

*Works from Untitled 1985-86*  
**BILL HENSON**

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# Notes on Bill Henson

by Terence Maloon

## 1. Hieroglyphs and Heterotopias

"In every new scene, which might at first seem surveyable in its uniformity or picturesque in its contrasts, but in either case intelligible, this moment of naive familiarity was followed, often definitively, by a bewildered sense, akin to a loss of balance, of once again confronting a mere stage set, and a familiar one at that, further intensified by a sense of being, here too, 'out of place'" Peter Handke.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Handke's novel-trilogy *Slow Homecoming* struck a responsive chord for Bill Henson, who felt it confirmed the direction he had taken when he embarked on his long-deferred project of photographing suburbia. The resemblance between some of Handke's visual descriptions and Henson's earlier photographs is quite striking. Time and again, Handke's sentences seem to veer out of their platitudinous ordinariness into a fathomless mystery:

"A whole newspaper spun about, opening and closing in its flight; folded, it rushed at the window in the darkness, but turned aside just in time and slowly opened ('for me'), as once more it fluttered away. Behind it grass swayed like wheat, and from the ocean came voices of a distant playground. For a moment Sorger was able to think of his child in Europe. He opened the front door and swore never to close a door again".<sup>2</sup>

Handke's sentences present the reader with a sequence of glimpses, but every statement could be taken as a *non sequitur*. Momentarily we wonder: what (if anything) holds these glimpses together? Could they be treated as a pack of verbal snapshots, reshuffled and re-presented in a different order or in different contexts? The puzzle of the novel's microstructure (the sentences) is amplified in its macrostructure: *Slow Homecoming* is a trilogy of novellas set in different locations and different times. The novellas seem connected by an 'inner relation', but it is difficult to explain how and why this impression is created. Are they merely held together by the acutely estranged, contemplative sensibility of each novella's protagonist or narrator? The fascination of Handke's writing is that it renders alienation absolutely matter-of-factly, as a more or less universal condition. This sense of all-pervasive, unconquerable alienation irradiates platitudes and commonplaces with a sort of frazzled tenderness, itself a characteristic feature of Henson's work.

Bill Henson's most recent photographic series (*Untitled 1983-1984* and *Untitled 1985-1986*) present a collection of abrupt, questionable, highly suggestive glimpses. Viewers may rapidly sense a rising anxiety: whether or how, these glimpses are connected. A prominent component in both of Henson's recent *Untitled* series is a long series of architectural images. These mark out an imaginary journey within the installation, a journey whose hypothetical duration stretches and warps the 'real time' of travelling around the exhibition, just as the vistas of Egyptian temples (or the baroque palaces in *Untitled 1983-1984*) stretch and warp the viewer's spatial sense with their tug of illusion. But are we looking

at one building, one architectural complex, or a composite of many far-flung buildings? What is the 'inner relationship' between the monuments of pharaonic Egypt and our contemporary urban landscape? What is the time-lapse between these glimpses—not necessarily in weeks or months, but possibly in centuries: for, the technological evidence apart, similar pictures could have been taken by French photographers in Egypt in the nineteenth century (Maxime Du Camp, Felix Teynard, etc).

Any two glimpses are bridged, as film-makers have long understood, by an idea of time and space. Time and space are mental constructs arising from sequential moments (glimpses, thoughts). Our sense of time and space in fiction differs quite drastically from mundane experience, but the difference is never more acute than when the work of art is a *heterotopia* (a term coined by Michel Foucault).

A *heterotopia* is a "disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite* . . . In such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all . . . Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together' . . . [Heterotopias] dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences".<sup>3</sup>

The intention to dessicate speech and stop words in their tracks is forewarned by Henson's choice of titles for his work: invariably, *Untitled*. In this respect he is at one with his precursor, the photographer he esteems above others, Robert Frank. Frank believed that "the visual impact of photographs should be such as will nullify explanation".<sup>4</sup> Yet the power of Henson's photographs does not simply consist in nullifying explanation, however much they thwart and frustrate any ultimate paraphrasing. They inflame the desire for explanation and fuel the imagination with their thematic suggestiveness.

Few of us ever experience heterotopias in all the primary, lacerating disjunctiveness Foucault describes. Most of us expect eventually to discover a common ground which will reconcile these mutually undermining glimpses. The alienated naturalism of Peter Handke's novels effectively proves how heterotopias may seem to lurk beneath the surface of the most pedestrian descriptions ("what holds these statements together?"). Moreover, something which is intelligible to one person, one culture or one historical period may assume the semblance of a heterotopia for another. An example close at hand is the friezes of religious symbols and hieroglyphics in several of Henson's Egyptian photographs. Having lost the code, being an alien to the symbolic order, each sign seems to exist for us in its own space, with no necessary relation to its neighbour. Henson's installations deliberately parallel this alienation, this break-down of the symbolic. His images are formally simple, compact and iconic, lining-up like hieroglyphs, but warding-off immediate legibility (any too transparent 'sense').

Given the prevalence of heterotopias in contemporary art<sup>5</sup>, these would have to be accounted for as a major sociological phenomenon. To me it seems clear that one of the underlying conditions or causes for their prevalence is the absolute dominance of photographic imagery over mass consciousness. Photography has an inherent tendency towards the heterotopian. Consider what Susan Sontag had to say about the

world-view constructed and confirmed by photography:

"In a world ruled by photographic images, all borders ('framing') seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else: all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently. (Conversely, anything can be made adjacent to anything else). Photography reinforces a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units of an apparently infinite number—as the number of photographs that could be taken of anything is unlimited. Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of mystery".<sup>6</sup>

Henson's *Untitled 1985-1986* could be construed as an expose of precisely these large-scale, long-term effects of photography—its fragmenting impact on the suburban landscape and on the way the majority of people experience their environment, its penetration (via TV, advertising, magazines, pornography, etc) into mass consciousness to the point where photography could actually be said to have colonised the subconscious.

Most of the stereotyped features of Henson's suburbia have been put into circulation by photography, or they resemble photography in being infinitely reproducible (the illuminated Handyway signs, BP stanchions, McDonalds restaurants, the Tweety cartoon character silkscreened on the pyjama top of a sleeping girl). The houses of the eastern suburbs of Melbourne are indistinguishable from those found almost anywhere within the newer, more affluent sections of a certain cultural and economic sphere—in Peru, South Africa, Korea, California, even in Egypt. Photography promotes, then bears witness to the ubiquity of these stereotypes.

The enlargement, distortion of colour and deepening of tone when Henson's photographs are printed results in a 'drop out' of visual information. As a result, the motifs are condensed, generalised—as if they were mental images or mnemonics. Like his precursor Robert Frank, Henson tries to capture phenomena more or less the way we experience them—almost never in crystal clear high fidelity, but usually inattentively, in a glance of automatic recognition, distorted by some emotion, distracted by some detail, whisking past a moving vehicle, etc.

Henson felt increasingly compelled to "treat real landscape as if it were a dreamscape". The loss of detail in many of these images attenuates their 'reality', establishing suburbia as a psychological environment more than a concrete, physical one. To a considerable extent, this distancing of 'the real' (of the concrete, the tactile, the particular, the interconnected) is due to the prior history and cumulative influence of photography itself: however unusual or exotic a sight may be, we invariably think we have seen it, or something like it, before—in travel posters, movies, other photographs. Photography's colonisation of the subconscious has resulted in a diminished sense of the primacy and specificity of first-hand experience. In effect, it has contributed to the general withdrawal of the real—to the point that, as Peter Handke pointed out, we experience even our own neighbourhood touristically.

The introverted expression of all the people we encounter in Henson's pictures seems to express a withdrawal of, or from, the real. They are

sunk in thought, fast asleep or (in *Untitled 1983-1984*) under the influence of drugs. How would things appear through their far-away eyes? They would probably appear like these neighbouring photographs: unfocused, bleak, phantasmagoric, dissociated.

The characteristic pathos and melancholy in all Henson's work arises from the fact that the viewer is always made to feel excluded, solitary and (in a sense) superfluous. The people we encounter in his photographs always look beautiful, but if they exert an erotic allure, it always seems unconscious, unresponsive and unseeing. Henson quoted me a passage from Canetti's notebooks: "Beauty . . . can't be loved, but you can long for it. It is richer in the mysterious ways of remoteness than anything you have within yourself".<sup>7</sup> Does this equation of beauty with remoteness mean, therefore, that the disintegration of public spaces, the dissolution of social bonds and the "inner migration" undertaken by whole populations will result in a heightened sense of beauty for everyone? Taken at face value, it sounds like a mad question. However, it is worth asking: why is it that these pictures of social deserts seem so beautiful as well as so true?

## 2. *The Baroque, the Crowd, the Dark Side of the Moon*

"How often in the overflowing Streets,  
Have I gone forward with the Crowd, and said  
Unto myself, the face of every one  
That passes by me is a mystery.  
Thus have I look'd, nor ceas'd to look, oppress'd  
By thoughts of what, and whither, when and how,  
Until the shapes before my eyes became  
A second-sight procession, such as glides  
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams".  
Wordsworth.<sup>8</sup>

For more than ten years, off and on, Bill Henson took thousands of photographs of crowds. While preoccupied with these crowd pictures, he changed the way he presented his work in exhibitions, shifting attention away from the individual image to the installation as a whole. It may have struck him that pedestrians poised at a kerb, with their stressful, heavily shadowed faces, looked like mourners gathered at a graveside. His photographic installation at the *Australian Perspecta 1981* exhibition in Sydney created a continuous horizon of these brooding, unseeing bystanders. They huddled together, encircling a narrow room as if marking out a grave—a common grave for everyone who stepped into their midst.

The literary reference usually cited in connection with his crowd photographs is Elias Canetti's magnificently idiosyncratic book *Crowds and Power*, but one can comb through this book in vain for any description to match the sense of desolation in Henson's pictures. According to Canetti, people "free themselves from their burdens of distance" when they merge into a crowd.<sup>9</sup> Henson's photographs absolutely contradict this notion. He deliberately chooses to photograph people who have come together accidentally, without any common interest or purpose. Strictly speaking, these aggregations are masses rather than crowds, and Baudrillard's description of the mass seems to fit them better than Canetti's: "The mass is what remains when the social has been completely removed".<sup>10</sup>

There is no crowd, no mass to be seen in Henson's *Untitled 1985-1986* sequence, but many features of crowds, crowding and crowdedness persist despite the absence of an explicit image. Henson's pictures

gather in a throng and multiply a supplement of competing ideas which jostle in the mind's eye. No image in this series claims to be anything more than a glimpse, one among a multitude of glimpses. There is a consistent waywardness of focus in individual photographs, not to mention the overall difficulty of focussing on *Untitled 1985-1986* as a whole.

The 'baroque' features of Henson's style also hint at the crowd as a subliminal image, for baroque art and architecture responded directly to the historical resurgence of crowds in European cities. In the 17th century, the first large-scale urban planning projects of modern times were initiated to accommodate crowds and facilitate traffic (St Peter's Square in Rome is the best known example).

Henson's photographs share formal features of baroque painting which seem to allude to the turbulence and mobility of the crowd—"the flashing in and out of colours which can scarcely be localised on individual objects"<sup>11</sup> exemplified in works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, Velasquez and Rubens. Likewise, baroque architecture seems to respond to the crowd with its visual restlessness and resolution in an effect of massiveness, where "the individual element was deprived of its value and force, and structural members were multiplied and lost their independent mobility, imprisoned in the material".<sup>12</sup>

Presumably, Henson is also intrigued by the fact that baroque painting displays the earliest instances of 'camera-vision': we have to consider Vermeer's paintings part of the pre-history of photography, since he is known to have used a *camera obscura*. Was the acquaintance of 17th century artists with the *camera obscura* responsible for the peculiarities of baroque naturalism—the fitful, fragmentary, disconnected brush-strokes which produce a coherent illusion only if we view the painting from beyond a certain distance? As soon as the viewer transgresses this minimum distance, Vermeer's *View of Delft*, Rembrandt's wizened features and the Infanta Margarita's glittering brocades decompose into an inexplicable shambles.

To approximate camera-vision, baroque painters had to paint exactly what they *saw* and forget what they *knew*. Velasquez had to forget that those silvery lustres were attached to a fabric; Rembrandt had to forget that the small cusp of golden light piercing the gloom was part of his own eye-socket. Viewed from a certain distance, everything *not* defined in their paintings is implied and falls into place in a powerful illusion. Yet the illusion is manifestly fallible: it is a conjuring trick. It exists as a dramatic contrast to its nemesis, the close-up. We can speculate about the effect of camera-vision on these artists and how much it contributed to the apparent dissociation of sensibility, the alienation of perception from knowledge, the decomposition of the means of representation into a welter of fragments which do not seem to heed the integrity and independence of objects.

But baroque naturalism was more than just an eccentric offshoot in terms of its technique. It expressed an attitude to life, a melancholy awareness of the mortality of appearances. We witness in those paintings phenomena emerging out of chaos and collapsing back into it. The darkness in Rembrandt's late works is a womb and tomb of appearances.

Darkness became an index of psychological depth in Rembrandt's work, yet there is no mistaking the tragic dimension of his soulful inwardness: Rembrandt became the historical prototype for 'the lonely artist', defining himself and his sitters as the antipodes to the 17th century crowd.

Bill Henson's photographs re-enact the dramatic disintegration of baroque paintings. Type 'C' prints disperse the image over the paper in a fine spray of coloured particles and even at close quarters the surface retains an illusion of depth. Darkness functions like a musical key in Henson's series, so that the waxing and waning of light, the momentary conjunctions, the flickers of sensation, the faces and places always seem to occur under the aegis of darkness. The 'key' of darkness facilitates Henson's metaphorical leap to ancient Egypt, with its vast, gloomy architecture and elaborate cults of the dead.

The horizontal, serial arrangement of Henson's photographs emphasises the passage of time, reminding us that each frame is a moment snatched out of flux. We have adopted photography as an ally of memory, in the vain hope that it will check the depredations of time and help us cheat death. In this regard, photography serves a desire which is—quite literally—as old as the pyramids. As Roland Barthes pointed out, photographs serve an analogous function in modern society to monuments in ancient times:

"Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that the least thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument. But by making the (mortal) Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of 'what has been', modern society has renounced the Monument".<sup>13</sup>

Yet, individually and collectively, we continue to rage against the dying of the light and, as Henson's photographs show, we live in a world where signs can still be taken for wonders.

## Notes

- 1 Peter Handke: *Slow Homecoming*, Methuen, London (1986) p.6.
- 2 Ibid p.66.
- 3 Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things*, Vintage Books, New York (1973) pp.xvii-xviii.
- 4 Robert Frank: "Statement 1958" in Vicki Goldberg (ed): *Photography in Print*, Simon & Schuster, New York (1981) p.400.
- 5 Apart from Henson artists whose work has at one time or another approached the condition of *heterotopia* are: Juan Davila, Richard Dunn, Mike Parr, Imants Tillers. Elsewhere, Komar and Melamid, David Salle and Sigmar Polke give examples of the tendency.
- 6 Susan Sontag: *On Photography*, Delta, New York (1980) p.22.
- 7 Elias Canetti: *The Human Providence*, Picador, London (1986) p.62.
- 8 William Wordsworth: *The Prelude (1805)*, Oxford University Press, London (1970) p.121.
- 9 Elias Canetti: *Crowds and Power*, Penguin, London (1973) p.19.
- 10 Jean Baudrillard: *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, New York (1983) p.6.
- 11 Heinrich Wölfflin: *Principles of Art History*, Dover, New York (1950) p.53.
- 12 Heinrich Wölfflin: *Renaissance and Baroque*, Fontana, London (1964) p.49.
- 13 Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang, New York (1981) p.93.

## 'Notes on Bill Henson'

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# List of Works

## Works from Untitled 1985-86

(A series which when shown in its entirety comprises 154 images)

Type 'C' colour photographic prints each 120 x 105cm.

Courtesy the artist and Deutscher Fine Art, Melbourne.

### Bill Henson

Born 1955, Melbourne

#### Individual Exhibitions

- 1975 Bill Henson, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
- 1978 Bill Henson Photographs, Church Street Photographic Centre, Melbourne.
- 1979 Bill Henson Photographs, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney.
- 1980 Bill Henson Photographs, Church Street Photographic Centre, Melbourne.
- 1981 Bill Henson Photographs, Photographers' Gallery, London.
- 1982 Bill Henson: Untitled Sequence 1977,  
The Developed Image Gallery, Adelaide.  
Bill Henson Photographs, North Hobart Photographic Gallery, Hobart.
- 1984 Bill Henson Photographs, Cockatoo Gallery, Launceston.
- 1985 Bill Henson: Untitled 1983-84, Pinacotheca, Melbourne.  
Bill Henson Photographs, Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney.  
Bill Henson Photographs, The Developed Image Gallery, Adelaide.
- 1986 Bill Henson Photographs, Pinacotheca, Melbourne.
- 1987 Bill Henson: Untitled 1983-84, Australian National Gallery  
at the Australian National University, Drill Hall, Canberra.  
Bill Henson: Untitled 1983-84, Centre for the Arts Gallery,  
University of Tasmania, Hobart.  
Bill Henson Photographs, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.  
Bill Henson: Untitled 1985-86, Realities, Melbourne.
- 1988 Bill Henson: Untitled 1985-86, Rex Irwin Gallery, Sydney.  
Bill Henson, Le Chartreuse de Villeneuve lez Avignon, Avignon.
- 1989 Bill Henson Fotografien, Museum Moderner Kunst,  
Palais Liechtenstein, Vienna.  
Bill Henson Photographs 1974/1984, Deutscher Gertrude Street, Melbourne.  
Bill Henson - Installation 1983/86, Urbiet Orbi, Paris.  
Bill Henson Photographs: Untitled 1987-88, Realities Gallery, Melbourne.
- 1990 Bill Henson Photography, Denver Art Museum.  
Bill Henson Photography, Marta Cevera Gallery, New York.  
Bill Henson, Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York.  
Bill Henson, Glendash Gallery, Los Angeles.  
Bill Henson Photographies, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.  
Bill Henson: Untitled 1977/87, Milburn-Arte, Brisbane.  
Bill Henson, Images from Untitled 1987-88, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.  
Bill Henson Photographs 1974-84, Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney.
- 1991 Bill Henson Photographies, Les Ateliers Nadar, Marseille, France.  
Bill Henson, Paris Opera Project, Realities Gallery, Melbourne.  
Bill Henson, Peter McCleavey Gallery, Wellington.
- 1992 Bill Henson, Paris Opera Project, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.  
Bill Henson, Photographs from the Paris Opera Project,  
Perspektief Gallery, Rotterdam.
- 1993 Bill Henson, Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

#### Selected Bibliography

- Michael Heyward, *Bill Henson Photographs*  
(exhibition catalogue), Pinacotheca, Melbourne, July 1986.
- Peter Weiermair & Ingrid Moessinger, *Mnemosyne or the Theme of Recording;*  
*An Exhibition with and in the Castle Herrnsheim* (exhibition catalogue),  
Frankfurt, September 1988, 2 vols.
- Michael Heywad & David Malouf, 'Bill Henson Photographs'  
(monograph) Pan Picador, 1988.
- Peter Schjeidahl, *Impressions of Henson*, Scripsi, vol.5, No.2,  
Melbourne, February 1989.
- David Malouf & Peter Schjeidahl, *Bill Henson Photographs*  
1974-1984 (exhibition catalogue), Melbourne, June 1989.
- Jean-Francois Chevrier, *Photokunst*, (exhibition catalogue), Stuttgart,  
November 1989.
- Christine Van Assche & Catherine David, *Passages de L'Image*,  
(exhibition catalogue), Paris, September, 1990.
- Fritz Gierstberg, *Bill Henson's Paris Opera Project*, Perspektief Magazine No 45,  
Rotterdam, December 1992.
- Peter Craven, *Bill Henson's Paris Opera Project* in Bill Henson (catalogue),  
Tel Aviv Museum of Art, February, 1993.

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

Between 1974-1993 Bill Henson's work has been represented in over 65 major national and international group exhibitions.

A selection since 1983 includes:

- 1983 *D'un Autre Continent: l'Australie, Le Reve et le Reel*,  
A.R.C.2, Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris.
- 1984 *Australian Visions: 1984, Exxon International Exhibition*,  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
- 1984/85 *La Photographie Creative*, Pavillion Des Arts, Paris.
- 1985 *Isolaustralia*, Galleria Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice.
- 1986 *Prospect 86, Frankfurter Kunstverein*, Frankfurt.
- 1988 *XLIII Biennale Di Venezia*, Venice.
- 1988 *Mnemosyne or the Theme of Recording - An Exhibition*  
*with and in the Castle Herrnsheim*, Frankfurt.
- 1989/90 *Photo Kunst*, Stuttgart Staats Gallerie.
- 1991/92 *Passages De L'Image*, Centre George Pompidou, Paris;  
Wexner Art Centre Columbus, Ohio; Modern Art Museum,  
San Francisco; Fundacio Caixa De Pensions, Barcelona.
- 1992 *Egypt From the Nineteenth Century Until Now*,  
Montpellier Museum, France.
- 1992 *Sphinx: Bathazar Burckhard, Bill Henson, Thomas Ruff*  
& Susan Wides, Galerie Pierre Bernard, Nice.
- 1992 *Peoples En Image: Wee Gee, Bill Henson, Roy Arden*,  
Raymonde April & Anne Favrat, Le Lieu Galerie  
de Photographies, Lorient, France.
- 1992 *Elegia de la Mirada*, Raymonde April, Bill Henson,  
Patrick Tosani, Thomas Ruff, Jeff Wall, Sala de Arte  
la Recova, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain.

### BILL HENSON

#### Works from Untitled 1985-86

An exhibition organised by the Plimsoll Gallery Committee,  
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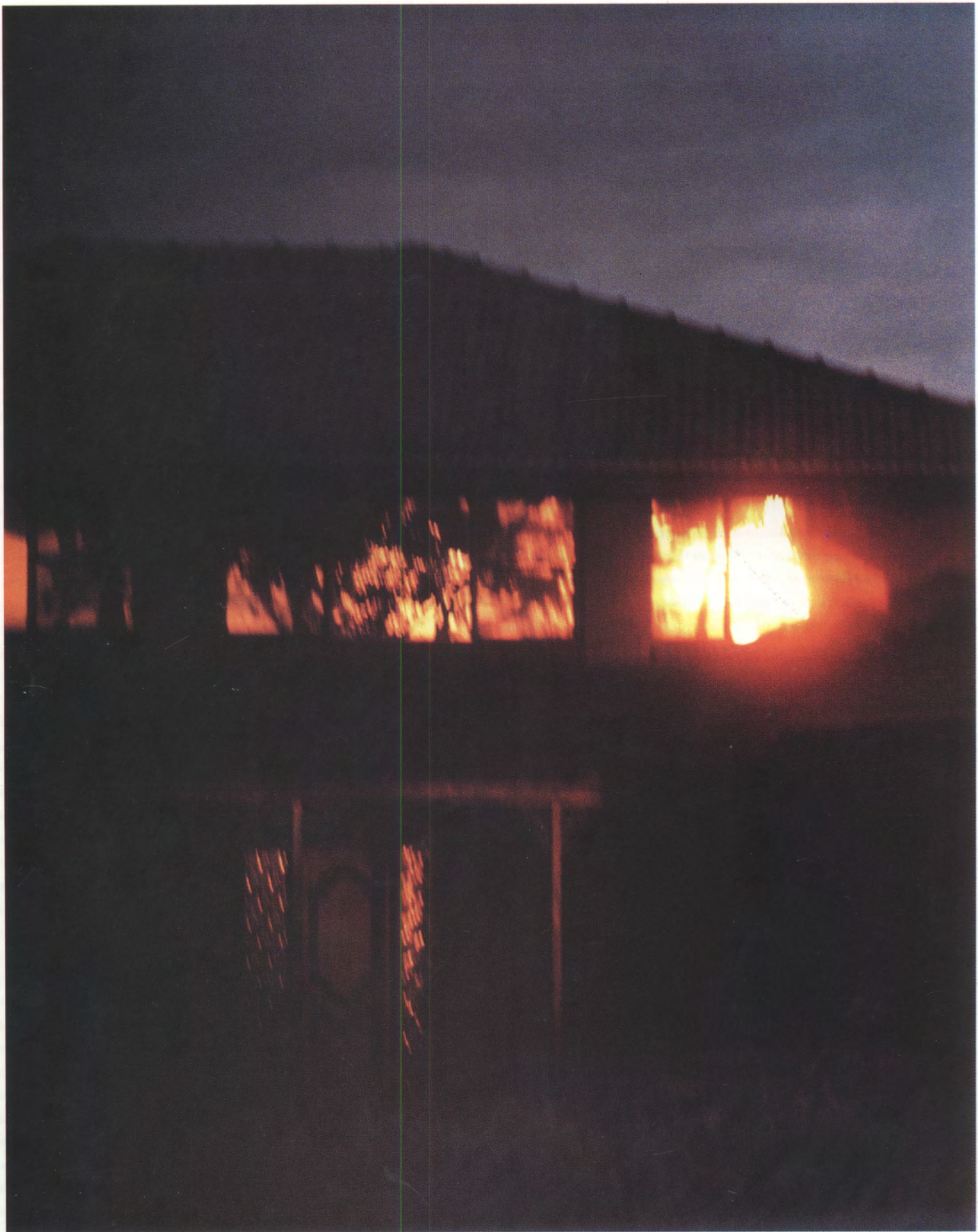
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Front of Catalogue: Image No. 121 from *Untitled 1985-86*

Back of Catalogue: Image No. 59 from *Untitled 1985-86*



Photograph of a building at night with two glowing windows.