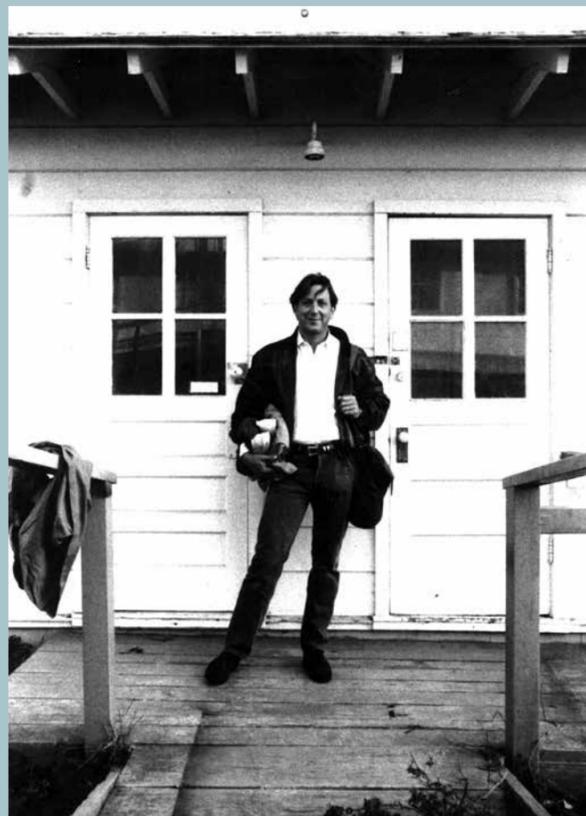


Whose American Dream?

(Somewhere Between



Pretext
and
Subtext)

Philip Gefter

In the mid-1980s, Larry Sultan had a studio just over the Golden Gate Bridge at the southern tip of Marin County, California. The Headlands Center for the Arts had converted several old military barracks into artists' studios and granted him a large second-story room with wood plank floors, a high ceiling, and two sizeable windows with a direct view of Rodeo Beach. Sunlight danced on the walls.

I lived in Sausalito then, a recent refugee from New York. Larry was head of the photography program at the San Francisco Art Institute and had hired me as an adjunct faculty member—the beginning of our virtually familial lifelong friendship. Maybe once a week I would drive over to his studio for an afternoon visit. At the time Larry was working on his series *Pictures from Home* (1983–91), a component of which consists of hundreds of still frames he had chosen from old home movies made by his parents during his childhood in Los Angeles in the 1950s. Pinned to the wall of his studio were small prints of the film stills assembled in a tidy grid above his worktable. I'd walk in and he would be standing there staring at the grid, sipping a little scotch, moving a few pictures around, having himself some fun.

We might talk for a while about the placement of one picture next to another, the cinematic rhythm of the grid, the psychological clues residing in the scavenged record of his childhood, or even whether this kind of personal documentation had any cultural relevance at all. Then, invariably, we would head out for a late-afternoon hike on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific and sit there for a while, the waves crashing against the boulders below, the vastness of the ocean and the distant horizon an open platform for our free-floating conversations. Sometimes we plumbed the deeply personal, at others the wildly theoretical, but by the time the sun was levitating just above the horizon line, our serious musings had happily devolved into a bunch of goofy laughter.

One day, in particular, we were talking about intelligence—what composes it, how it's manifest, agreeing that academic aptitude alone is not what propels civilization forward. I wondered aloud if all great ideas didn't have some fundamental emotional source, like the Wright brothers' impulse to fly, for example. Larry then said something that stopped me in my tracks: "Isn't imagination really the final measure of intelligence?" It was the most obvious thing in the world—and revelatory—but it had never occurred to me before. He seemed always to have such observations, casually offered, as if in an afterthought, and, because of it, I always found myself learning something when I was with him.

Sultan's family, friends, colleagues, and students would all agree that he was charming, philosophical, generous, socially conscious, and politically engaged, but if I were to distill his essence to only two words, they would be "playful" and "poetic." Larry's innocence was the source of his imagination—the ultimate measure of his intelligence. "Innocence," wrote Lisette Model, the legendary

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photographer, “is one of the highest forms of being and ignorance is one of the lowest.”¹

A great deal of intellectual rigor drove Sultan’s art making; he was a disciplined artist who worked all the time, but never was he on more fertile ground than when he allowed himself to roam his mind in the afternoon, sitting in his studio, getting lost in an Ornette Coleman riff, watching a beam of sunlight as it inched across the wall. Because his art derived from his way of being and the daily experience with which he made sense of the world, I think about what his different bodies of work signify about him personally, how they reflect his evolution as an artist, and how his persistent inquiry about the medium of photography engaged a dialogue with the art-making practices of his time.

Sultan’s work—his discipline and practice—was an exploration



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of the photographic image in formal terms and its implications in cultural terms. He was interested in the narrative complexities of the photograph and also its visual structure. And yet, with keenly solemn intention, he managed a playfulness about his artistic concerns, riffing on the conventional and predictable, poking at the anatomy of form itself to see if there were other ways of making a picture, telling a story, thinking about the world, imparting meaning. Ultimately, though, underlying the conceptual inquiries about form, content, and meaning so evident in all of his work, he was telling stories about who we are—as well as about who he was.

In the early 1970s, while in graduate school at the San Francisco Art Institute, Sultan met Mike Mandel, a fellow classmate, with whom he began a collaboration of conceptually based public artworks that would continue for another thirty years. Both had come of age in Southern California in the 1960s and had gotten stoned like so many others of their generation.² The glamour machinery of Hollywood loomed large in proximity to their middle-class suburban adolescence in the neighboring San Fernando Valley, perhaps casting in heightened relief the cultural hypocrisies that eventually prompted the national student rebellions of the era. “In 1972, my own escape from the suburbs of my youth was fresh enough to count, in my mind, as an act of rebellion,” Larry wrote.³ While the celluloid version of the American dream was make-believe, the media was complicit in perpetrating the lie. As art students, recognizing a discrepancy between the cultural status quo and the way they experienced the world, Sultan and Mandel set about giving form to that incongruity in a kind of perceptual burlesque. Their first public artworks appeared on a series of commercial billboards donated to them as artists. With earnest preparation and deadpan wit, they paired enigmatic images with inexplicable text in a masquerade—and mockery—of the advertising form: on one billboard in downtown San Francisco, they presented an image of three oranges on fire and the accompanying words, “Oranges on fire.” A later billboard in Boulder, Colorado, presented an image of an atomic-bomb test, the rising mushroom cloud framed by the words, “Ooh la la!”

To borrow from the lexicon of postmodern terminology that would not surface for several years, their billboard art deconstructed and recontextualized a visual platform on which the public had come to expect brand-name products. In fact, another later billboard of theirs succinctly portrayed the transaction between the advertiser and its audience with pictures of people holding cigarettes and text that got right to the point: “We make you us.” Indeed! For the billboard pieces, Sultan and Mandel might have taken their cues from a 1973 book, *Subliminal Seduction*, by Wilson Bryan Key, with an introduction by Marshall McLuhan, author of the earlier *The Medium Is the Message*, both book titles and theses, in effect, fueling the absurdist strategy employed by these “two guys from Van Nuys”⁴—hijacking the medium and scrambling the (subliminal) message. To strike the playful note once again, it is not a stretch to say that the two young artists had turned the proverbial stoned mindfuck into a whimsical artistic gesture of Duchampian proportion.

In fact, Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel might be considered the Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray of the Pictures Generation era, updating that Dada duo’s antic humor with their collaborative conceptual billboards, their later installation projects, and, above all, their masterpiece, *Evidence* (1977), a stunningly simple, albeit

labor-intensive, exercise in recontextualization that challenged the foundation of canonical thinking about photography in the same way Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) had challenged the meaning of art.

Evidence is a book of black-and-white pictures culled by the two artists from the archives of government agencies, public utilities, university laboratories, and private corporations. The photographs had been made to document actual fires, land sites, crime scenes, product testing, and scientific experimentation. In *Evidence*, the pictures are removed from their context of origin and printed, one to a page, without caption information. Individually, the pictures take on surrealist properties subject to endless narrative interpretation; collectively, the sequencing creates a running narrative with no coherent story. Since the pictures so closely resemble the black-and-white documentary images that came to define art photography in the 1970s, *Evidence* was among the early postmodern works to contest the growing acceptance of photography as art, photographer as artist-author, photographic documentation as fact, and the truth-telling capability of the medium as unwavering.

Robert Heinecken, a Los Angeles artist whose work posed many challenges to "the photograph" throughout the 1960s and 70s, was an undeniable influence on Sultan and Mandel. One can also see the 1920s Dada posture of opposition in their collaborative projects. In particular, though, they built on the countercultural nose-thumbing impulses of the Fluxus artists of the 1960s, despite the fact that they may not even have been aware of the movement until later. The deadpan irreverence of *Evidence*, however, gets at a deeper truth about the veracity of the photographic image: just because a photograph presents information with the look of (f)actual reality does not mean that what it presents is true. Many pictures in the book present artificial situations intended for observation and study, yet without context and information, the gap between the photographed *pre-text* and the emergent *sub-text* asserts itself in the images as its own underlying message.

By the late 1970s, in his early thirties, Sultan was ready to explore concerns of his own as an artist. He returned to a project he had started before graduate school, initially photographing blind people learning to swim. Now he took it up again as a more serious inquiry, photographing underwater during swimming classes of varying types at public pools in the San Francisco Bay Area. Larry cited Jean Vigo's 1931 short film, "Taris," about a champion swimmer, as one of his five favorite films, "a masterpiece of magic realism," he said, responding to an inquiry from Focus Features. "What might have been a straightforward depiction of a great swimmer becomes, in Vigo's camera, a haunting meditation on a white body in inky water. The scenes shot

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underwater are breathtakingly graceful and strange.”⁵

Swimmers, a series of color photographs made between 1978 and 1982, constitutes Sultan’s plunge into the unconscious. The work represents a kind of Jungian journey in search of his own artistic imperatives, as opposed to the more cerebral and theoretical posture that drove his collaborative work with Mandel. Going underwater, literally, he was freeing himself for access to his more archetypal artistic impulses. It made him vulnerable; he became self-conscious about the painterly quality of abstraction and distortion in the *Swimmers* pictures; he feared they were too beautiful, self-indulgent, and, perhaps, irrelevant to the art making of the period.

Whenever Larry spoke of his confusion or doubt, which was



not uncommon, I liked to invoke his astrological sign, Cancer, a water sign, and joke that he had simply taken a dive into the ocean of his deeper emotions, swimming around near the bottom where he felt most at home. Years later, Dru Donovan, his former student, studio assistant, and good friend, described the qualities that made him such a compelling teacher: “He mixed wisdom with doubt and critical intellect with vulnerability and honesty.”⁶

The pictures in *Swimmers* foreground an essential perceptual property of the photographic image: water is a volume through which objects appear altered to the eye, in opposition to the optical clarity of a photographic lens; it creates a dislocation in the viewer, at once calming and unsettling. In one picture, a young boy whose full body is

vertical to the picture plane floats freely underwater as if weightless. Something about the image seems prenatal, primordial, virtually amniotic, as if the figures were floating in a preconscious state before birth. Perhaps this body of work is what enabled Larry to give birth to himself as a mature artist.

At the time, Sultan was reluctant to stand firmly behind *Swimmers* as a viable body of work, but his confusion may have led him to his next project: *Pictures from Home*, begun in 1983, was a methodical exploration of his own childhood through an almost forensic scrutiny of his family. Larry’s parents personified a kind of Jewish diaspora (from New York to Los Angeles) in the late 1940s during a wave of postwar optimism that fueled the pursuit of the American dream. *Pictures from Home*, a personal opus with considerable cultural scope, presents a combination of the still images culled from his family’s home movies, contemporary photographs Larry made of his parents in their affluent retirement community near Palm Springs, and conversations he recorded with them, not only about their memories and expectations, but also about the act of being documented itself. He entered a paradoxical relationship to the project, wondering how to navigate his role as a “subject in the drama rather than a witness,”⁷ an edge he managed to straddle, finally, with sustained artistic balance. The Museum of Modern Art in New York displayed a wall of the film stills in the 1989 show *California Photography: Remaking Make-Believe*, and, that same year, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibited a more complete version of the series.⁸ Arguably, *Pictures from Home* would become the defining project of his career.

“Weaving together my parents’ snapshots, film stills, business archives, and then my pictures of them was very much influenced by *Evidence*,” he explained in a 2008 interview. “The difference of course is that my own pictures figure predominately in *Pictures from Home* and stand in contest to the image/artifacts of my parents. But similar to *Evidence* the intentions of the project are to push at and extend notions of documentary practice.”⁹

The scope of the project reflects Sultan’s underlying fascination with storytelling. In this case, it is the story of his parents’ migration to California: their personal odyssey in establishing an outwardly comfortable life together, the values with which they raised their children to conform to an American standard of success, and their conclusions about whether or not they had attained a utopian ideal—all in simultaneous narratives unfolding in several forms at once.

“It is always a mysterious thing, why one does what they do,” Larry said about what motivated him to make *Pictures from Home*. “But, in 1983, a number of outside influences helped me to come to this project. The Republicans had hijacked the family and turned it into an ideological tool—‘family values.’ I felt the family they were talking about was quite oppressive. The family is one of the most complicated,

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unnerving institutions, and, yet, it is one of the last institutions most of us believes in.”¹⁰

Today, *Pictures from Home* is a document of one married couple that falls in place in a legacy of important literary, cinematic, and musical works anatomizing American family life: *Trouble in Tahiti*, an opera by Leonard Bernstein first performed in 1952, portrays a day in the life of a married couple with a young child in any upper-middle-class enclave in America, its choral refrain borrowing from the optimistic advertising jingles of early television; *Too Far to Go: The Maples Stories*, by John Updike, is a collection of short stories, written over twenty-four years and published as a book in 1979, about Richard and Joan Maple, a suburban New England couple, from the beginning of their marriage through their divorce; and *An American Family*, the television documentary series about the Loud family of Santa Barbara, shown on public television in 1973. *An American Family* was another film Sultan cited among his favorites: “That the representation of someone else’s life in all its vivid and banal specificity could not only be interesting but bring to mind my own family life was an incredible revelation—one that gave me reassurance and courage over the nine years that I photographed mine in the 1980s.”¹¹

Pictures from Home brought Sultan to the subject of his next body of work, *The Valley* (1998–2003), in which he documented pornographic film production in suburban homes rented out for the occasion in the San Fernando Valley, where he grew up. It was a running joke between us that the time Larry spent contemplating his childhood in *Pictures from Home* got him as far as puberty. Still, *The Valley* is a serious contemplation of an existential impulse (sex) in the context of late capitalism (money), animated by the artifices/edifices of the American dream (happiness).

For *The Valley*, Larry returned to the neighborhood of his own adolescence, where his sexuality had formed in the American suburb, an alienating place in which sexual arousal surfaces at the most confusing moments. “Lazy afternoons are interrupted not by noisy children but by the uncontrollable desires of delivery boys, baby sitters, coeds and cops,” Larry wrote about his experience while making this body of work. “They crowd in the master bedrooms and spill out onto the kitchen floors and onto the patios and into the pools that look just like our neighbors’ pools, like our pool. And by photographing this I’m planted squarely in the terrain of my own ambivalence—that rich and fertile field that stretches out between fascination and repulsion, desire and loss. I’m home again.”¹²

Narratives mount in Sultan’s pictures of porn actors feigning desire for the camera as he pulls back the curtain on the charade.¹³ The deeper complexity of this work, however, comes from his

depiction of the layers of fabrication intrinsic to the act of image making, stepping back to photograph not the sex act so much as the suburban context in which the actors perform for the camera—upholstered couches in carpeted living rooms, backyard pool decks with lounge chairs and barbecue pits, wallpapered bedrooms lined with stuffed toys. Tropes of the American dream are in evidence here, juxtaposed in a double-edged voyeurism: titillation from naked women and kitchen counters—the naughty and the sanitized—and the artist’s critical distance on an industry that monetizes native desire.

One picture, *Sharon Wild* (2001), presents a classical figure with beautiful proportions and a porcelain cast to her skin, sitting undressed on the edge of a bed with arms folded across her chest—the



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Hitchcock blonde gone bad. I can imagine Larry standing with his camera in the doorway of that suburban bedroom in the San Fernando Valley, the resonance of his own parents’ bedroom summoning the sixteen-year-old in him all over again. He would riff on the idea of a leggy blonde sitting at the edge of his parents’ bed, the thrill and intimidation that might have conjured his own sexual fantasies as a teenager. But I suspect that Larry, the adult photographer in that doorway, also imagined the scene as a roadside motel room somewhere outside Vegas, say, the atmosphere crackling with sexual tension and emotional innuendo and a variety of other plotlines that drew immediate reference from the noir films of Nicholas Ray or the stories of Raymond Carver—even as he stood there reading the social

implications of the scene in obligatory postmodern terms.

Still, Sharon sits there in bra and panties, looking at the camera tentatively, with vulnerability, her arms folded elegantly, self-protectively. Larry had a sixth sense with which he could read the emotional frequency of a friend or a stranger, regardless of what was being presented. In the case of *Sharon Wild*, Larry saw beyond the hard-bitten porn actress, more exposed in the intimacy of a quiet moment in front of a stranger's camera than when she was performing sex acts before the cast and crew. "In *The Valley*, I wasn't interested in pornography as a phenomenon," Larry said in 2008, "but in how it uses domesticity as a narrative. The sex industry can be such a tired, worn-out subject, but when it's imported into kitchens and dining rooms of a middle-class suburban home, something new opens up. At least for me it did."¹⁴

The projects that define Sultan's career probe the narrative possibilities—and limitations—of photography, as well as the longing summoned by—and the artifice mitigating—a presiding American dream. His work intentionally hovers in the ambiguities between fact and fiction, raising questions about whether a made-up story might actually pose a greater truth. His domestic scenes allude to the spontaneous moments they are staged to emulate, but, once again, the balance of pretext and subtext is what he was really aiming for. While he photographed real-life situations, the degrees of staging nod, perhaps, to the deceptions of advertising. His work falls in place with several other photographers exploring the parameters of the staged document in the 1980s, among them Tina Barney and Philip-Lorca diCorcia. They, too, documented real-life circumstances even as they arranged the lighting and adjusted their subjects to better tell the story. While the moment is not spontaneous, the circumstances are authentic.

Homeland, the series Sultan began in 2006, was completed soon before he died, in 2009. Once again he returned to the California suburb, this time to explore notions of home, family, and aspirations of the good life slammed up against the immigrant experience in the land of opportunity. Larry hired immigrant laborers who assembled every morning in strip-mall parking lots for daily jobs in construction. He employed them by day as photographic models in a variety of activities situated against the backdrop of the "promised land." This work departs from his previous series in that he staged actual workers in artificial scenes. These immigrant workers had come to the United States not to make a home for themselves—while their labor helped to construct an American form of utopia in the suburbs of California, they came to the United States only to make enough money to send back home to their families in Mexico or Central America. "I direct these men's actions and gestures while drawing from multiple

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sources: an amalgam of my own childhood wanderings in this landscape as well interpretations of their experiences as exiles," Sultan wrote about *Homeland* in 2009. "The resulting dramas are small and mundane in nature: carrying food to a potluck, stringing lights on a tree, or walking to a waiting car. They are routines and rituals related to place and domesticity, alluding to the poignancy of displacement and the longing for home."¹⁵

Homeland is a continuation of the consistent themes running through Sultan's bodies of work: a contemplation of the many facets of home; an inquiry about longing and belonging and about a version of the American dream, whether utopian ideal or, in this last body of work, a coaxed, Thomas Kinkade-like mirage; and an examination of the photographic image as a narrative form and a visual metaphor. *Pictures from Home*, *The Valley*, and *Homeland* form a trilogy centered



in the type of California suburb in which he grew up, observed by an artist whose concerns are formal, but also existential. Again, the balance of *pretext*—what is presented—and *subtext*—what is perceived or felt—is a tension that runs through all of Larry Sultan’s work.

Larry often referred to his own childhood in Southern California as a formative experience that determined the essential themes in his work: “As a child, my parents hired a decorator, and she painted a grape tree in the living room and put rubber grapes on its tendrils,” he told an interviewer in 2008. “She also put gold leaf on a Picasso print so that it looked like Picasso had painted in gold. We had shag carpets, and our living room was one that no one went into. We lived in that kind of situation where our family house was a theater. Family life is already a stage—home is situated as a symbol of the good life and an extension of our desired identities. There is desire and nostalgia that can manifest itself in sliding glass doors or flagstone fireplaces.”¹⁶

In his lifetime, Larry, with his wife, Kelly, created a way of living tailored distinctly to their sense of a good life and consistent with their desired identities. As long as I knew the Sultans, the road to their house was Lucky Drive in Marin County, California, ending in a most unusual cul-de-sac. After parking your car at the end of the street, you embarked on a half-mile hike down a boardwalk past an array of idiosyncratic houses on either side. Their house was at the very end. Larry and Kelly, and their sons, Max and Will, along with various dogs over the years, were a kind, zany bunch whose lives had style—spare, original, elegant. The entire house seemed to float on water. In the last years of his life, Larry’s studio was next door, where, when he worked, he could look out at the inlet running behind the house, or at the fortress of San Quentin prison across the Bay, or out front at the open marshlands with egrets and wrens and a distant view of the San Francisco skyline and a nearer silhouette of Mount Tamalpais against the western sky. Once again, sunlight danced on the walls.

Sultan’s photographs possess a quality of hard-edged California light, heightened color, optical precision, and, often, domestic familiarity that, together, comprise a visual signature so influential that several early-twenty-first-century films—such as the Coen brothers’ *A Serious Man*, Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation*, Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Punch Drunk Love*, and Tamra Jenkins’s *The Savages*—borrow from that Larry Sultan look. Whenever I walked down the boardwalk and entered his house, I was reminded that this is where that Larry Sultan light comes from; this is where he hones his precision-cut insight. The home he created with his wife, Kelly, in no way resembled the suburban theater of his childhood investigated in his many bodies of work; it was the home he had always wanted.

Endnotes

1. Lisette Model, in “The Snapshot,” special issue, *Aperture* 19, no. 1 (1974): 6.

2. Todd Gitlin, the American sociologist and author of *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, was interviewed by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1988 when his book was published and offered a succinct explanation for the popularity of marijuana among the youth of the 1960s: “Todd Gitlin will never be president,” the article begins. “He says he liked marijuana. He liked all the ‘jabbering and giggling,’ and he liked the way his taste buds drew him to M&Ms and whipped cream. He liked how the lyrics of Dylan’s ‘Mr. Tambourine Man’ seemed to grow more profound, and he liked how the afternoons and evenings seemed to stretch. I don’t think there was anything ignoble about smoking dope, about testing the bounds of human experience, about doing wacky things,” he said. “In a way, there was something very American about it, dreaming the

impossible dream, taking chances. It was utopian, it was about innocence—the American delight as well as the American tragedy when it’s pushed too far.” Dick Polman, “Nixing the ‘60s,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 10, 1988.

3. Larry Sultan, “Bill Owens,” *Bomb* 77 (Fall 2001), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2423/>.

4. Mandel and Sultan were both brought up in the vicinity of the Van Nuys neighborhood of Los Angeles, but did not meet until after they moved away. “Two guys from Van Nuys” is a playful locution they conceived as the title of the book about their collaborative work. Charlotte Cotton, “Two Guys from Van Nuys,” in *Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel*, ed. Thomas Zander (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2012), 8–39.

5. Larry Sultan, in “Larry Sultan’s Five Favorite Films,” Focus Features website, http://www.focusfeatures.com/article/larry_sultan.

6. Dru Donovan, quoted in Jason Fulford, *Dispatches*, *Aperture* 210 (Spring 2013): 21.

7. Larry Sultan, *Pictures from Home* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 18.

8. Sultan finished *Pictures from Home* in 1991; the series was first published in its entirety in 1992 (see note 7 above) on the occasion of an exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art.

9. Larry Sultan, interview by Ben Sloat, *Big Red & Shiny* 1, no. 81 (April 27, 2008), http://www.bigredandshiny.com/cgi-bin/BRS.cgi?section=article&issue=81&article=A_CONVERSATION_WITH_2773725.

10. Larry Sultan, interview by Drew Johnson, December 16, 2003, transcript, The Oakland Museum Oral History Project.

11. Sultan, in “Larry Sultan’s Five Favorite Films.”

12. Larry Sultan, *Katherine Avenue*, (Göttingen: Steidl; Hanover:

Kestnergesellschaft; Cologne: Galerie Thomas Zander, 2010), 57.

13. This description regarding *The Valley* echoes language I used in a 2010 tribute written soon after Sultan’s death. Philip Gafter, “A Tribute to Larry Sultan,” *Dear Dave*, no. 7 (2010), <http://deardavemagazine.com/issue/seven/larry-sultan/>.

14. Sultan, interview by Ben Sloat.”

15. Sultan, *Katherine Avenue*, 95.

16. Larry Sultan, interview by Terri Whitlock, 2004, transcript, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.