



ARTIST

Karl Baden

TITLE

Untitled

DATE

1975

DIMENSIONS

5.25 in H x 7.75 in W

MEDIUM

Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1975.008

CURRENT LOCATION

1114-6B

KARL BADEN

BORN

1952

BIRTHPLACE

Boston, MA

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Light Work Gallery, 1973

Light Work Grant, 1975

Light Work Gallery, 1976

Artist-in-Residence, 1985

Light Work Retrospective Exhibition, 1985

Fine Print Program, 2000

Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 2000
Main Gallery, 2005
Donation, 2007
by Robert B. Menschel
Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2018
Be Strong and Do Not Betray Your Soul

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 5
Contact Sheet 25
Contact Sheet 50
Contact Sheet 97
Contact Sheet 106
Exhibition Catalog: Light Work Retrospective
Contact Sheet 198

ESSAYS

'To me, perhaps the most interesting aspect of this series of manipulated photographs is observing how the look of my work evolves as time goes on. Often a particular photo will indicate a new direction, which in turn points me to something else. Looking back on the work of several months provides clues as where to proceed next.' This quote by Karl Baden reflects the approach he has taken towards his work since the early 70's. During his residency at Light Work this summer Baden continued work on his latest group of pictures involving images taken from television. Baden photographs images off the television screen and recombines the pictures in order to explore what television tells us beyond the superficial presentation or meaning. In doing so Baden attempts to reinterpret televisions code or language to form new interpretations hidden within the original transmission. Baden has the distinction of being the only artist to have received a Light Work Regrant and an Artist-in-Residence grant. Baden developed many of his photographic skills in Syracuse as an undergraduate at SU and as a worker at the Community Darkrooms in the early 70's. Baden currently lives in Boston where he has directed the Photography program at Project Arts Center since 1981. His work has been included in numerous exhibitions including O.K. Harris in New York, Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Silver Bullet Gallery in Providence, RI. He received a Massachusetts Artists Foundation Fellowship in 1983, and a Polaroid Foundation product grant in 1980. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in NY and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston among others.

Jeffrey Hoone (c) 1985 It is not hard to imagine that if Karl Baden hadn't dropped out of school for a semester in 1972 and brought along his father's camera while hitchhiking to the west coast on his way to Peru he may well have wound up in the Guinness Book of World Records for assembling the largest ball of string, or the biggest paper clip collection, or accomplished some other feat to satisfy his compulsive nature. But the creative demands of an artist sidetracked this would-be string collector, and his work over the past 26 years reveals that the process of making engaging art is often the product of a very personal obsession. Through the work presented in this exhibition and catalogue Baden poses the essential question 'How did I get here?' and invites us into the process of assessing the meaning of our lives by presenting us with a microscopic look at his own. In the series Every Day, an ongoing and epic project, Baden has made a photograph of his face on a daily basis since February 23, 1987. By the opening date of this exhibition Baden will have made approximately 4,789 photographs of his face. He has taken great care to standardize the process using identical framing, lighting, backdrop, and film for each picture so that the only variable is the change in his face over time. To this end, he has refrained from changing his hairstyle, growing facial hair, or otherwise altering his looks beyond the natural process of aging. In describing this project Baden says, 'The impulse behind this work comes from both curiosity and fear about four factors affecting my life: mortality, incremental change (in this case, an existential perversion of Minimalism), obsession (its relation to both the psyche and art making), and the difference between trying to be perfect and being human.' Every few months, Baden will develop film from the project, append a date to each frame, and make a proof of the entire roll, which is then added to a book of all the previous pictures. Reproduced on the end pages of this publication are two of the pages from this book. In the front is the first page from 1987 and in the back is one of the most recent from 2000. In comparing both pages there doesn't seem to be a dramatic difference in how he looks, but as Baden states, 'As much as I try to make each day's image a clone of its neighbors, there is always a difference. Sometimes the discrepancy is subtle, sometimes it is hilariously gross. Failure is a foregone conclusion. Life gets in the way. Mistakes are part of the project and part of the process.' The self-portrait is a well-worn genre within the history of art. Many photographers have been the subject of their own work including Lee Friedlander, Jack Fulton, Francesca Woodman, and John Coplans among many others. Undoubtedly many more photographers have had notions to make a picture of themselves everyday, but few, if any, have matched the grand proportions that Baden has reached. There has been much debate within the field of photography as to what constitutes a self-portrait, and it has taken Baden nearly a quarter-century to admit that the majority of the work that he has produced since 1974 could be defined as fitting within that category. Definitions aside, what is clear is that the universal struggle to understand the conflicts and contradictions of one's life is the core of Baden's work, and the results of that struggle can sometimes be as clear as the nose on your face and sometimes as dark as fear can get. Baden began using himself as subject while still a graduate student at the University of Illinois. While making photographs on the street he found himself moving ever closer to his subjects attempting to discover the smallest amount of information his lens could retain in focus and still have the image hold together. After employing this method on such minutiae as insects, worms, and the dental architecture of his pet Siberian husky (figure 1) he turned the camera on himself (figure 2), and from that point forward his body and his life would become the major subject of his work. Baden has been as creative in his use of photography as he has been in the method and manner in which he has employed himself as subject. From the series Self-Images, to the series In Our House, Baden has crafted images that are uniquely photographic. In Self-Images his use of focus and selective framing renders images only a camera could make, challenging the viewer to recognize the metamorphosis of human form from whirls of abstraction. In Contact Sheet Self-Portraits the grid of the ubiquitous photographic contact sheet becomes an armature, supporting surreal assemblages which are painstakingly mapped out and astonishingly previsualised. In an artist's book published in 1981 titled Some Significant Self-Portraits, Baden collages himself into famous photographs, simultaneously paying homage to their makers while literally inserting himself into the canon of the medium. In the series In Our House he accomplishes perhaps his most difficult photographic challenge by reinvigorating the ever-present baby picture with humor and sensitivity while creating a fresh and candid look at parenting. It is not surprising that Baden, who finds comfort in distilling order from chaos, might be traumatized by the major routine-altering decision of having a child. In his unpublished manuscript, The Kid, Baden combines photographs, text, and graphics to chronicle the 'discussion, negotiation, second guessing, threat and counter threat, outright battling, reconciliation, and finally agreement' that he engaged in with his wife Liz in the process of deciding to have a child. In the work that he has made over the past 26 years there is clearly a chronology we could follow in order to answer Baden's question, 'How did I get here?' We could point to certain formal qualities in his work that logically opened doors for subsequent series,

or argue that the work had matured as Baden did himself. But to boil his work down to academic concerns of form and style would be to miss the essential qualities that makes his work so engaging, thoughtful, and expressive. Baden's work is a matrix of emotions, philosophical inquires, and historical perspectives that offer us a unique interpretation on what it means to be human, all within the pursuit of a good nights sleep. Jeffrey Hoone (c) 2003

The Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University's Bird Library, which is right down the street from Light Work, contains an amazing 100,00 printed works and 2,000 archival collections. As part of its Spring 2010 programming, the Center is featuring the exhibition *Covering Photography: Imitation, Influence, and Coincidence*. The show's guest curator, Karl Baden (Light Work Artist-in-Residence, 1985), is the founder of the web-based archive *Covering Photography*. Both the website and the exhibition explore the relationship between the history of photography and book cover design. Comparing the book covers to their "source" images, this relationship ranges in strength from direct appropriation to the possibility of subconscious influence on the designer. Light Work's Digital Lab Manager John Mannion worked closely with Baden and the Center to realize the various prints that are staged with the actual books and covers in the show. This project is a great example of the focused, project-specific assistance available through our digital services in Community Darkrooms. The exhibition runs through April 30, and Karl Baden will host a gallery talk about the project on Tuesday, March 2 at 5pm. *Covering Photography: Imitation, Influence, and Coincidence* January 19-April 30, 2010 Special Collections Research Center Bird Library, Syracuse University 111 Waverly Avenue Syracuse, New York 13210