

# IN TRANSITION

edited by Hal Fischer

**Camerawork began in Fairfax, California in 1974, moved to San Francisco to the Folsom Street location two years later and settled into its present Twelfth Street space in 1977. In that hectic period of transition and change in 1976 and 1977 Camerawork lost its founder, went non-profit, selected a new director, developed a board of directors and moved into new quarters. The following conversation with Craig Morey, Camerawork's first appointed director; Ted Hedgpeth, current chairman of the Exhibitions Committee; and Hal Fischer, longtime supporter and occasional devil's advocate, highlights the more memorable moments of Camerawork's early days in San Francisco.**

— ED.

**Ted:** Craig, how did you get involved with Camerawork?

**Craig:** When I came out here in 1974, I had just graduated from college and had begun to have an interest in photography. To continue this interest, I went to a workshop that John Lamkin had organized through his gallery in Fairfax; it was a day at Jack Welpott and Judy Dater's house in San Anselmo. When the gallery moved to Folsom Street in 1975, I began to volunteer, helping out John when he had to go somewhere for the day.

**Ted:** How did John operate the gallery?

**Craig:** I believe at that time John's major sources of support for running the gallery, and for whatever his own needs were, came from doing these workshops. Until we established a non-profit status, the gallery and John Lamkin were really one and the same; he would use his own earnings to support the gallery, and the money that would come in for the gallery he used himself when necessary.

**Ted:** Hal, how did you get involved?

**Hal:** Initially through San Francisco State — Oliver Gagliani's graduate students had a show in the Fairfax gallery in 1975. When John moved to Folsom Street in San Francisco, I began reviewing the gallery shows on a regular basis. My involvement on the organizational side came in 1976, when John asked Donna-Lee Phillips and me to co-jury the *Eros & Photography* exhibition. We made the initial selections at Folsom Street, but as it turned out, for whatever reason, John was forced to vacate Folsom Street and decided to rent a portion of Carl Loeffler's La Mabelle space at 70 Twelfth Street for a new and larger Camerawork. *Eros & Photography*, scheduled for January 1977, was to be the first exhibition in the new space.

**Craig:** Just before the move was to occur, John had a meeting of what was ostensibly, but not legally, the board of directors. He said he wanted to make the move, but he also told us that at the same time he was going to take a sabbatical. None of us knew John well enough to know what he was going to do or when he might be back. In fact, as it turned out, what he really wanted to do was to get out of the gallery and do some other things with his life.

**Hal:** I never knew John was leaving. All I knew was that he had gone, and we were left with this gallery and with hundreds of photographs. Donna-Lee and I had pretty much made the final selections. A week prior to the show, however, the walls still weren't finished, the electricity incomplete, and no one was really sure of who was in charge. As late as an hour before the opening, we were still hanging prints. Finally, realizing we would never get all the work on the wall — and by this time people were lined up outside the door — I made the decision to hang only the bigger works, telling everyone that the smaller works would go up after the opening. Of course, this added to the disaster. People arrived who thought they were in the show only to find their work not on the wall. This was really an auspicious beginning in the new space. In retrospect, it would have been better if we had just cancelled the opening.

**Ted:** What happened next?

**Hal:** Well, this really marked the beginning of a major transitional phase. All of a sudden, Camerawork was no longer John Lamkin's solitary pursuit. There was a group of interested volunteers, and it was expanding.

**Ted:** So who took over the gallery?

**Craig:** We don't really know!

**Hal:** It was sort of spontaneous. I came up with the idea that if we could get about twenty people together, each contributing \$100, we would at least have money to see the gallery through the next six months.

**Ted:** Was anyone getting paid for anything?

**Craig:** Oh, God, no. We were just trying to cover the rent. We had no funds in the bank.

**Ted:** So, Craig, how did you take on the responsibility of running the gallery?

**Craig:** Hal and Donna-Lee talked me into it. They said I wouldn't have to do anything.

**Hal:** We told him it would be easy. He was relatively unemployed at that point anyway. We were also quite desperate (no offense to Craig), and I was a bit irritated with John for the quandary we all found ourselves in. But as soon as we had some assets, I felt it had to be made clear as to who was running the gallery, so I arranged for John to sell the gallery to us for a dollar. Frankly, I think he was pleased to see it being carried on without his having to be responsible.

**Craig:** I gave him the dollar — that was my dollar.

**Hal:** Because John had gotten print donations over the years, and some of them were relatively valuable, we had to separate his personal collection from what was the gallery's. That work became the basis of what was to be the first Camerawork auction.

**Ted:** How did the new board work?

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**Hal:** It was very unwieldy. It was clear from the beginning that there were two very distinct sets of people: the volunteers from the very early days and those of us who had gotten in later through the *Photography & Language* exhibition in 1976. It was obvious that these two factions weren't going to get along.

**Craig:** A lot of people, those who weren't primarily photographers, dropped out very quickly because they saw it wasn't going to take the direction they were interested in.

**Hal:** It was an interesting crossroads. I think if these people had stayed, and I'm speaking about people like Donna-Lee Phillips and Lew Thomas, Camerawork would have evolved differently, becoming more art oriented as opposed to focusing only on photography.

**Craig:** Because John Lamkin had come from the Wynn Bullock/Ansel Adams school of photography, there were many people who wanted Camerawork to promote a fairly traditional approach to the medium. There was no middle-ground between the two factions and no one strong enough who was willing to get the two sides to compromise. Ultimately, the arguing back and forth did force both sides to see the other position. In the end, it was not really a matter of who was right or wrong, but who had the most support and those little political things, like who had the most time, who had the most money.

**Ted:** What was Camerawork's status at that time?

**Craig:** That was another one of those areas that had remained vague the entire time I was involved with

John. I always assumed Camerawork was officially non-profit, but it actually wasn't. John's intentions were the same as if it had been non-profit, but he wasn't registered as anything and it wasn't an official business. In short, nothing was really legal. This was one of the first things we took care of. In 1977 Hal, Lionel Glaze and I drove up to Sacramento and filed the proper papers so that we could get non-profit status.

**Hal:** That was probably my last official act with Camerawork, with the exception of my role as auctioneer for the past three years.

**Craig:** The three of us who went up to Sacramento were officially the incorporating directors, and then there were the charter members, the original board which numbers between twenty and thirty.

**Ted:** Did the possibility of funding from the NEA as an alternative space have anything to do with Camerawork's direction, of keeping it away from the traditional?

**Craig:** That wasn't an important issue in 1977. We figured that with non-profit status we could get funding from the NEA and the California Arts Council. We weren't really concerned with doing something different just for the purpose of getting funded. We just assumed that we'd be able to get money because we were non-profit, and at that point you really could.

**Ted:** Was one of the premises to exhibit something that wouldn't be shown otherwise?

**Craig:** Yes, but when we meant something that wouldn't be shown otherwise, we were talking about

younger people, people who hadn't been exhibited, not necessarily people who were doing something different. We thought our mission should be to show those photographers just out of college. Showing avant garde or new wave photography just wasn't our mission.

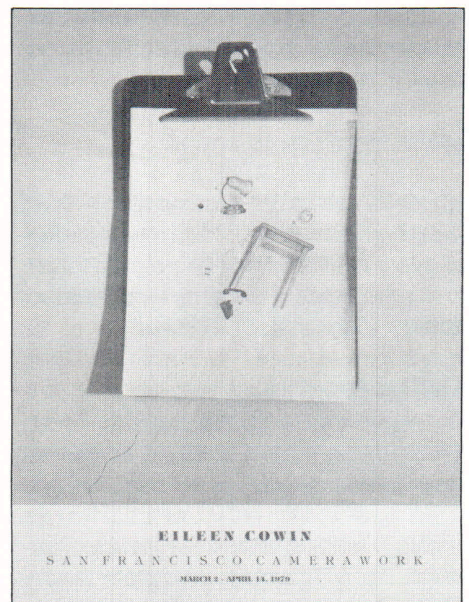
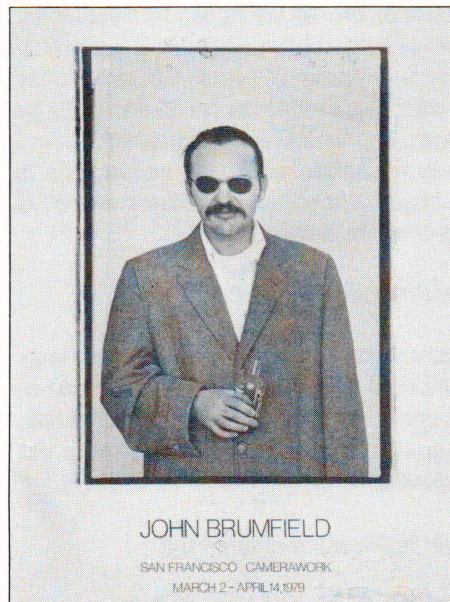
**Ted:** Do you think that changed over the period of time that you were a director?

**Craig:** The issues were always changing because the people involved were always changing. It was really a function of who was on the board, and even more than that, who came to the meetings. People would show up who hadn't been there for six months and wonder what was going on. The argument was not over whether what had happened was good or bad, but whether or not they had any say in it because they hadn't been there.

**Ted:** I guess one of my impressions was that there was a definite lack of self-criticism because of the problems of the organization itself. It was so loose that a great deal of time was taken up with figuring out how to be an organization.

**Craig:** My concerns as a director were how we were going to pay the rent, and who was going to be in the gallery when I couldn't be there, and how the next show was going to get hung, rather than what was up on the walls. I can remember walking in and out of there every day, and a month would go by, and I would realize that I hadn't even looked at the show because I was too busy filling out forms and calling people. I wasn't paying attention to what was up on the wall.

**Ted:** Hal, do you feel those early shows were success-



ful — *Eros & Photography* and *Photography & Language* for example?

**Hal:** *Photography & Language* was extremely successful, I think. The cooperation alone was astounding. Lew Thomas organized it with John Lamkin and Carl Loeffler of La Mamelle, and it was hung at both Camerawork on Folsom Street and at La Mamelle. It offered a real survey of what was being done nationally with words and images, and it gave rise to the book of the same title. *Photography & Language* is probably one of the most important photo books ever produced in California and probably one of the most important theoretical books for practicing photographers to have come out in the 1970's.

**Ted:** What do you think Camerawork contributed to the national scene?

**Craig:** It wasn't so much that it contributed, as much as it reflected what was going on. What we were showing was happening everywhere.

**Hal:** That may be true, but Camerawork did provide the organizational structure for *Photography & Language*, and it did maintain enough flexibility to allow things like the three contemporary California shows to take place in 1978. It provided an environment, and in this respect, I think it still continues to fulfill an important function. Every non-profit organization is faced with the issue of having to define its mission, while, at the same time, remaining receptive to the needs and desires of its constituency. The fact that Camerawork has survived and grown over the past ten years is in itself an indication of a certain success and relevance within the northern California photographic community. ■



R.W.F.

SAN FRANCISCO CAMERAWORK

AUGUST 22 - SEPTEMBER 23, 1978



Lanzano

SAN FRANCISCO CAMERAWORK

April 24 - June 2, 1979



JEFF GATES  
BREAST PLATES

SAN FRANCISCO CAMERAWORK

JANUARY 22 - FEBRUARY 23, 1980



NANCY FINK  
*Let's Home*

SAN FRANCISCO CAMERAWORK · AUGUST 19 - SEPTEMBER 20, 1980