



**ARTIST**

Sylvia de Swaan

**TITLE**

Knoxboro, NY

**DATE**

1976

**DIMENSIONS**

9.375 in H x 6.375 in W

**MEDIUM**

Gelatin Silver Print

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

1977.082

**CURRENT LOCATION**

1114-3B

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**SYLVIA DE SWAAN**

**BORN**

1941

**BIRTHPLACE**

Czernowitz, Romania

**GENDER**

Female

**CITIZENSHIP**

United States

## CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

## LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1990  
Light Work Gallery, 1980  
Light Work Grant, 1977  
Light Work Grant, 1992  
Light Work Grant, 2001  
Artist-in-Residence, 1994  
NYSCA Sponsored Project, 1994  
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 2016 – 2017  
Place: Selections from the Light Work Collection

## LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

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A Just Image: Selections from the Light Work Collection

## BIOGRAPHY

For a more recent CV or bio please visit the artist's website, [www.sylviadeswaan.net/](http://www.sylviadeswaan.net/)

## ESSAYS

There are few passions that equal the energy generated by protest and rebellion. To find yourself amidst a gathering of citizens demanding change in a collective voice is a personal experience, that for most participants, endures beyond the promise of reformation. For the past several years Sylvia de Swaan has been working on a project, Pledging Allegiances, photographing rallies, marches and other kinds of public gatherings from Atlanta to Prague. This past fall de Swaan participated in our Artist-in-Residence program printing and editing work from this series, and working on a series retracing some of the routes her family traveled in Europe during 1945-51, as they were displaced from Romania during World War II. In the image to the right, de Swaan holds a photograph clipped from her childhood passport against the blurred landscape outside her train compartment on the Baltic Express. The reflection of her arm in the window suggests a haunting reminiscence of a memory yet to be captured, and a transparent link from past to present. On the following page at a march for Women's Equality in Washington, DC, de Swaan isolates a young woman caught in a defiant posture of crossed arms, her face turned in a scowl of loathing. The young woman's posture of resistance is carried through in the creative independence exhibited by the eclectic nature of her clothes and the flamboyant style of her hair. De Swaan has chosen her as a symbol of the rally, positioning her next to a blank banner where we imagine the next chapter in the history of women's equality could be written. In the final image reproduced here, we need the caption of the photograph to inform us that the crowd of demonstrators was photographed in Prague in 1990, not Berkeley in 1968. In this image there are no signs to tell us the specific nature of the crowds questions, only two-finger peace symbols flash throughout the crowd suggesting a plea for sensibility and humanity. It is in this absence of concrete reference where de Swaan looks for the 'equation between conviction and prejudice in the collective energy that demonstrators generate.' As she records the passion of mass demonstrations and traces her memory of political displacement, she reminds us that the human choir of intervention may also be the blind catharsis of unashamed bigotry. Jeffrey Hoone (c) 1990 Sylvia de Swaan is a Romanian-born photographer who has lived and worked in Mexico, Europe, and the United States. As she describes in her artist statement, her photographic works explore a range of themes that include personal history, individual and collective memory and identity, the state of the world and the neighborhood where she lives. She has worked with Light Work in many ways, including an exhibition in 1980, multiple Light Work Grants, and two residencies. She has also served on Light Work's board of directors. De Swaan is the recipient of a Lucie Award, and fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Constance Saltonstall Foundation, and the Aaron Siskind Foundation, and more. She has completed residencies at Light Work, CEPA, Anderson Ranch Art Center, Künstlerhaus in Vienna, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Please visit her website at <http://www.sylviadeswaan.com/> for a full view of her accomplishments. Sylvia de Swaan lives in Utica, NY. The Light Work Grant program is one of the oldest photography fellowship awards in the United States. Every spring Light Work awards three grants of \$1000 to encourage and reward photographers, critics, and photo-historians residing within a fifty-mile radius of Syracuse. The twenty-seventh annual Light Work Grants were awarded in the spring of 2001 to three photographers. Sylvia de Swaan (Utica), who was born in Romania and fled the Holocaust with her family, was awarded a grant to continue working on Memorabilia, a series of monuments and what de Swaan calls "memory places" photographed in Eastern and Central Europe. By juxtaposing images of her "memory places" with personal, factual, or ironic narratives, de Swaan says she "aims to provoke a complex set of responses [to the] issues of war and [the] memorialization of the past." The series is comprised of twenty images that merge the past with the present, and convey sixty years of changes in Eastern Europe. De Swaan is currently a visiting lecturer in photography at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. She was the executive director of Sculpture Space, Utica, NY, from 1979 to 1995. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. She is a three-time Light Work Grant recipient and has participated twice in the Light Work Artist-in-Residence program. Ron Jude (Ithaca) submitted the project Landscapes (for Antoine), which takes its title from the Jean-Paul Sartre 1938 existentialist novel *La Nausée* in which Sartre's fictional character Antoine Roquentine seeks the meaning of existence and determines with disappointment only "I am. I am. I exist, I think, therefore I am..." Unlike Antoine, Jude does not seem to fear pure existence but finds an ally in it. By stripping his pastoral and roadside scenes of explanation or essence, Jude creates a subtle tension between beauty and banality. According to Sartre, existence precedes the essence of an inanimate object; the existence is hidden by the essence. The essence of the object is made up by the physical qualities and attributes or the simplified idea that is assigned by the viewer. Jude believes the lack or denial of explanation for this series is then the meaning of the work; it just simply is. All of the images in the series were taken in Central New York. Jude is an assistant professor in the Cinema and Photography Department at the Roy H. Park School of Communications at Ithaca College. He

has exhibited in Atlanta, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and London. His work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Blind Spot*, *Harper's*, and *Double Take*. Kim Waale (Manlius) created *Campfire Tale #1* in several formats: a film, a book, and an installation. Initially the piece was shot on 16mm black and white film; stills from the film were scanned and digitally manipulated to create the book and installation. The tale, Waale says, "is a loose reenactment of those kinds of stories I heard told around campfires when I was attending Girl Scout summer camp. I remember being terrified by those stories—the feeling of fear was authentic (and oddly desirable) even though I knew the stories weren't true." The series of dark images focuses on a forest floor littered with discarded clothing and a nude woman lying face down among the leaves, assumed dead. She is not; rolling over she reveals that a bear mask covers her face. The last image is of the bear mask, alone in the forest. Waale says the tactics she uses in the project are borrowed from horror movies with irony and parody added. A secondary theme of the piece is human interaction with nature. Because the installation is a replica of the film site, Waale then asks the viewer, "How necessary is a fabricated narrative in framing our encounters with nature?" Waale is a professor of art and design at Cazenovia College, Cazenovia, NY. Her work has been exhibited throughout the Northeast, and she has received several grants. She is co-editor of *A Due Voci: The Photography of Rita Hammond*, which will be published by Syracuse University Press in the spring of 2003. We congratulate the grant recipients and extend our thanks to the grant selection panelists: artists Lori Nix of Brooklyn and Iosif Kiraly of Bucharest, Romania. Nix holds an M.F.A. in photography from Ohio State University. Kiraly is a lecturer of photography at the University of Arts in Bucharest. Marianne Stavenhagen Un/Common Threads In organizing the exhibition "Un/Common Threads: Selections from the Light Work Collection," curator Kaylen Williams went beyond a superficial perception of diversity that has become pervasive in the United States. As a 2007 study by the sociology department at University of Minnesota revealed, many Americans happily endorse diversity as a nebulous concept; however, many are still at a loss to discuss the specifics of diversity and its related sub-topics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual orientation. (1) "Un/Common Threads" harnessed the power of photographs, using a visual language to voice these all-important specifics of diversity. Williams used the visual language that coalesced among the various images to stimulate dialogue about the complex challenges of a pluralist culture in ways that addressed both broad and personal implications. Exhibiting together the work of artists such as Myra Greene, Dawoud Bey, Clarissa Sligh, Yuri Marder, Hank Willis Thomas, and Binh Danh, among others, certainly highlighted the individuality of their concerns and aesthetic choices. Yet this varied grouping also served a common goal by giving voice to specific, possibly contentious topics surrounding diversity. To emphasize this unity of purpose, Williams combined the "Un/" in the exhibition title with "Common Threads," acknowledging the connections that can occur between diverse artists and the viewers of their work. Many of the photographs in "Un/Common Threads" manage to evoke the idea of connections and also simultaneously turn it on its head by asking viewers to re-examine preconceptions that they may bring with them into the gallery. Ellen M. Blalock's photograph, "Jermane," a portrait of a black teenage father pictured full-frame in an intimate embrace with his baby daughter, may provide a good example of this phenomenon. Those who find themselves jarred by the tender presence of emotion displayed by the young African American father must question and explore the sources of any biases regarding age, race, and gender. This is the inherent power of such photographs—when a viewer accepts involvement in questioning such preconceived connections, he or she is more inclined to get involved in talk of answers that can lead to a deeper understanding of identity and diversity. Many of the artists whose work curator Kaylen Williams, a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, selected for "Un/Common Threads" engaged the topic of diversity from a personal perspective. Regarding her impetus for organizing the exhibition, Williams explains, "This project was of particular interest to me because of my own ethnic background of Japanese and Western European ancestors. Many students on campus are, like me, a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds. My Japanese mother was adopted by Americans and never had an opportunity or the encouragement to explore her racial identity." In culling this selection of images from the Light Work Collection, Williams invited viewers of Un/Common Threads to explore the diversity of identity and to participate in the critical mass that follows an expansion of consciousness. Laura A. Guth (c)2008 1. Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann, "Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of 'Happy Talk.'" *American Sociological Association: American Sociological Review* 72, no. 6 (December 2007): 895–914. The exhibition was on view in the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery from January 16 to April 19, 2007. It was curated by Kaylen Williams. The exhibition included work by the following artists: Don Gregorio Antón, Dawoud Bey, Ellen M. Blalock, Binh Dahn, Sylvia de Swaan, Lonnie Graham, Myra Greene, Saiman Li, Yuri Marder, Nzingah Muhammad, Osamu James Nakagawa, Suzanne Opton, Kanako Sasaki, Clarissa Sligh, Tone Stockenström, Lida Suchý, Hank Willis Thomas, Linn Underhill, and Carrie Mae Weems. When she curated the exhibition, Kaylen Williams was a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University. She graduated in 2007. Laura A. Guth is an artist and educator. She lives in Manlius, NY. A Just Image As it plays out in the headlines, justice means equality, fairness, and the rule of law. Yet beyond the events broadcast on television and the news alerts flashed instantly to laptops and PDAs, there is a large realm of justice that eludes reporters. Throughout daily life - at home, in school, doing errands, tending children, making dinner, playing sports - perceptions of justice often float just below the radar. The Light Work Collection offered plentiful proof that photographers frequently make images of routine daily life and its relationship to a sense of justice. However, as members of the Fine Arts 395 "Art and Identity" class noticed, scholars seldom extend the concept of justice into aspects of living that are legal, but sometimes ethically questionable. Counselors, social workers, and therapists seem to take over where the justice system stops. Nevertheless, the line between the legal system's purview and personal life is not fixed. Class members were careful to insist that the law is often less subtle in its grasp of situations and unaware of complexities than are the images included in this show. Nowhere in the law is it written that by embracing a stereotype one can sometimes achieve influence skin to contesting the mold. Thoughts and feelings such as these coalesced as the subject of this exhibition. Work and family emerged as sites where what is fair is not always what is equal, and what is equal is not always fair. However fair or unfair, the triumphs and annoyances one experiences at work mostly fall below the threshold of the law. It is conventional wisdom, not the IRS, which suggests that wealth carries no guarantee of happiness. Creating this nuanced exhibition about justice in everyday life led the class into hearty and un-nuanced discussions about the slights, snubs, and rebuffs of an ordinary day. The students chose the title *A Just Image* for this exhibition before they read about the expression in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. With the phrase, he and they recognize that art coaxes the world of appearances to create symbols signifying ideas for which there are no words. Just an image becomes *A Just Image*. Mary Warner Marien *A Just Image: Selections from the Light Work Collection* is the result of a collaborative effort by thirty-one Syracuse University students enrolled in Professor Mary Warner Marien's "Art and Identity" course. The exhibition examines the Fall 2007 Syracuse Symposium theme of justice. The students chose images from the Light Work Collection, considering the personal and societal meanings of justice. They have created an interactive exhibition, where, as the students write in the exhibition catalogue, "ironically... the viewer is still judging." *A Just Image* invites viewers to explore the photographs and rethink their definition of justice. As the students of the "Art and Identity" course discovered, though justice is a universal concept, it does not necessarily carry the same meaning for everyone. This can be seen in the different perceptions of stereotypes, families, occupations, and leisure activities, which are some of the topics examined by the class. According to the students, "The Pictures we have chosen require more than just superficial judgment; they require the viewer to acknowledge their own stereotyped projections." Roslyn Esperon