

Jerry Dantzig and the Cirkut Camera

Author

Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)

Date

1978

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2353

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,
primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.



Jerry Dantzie

The Museum of Modern Art,

May 9-July 30, 1978

This exhibition, sponsored by Springs Mills and the Nat

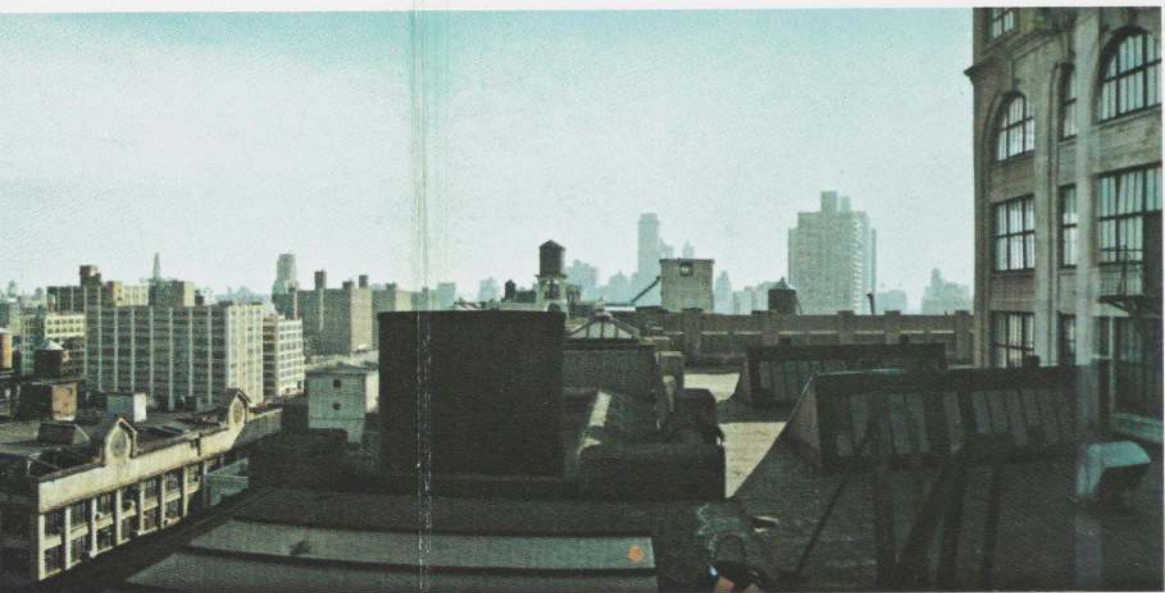


ic and the Cirkut Camera

Art, New York

l the National Endowment for the Arts, is the first in the Springs Mills Series on American Photography.





Jerry Dantzie and the Cirkut Camera

In 1973, after almost twenty years as a professional photographer, Jerry Dantzie first saw a Cirkut Camera. Fascinated by the fact that the machine seemed an elaborate contradiction of everything that he understood photography to be, Dantzie borrowed it. For several months it stood unused in his studio, an exotic and vaguely threatening interloper.

Dantzie had been educated as a photographer during the 1950s, when the prevailing photographic aesthetic emphasized tight visual editing, simple and forceful graphics, and quick, intuitive responses. The teacher to whom he feels most indebted—Alexey Brodovitch—was one of those who helped define this aesthetic, which might in approximate terms be considered equivalent to the then-current architectural dictum, Less is more. The Cirkut Camera, in contrast, seems to describe everything, with tireless impartiality, and imposes on the photographer the requirement of methodical and deliberate planning.

When Dantzie finally began using the borrowed instrument, he felt at first that he served no serious function in its operation. Like the liberated robots in science-fiction stories, it seemed to take over and make

pictures that conformed to its principles. Dantzie felt nevertheless that the machine had potentials that had never been realized, and he addressed himself to the task of collaborating with it. By now he describes the relationship between him and the camera as one of circumscribed understanding and tentative friendship.

The Cirkut Camera was invented at the beginning of this century, but the problem that it was designed to answer goes back to the earliest days of photography. The goal was to increase the photograph's field of vision beyond what might be called—somewhat arbitrarily—the normal field of the human eye. In 1845 von Martens made a daguerreotype on a curved metal plate that described an arc of 150°, but when standard photographic procedure came to be based on the inflexible glass plate, extreme wide-angle views could be made only by pasting one paper print to another. After the development of flexible film in the 1880s, it was possible to pursue again the goal of a coherent, seamless image that could describe a wider view—even the entire circle of the horizon.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century many cameras were designed to meet this

challenge. They were based on several alternative principles, but that of the Cirkut Camera was the most radical: when one pushes the button, the entire camera begins to revolve at a predetermined speed around its vertical axis. Simultaneously, the film is wound past a narrow vertical slot in the back of the camera, at precisely the same speed as the moving projected image, so that the film and the image remain stationary in relationship to each other. (Imagine photographing one speeding train from the window of another moving at the same speed on a parallel track.)

The perspective system of the Cirkut Camera, although coherent and logical, is disorienting, since we have been educated to assume that the perspective conventions of the Renaissance have a privileged relationship to reality. In Cirkut Camera pictures, horizontal straight lines that are perpendicular to the camera's line of vision will be drawn in the picture as convex arcs; a circle, on the other hand, if photographed from its center, will be drawn as a straight line.

The Cirkut Camera was in fairly common use as late as the 1930s, and was generally employed to photograph, in a constricted

space, the city's entire police department, or all of those attending the Elks' picnic. Whenever possible, the photographer posed his subject in such a way as to conceal or minimize the potentially unsettling effects of the camera's peculiar style of description.

Dantzie, on the other hand, has considered his machine's unfamiliar system of notation as a challenge. As his scrolls approach and exceed 180° of vision, unfamiliar technical and formal issues arise: the sun casts shadows in diametrically opposite directions; since the photographer shoots both with and against the sun, normal guides to correct exposure are no longer relevant; as in the case of the traditional Chinese scroll painting, the conventional Western concept of composition is no longer useful. Perhaps most interesting, these pictures have no vanishing point: no center line from which, under the old dispensation, one could identify the peripheral.

*John Szarkowski, Director
Department of Photography
The Museum of Modern Art*