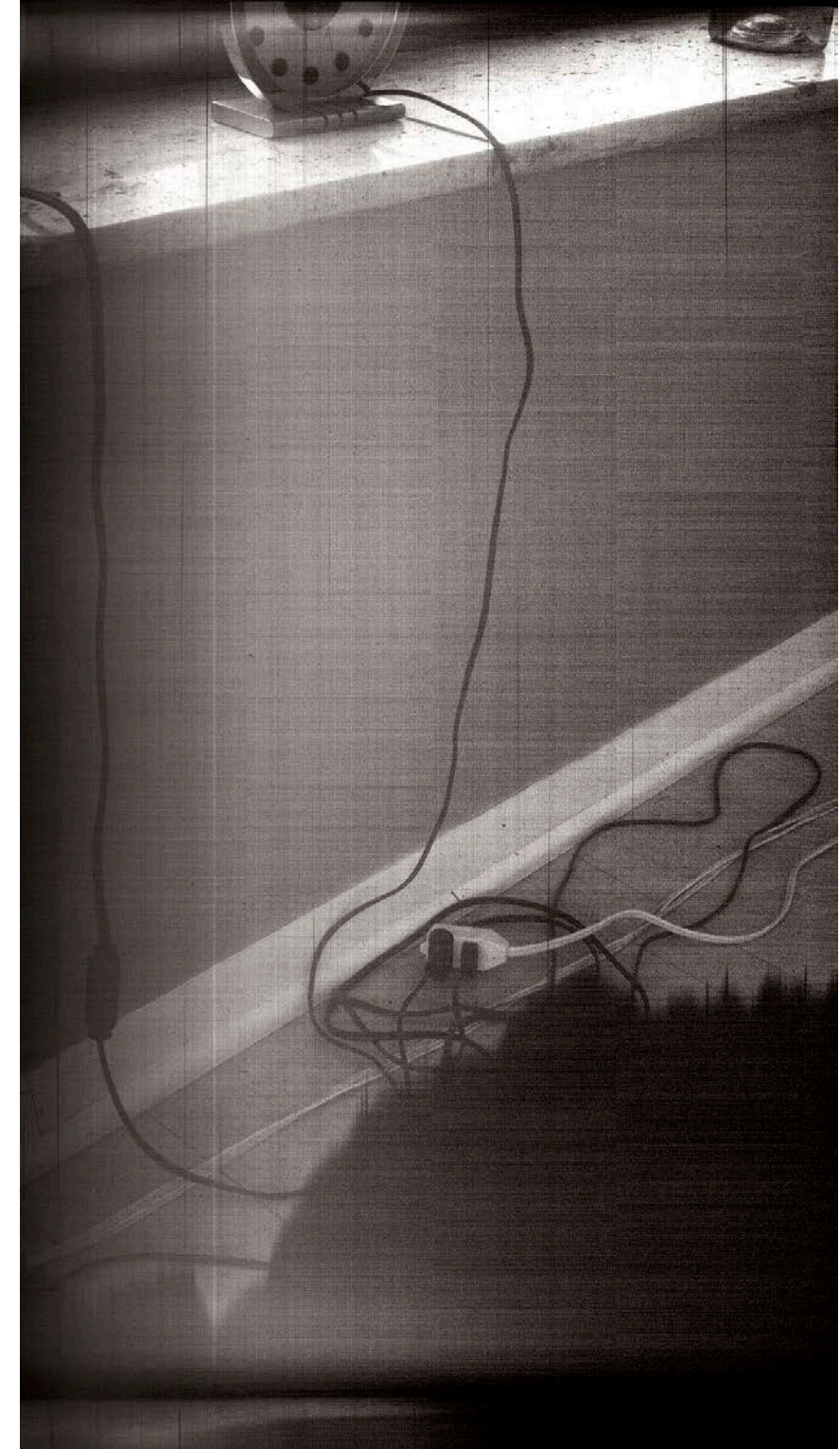
John Neff
September 5 – October 28, 2012
Golden Gallery, New York

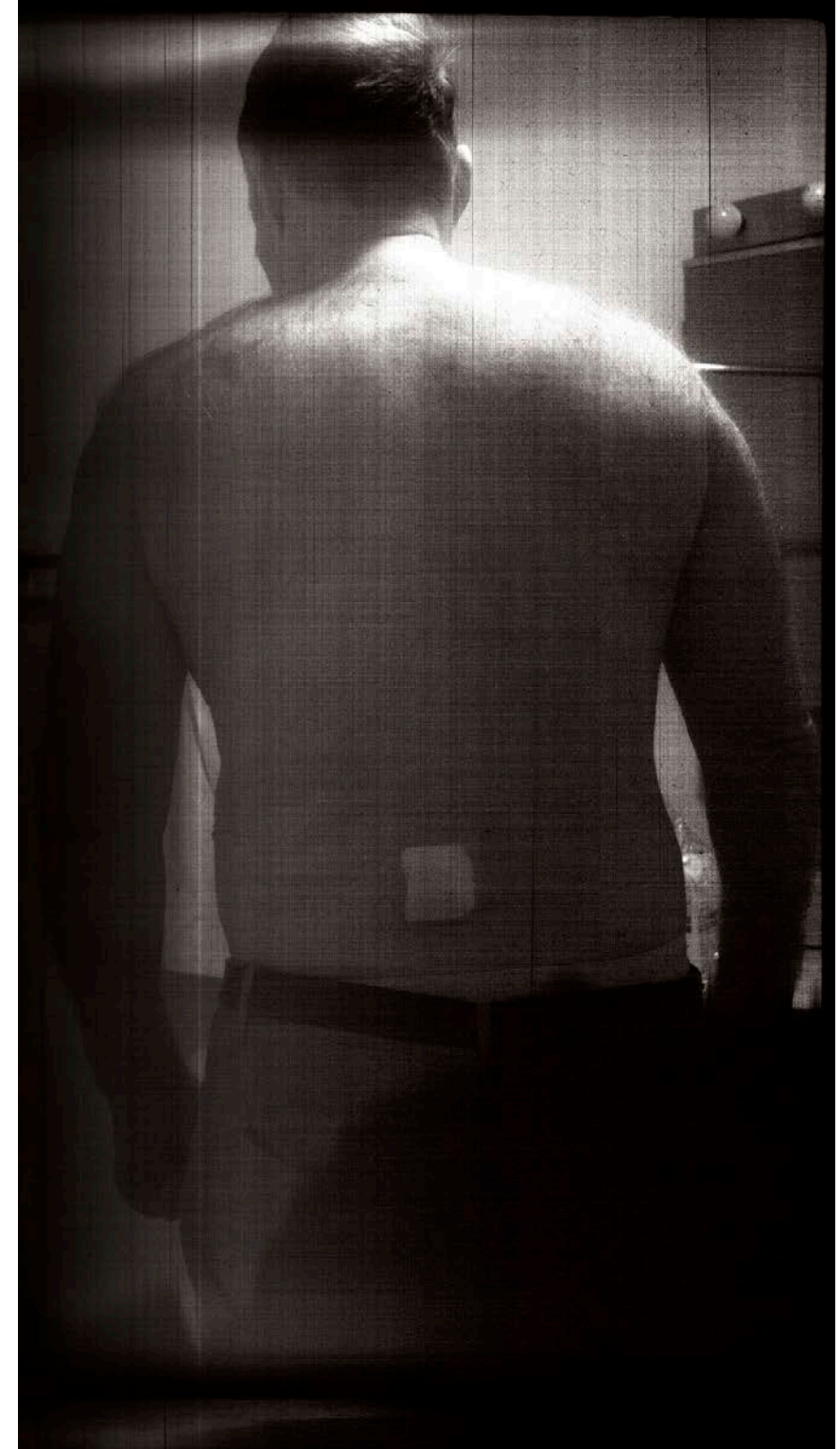
Golden Gallery is proud to present an exhibition of new photographs by John Neff.

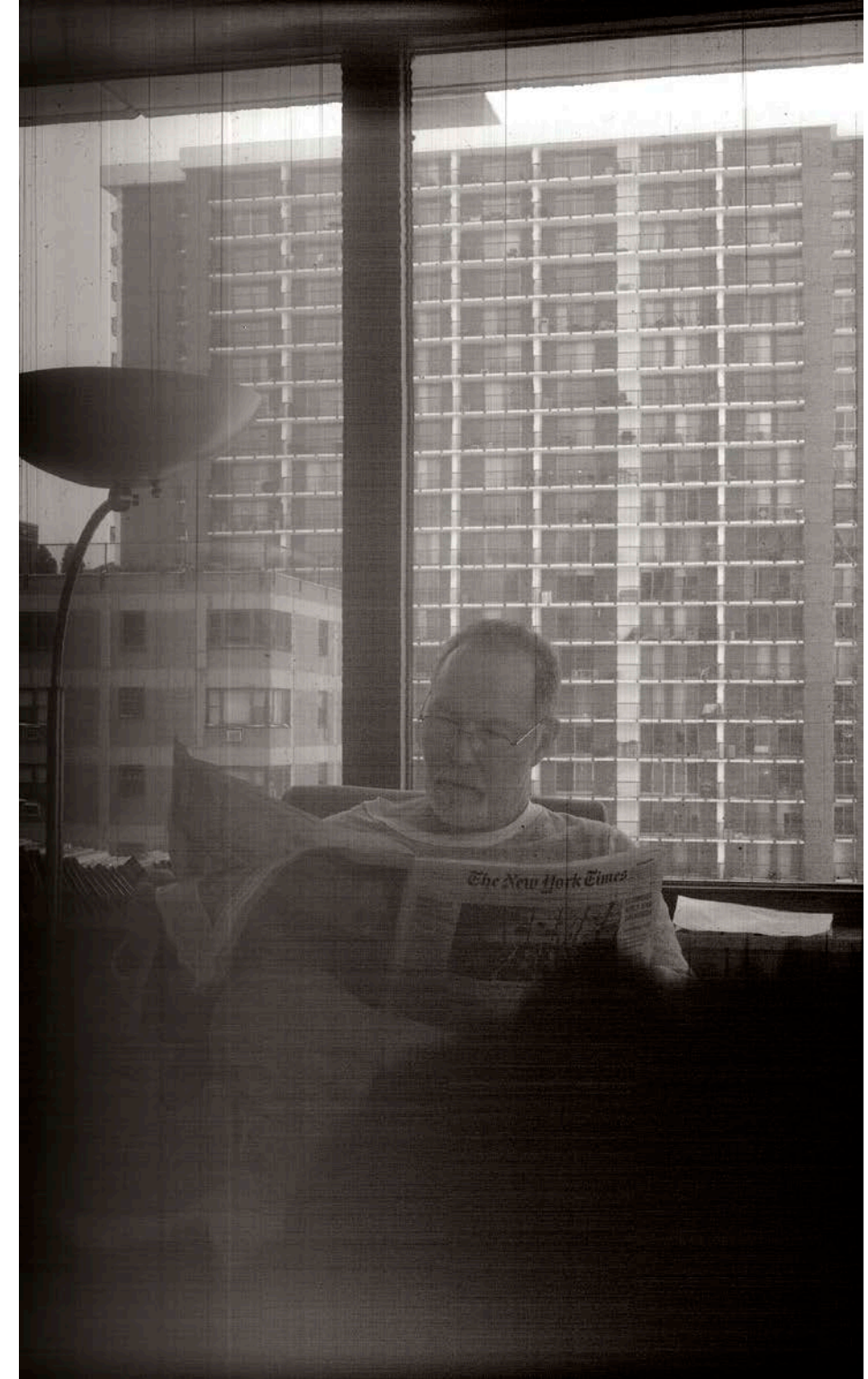
This exhibition signals a shift in Neff’s work away from the development of multi-media conceptual projects and toward the production of discrete photographic artworks. For the past eighteen months, the artist has been photographing his immediate environment using cameras assembled from altered consumer grade scanners and early twentieth century large and medium format camera parts. These devices capture images using a slow-moving linear scanning array, rather than a full-field sensor, and are prone to unpredictable mechanical and optical irregularities. Additionally, they are built without range- or viewfinders, requiring that compositional adjustments be made between, rather than before, individual exposures. This means that, in order to achieve a compelling likeness of his sitters, Neff requires their extensive cooperation in the time-consuming framing and exposure process.

Stylistically, the scanner photographs recall the straight photography of American Modernism, an important strain of 20th century art whose rich potentials for contemporary photography lie largely dormant. Pointedly self-conscious in their relationship to the art history of their medium, the pictures are also -- and perhaps primarily -- traces of intimate social encounters. Their subjects are not neutral; they are foci of the artist’s attachments, sometimes of his love. While working on these pictures, Neff carried his tripod-mounted scanner camera and laptop (the scanners were powered by, and the images stored to, a standard laptop) with him, occasionally “stopping” social encounters to photograph notable gestures, postures or scenes. The pictures are documents, but perversely so; in them, the instantaneous capture of decisive moments is slowed to thirty or more seconds, creating images that lie somewhere between spontaneous and staged. The photographs are the work of relationships between the photographer’s intentions, the scanner camera’s eccentricities and the sitters’ actions: images resulting from three agencies performing in -- occasionally dissonant -- concert. A digital document containing the entire series and an essay written by artist Doug Ischar will be available for download through the gallery’s website.

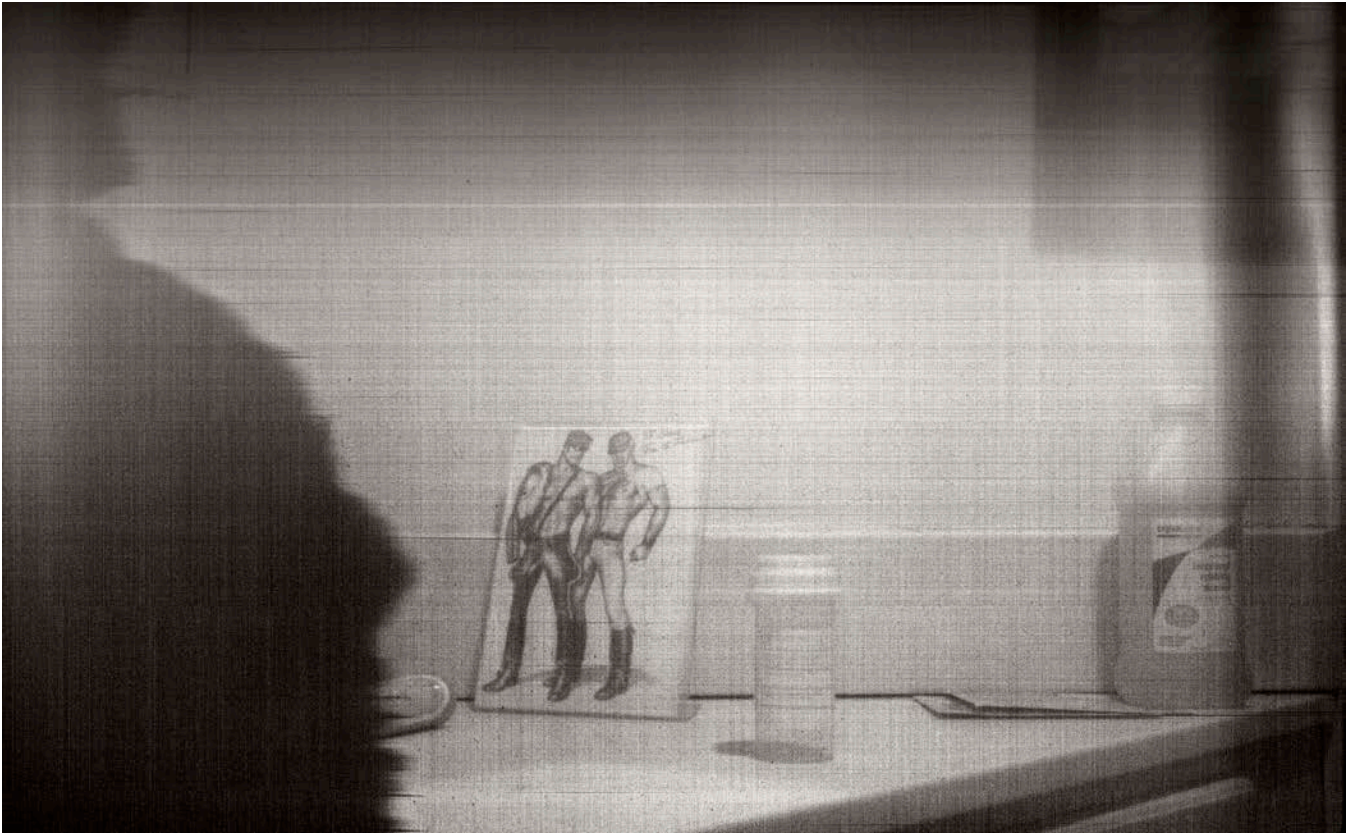
This is John Neff’s second solo exhibition with Golden Gallery. The first, *John Neff Prints Robert Blanchon*, was presented in Chicago late spring 2011. That exhibition processed the life and work of artist Robert Blanchon through the partial recreation of a 1995 artwork, *Untitled (aroma / 1981)*. Neff lives and works in Chicago. His work is held in the collections of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. The artist wishes to thank Eileen Mueller and Walker Blackwell of Latitude’s Artist In Residence program for their essential contributions to the realization of this exhibition.











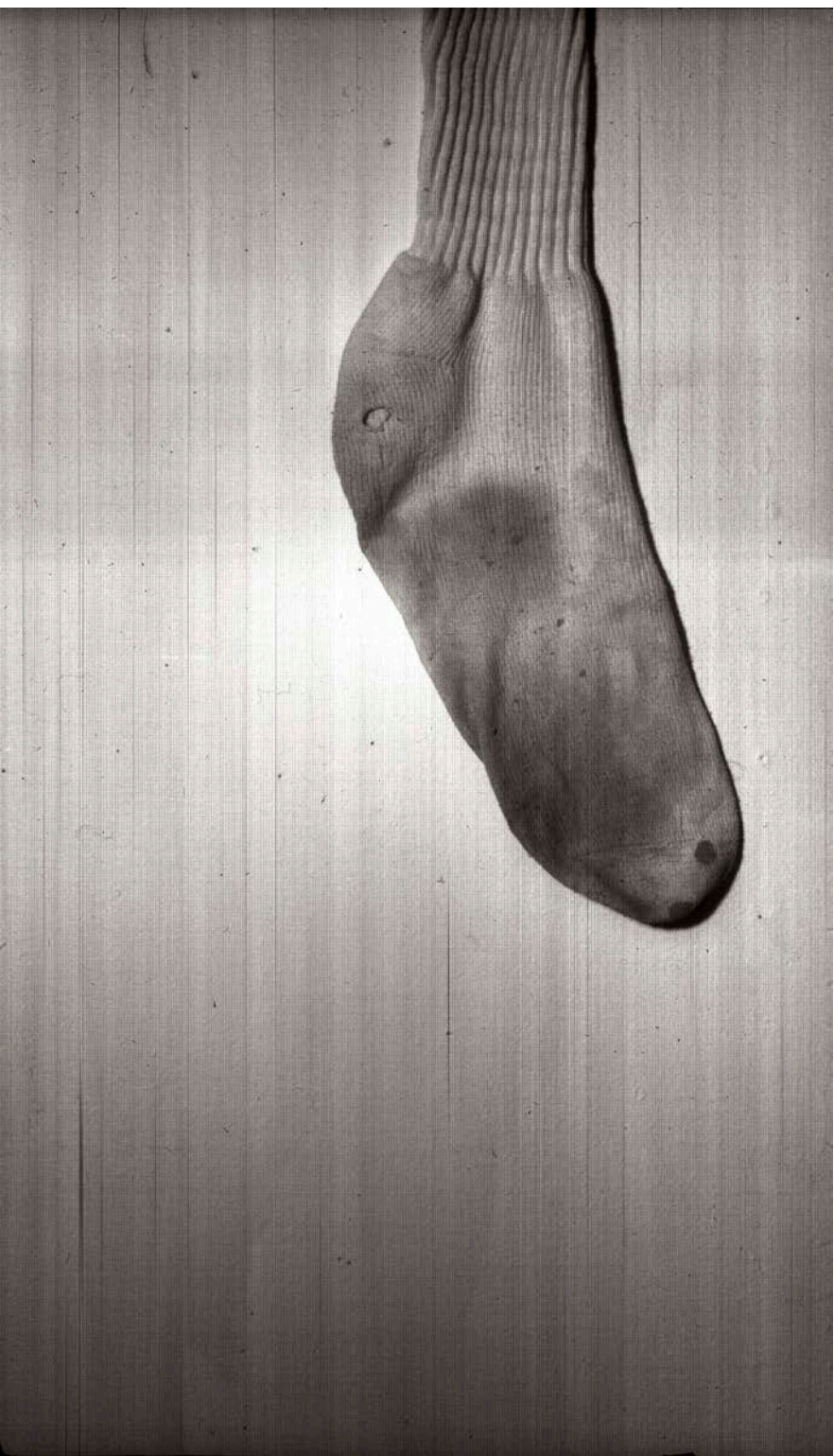


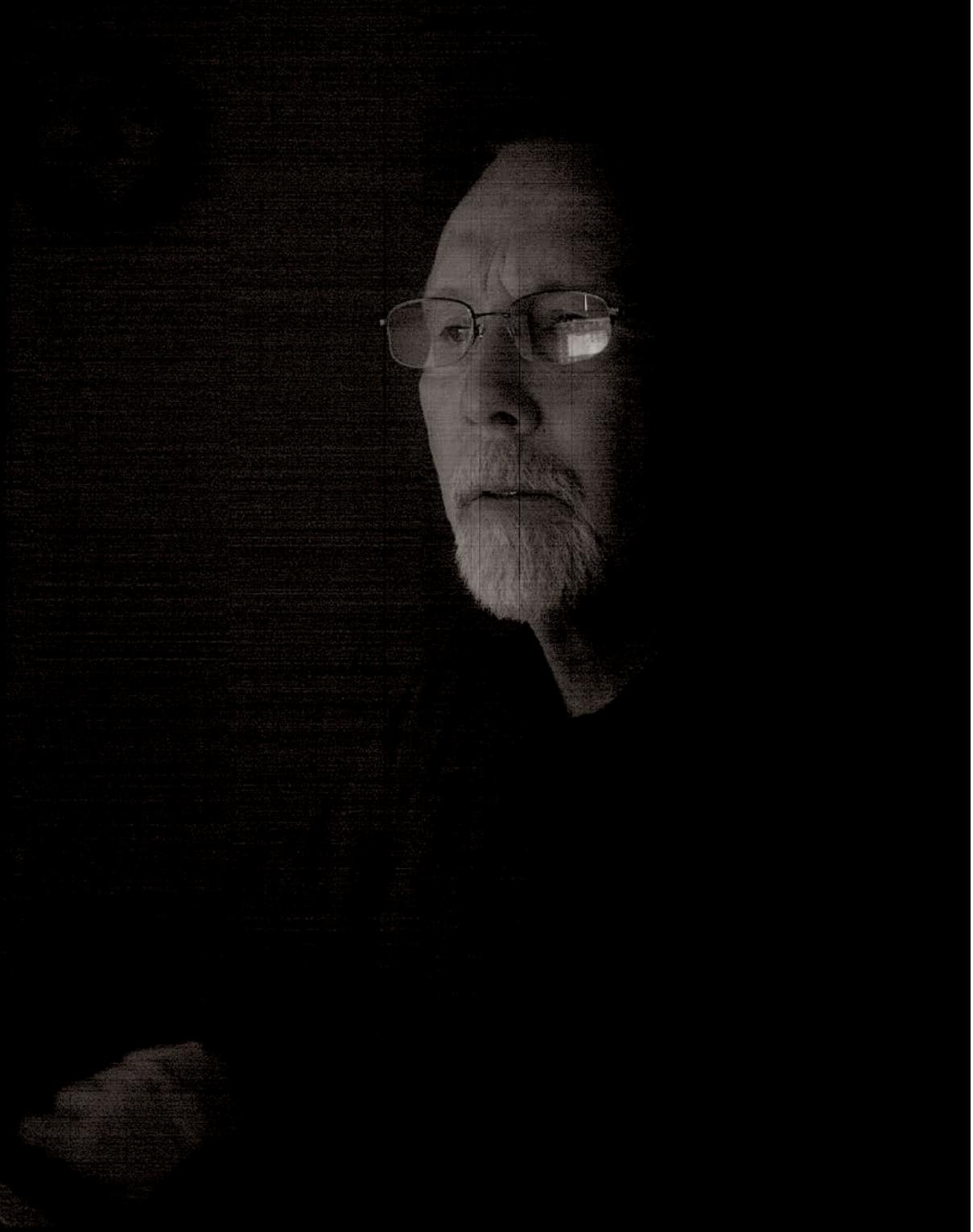












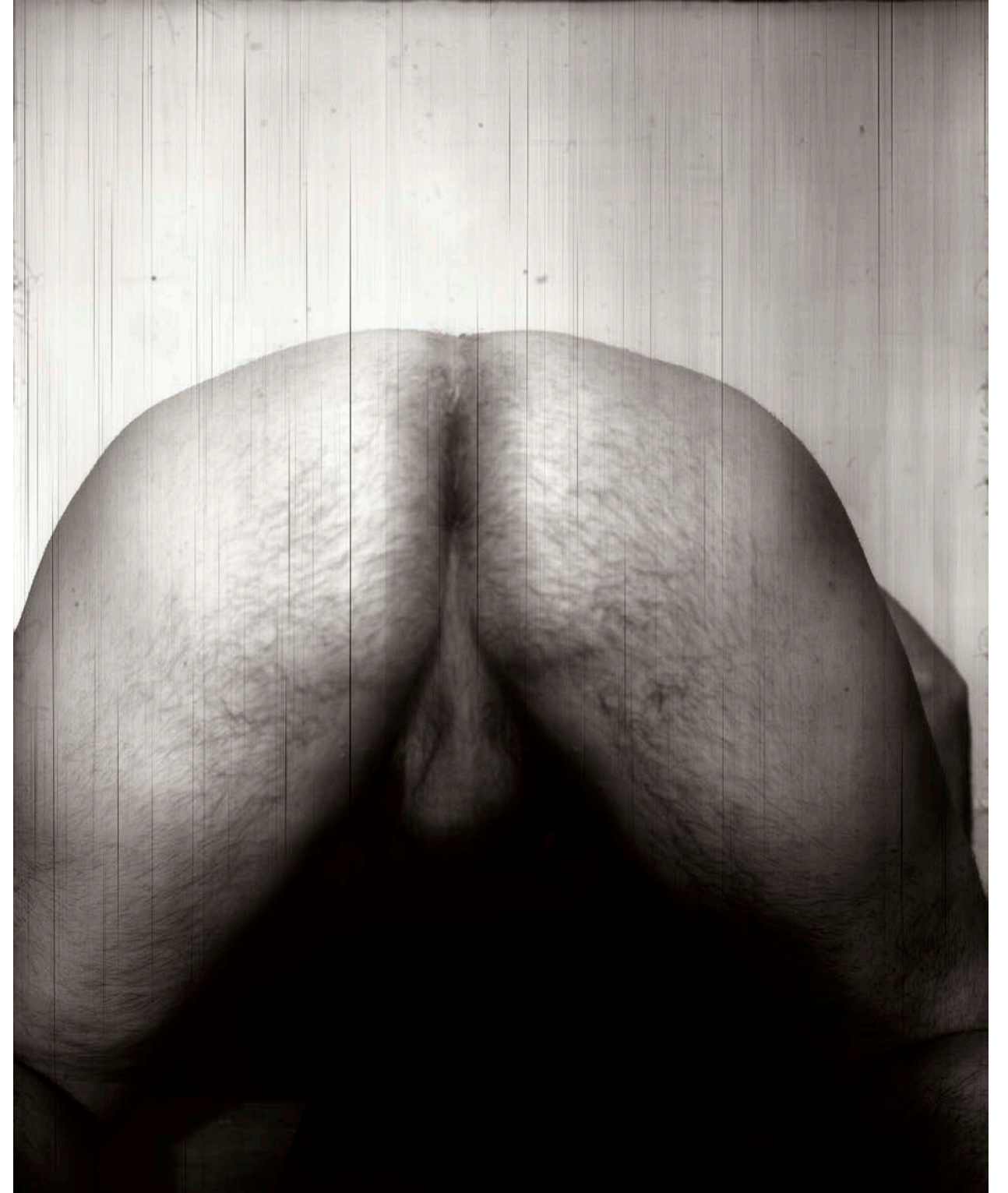


















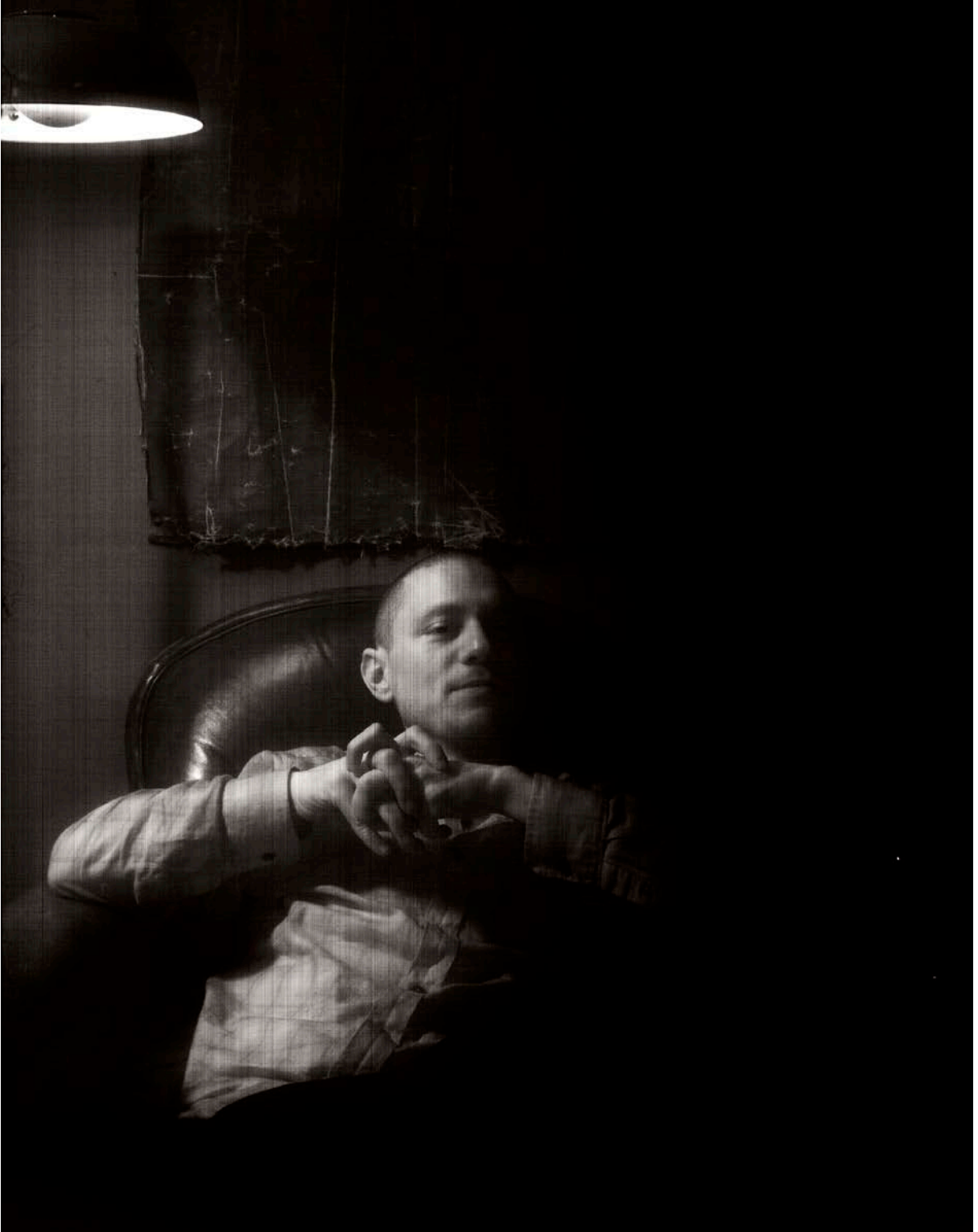












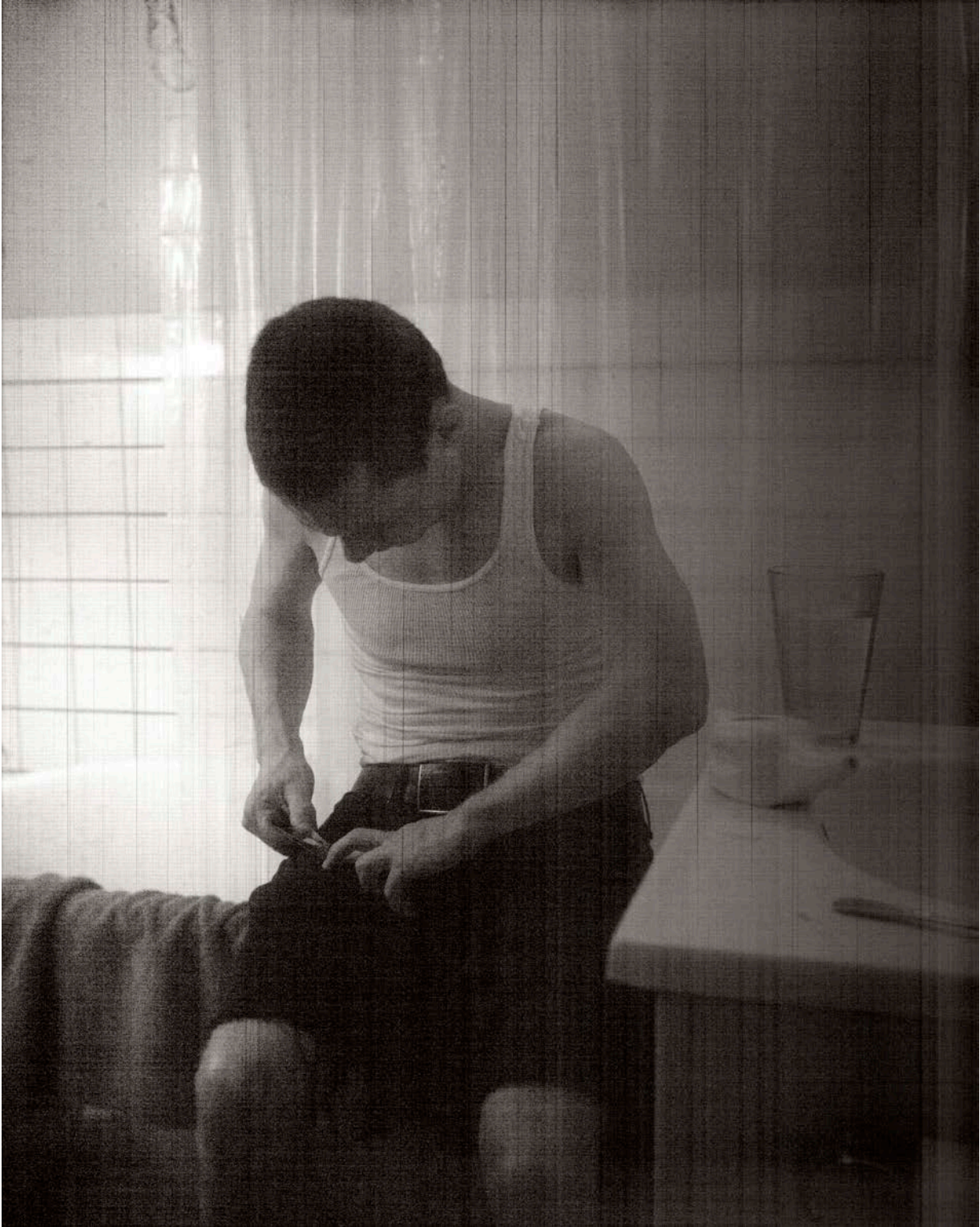


















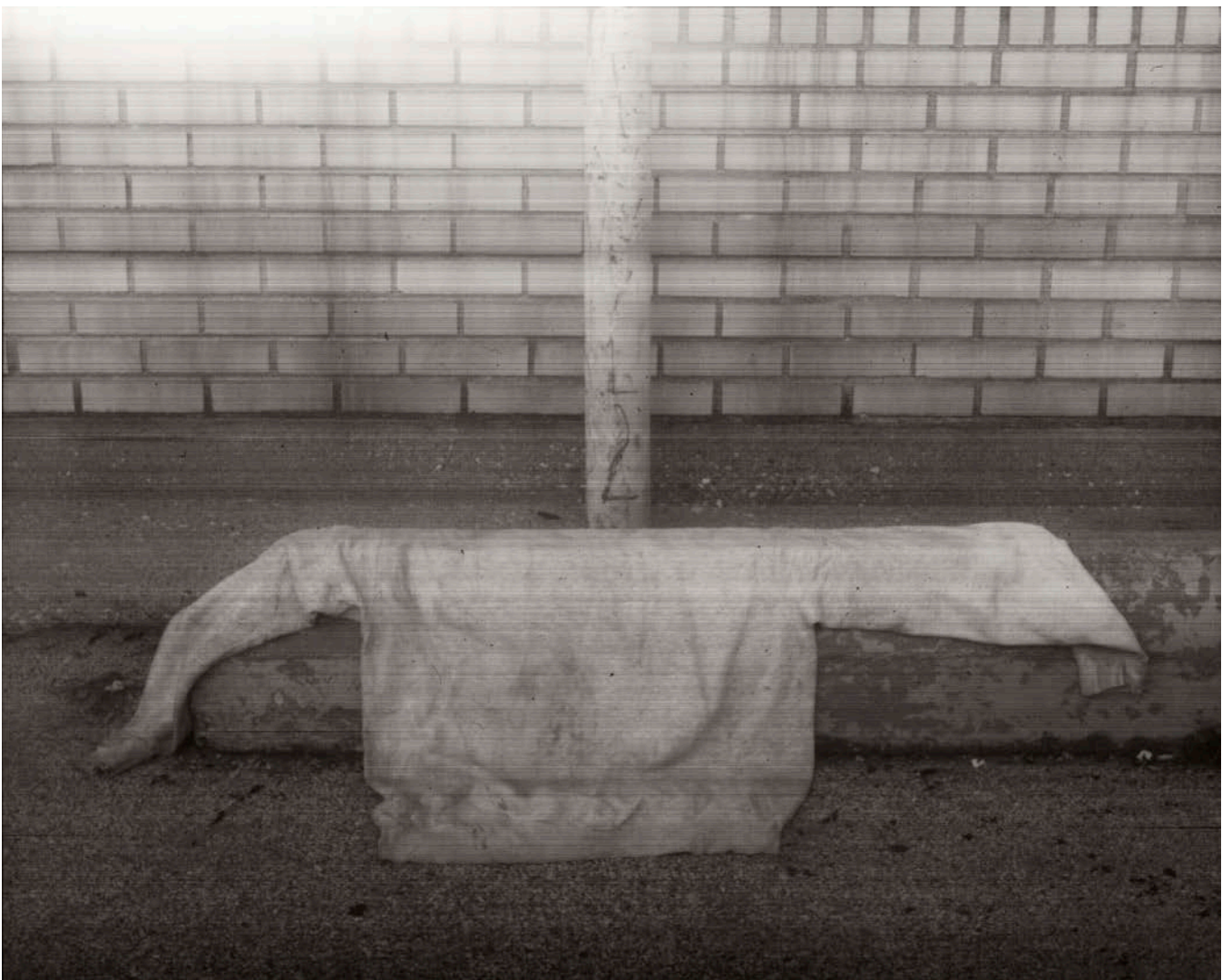






















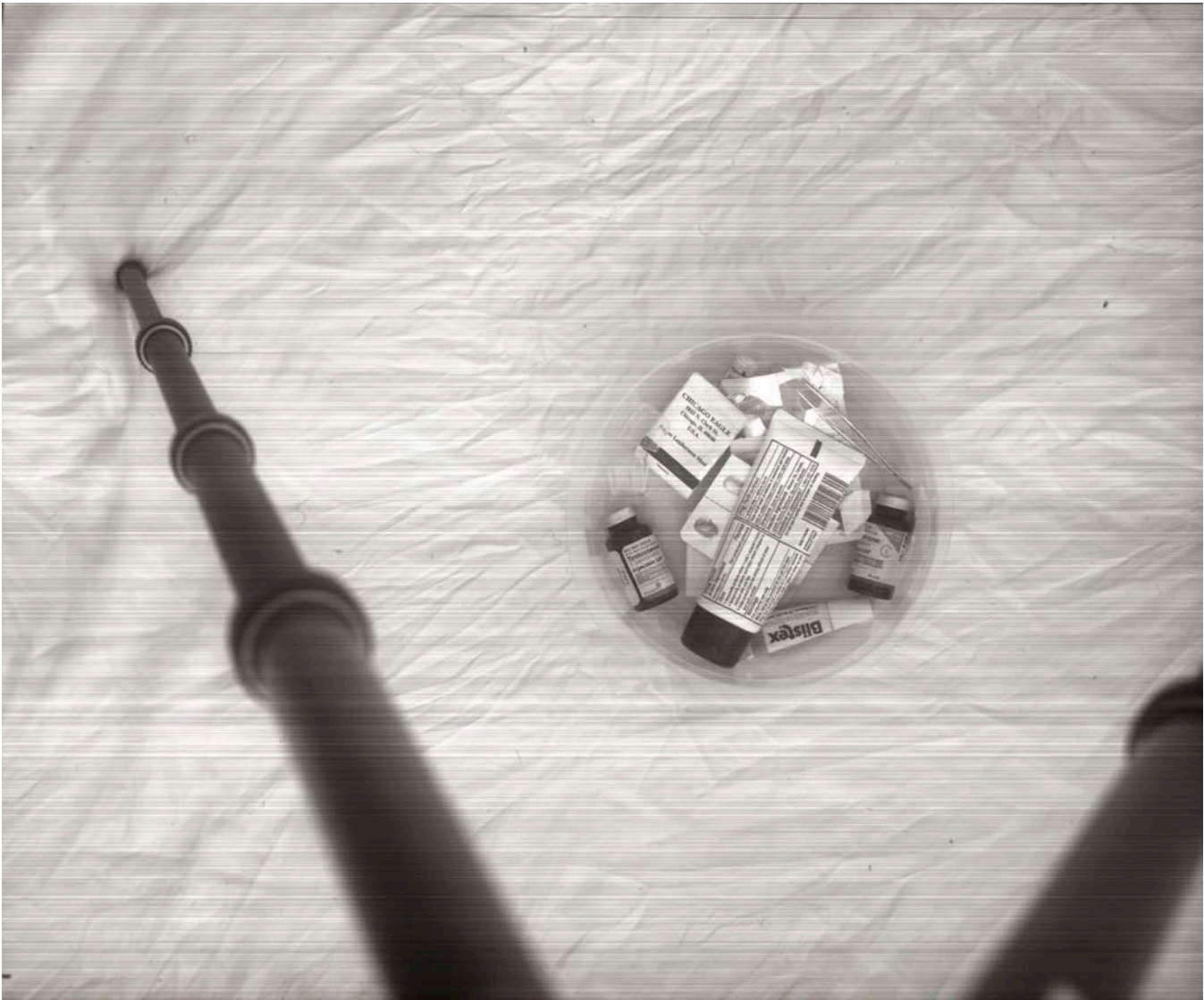


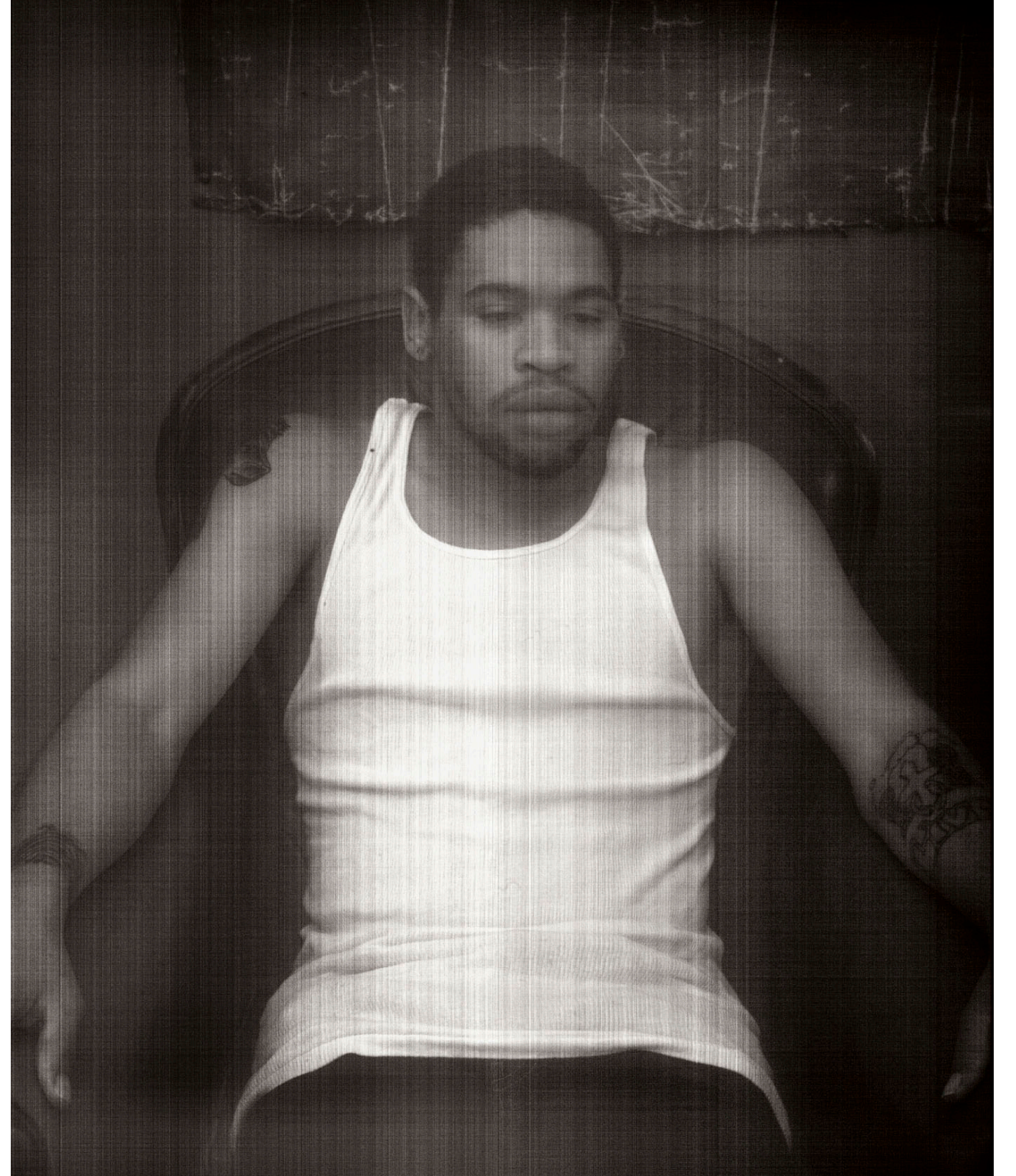








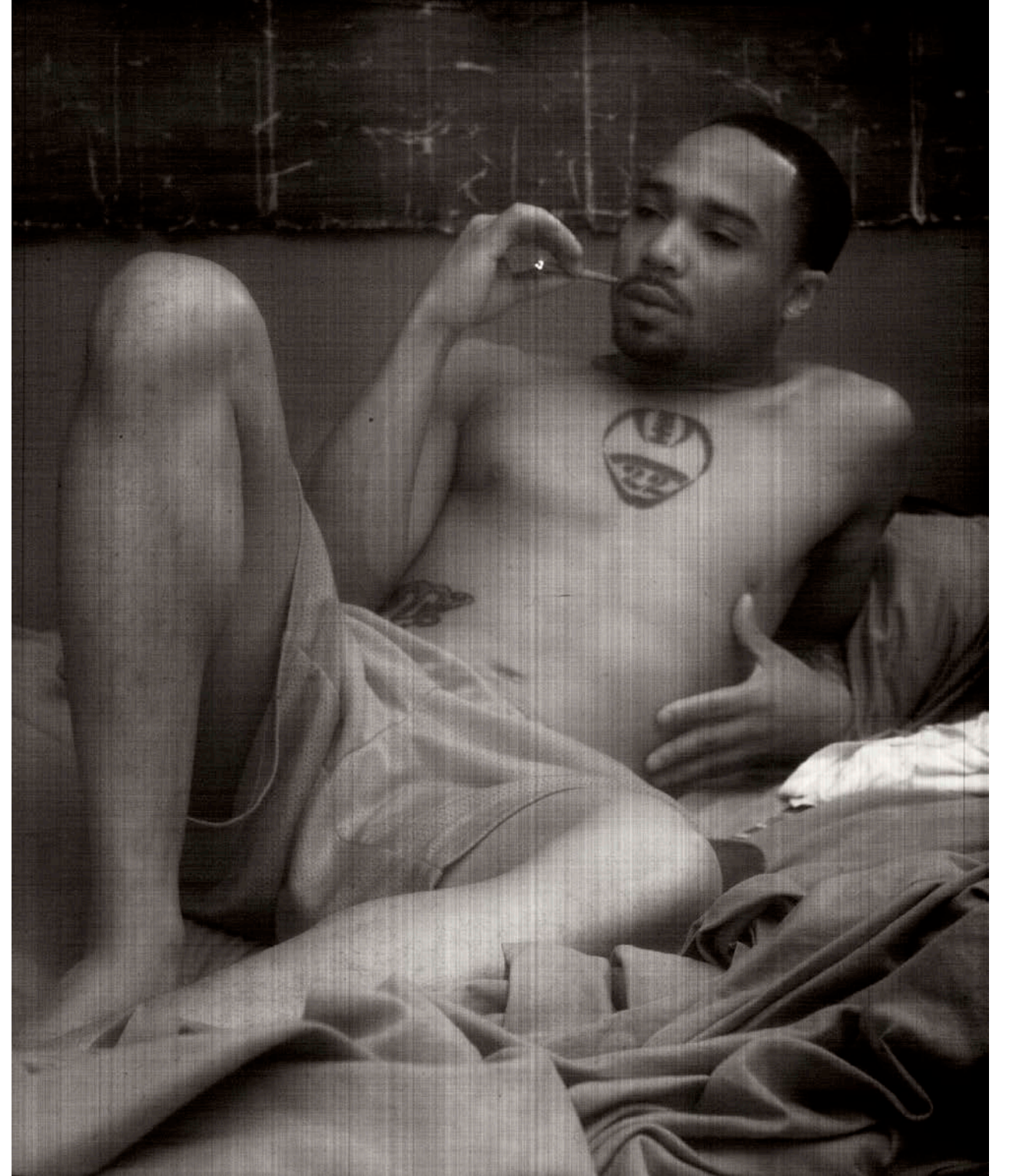












***Still Different* – new photographs by John Neff**

Aside from their digital blemishes, John Neff’s photographs look much like photography of the past. Paul Strand comes to mind, as does Brassaï. It might be tempting to call them ‘documentary.’ Do they memorialize the artist’s social set in Chicago? Are they character studies of their sitters and environments? What ‘conceptual’ motivations might underlie them, redeem them? These are all reasonable questions which, I believe, miss the point of these modestly eloquent pictures.

While John Neff has used photography in his work for years, this exhibition is his first to deploy photographs as primary, discrete objects, i.e. not embedded in sculptural installations. Although these photographs are presented in concert with one another, that does not prevent their being singled out for individual consideration. Their presentation at Golden Gallery is understated and ‘traditional.’ Is this a vain attempt at neutrality? Another “wretched simulacrum...?”

Neff’s new pictures are quiet, slow. In resembling the past they do not ape it, nor are they quotational. They bear, glaringly, the disfiguring marks of their quirky digital production. Any encounter with them must first take into account the ungainly, jerry-rigged apparatus that ‘took’ them. The utility of Neff’s self-built scanner camera should be balanced against an acknowledgement of its Frankenstein’s-monster physique, and of its kinship with digital/electronic zones of production. The encroachment of this contraption – plus tripod, plus laptop – had social as well as aesthetic consequences.

Scanning is a thoroughly post-industrial function and – as in this instance – it departs fundamentally from the optical predilections of Modernism. It does not gaze, it is no window or mirror, it traverses a world that has traded windows for Windows. Its destination is not the page so much as the screen, a screen like the one used in vetting these photographs. But Neff has detoured his images from web to page and in so doing has turned the digital file into an object, one that – now printed and framed – demands its own space in the world. In terms of the photograph’s current cultural status, perhaps a stubborn, untimely demand?

As long as the photograph is not electromagnetic, it remains the first of all post-industrial objects. Even though the last vestiges of materiality are attached to photographs, their value does not lie in the thing but in the information on their surface. This is what characterizes the post-industrial: the information, and not the thing is valuable. Issues of the ownership and distribution of objects (capitalism and socialism) are no longer valid.

Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 1983

Given Flusser’s claim of the post-industrial object’s radical devaluation, it would seem that Neff has perpetrated a double about-face. Rather than adhere to the electromagnetic realm in which his images were (arguably) produced, he has willfully reassigned them to the historical state of the analog photograph. And not only that, he has insisted on recuperating their corresponding thing-ness. This is, of course, a push-pull that’s been in play since early-Modern theorizations of photography. Walter Benjamin comes to mind most prominently. But Neff’s objectification goes beyond that typical of almost all art photography in that he does so knowingly, purposefully (as opposed to passively, as parapraxis) while also attempting to retrench the photograph’s aesthetic function to its physicality.

How do Neff’s pictures differ from the vast majority of art photographs routed through scanners, computers and ink-jet printers? They do so simply, and perhaps at first, unrecognizably.

Most of today’s photographic art relies on concepts and discourse to attain wholeness. It needs the aid of an animus – in physical terms – not its own. Neff’s work is not at all ‘conceptual.’ It outdistances much contemporary photography simply by staying home, i.e. by residing in itself. Is this a claim of immanence? A return to the discipline-specific fiefdoms of Modernism? No. The work’s aim is to – quite radically, today – remand the photograph’s agency to its physicality, to drown the chatter of language-based discourse in the richness of the image. The mode of engagement with these photographs should be pictographic rather than linguistic. Their connotators are shape, affect, mood. Their relationship to discourse is both pre- and post-linguistic. They ‘mean’ before language can engage them; they mean, most powerfully, in that end zone where language fails them. Look at what’s stubbornly in them – these pictures who wait patiently for the wisely thoughtless viewer. Try to avoid the meta, where we have spent too much time of late. Stick with denotation doggedly, at least long enough to forestall facile, ever-at-the-ready, art-speak spin. Meta-phor will arrive in due time; don’t harry it; don’t slap it on.

Roland Barthes has noted that Art is a form in which one focuses on the signifier, rather than, as per usual, the signified. Flusser in a sense, seconds this...

It is not the world out there that is real, nor is the concept within the camera’s program – only the photograph is real. The program of the world and the camera are only preconditions for the image, possibilities to be realized. We are dealing here with a reversal of the vector of significance. It is not the significance that is real but the signifier, the information, the symbol...

Once one lingers with the bodies of Neff’s photographs, one might note in their simplicity a no longer familiar queerness. Their human subjects are overwhelmingly male and scanned with a patient, immediate intimacy. The scanner’s slow traversals of places and bodies give the images a haunting stillness, reminiscent of Atget. Time passed here, within the image, without having been peremptorily fixed. The scanner’s tortured distortions serve to acknowledge the productive process, while introducing a touch of woundedness. (Note: While these are metaphoric qualities, they reside firmly in the image’s physicality.) These are not qualities associated with today’s dominant ‘queer art’ which is overwhelmingly based in pop and web cultures. In this regard Neff has taken a digital commonplace and turned it against itself. Rather than producing art derived from the digital world, he has maimed the digital apparatus and forced it to produce *as if* the photographic index were still with us. His pictures have the appearance of the past but they are in no way nostalgic. Having first handicapped his foe, the apparatus, Neff has gone on to use it against its programmed nature, as Flusser has endorsed. In addition, Neff’s photographs are all made using available light, a photographic environment miles away from the show biz and studio worlds that inspire most young queer artists. The result is not business as usual but rather a usual-appearing project that radically departs from the discursive dependencies of so much contemporary art, while recapturing the affective world of a queer master like Peter Hujar.

Postscript

Is there not perhaps a telling parallel between the distance separating the contemporary art work from its discursive spin – its life support – and that which separates social, corporeal human life from the virtual ‘world’ which increasingly upstages and usurps it? The spin-dependent Art consumer has fallen head first into the maw of the Apparatus which now actualizes Postmodern theorizing to perfection. The simulacrum, once glimpsed from the wrong end, is not, it now seems, a copy of a past Real or even an imagined one. It is this virtual world – of our own making and bidding – which more and more engulfs us, *makes us*.

While Neff’s photographs cannot, alone, undo this predicament, their eschewal of discursive props and their quiet insistence on imaging an intimate affect-rich world are a subtle but firm reminder that – here and there – now and then – things are *still different*.

– Doug Ischar

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