

THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981

# BOMBSITE



Robert Polidori  
by Michèle Gerber Klein  
BOMB 99/Spring 2007, Art



*Velours Frappé, Salles Du XVIIème, Versailles 1985. All images courtesy of the artist.*

I met Robert Polidori through a photograph he had taken of the Versailles restoration. It captivated me. Seeing so many layers of history in one image was astonishing. So was being spurred to imagine Versailles as a real dwelling defined by the remnants of its inhabitants, and all the changes in history they and it had undergone.

This was the '90s, when many photographers making art were constructing their own subjects or creating intellectual images that involved visual sleight of hand. The straightforward voluptuousness of Robert's photo stood in stark contrast to all this. It was this originality and this lushness that enchanted me.

Later, after I got to know him, I invited Robert to visit North Dakota and photograph a town that had once belonged to my grandfather and is—now that the celebrated territories romanticized through legends of the Wells Fargo are a virtual desert—nearly gone. I wondered what his lens would uncover in that supernatural barrenness. Robert accepted. On the first day, we were so busy talking in the airport we missed the plane. On the second, I discovered that Robert fully expected me and Leaf, my Native American driver, to meet him for breakfast, totally awake and smiling, in the motel restaurant at 5:30 am, and to keep going until we lost the sunset's last ray. To say that Robert is passionately focused is an understatement. He was so intense in his search for images that the final night, while we were having dinner in the same motel restaurant, a man came over to him and said, "I know who you are. You're the guy who was taking pictures in my backyard this afternoon. I'm the mayor of this town." I don't think Robert had even realized we were trespassing.

The Metropolitan Museum commissioned Robert to take pictures of the New Orleans flood disaster. A friend who had grown up there cried when she saw them. She was not alone. The Fall 2006 show in the Howard Gilman Gallery was the most attended photography show in the history of the Met. Robert's work has an extraordinarily wide, visceral appeal.

Robert's focus and intensity made him very easy to interview. The difficulty was in deciding where to edit the generosity of riches in all he had to say. And despite the bleakness of his conclusion, I think that Robert transforms the sorrow of his subject with the compassionate beauty he discovers in its form.



*Marat De David, RDC, Aile Du Midi, Versailles 1985.*

**MICHÈLE GERBER KLEIN** You were a filmmaker before you were a photographer.

**ROBERT POLIDORI** I used to work in avant-garde film, or what was known as structural film. It all started in 1969, when I was a freshman in college in Florida. Annette Michelson came and showed some films, including *Wavelength* by Michael Snow, and that changed my life. When I came to New York a couple of months later, she was kind enough to let me stay with her for a brief period.

Through Annette I met Jonas Mekas and then I worked at Anthology Film Archives, even before they opened their first location at the Public Theater.

**MGK** So how did you start making still photography?

**RP** Well, my films were about the temporality between still and motion. But it really came about because I read a book called *The Art of Memory* by the late Frances Yates. This book was about ancient mnemonic systems, and rooms play a central role in "memory theaters."

**MGK** How?

**RP** Say, for example, in the Pythagorean School—Pythagoras was into math and spirituality. He used to teach math by sounds—by fractioning lengths of strings or ropes. The students there were not allowed to speak for two or three years. They were taught to memorize empty rooms. A room was a locus for memory. They would memorize the color, doorways, windows, and halls.

**MGK** They would memorize the landscape of the rooms, develop a visual memory?

**RP** Yes, and they would place *imagines agentes*, roughly translated from Latin as *activated images*, in the loci. These would be theatrical tableaux. The idea is that the mind has the hardest time remembering banal everyday things, but can more easily recall things that stand out of the ordinary. So they would compose these tableaux in order to remember something. I will give you an example. A lawyer had to memorize the facts in a case where a doctor had poisoned an old man to get his inheritance, and there was a witness. So the lawyer creates an image of two men in a blue room: an old man, semi-reclined in bed, and another man standing over him, who in his right hand holds a cup placed to the patient's lips. The right hand indicates volition—that is, the doctor willed it, it was not an accident. Between the doctor's fourth and fifth fingers were the testicles of a ram. The fourth finger was known as the medicinal finger, hence the doctor, and in Latin, testicles and witness are practically homonyms. The image is easier to remember than the facts, and by using a consistent deciphering language you could extract all the facts you might forget because of, say, your busy caseload. Memory was just one of the seven parts of classic rhetoric.

This particular example comes from the *Ad Herennium*. A Latin copy of that text from antiquity is dated 64 AD, and only fragments of it were still in existence just before the Renaissance. The *Ad Herennium* is an example of memory systems meant for practical usage. Later philosophers developed memory systems as theistic paradigm theories. Giordano Bruno, the last Catholic heretic burned at the stake, is a notable example. All of this is explained in Yates's book. This is how I got into rooms, rooms as metaphors for states of being. And practically speaking, rooms simply don't look that good in films; they look better in photography. When there is nothing else moving in the room, the grain effect of cinema makes the walls buzz as if they were composed of a swarm of bees. It doesn't look right to me.

Metaphorically speaking, photography does to time what a wall in a room does to time. It's a kind of slice of time that is transfixed and only very slowly degrades its semblance. Curiously akin to the quantum of time it takes to forget something. I would say that the emblematic photographic image is a picture from inside a room looking out. I think this defines photography. It's the metaphor for the notion of first sight. What one saw first.

**MGK** Well, the camera is like a room; the shutter is like the window.

**RP** Yes, and *camera* in Italian means *room*. Anyway, when I realized the psychological importance of rooms and my commitment to them, I wandered away from cinema. There were other books too, Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* talks about rooms and beehives and a set of drawers, all these receptacle kinds of images, and their metaphorical and psychological undertones.

Besides the obvious sheltering from the extremes of the elements, people make rooms to live in as if they are animated by an unconscious desire to return to a prenatal life, or even before that, to a soul life. This is what they exteriorize in rooms, their internal soul life, or less magically put, their personal values, if you will. *The Art of Memory* also talked about the Oracle at Delphi. I wrote about this



in my *Metropolis* book. The priestess sat on a tripod above this big hole in a grotto, and the people came to her with written queries that she would read and throw down into the hole. She would then speak words that suggested things to the seekers, words that would only have meaning to them. This has become a standard practice in the quasi-science of psychic readings. So I equated tripods with acquiring psychic truths.

**MGK** Oh, okay.

**RP** Like: where you point the camera is the question and the picture you get is the answer to decipher. I would say that since World War II, photography has gone through a revolution with the small, handheld cameras. Cartier-Bresson is credited with "the decisive moment," but there is a whole school of practitioners of *l'instantané*, the snapshot. It was thought to be more modern and revelatory. Whatever. For me, these pictures are not so revelatory of truth. I find them more—how should I put it? Stylistic. I find them too myopic or fragmentary. I like the earlier practitioners, like Gustave Le Gray or Matthew Brady—those historically conscious guys. And I like the American school, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. But I never really studied photography; I came to it almost in spite of myself. I got into it because of rooms—this is what I am trying to say. In the '70s there was a lot of interest in "spirit" photography. I read these books about this guy who was famous and then later he was publicly debunked, Ted Serios. He used to put a Polaroid camera lens to his eye and get photos of buildings in Cairo or Chicago. I knew it had to be fake, but I liked the idea of it.

**MGK** You were trying to photograph spirits?

**RP** Yeah, I guess, in a way. The idea of it excited me. Serios turned out to be trickery, but for me it didn't matter. I had certain conversations with Harry Smith, the filmmaker and ethnomusicologist who did that Anthology of American Folk Music in the '20s and '30s. I used to edit rushes of his film, *Mahagonny*, at the Anthology. He told me about the Golden Dawn society, the Theosophical Society of India, Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, C.W. Ledbetter, Krishnamurti, all those spiritualists.

Here's the key thought: images had *meaning*. Or were supposed to, as far as Harry was concerned. The big artists around that time, we're talking 1970, '71, Frank Stella and people like that, their stuff looked good and all, but it's like decoration. All the meaning of that work was formal. Harry could talk for 20 minutes on the meaning of a few seconds of one of his films. I don't think that is possible for Warhol's *Chelsea Girls*.



Former House of the Marques De Arcos, Havana Vieja, Cuba 1997.

**MGK** How did you start with Versailles? That was the first work of yours that I saw at the Robert Miller Gallery.

**RP** I stopped making films about 1978 or '79 and left New York in 1983. It's hard to compete with guys in their 50s when you're 27. You'd go to these screenings at the Anthology, the Collective for Living Cinema or Millennium Film Workshop, and everybody in the audience was another filmmaker competing for the same limited grant money. It's unfortunate that it became a depressing scene for me.

**MGK** I could see that. *(laughter)*

**RP** And there was the video part of it too: Nam June Paik, though he wasn't my favorite. I was close to Woody Vasulka and his wife, Steina. I became friends with them when they were in New York. Then they were professors of mine in Buffalo. That's what I did after a while. I went to Antioch, studied film under Paul Sharits, then later I went to SUNY Buffalo because Paul was there, and the Vasulkas, lots of people. So I sort of traded in all that experience for college credit.

**MGK** You got a Master's degree in film from Buffalo, right?

**RP** Yes. And then I came back to New York and I was really depressed. My career wasn't going anywhere and to make money I was working renovation labor for all these lucky people living in SoHo. I started to realize that I never intended to grow up to be a construction worker.

**MGK** *(laughter)*

**RP** I wasn't so interested in the New York art world anymore. The big galleries never took avant-garde film seriously, anyway. There was no product that they could sell. They weren't interested in me, and I did not fit in with their cultural vision. So I left the country and went to Paris. Somehow, one day, I woke up with the idea that I was going to make money with photography, so I should start paying more attention to it. I started to look at photography and ask, "What is it about the pictures that I really like? Why are mine not as good?" I realized there are all these guys I like who use view cameras. So in 1982, I bought a view camera. I just wanted to take photographs. I didn't really care if it was art or not. I started looking at art in a broader context. In France, in those years, the overall culture was of more importance than any singular art. After all, it was Socialist France of the Mitterrand years.

**MGK** But there are artists who work from the perspective of the overall culture; Chinese artists are a case in point. You are not alone in thinking about the whole outside yourself.

**RP** Right. You know, I was born in 1951, and one of the things that I came to realize around the time of Woodstock—not that Woodstock did it, but for me it's like—

**MGK** A benchmark.

**RP** Yes. Up until then, the notion of the future was always going to be something better, and then, around 1969, the future began to seem a less good thing: diminishing returns.

**MGK** That's interesting, it's scary, but for people of our generation it's true.

**RP** We are witnessing the end of industrialism. The promise of industrialism was that more and more people could live longer and longer, get richer and richer. Now you can only have one of the three. You can have fewer people that live longer and longer, richer and richer, or you can have more people that live less long, poorer.

**MGK** What about more people that live less long, richer?

**RP** Yes, you could have that.





Street Scene, Downtown Manfred, North Dakota, 2000.

**MGK** Let's get back to Versailles.

**RP** What interests me is a notion of social portraiture. With Versailles, I had the opportunity to witness museum restoration, but I realized that what was really going on was historical revisionism. What does it mean to restore something? It means to make something old, new again. It's a temporal paradox, especially in a place like Versailles that went through so many changes. During his lifetime, Louis XIV changed his mind about lots of rooms many times. It was his ongoing work. He lived his whole life in a construction site. Louis XV built only a little less, and Louis XVI built, too. They used it as a political tool. They got a lot of political clout through great parties and great decors—I won't say they used it for world domination, but for world influence peddling. So when you choose to restore a certain room as it was in a certain period, the period you choose is based on your contemporary worldview. Each point of view of the present has its harmonics in the past. It was no mistake that during the Mitterand years they loved Louis XV, because he's sort of a Louis XV kind of guy.

**MGK** Mitterand?

**RP** Oui.

**MGK** In what way?

**RP** Well, he kept stuff hidden upstairs—

**MGK** Okay, okay, all right. (*laughter*)

**RP** You know what I'm saying? I feel they both tried to come off as erudite, but he had in his demeanor a certain kind of *retenue*, more discreet and subtle, whereas Louis XIV was more showman-like. Louis XIV was like a flaming creature. What we are looking at in these museum restorations is the society's superego, what a society thinks of itself, and how it thinks it should be seen by itself. This is what individuals do to a room. Again this same theme. It's the exteriorization of the soul life or of personal values. What we have affixed on these walls is the superego, in the Jungian sense. To get back to this universe of the decisive moment of Cartier-Bresson, what interests me more is the decisive summation of value, an emblematic image.

**MGK** It goes back to your image of the murder and wanting to record everything you see, or things that you see that you don't even know that you're seeing. It's an idea of the photograph as encyclopedic.

**RP** Yes.

**MGK** And that also factually reaches backward into history. Whether it reaches forward or not is another question.

**RP** It becomes the egg for the next generation. Let me give you another example. I'm not known for my portraiture, but in India I do a lot of portraits. It's so easy, there are so many people. I shoot them in front of where they live; somehow I get them to give the pose that they think that they should give. I'm not so interested in what I think about a person, I'm interested in what that person thinks about him- or herself. And that's how I relate to places as well.

**MGK** How does that relate to the idea of rooms that have been created consciously, but then devastated by time?

**RP** The rooms that are devastated by time are the ones that have the most traces. The brand-new, fabricated rooms only have graphic qualities. They don't really have any soul to them.



*Bowling Alley, Cando, North Dakota, 2000.*

**MGK** How did you actually get to do Versailles? Did you choose it; were you asked to do it?

**RP** I chose it. I had a friend who lived in the town. I used to go and visit her. One day, she said, "Why don't you go look at the chateau?" So I did.

My friend Peter Fend used to talk about mega-structures, how one city should be one building, or one building should be one city. This is what we had in Versailles. At its zenith over 10,000 people lived in that building. I was mind-blown by the scope of it. By the way, a few days ago I was in Delhi, and I love the Indian capitol, Rashtrapati Bhavan, and the Kremlin is just a fantastic capitol complex.

**MGK** It's all related—Versailles is a capitol complex, of course. Did you have to pull all kinds of strings to take pictures of Versailles?

**RP** That's how the French are. You go through all this crap, and then you're in, and it's fine. After a while I got wind of what was going on in the chateau. They were in the middle of intense restorations of the ground floor. I could see what was going on just by peering through the windows. I made an appointment with the curatorial administration and simply showed them work I had previously shot in the Orangerie in their tropical tree storage. They liked it and I got to shoot

those rooms that were in transformation. Looking back on it I think what initially helped me was the fact that they were really mad about Deborah Turbeville's book. They hated how she went about it. She got Jackie O to call, and Giscard D'Estaing, to put on pressure. They thought she overstepped her boundaries. And besides, the fact that they also hated the pictures somehow helped me. They liked the pictures I took because they had the right feeling for them.

**MGK** Because you can see the layers of history. When I saw those pictures I was absolutely fascinated. You learn about Versailles as it was when Louis XIV was building it, but when you see it as it is, something that was lived in by many people over a period of time, it's amazing. That was the beginning of your being an art photographer. Is that when you met Olivier Renaud-Clément, who was head of the photography department at the Robert Miller Gallery?

**RP** Yes, through Gilles Dusein, who is dead. He had one of the best photo galleries in Paris in the '80s, on Rue de Turenne, it was called Urbi et Orbi. What I showed in his gallery, believe it or not, were these shots I was doing just before Versailles, of these rooms in New York's Lower East Side where people had just died. Little did I know then that Gilles himself was dying. But yes, he and Olivier used to be buddies, and Olivier would come to Paris for a month every year and take some prints on consignment, and I wouldn't see him for a year or two and then I'd get some money later.

**MGK** At that point you were hitting your stride.

**RP** Right. It took a long time to get the first Versailles book published, which I hate of course, and I'm going to redo it in a year or two, my way, with older and newer work. I didn't have the clout then to make the Versailles book the way I wanted. I told my French publisher that it's about historical revisionism as seen through museum restoration. He looked at me and said, "Nobody's going to buy that. We're making for you the best coffee table book that's ever been made on the subject." So I had to go for that. That wasn't my idea. But, fine. When I was shooting all this stuff in Versailles, none of my friends believed in it. The French thought I was out of my mind.

**MGK** But they liked you.

**RP** But they didn't like that subject. They looked at it as an American's view of the French past. And the French did, after all, have a revolution and execute their monarch, so they didn't really get where I was coming from with it. Yet Versailles is one of the most visited French monuments. But it's almost embarrassing to them.

**MGK** Really? But they're so traditional, they're so much about their past.

**RP** I agree with you, there's a contradiction there. I don't think they really picked up on all the contradictions in those pictures. I'm not sure that the Americans get it either.

**MGK** But it's interesting for a society that's as controlled as France, to acknowledge that it has all these cracks, all this contradictory meaning. So then you came back to America with Olivier and did that show of Versailles.

**RP** That show was instrumental in my coming back, yes.





*Main Street, Nekoma, North Dakota, 2000.*

**MGK** Let's talk about the American rooms that you've photographed.

**RP** The photos in the show I did with Gilles Dusein were all these apartments where people had just recently died. Kids, mostly teenage boys, would just go in and break everything. I knew this painter, Larry Berzon, who used to make money as a real estate agent and who happened to manage this building where in the space of about a month three occupants had died, and he had access to those apartments. That's when I started to photograph those kinds of rooms, and I realized that they were quite powerful images. I did it again with Chernobyl and of course in New Orleans, and the actual type of damage or, say, habitat violation in each is of a different nature, but they're close neighbors. It's the same family of phenomena.

**MGK** Destruction.

**RP** Even the Havana work, the rooms are not totally destroyed. There, the cause is political and economic. In North Dakota, there weren't that many interiors that I photographed, because—

**MGK** There were no layers in the interiors.

**RP** Yes, the interiors were pretty much empty. There it's been abandoned, as if living was simply too harsh. They took whatever belongings they had and just moved away. The layering of time is in the exteriors. In North Dakota, there's so much space around everything. Maybe that frightened me. It really is rural.

**MGK** Yeah, it's eerie.

**RP** I don't quite feel comfortable in that kind of environment. I feel like I can shoot it, but it's physically and psychologically hard.

**MGK** Well, the urban environment is warmer. There are people around you; there are more symbols; there's a sense of busyness; it's not the incredible loneliness of these vacant buildings, where an attempt was made but it never quite clung to the earth. That photograph of yours in *The New Yorker* with the car and the old hotel and the grain elevator in the back. Talk a little bit about that photograph.

**RP** All of it was totally abandoned. It was left there 20 years before I shot it and nothing's been moved. In an urban environment, like the Lower East Side, kids and foragers will at least come and break things. In that North Dakota settlement, there's nothing. It's only time. In a way, it's a look far back in

America's past.

**MGK** In what way?

**RP** I don't think it profited from the post-WWII boom. It got stuck after 1929. The abandoned stores have people's private names, like Petersen's Store. You're hard put to find that anywhere in Chicago or New York, where, by the '50s or '60s, all the mom-and-pop stores were being bought or put out of business by Walgreens and the first Western Autos, J.C. Penneys, and Sears. Chain stores didn't even bother to go to most of the places in North Dakota. So you're looking that far back in time, whereas in Havana, you're looking back to 1959.

**MGK** It's also been preserved, but it's been changed. The Cubans have taken those cars, retooled, repainted, and reused them. That fabulous interior you did that's the cover of your book; they've been living in this kind of palace and making little nests for themselves. And the vegetation is so lush in Cuba; you expect palm trees to start growing in the middle of these mansions.

**RP** In North Dakota, there are no trees. There never were any, because the plains used to be covered with water, and later, ice. And when the ice retreated it became grassland. It just goes on forever.

**MGK** It does, it's amazing. You have the feeling that you're the only thing between the earth and the sky. I noticed when I was out there watching you shoot that you were fascinated by the grain elevators. You shot that grain elevator complex in Harvey again and again from every possible angle. And factually, they are interesting structures; they look like little castles.

**RP** Yes, it's true. They are, after all, the largest structures in town. They had for me a unique look, where so much else I saw there wasn't so original.



*Abandoned Farmhouse, Schaty Farm, Slope County, North Dakota, 2000.*

**MGK** So, in contrast, let's talk about Cuba and New Orleans.

**RP** Havana was a major metropolitan, world-class city. It's the model for Miami and not the other way around.

**MGK** Oh, definitely. It was also incredibly beautiful and sophisticated.

**RP** Yeah, very rich. After the revolution, I think Fidel has mostly neglected his country's urban health. He's curious, Fidel, a lot of these dictators build monuments to themselves, but he didn't. He built up the educational and

medical stuff.

**MGK** It's interesting to me that he turned that grand old country club into an art school.

**RP** True, but then he throws out the architect. (*laughter*) I think the Eastern European Communists told him that he was too bourgeois about architectural style. In Havana you get to see back pretty much to 1959. So really what you're seeing is the '50s. And that's an amazing sight.

**MGK** And that's when you were born.

**RP** Yeah, that's true too. Now, New Orleans, that's the most depressing one. That whole book I did is a dirge. Because it's a rotted city. Wind damage is one thing, but with water damage, the only things left are metallic or ceramic. Everything else is lost. I think of each one of those interior photos as a funerary image. It's paying your last respects. All those homes are going to be demolished or burned, and you'll never have any other traces of any of it but through photographs. There were some 2,000 dead, but hundreds of thousands of homes were destroyed, and most of their inhabitants are now living an interrupted life somewhere else. What we're looking at in those images are discarded exoskeletons. That's what that work was about. And as far the exteriors go, it's just incredible what wind and water force can do.

**MGK** It's an amazing thing, in our time, the destruction of a major metropolis—fast.

**RP** In contrast, the Dec 26th tsunami killed two million. I guess we're going to see more and more of these kinds of things because of these weather changes.

**MGK** And also because of something else that you talked about, which is the end of industrialism. These things that people built that defined a moment in civilization—it's over. There's something else coming. How was Dubai for you?

**RP** I wouldn't live there, but I liked it more than Vegas.

**MGK** You know, we've talked so much about structure as memory, structure as something that new generations can derive ideas from, but what about the concept of structure as future?

**RP** Well, that's hard for me to answer. Maybe it's because I am middle-aged now, and there's more time in the back of me than in front, or because so many of my past predictions about the future were just simply wrong. Emotionally speaking, the notion of the future frightens me now because of what we spoke of earlier. The end of industrialism and the pain of contraction that it will bring about. You know, it won't be a pretty sight—and it will be tough to witness in old age. Though, I don't imagine pain is much fun at any age. I was watching CNN in my hotel room, a news analysis on people's carbon footprint, and it made the point that to make up for the pollution of any 7-hour jet-flight each person had to plant four and a half trees. Well, I owe whole forests by now. So, it's not so pleasant to realize that you yourself are part of the problem. The camera may have been invented in the Renaissance, but photography, let's face it, is an industrial art. I always thought I was one of the good guys, so now realizing that I am not, I really don't know what to do about it. Is it all right for one to commit evil for the sake of good? There is a lot of this kind of thing in the drift of current events now. You know that line in "Stairway to Heaven," about "in the long run there's still time to change the road you're on"? Well, you know what I think? The older you get, the less time there is and the less inclined one is to change the road he's on. So the notion of the future frightens me.