

# Disfigure and Ground

Three books reveal how defacement became art in the twentieth century

BY R.C. BAKER

**T**he defacement of an image is always violent, a stand-in for the harming of flesh or obliteration of ideas. In *Ground*, photographer Bill McDowell has resurrected defaced photographs that depict rural hardship during the Great Depression, in the process revealing how formal disruption created new aesthetics for a fractious century.

It is difficult today to imagine the matrix of New Deal politics and economic desperation that gave birth to the Farm Security Administration, a federal bureaucracy that attempted to alleviate poverty through education, relocation, and other assistance to sharecroppers and tenant farmers. In the mid-1930s, the FSA's Information Division sent such photographers as Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, and Ben Shahn across the nation to bring the dire conditions of the agrarian poor to the attention of a larger public, to "show the city people what it's like to live on the farm," as one official put it. The artists returned with photographs that the historian and curator Beaumont Newhall would later characterize as beyond documentary, images calculated "not to inform us, but to move us."

Yet even a photographer of the caliber of Walker Evans — whose images from the era have come to define the hardscrabble sorrows of tenant farming — was at the mercy of the hole-punch wielded by the head of the Information Division, Roy Stryker. A Columbia-trained economist and occasional shutterbug, Stryker wanted his photographers — whom he equipped with a camera, film, an expense account, and an automobile — to convey "a sincere, passionate love of people, and respect for people." But after the dark-room workers in Washington developed the rolls of film mailed in from far-flung artists, Stryker would mercilessly "kill" any negative he felt didn't jibe with the FSA's crusade for national betterment. Conversely, he worked assiduously to get the photos he deemed worthy of New Deal ideals printed in such widely circulated magazines as *Life* and *Look*.

In Evans's image of an Alabama family on a rough-hewn porch, a girl uses a bucket for a stool and a younger boy crouches on the uneven planks, surrounded by melon rinds. Between them, a



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black hole pierces the chest of a seated older woman. McDowell (who downloaded these high-resolution images from the Library of Congress's vast New Deal archive) has enlarged the defaced photo, and the matriarch, her worry-lined face softened by the shift in scale, takes on the pensive glow of a figure in a Vermeer painting, reviving the sense of love and respect that Stryker, reviewing somewhere north of 145,000 negatives from 1935 to 1943, sometimes missed. (In a number of cases his hole-punch occasioned the literal removal of a face: A black void consumes almost the entire head of *Mr. Tronson, farmer near Whealock, North Dakota*, shot by Russell Lee in 1937.)

The compositional violence effected by

Stryker's hole-punch was undoubtedly more utilitarian than malicious, but *Ground* reminds us that government sponsorship — and judgment — of the arts was the norm worldwide in those pre-war years. In 1997, the British graphic designer and historian David King published *The Commissar Vanishes*, a visual compendium of politicians and apparatchiks who disappeared from official photographs as they fell from Stalin's favor. Whether subtly airbrushed out of a group portrait with the General Secretary or jaggedly cropped with a razor blade, these erasures often signaled literal death for those edited out of Soviet history. One chapter of King's book focuses on a massive, state-sponsored tome created by the brilliant artist

Alexander Rodchenko in 1934, chronicling ten years of Communist rule in Uzbekistan. But 1937 brought a purge of Uzbek Party leaders, and Rodchenko, tyrannized by the Stalinist concept of "personal responsibility," found himself using india ink to obliterate portraits of the liquidated bosses, lest his graphic virtuosity be seen as honoring those who had become unpersons. Like the hole through farmer Tronson's face, such disfigurements are disturbing, but even without the backstory of an artist mutilating his own work, Rodchenko's desperate brushstrokes convey chilling despair.

There's a similarly eerie quality to the landscape photographs in *Ground*. In one, what at first looks to be a black sun ➤ p18

appears to be casting misaligned shadows over a clapboard house; in another, the very stubble on the ground is punched through, the land seemingly drained of nourishment. These defaced fields resonate with another classic photography book, Richard Misrach's 1992 *Violent Legacies*. In the late 1980s, traveling through Nevada and western Utah, Misrach found something even worse than the parched landscape of the Depression-era Dust Bowl: the windswept remains of the bomb-loading pits used by crews training to drop the world's first atomic weapons on Japan. This was a project the government definitely did not want publicized in *Life*, and for over four decades these excavations awaited their fifteen minutes of infamy. Misrach's 1989 photograph *Atomic Bomb Loading Pit* shows a dark gash in the land, a grim void that echoes Stryker's ominous cancellations.

But it is Misrach's *Playboy* #38 (*Warhol*) that delivers perhaps the most meta defacement of our time. In 1988, Misrach was exploring the edge of a nuclear test range in Nevada and discovered two *Playboy* magazines that had been used for target practice by persons unknown; one had been propped against an old television set, which was also riddled with bullets. (It doesn't get more American than that.) While the Bunnies on the covers had presumably been the targets, a whole swath of popular culture is blasted on the interior — Marlboro Men, a still from *Rambo*, a portrait of Madonna. The magazines were from 1985, and one ad featured Andy Warhol shilling for Vidal Sassoon: "Hairspray for men — the art of style." By the time the *Playboys* were retrieved, Warhol was dead, having survived actually being shot in 1968 only to die from a routine operation in 1987. In Misrach's crop, Warhol's left eye is gone, the middle of his face a shredded riot of benday dots — like a victim from one of his own epochal "Disaster" paintings.

There is a weird beauty to these menacing images, a poignant absurdity that cuts through the visual overload of our age. In an interview published at the end of *Ground*, McDowell observes, "In the years since the FSA negatives were defaced, our thinking about photography (as with everything) has changed...the meaning of that black hole, as a mark, now signifies something that it didn't in the 1930s." Indeed, the ragged edge of the hole-punch attains a visceral presence that echoes Rodchenko's slashing ink strokes and Warhol's blasted visage, raw narratives heightened by abstract disruption.

#### **Ground: A Reprise of Photographs From the Farm Security Administration**

By Bill McDowell  
176 pp., Daylight Books

#### **The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia**

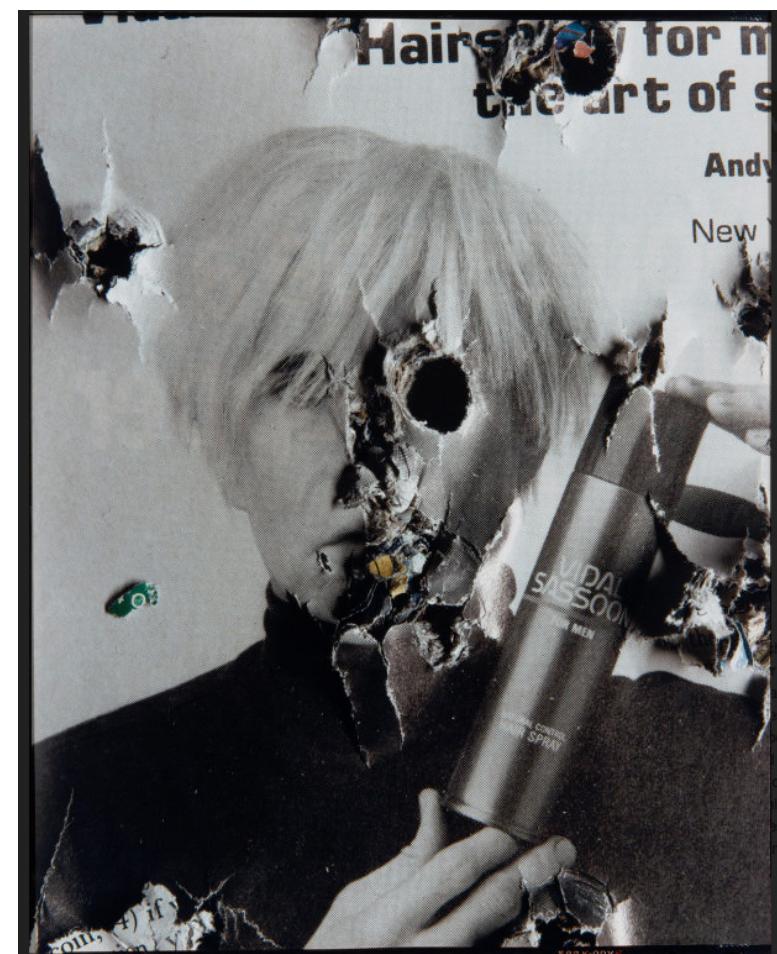
By David King  
192 pp., Metropolitan Books

#### **Violent Legacies: Three Cantos**

By Richard Misrach  
96 pp., Aperture Inc.



From Rodchenko's copy of *Ten Years of Uzbekistan*



Misrach's *Playboy* #38 (Warhol)