The Window
October 16 – November 17, 1982

Anne Turyn
Lessons & Notes

THE NEW MUSEUM
Anne Turyn, Lessons & Notes

In her series of color photographs Lessons & Notes presented in The New Museum's window, Anne Turyn fabricates a familiar setting—a grade-school classroom in which a child exists in a surrounding environment of blackboards, desk tops, writing papers, charts, toys, or other educational paraphernalia. However, the usual blackboard exercises and pupils' notes have been replaced in these scenes by Turyn's own questions and observations, written in a childlike hand. These simply worded, beguiling writings in fact address complex issues of how human beings perceive, structure, and synthesize meaning from experience on both individual and social levels.

Each of the works in this series elucidates different aspects of the artist's intuitive visualization of a fundamentally linguistic mode of our being in the world, one which mediates our feelings and actions. Turyn's investigation of these mental processes has arisen from a long standing interest in human cognitive development, in general, and the acquisition of language skills, in particular. A model for Turyn's own incorporation and juxtaposition of written symbols with visual images may be found in the didactic methods used to teach reading and writing. The teaching/learning exchange serves as a source of inquiry into the development of cognition as well as the process of socialization. In Lessons & Notes, the classroom and its contents thus provide a vehicle of visual investigation into these linguistic and cultural, as well as philosophical, concerns.

The classroom scenes Turyn creates are symbolic and share a certain composition, treatment, and strategy of elements. In the foreground of several scenes, the table tops and objects arranged on them are enlarged or distorted, casting doubt on the perceived nature of empirical experience. The human subjects often seem dwarfed by or tenuously attached to this unstable world of objects; their figures are blurred, conjuring an inner mode of being, representing fluctuations of identity or subjective consciousness. Evoking a "mental space," the gre background sets off the photograph from the external environment—here a vivid spectrum of primary, "gradeschool" colors. Within a number of works this diffused atmosphere disjoins, both philosophically and visually, the subject from his or her apparent consciousness as transcribed and objectified on childrens' "magic slates." Floating on the periphery of the photographs, these tablets and the inscribed thoughts take on a disembodied voice of their own.

In contrast to the foreground, the objects in the background are more central, undistorted and clearly focused. In many scenes, the blackboard serves as an expansive, empty surface for Turyn's probing writings which have displaced and stand in contrast to the classroom instruction we would expect to find. Or, instead of blackboards, educational props and aids—pictures, illustrations, charts—are used in other photographs to present but also implicitly question the "given," predetermined nature of much cultural information. These aids, underpinnings of culture, are left untampered with, while figures oscillate and other objects loom and slightly lurch in these photographs.

Individually, the works in this series each juxtapose many different levels of Turyn's dissection of "how we think and remember, what we feel, and how we act in different situations." "The world is not my oyster" depicts a young girl of seven or eight years apparently writing this refrain over and over again in a disciplinary exercise. In fact, children of this age group cannot grasp the meaning of this cliché metaphor (or its negative), nor can they appreciate the sobering lessons of adult life to which the artist is alluding. The child's actual level of cognitive development is revealed in the two charts of the cursive and script alphabets behind her; she is in fact at an age when she is just learning to write.

In "How do you mark the years passing?" Turyn rephrases the familiar "How old are you?" into a slightly more puzzling query. Instead of a clock or calendar, however, she provides a chart of "Number Concepts," a slide rule, and a calculator. However, the problem is not to calculate the years, but to mark them, wherein lies a twist to Turyn's question. She is actually posing an investigation of how we experience and remember time. The accepted usage of the word "mark," meaning "commemorate" in this context, raises the issue of how we come to fully accept and formally acknowledge time as a framework of existence. In her choice of words, Turyn is utilizing the riddle, a form of discourse which, like the metaphor, requires a certain cognitive maturity and which operates to convey insight. As a non-logical means of transmitting cultural beliefs and values, the riddle has played an important role of socialization in preliterate and more traditional societies. Turyn's use of questions in this series derives in part from this ancient oral practice of arousing awareness and reveals her consideration of contemporary society from such a relative anthropological and historical view. From this overview, the slide rule and calculator appear as contemporary anachronisms in the presence of an ageless conundrum of human existence. They symbolize and comment on our society's means of understanding the depth of human existence in general. Unlike most questions, the riddle theoretically can be answered only by the questioner. Here, the artist's partial answer in the visual clues of this photograph...
1. Lessons & Notes. No one ever told me the sky was blue.

suggests that our society may lack means to convey a full understanding of time and mortality.

The artist feels this is due in part to the "given" understanding of reality which our culture offers. In "No one ever told me the sky was blue," Turyn contends that despite the familiarity of the phrase we are in fact not encouraged to examine and perceive our world, that the nature of reality is in large part assumed and transmitted as common knowledge or not acknowledged at all (fig. 1). A "Cloud Chart" illustrating and naming a variety of formations enhances but also denies the possibility of knowing nature by means of pictures and adjectives. For Turyn, the chart suggests that nature possesses a richness that is commonly overlooked. But the multitude of cloud types overwhelms the simplicity of a truisms like "the sky is blue" and seems to demonstrate instead that it is not possible to perceive and understand nature by naming it, but only by experiencing it.

On a small tablet in the foreground, Turyn continues her observation of "No one ever told me the sky was blue..." with "...or how to remember my name." In this phrase, she asserts that to some degree identity is also given in the act of naming a child at birth. Turyn views the shaping of our self-conception as a process that, like nature, is subject to the constraints of words (she tags a "Don't Forget" warning onto the tablet) which not only focus but also in some ways determine our understanding of ourselves.

The puzzling impact of language on a child is touched on in this work and is a topic in other photographs in the series, including "And when you think to whom are you talking?" (fig. 2). In another photograph, a little girl wearing a dunce cap asks, "After the war which language will we speak?" - a troubling question which Turyn asked herself as a child when she was afraid the United States would be invaded by Russia. This work reveals how closely Turyn associates language with experience; thus she relates the fear of not knowing what to say or how to say it to the awkwardness and confusion of not knowing what to feel, think, or act. In other works she examines "appropriate and inappropriate" forms of behavior which reveal the type of thinking, the kind of values our culture promulgates. In "What if I cry?" a little boy seems threatened by the party favors which lay in front of him. In the disparity of real and appropriate emotions, Turyn reminds us that relating to others and the world can be frightening, that the socialization process that accommodates us to social reality is a wrenching experience.

Turyn inserts into other photographs socially idealized images that teach appropriate behavior by example. A poster of a rosy-cheeked, blonde girl cuddling her puppy dog is contrasted with two rather battered, stuffed toys whose presence implicitly questions the picture-perfect image of childhood (fig. 2). Or she incorporates more didactic illustrations of children enacting correct behavior in the face of various dangerous situations (see cover). While not questioning the common sense and lessons of self-protection that children are taught, Turyn interrupts the sense of security these images nostalgically engender with a caption to the scene: "Stability insures change. Change guarantees stability." Like the riddle, the paradox is a non-logical means of arousing an intuitive insight. With this statement, Turyn underscores the all-is-well wholesomeness of these stylized figures to remind us that life can never be as stable as these images would have us believe, that even the bedrock of a society must shift and realign. In the left foreground, the artist poetically alludes to the dynamic forces which overtake and transform us: a toy contains a snowman in top hat being engulfed by the swirling currents of snow.

Turyn draws on the riddle form again in the photograph entitled "What's stronger than a lion and sweeter than honey?" (fig. 3). The answer is visually supplied by means of the cut-out hearts strewn on the table next to the subject. But the caption embedded within the photograph, "Love is the greatest and most deadly of the illusions," suggests Turyn's views of a different role for this emotion in society. The pervasiveness and popularity of the theme of romantic love in literature, film, television, as well as everyday life, has led the artist to investigate this mass obsession in much of her work. Turyn incorporates aspects of these various media in the hybrid form of her work - the photo-novel. However, she alters conventional means of visual and literary narrative into a
different kind of discourse which relates word and image in different forms of organizing structures. Like the elements of language and image she investigates, Turyn analyzes larger narrative systems with the same aim of revealing and questioning the “given” and determining nature of the cultural values inherent in their form and content.

In Turyn’s photo-novels, elements of narrative – character, plot, and setting – are treated to a reduction and redefinition of terms. The artist turns to genre as a means of subverting character development and dispensing with complex story line. In this episodic form, typical of television programming, the same set of problems arises and is resolved in an ongoing fashion that consists of self-contained vignettes which return to the original underlying premise or impulse. The titles of her most recent series – Dear Diary (1979), Dear Pen Pal (1979–80), and Dear John (1981) – are basically terms for minor literary genres. In the earlier series the context is abridged or omitted – the brief opening remarks following the salutation comes to a quick halt – while in the Dear John series the story line is similarly truncated, but here the beginning is lopped off. The entries in Dear Diary were strangely unrevealing, inconclusive, or cryptically banal. Dear Pen Pal consisted of seemingly harmless observations transformed into conclusive indictments when paired with visual elements. And in Dear John, the termination of plot, signalled by the infamous letter of rejection in each scene, is the reiterated fragment.

In all the series, the situation or action has usually already occurred or been observed, and the character is engaged in a mental action only. In the early series, there are no human subjects in the photographs, only their written thoughts; in Dear John, Turyn began to include fragments of the human body or face. The emphasis often shifted to the setting, in which Turyn inserted objects and other incongruous visual elements – wallpaper, greeting cards, dated clothing – to evoke the partial or absent character and plot. Lessons & Notes in many ways departs from the uncarry dead-pan, yet limiting, humor found in these series. Turyn herself described the later work as an effort to be “more serious,” an attempt to understand human identity in order to create characters in her future photo-novels who will operate on a deeper level of human reality.

Two other works in the window illustrate Turyn’s findings and attitudes about storytelling. “If thoughts are yo-yo’s, then words are tangled strings” is a nonsensical equation which effectively describes Turyn’s form of narrative and its basis in language. Like yo-yos, Turyn’s photo-novels repeatedly spin out and return to the same starting point. The words – “tangled strings” – throw a monkey wrench in the works and guarantee that the ride is a jerky one, that one must stop and examine every assertion before proceeding. But Turyn’s narratives have no endings, or beginnings either. The open-endedness of her cyclic and repetitive form of narration reflects an endless drama of human life on a large scale, one in which every character plays more or less the same role and no one knows the outcome. “The hard part is not knowing the end of the story” reflects the artist’s frustration in constructing unconventional plots for her photo-novels. However, the objects in the photograph, symbolizing the passage of life, suggest the difficulty arises from life, not fiction. Included are a tarot card of death, a diary, and a die. As various means of reflecting on oneself and the forces in life, they visualize the intention of Turyn’s inquiry into fundamental levels of individual and social reality.

Robin Dodds

Notes
1. All quotations are transcribed from conversations with the artist in July through September 1982, unless quoted material is rhetorical.
3. Ibid., p. 185.
5. For example, juxtaposed with candy suckers wrapped in plastic is the letter, “Dear Pen Pal: We don’t just grow food. We manufacture it.”
2. Lessons & Notes: And when you think to whom are you talking?

All photographs in the series are Type-C prints and are 16 × 20 inches.

ANNE TURYN

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1976 The Grey Gallery, Antioch College, Yellow Springs
1977 The Pittsburgh Film-maker’s Gallery
1979 Lies, Hallwalls, Buffalo
1982 CEPA, Buffalo (artist’s publication)
Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, N.Y.
The artist has given readings from her work: 1978 – Hallwalls; WBFO Radio, Buffalo 1979 – Artspace, Peterborough, Ont.; CEPA; Rumour, Toronto 1980 – A Space, Toronto 1981 – Buffalo State College.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1976 Noyes Gallery, Antioch College, Yellow Springs
1977 The Instant Image, Camerawork Gallery, San Francisco Snowshow, Hallwalls, Buffalo
The Stories, I.D.E.A., Santa Monica
1978 Buffalo Chicago Exchange, N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago
Anne Turyn/Jill Baroff, CEPA, Buffalo
West Hubbard Gallery, Chicago
1979 Altered Photographs, P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, New York Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans (video)
In Western New York, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (cat.) Pin-Up Portraits, Western Front Society, Vancouver, B.C.
Narratives, Kathryn Markel Gallery, New York

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.
Articles and Reviews
Periodicals with Projects by the Artist
Benzene (New York), Issue no. 7, Fall 1982.
Contact Sheet 12 (Syracuse: Lightwork/Community Darkroom), 1980.
Books with Writings by the Artist
Turyn is founder and editor of Top Stories, a prose periodical published by Hallwalls, for which she wrote “Real Family Stories” in 1982. The artist’s biography was researched by Kevin Concannon.

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