ENVIRONMENTAL KODALITHS

by

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ABSTRACT

It is the intention of this thesis to present a
pictorial and written analysis of the human visual
image in the context of its historical, sociological
and environmental place in the Western world. This
investigation begins with "the severed head" of the
pre-Christian Celtic world and continues to follow
the motif of the head through the most humanistic
period of all - the twelfth century Gothic (parti-
cularly at Chartres) and into the world of the
photographic image and the environmental kodalith.

This study is made in relation to my own work
with the photographic image prior to "Faces," the
Stairway Seven project and continues past it.

It illustrates my concerns with light, the
visual image in its environment, and Man's place
in this environment.

Thesis supervisor . . . : ⋅/ ⋅✓⋅◡⋅/⋅ . . . .

Professor Otto Piene

Title: Director, Center for
Advanced Visual Studies

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"The Celts, from whom so many of the later
European peoples were descended were, like other
northern peoples, headhunters. But apart from cut-
ting off the heads of their enemies in battle they
worshiped the severed head, and believed it to be
imbued with every divine power - prophecy, fertility,
speech, song and hospitality and, perhaps more than
anything else, the power of averting evil."[1]

The Severed Head

My first reaction was one of shock, then fascination, abhorrence and finally dismay, when recently at an airport and directly confronting me was a very large woman wearing a necklace of many dangling heads glinting on her bosom. "Heads," I thought to myself, "Why is she wearing heads?" They were flat, and gold, and each depicted a childish silhouette, either a boy's or a girl's (as differentiated by having short hair or shorter hair) and bearing a first name and date (presumably the birthdate of the child). This was the grandmother by all indications, and she was wearing a type of popular commercial jewelry decoration. But severed heads!!! I was sorry not to have recorded this image photographically, but even more dismayed at the flatness, the stamped out identity of a presumably cherished visual image. Its only personal identity was in the engraved labeling.

We are all of us not so far from our ancestors' cult of the head - the human head is an endless source of fascination. We bear I.D. cards and driver's licenses and passports with our photographic images to prove who we claim to be, and those photographic images are the combination of reflected light waves and chemistry that can reproduce the "true" institutionally accepted "YOU". "Photographs furnish instant history, instant sociology,

instant participation. But there is something anodyne about these new forms of packaging reality."[2]

The pre-Christian Celts worshipped the human head, and made images of it in naturalistic and non-naturalistic ways - but it is always an easily recognizable image.

"Image-making at its origins, when it was a practical, magical activity was a means of appropriating or gaining power over something. The further back we go in history, as E. H. Gombrich has observed, the less sharp is the distinction between images and real things; in primitive societies, the thing and its image were simply two different, that is, physically distinct, manifestations of the same energy or spirit. Hence, the supposed efficacy of images in propitiating and gaining control over powerful presences. Those powers, those presences were present in THEM."[3]

These images moved from pagan worship into the Christian churches and cathedrals all over Europe with the ease of adoption that the specific spirituality of the site embodied, and the early Christian church wisely wove into the texture of its theology that which it could not eradicate.

The early pagan deities retained a visible and tangible presence. The sun and the moon have always had their place in divine imagery, and the early Gothic

churches embodied the very complicities of light in the
relief and modeling of stone images and in the very
physical presence of their interior and exterior archi-
tecture.

Chartres was built over a pagan Celtic shrine that
was known to be the central annual meeting place of the
Druids. Chartres Cathedral is one of the three most
fascinating places I have been privileged to visit. (The
others are Stonehenge and Antonio Gaudi's Temolo Expiatorio
de la Sagrada Familia in Barcelona.) The infinite layer-
ings of mystery and light since the earliest habitation
of Man to our present time have endowed this sacred place
with an energy that is indescribable.

"Just as the Greek Temple is simple both in form and
in function, so the Gothic cathedral seems to proclaim
the complexity of mankind and of the world. Like the
celestial Jerusalem of which it is the terrestrial image,
it contains in its bosom many mansions, which is the mis-
sion of architecture to arrange in a clear order and to
bind together within broad perimeters: for the cathedral
summons men from far and wide, with its belfries, its
facades, and the manifold approaches of its portals.
Its very shape seems to be modeled on the movement of
the crowds whose steps and glances it holds in focus;
and the vast space it encloses is fully defined only by

the sonorous volume of its organ and the songs that echo

in its depths. Without its ritual and its people, the

cathedral would lose much of its significance; yet it

would retain its cosmic quality, its rich quality of

meditation upon the facts of the universe. For with

masterful skill it exploits and organizes substance and

weight, space and light, just as it does the masses of

humanity; and in the multiplicity of the rhythms with

which it links them, in the movements that it combines

and blends together, it seems to identify itself with the

fundamental impulses of the mind and nature."[4]

The human expression, the human appeal, the human

landscape pervades the entire being of Chartres. My own

endeavors seem closely allied to the thirteenth century.

In the Gothic carvings a likeness to life is brought forth

from the very contradictory demands of stone, and light

is the source of that life. By way of the photographic

human image and the effect of environmental light in my

work with kodaliths my concerns appear to parallel a frag-

ment of that amazing century. I am striving for a more

intense reality of the human image by way of the tech-

nology of my century.

Susan Sontag, in her vehement dissertation "On

Photography", states:

"In the past, a discontent with reality expressed itself as a longing for ANOTHER world. In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce THIS one. As if only by looking at reality in the form of an object - through the fix of the photograph - is it really real, that is, surreal."[5]

Susan Sontag's book is an endless source of searing psychological studies on photography in our society. No matter how my opinions may differ from hers in various other attitudes, I must sadly acknowledge her view of "the chronic self-destruct quality of American experience" that Bernice Abbott's book of 1939, Changing New York, so aptly illustrated. "Bernice Abbott's purpose ('I wanted to record it before it changed completely') sounds like that of Atget, who spent the years between 1898 and his death in 1927 patiently, furtively documenting a small scale, time worn Paris that was vanishing. But Abbott is setting down something even more fantastic: the cease-less replacement of the new. The New York of the thirties was very different from Paris: 'not so much beauty and tradition as native fantasia emerging from accelerated greed.' Abbott's book is aptly titled, for she is not so much memorializing the past as simply documenting ten years of the chronic self-destruct quality of American

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experience, in which even the recent past is constantly being used up, swept away, torn down, thrown out, traded in. Fewer and fewer Americans possess objects that have a patina, old furniture, grandparents' pots and pans - the used things, warm with generations of human touch, that Rilke celebrated in The Duino Elegies as being essential to the human landscape."[6]

In 1905 Henry Adams published his great book Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, and in 1957 Francis Henry Taylor wrote the following in the introduction to the new edition:

"When I first read Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres more than thirty-five years ago I was teaching English at the lycee in Chartres. There I had the opportunity to spend the better part of a year studying the cathedral from top to bottom. The gardiens, Etienne Houvet and Robert Batais, had given me the freedom of the cathedral and also had entrusted me with keys that would admit to the triphorium gallery, to the crypt, and to the external galleries on the roof. There was scarcely a stone or piece of glass with which in the course of my sojourn I was not intimately acquainted.

"I had been given the book by my family as a sort of consolation prize for being stationed in what seemed to them a remote provincial French town. From it I got my first introduction to the Middle Ages, to the life of the

thirteenth century, to the historical circumstances, especially the cult of the Virgin, which had brought about the erection of these great cathedrals. I learned from it also about the guilds and corporations and of the royal and princely donors who had given the windows and statues which in their ensemble have made the cathedral such a perfect work of art . . . . Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, I discovered, was something of a Baedeker to the topography and daily life of another epoch. I was obsessed and excited by its immagination and its scholarship . . . .

"What I did not understand, for I was only twenty-one at the time, was that Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres was a protest against the world in which Henry Adams found himself. Superficially it is an essay on the Middle Ages. Only since I have become more mature have I understood the basis for the unhappiness and the inner conflict of the man who wrote it."[7]

Francis Henry Taylor goes on to speak of Adams's Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres as a "flight from reality - from the encroachment of the materialistic determinism of the industrial revolution - Henry Adams's medievalism was likewise an escape from the inexorable disasters of the twentieth century which as a philosopher and historian he foretold. He linked the White House of his illustrious

ancestors with his own existence and that of his contem-
poraries. Already as a young secretary in his father's
legation in London in the Civil War, he felt that his
world was lost, and he sought consolation in the wonders
of the past . . . ."[8]

"The idea of Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres origi-
nated in the trip to Europe which followed the tragic
events surrounding his wife's suicide in 1885. He plunged
into a new world and it is not too much to say that Henry
Adams lost himself in the Middle Ages deliberately. His
personal unhappiness and the collapse of the world to which
he had been brought up, the panics of 1873 and 1893, and
the consequences of the War of 1870 in France, bore down
upon him heavily. . . ."[9]

"This mood was to persist, and some years later writ-
ing to his friend Charles Milnes Gaskel from Paris he says -
. . .The Normandy trip turned out well: charming
weather; easy journeys; a new world of architecture; and
to me a new variety of scenery and people. I bagged a
dozen new churches, and a few castles and chateaux besides
Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres . . . .

"I am sure that in the eleventh century the majority
of me was Norman, - peasant or prince matters nothing, for
all felt the same motives, - and that by some chance I did
not share the actual movement of the world but became a

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retarded development, and unable to find a place. Going

back now to the old associates seems to me as easy as

drinking champagne. All is natural, reasonable, complete,

and satisfactory. Coustances and St. Michel show neither

extravagance nor want of practical sense. They are noble

both in spirit and execution, but they are not, like the

later Gothic, self-conscious or assuming. They knew their

own force perfectly well; measured it to a hair; gave to

the ideal all it had a right to expect, and looked out

for the actual with a perfectly cool head . . . .

"Undoubtedly you and I were there which accounts for

us. I rather think that most of me were vassals of the

Church; respectable farmers, doing military service for

their fiefs. They also helped to build the churches of

Coustances, and Bayeux and Caen, and did it with satisfac-

tion. They liked architecture. . . ."[10]

"The following year Adams wrote to his niece,

Elizabeth Cameron:

'. . .Sunday afternoon I passed at Chartres, in the

cathedral, with the glass and the afternoon service. In

my sublimated fancy, the combination of the glass and the

Gothic is the highest ideal ever yet reached by men;

higher than the Mosaics and Byzantine of Ravenna, which

was itself higher, as a religious conception, than the

temples of the Greeks or Egyptians. Our age is too thor-

oughly brutalized to approach any of these creations of
an imagination which is dead. I am myself somewhat like
a monkey looking through a telescope at the stars; but
I can see at least that it must have been great . . . .'

"This tallies with the argument of the book. His
recent biographer, Emily Stevenson, has stated that the
book, written with 'an unfailing vivacity of color and
manner, might seem on first reading to be cheerful, even
gay, certainly bright. Yet it rests upon a bedrock of
somber prepossessions. Its premises might be stated as
follows:

'a. The universe is unintelligible and inimical
     to man.

'b. Society is a fiction - an attempt to make the
     universe intelligible and bearable.

'c. There are various possible fictions on which
     society may rest.

'd. The fiction of the twelfth century was one of
     the best.

'e. It too failed - life is tragic'."[11]

What better place to be then, than the twelfth century
for Henry Adams. And perhaps twentieth century society
would benefit from taking a closer look at the twelfth
century as well.

The blank windowless walls of our popular local

architecture negates the existence of natural light al-
together - its interior is claustrophobic and without
character. It could be anywhere at all it is so anony-
mous, so unrelated to its physical environment, and its
exterior is a blind brick expanse in an immense parking
lot? We are reduced to an isolation that is augmented
by the great god "Car" - why is it necessary to have two
drive-in blank-walled banks within seventy feet of one
another in Newton Centre, I wonder, when what was once
an adjacent town green has already been eaten up as a
parking lot. If this distressing construction of blank,
solid-walled type building continues (and its implications
for violence are staggering) how "quaint" will be viewed
our few remaining wooden structures with their naive little
architectural salutes to the sun.

The twelfth century is looking better and better.

"Despite the inevitable overstatement involved in
such simplifications, it can be said that the Gothic
cathedral sums up a whole epoch of humanity; that in these
cathedrals a social structure, a theological mode of
thought, together with a long tradition of craftsmanship
and sensibility, found their most beautiful and most human
expression. And this explains the fascination they have
for the soul of modern man."[12]

It is an exceptional experience to come upon the

spires of Chartres from across the great expanse of wheat
fields, and to feel so large in comparison to those dis-
tant tiny spires. You come closer and closer until sud-
denly it is large and you are tiny. Its figured exterior,
eloquent with life and ever changing and dazzling light,
exudes a human warmth. And moving from that living energy
into the interior and darker space, one passes into a
deeper radiance. Most things written about the windows
are of a more scholarly nature: the sociological stories
they tell, the original stained glass remaining nearly
wholly intact, and of course their monumental tribute to
the outstanding craftsmanship in the Gothic period. But
what is most exhilarating of all to me, is physically
moving through that colored light. What it must be like
to watch it in its travels every day!

Joseph Nicephore Niepce (1765-1833) was the inventor
of what we call photography. He and his brother were the
first "collaborators of the sun" as photographers later
came to be called.

Heliography (sun writing) was Niepce's name for the
process whereby the image appeared on the plate. In July
1839 Daguerre's achievement in perfecting this process
(he did not invent it) created an astounding excitement
in Paris. The "Mirror with a Memory" it was called:
"A mirror made of a silvered copper polished to a perfect

finish. Making a daguerreotype involved a complicated

series of operations: the plate had to be sensitized

with iodine vapour before exposure, and the image, in-

visible at first, was developed with mercury, so that it

appeared as a delicate incrustation on the surface of the

mirror."[13]

Everyone wanted one . . . . until the next photo-

graphic process came along, one that could be reproduced.

"The daguerreotype was abandoned, and I think wrongly.

The accusations against it were that it was insufficiently

sensitive and that it produced mirrorlike pictures which

could only be seen when the light fell on them at a certain

angle. This was all true; but if, instead of transferring

their attention to the paper print, photographers had per-

severed with the daguerreotype, they might have obtained

results even more remarkable than those obtained with glass

and paper. Even the best motion pictures do not give the

almost hallucinatory feeling of presence that we experience

looking at a daguerreotype. In the strange sepulchral

light, at once luminous and flat, which is so characteris-

tic of daguerreotypes, the features take on a supernatural

relief. Eyes blaze beneath jutting brows, lips seem to

move . . . There is a daguerreotype of Balzac, in the

Musee Balzac, which is quite extraordinary. It brings

one face to face with him better than any painting or any

photograph. He is there before one, about to open his mouth and hold forth on one of those chimerical schemes of his - and then a sunbeam is displaced and he is dead again. That leonine mask is now nothing but an elusive pattern of pearly surfaces."[14]

I have tried to capture the presence of this luminous and yet flat silvery "other" image in the daguerreotype here reproduced. Included are the best two of several attempts; but these images are not comparable in any way to the natural clarity and magical essence of this "other" image obtained from the daguerreotype itself.

The daguerreotype attracts me because of its social interest, the visual human image (the head usually), and its three-dimensional quality. I too regret that the daguerreotype was abandoned so rapidly when the polished copper plate was displaced by glass and a transparent paper negative.

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JAMAICA · PLAIN
HIGH SCHOOL
CLASS of 1935

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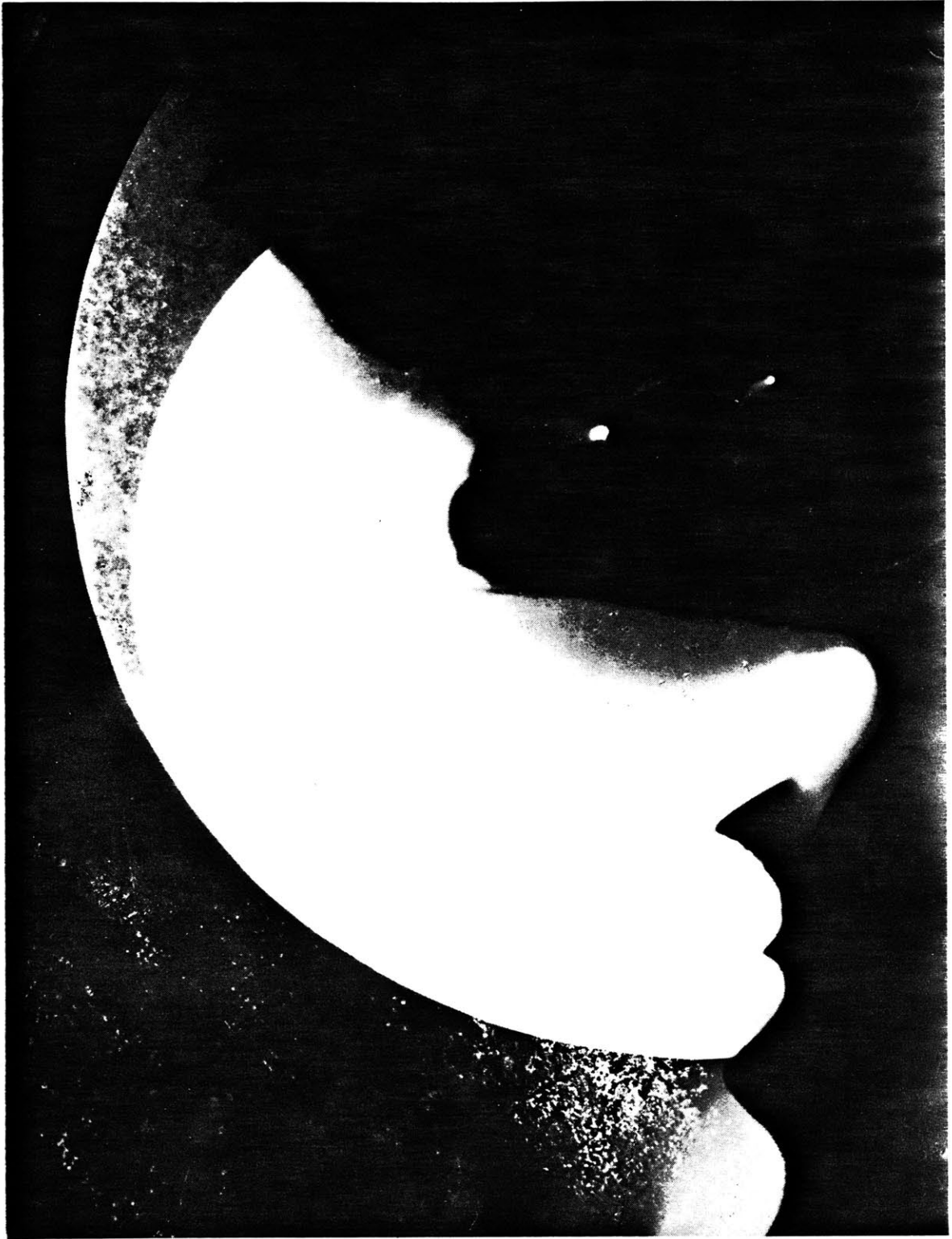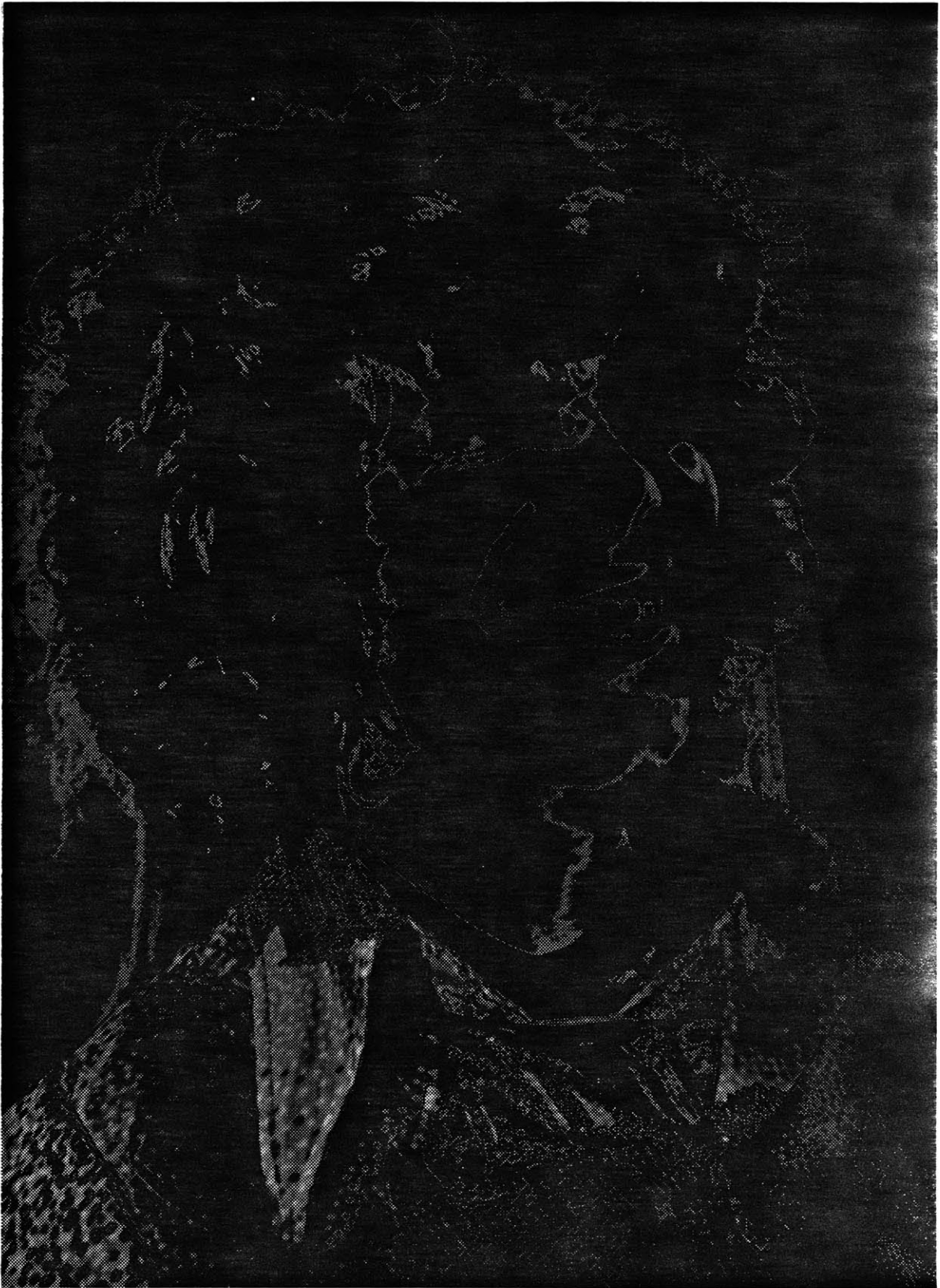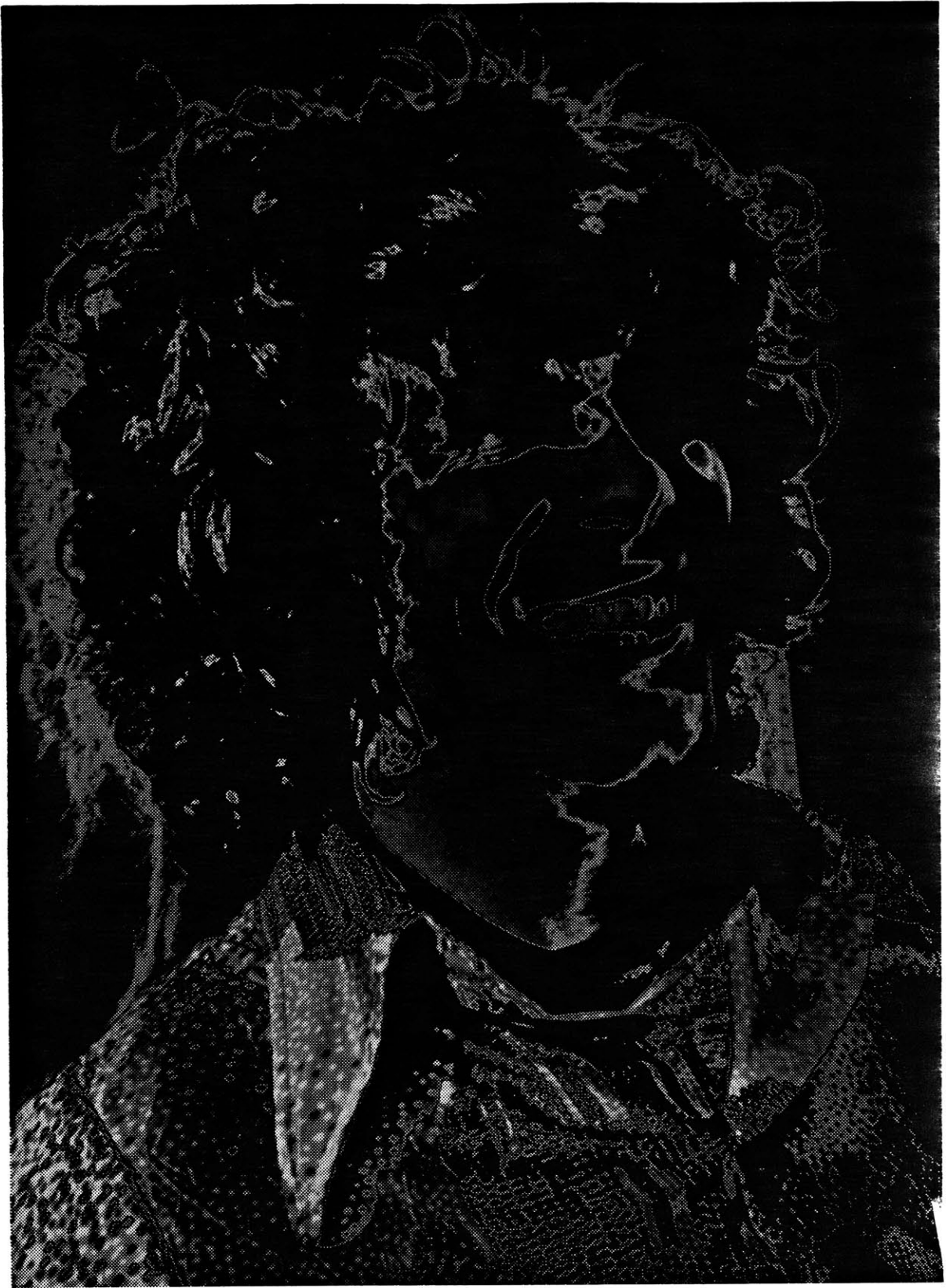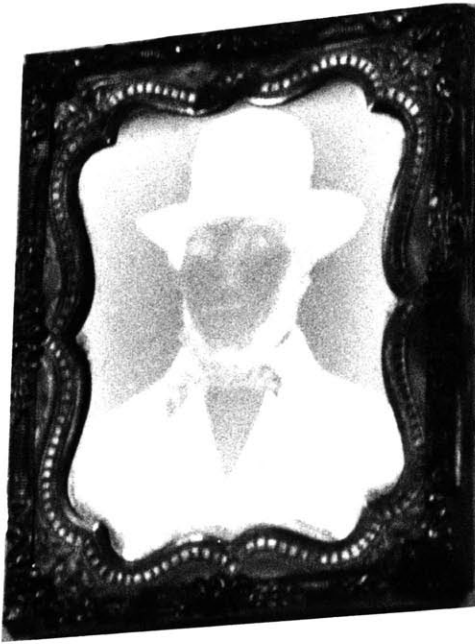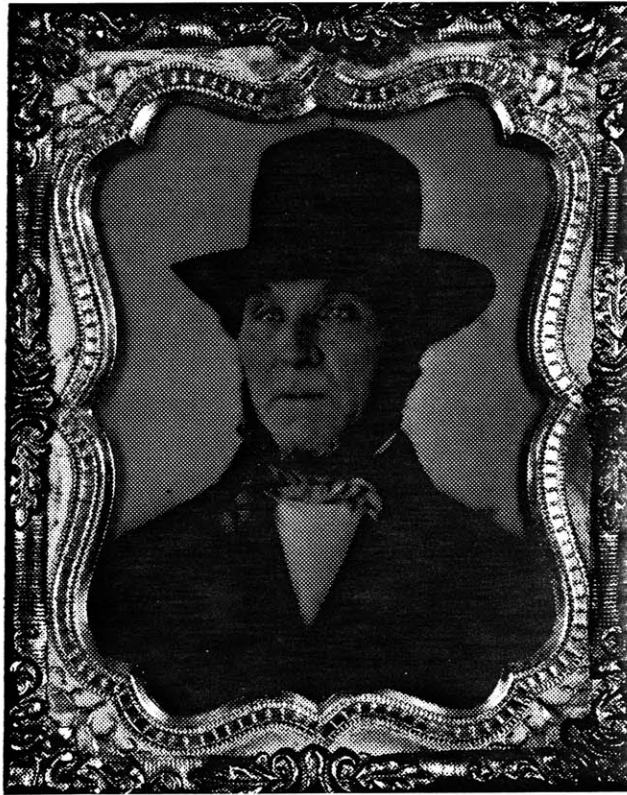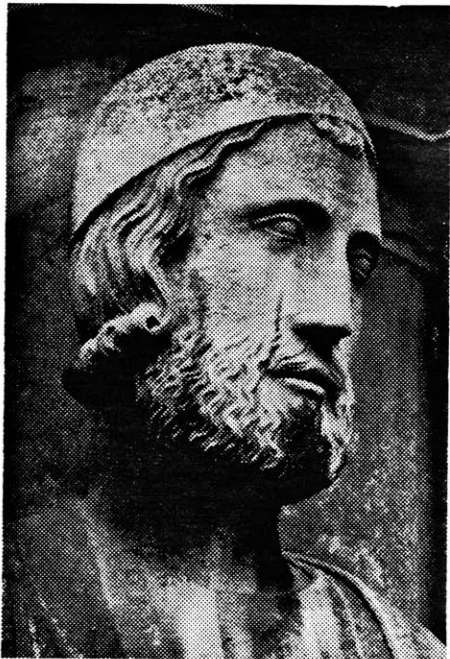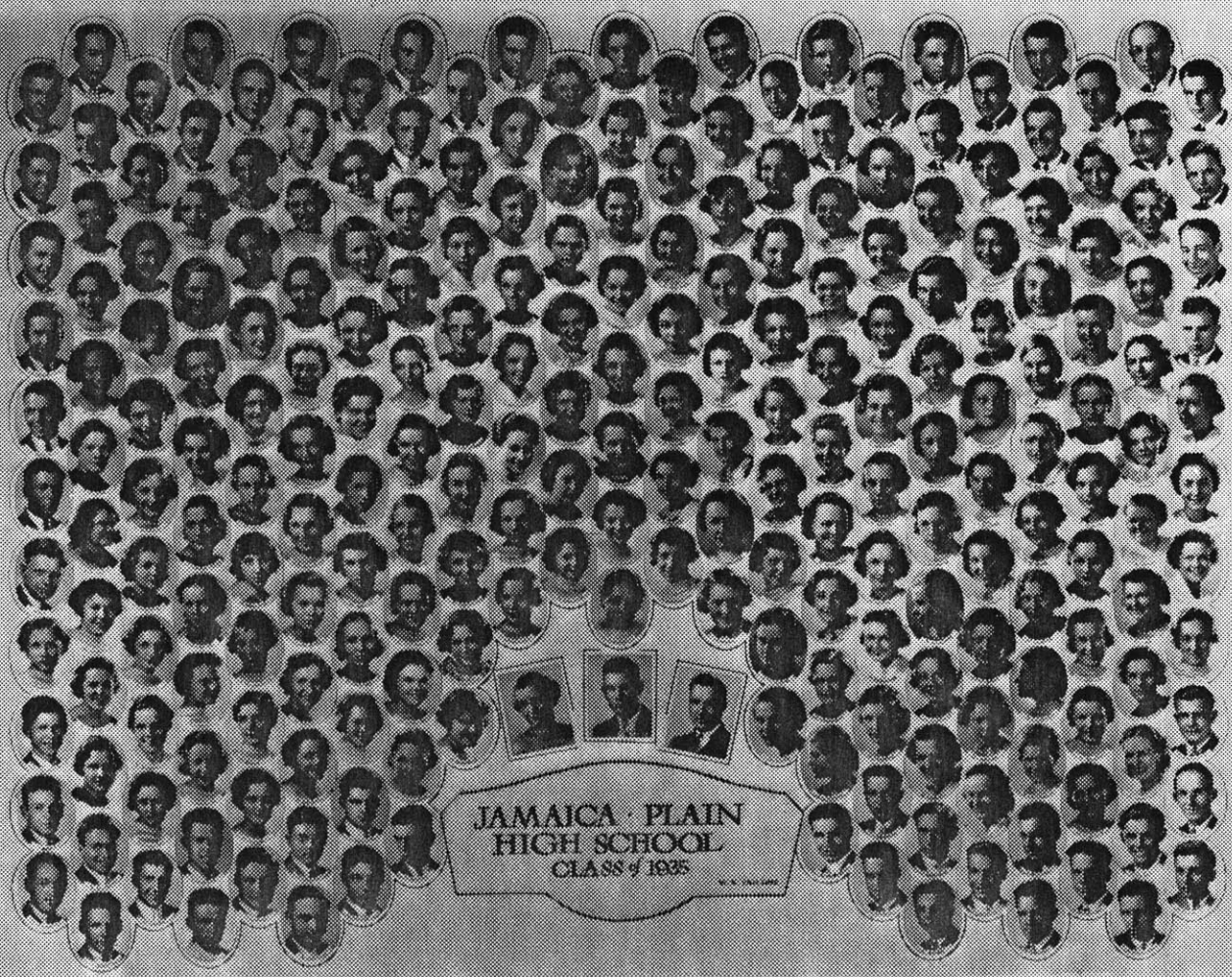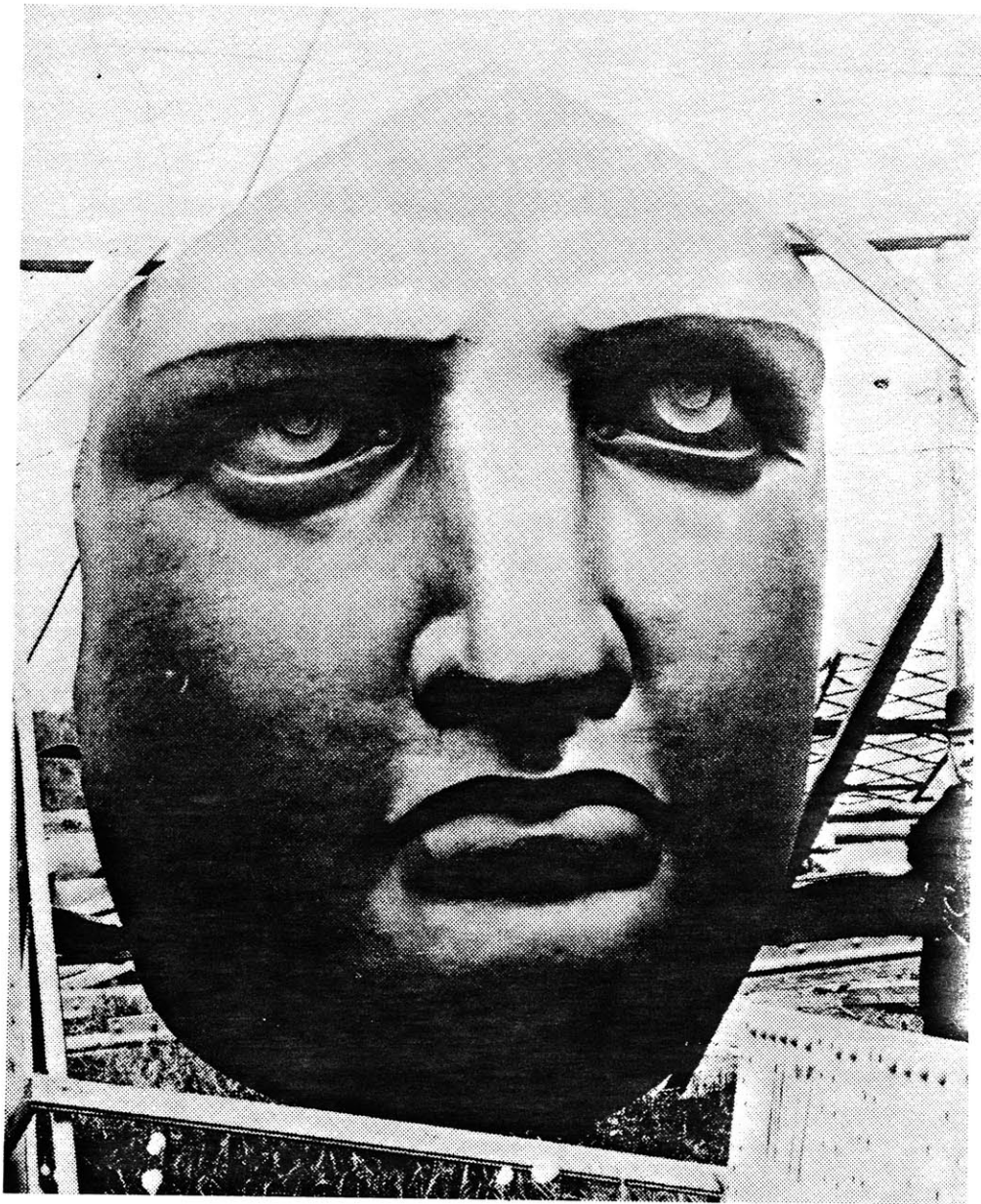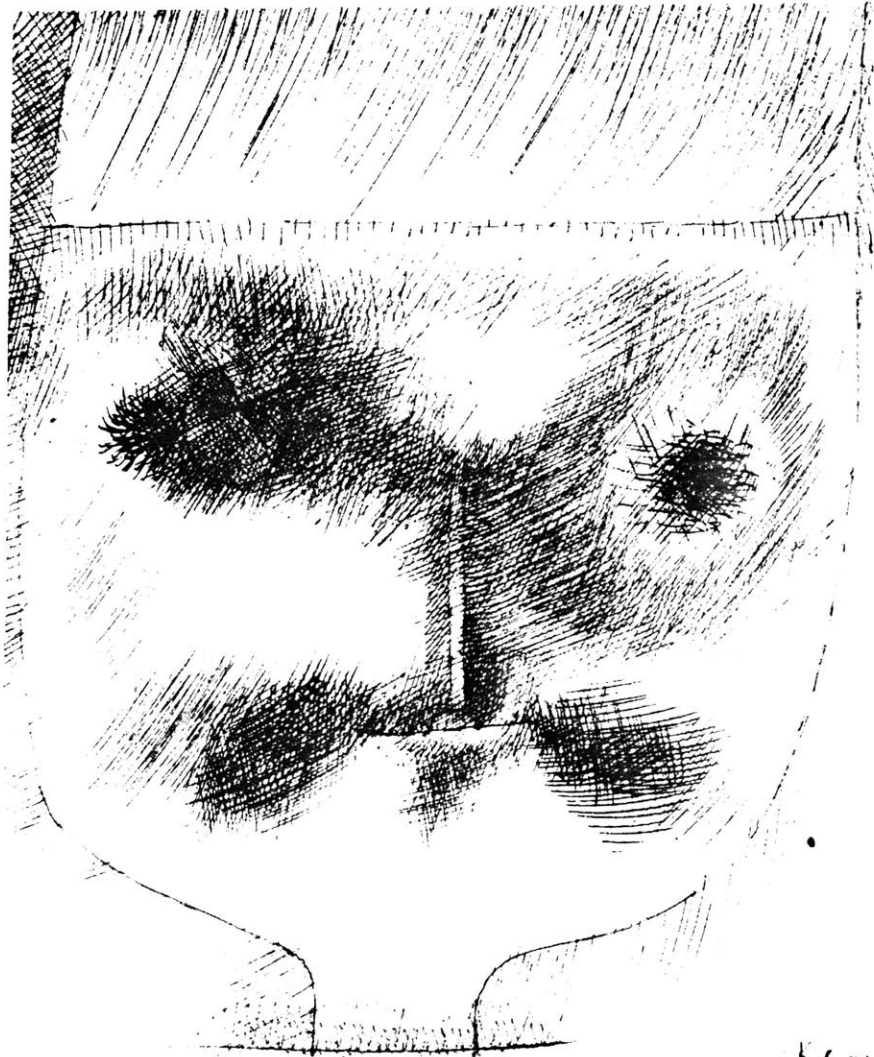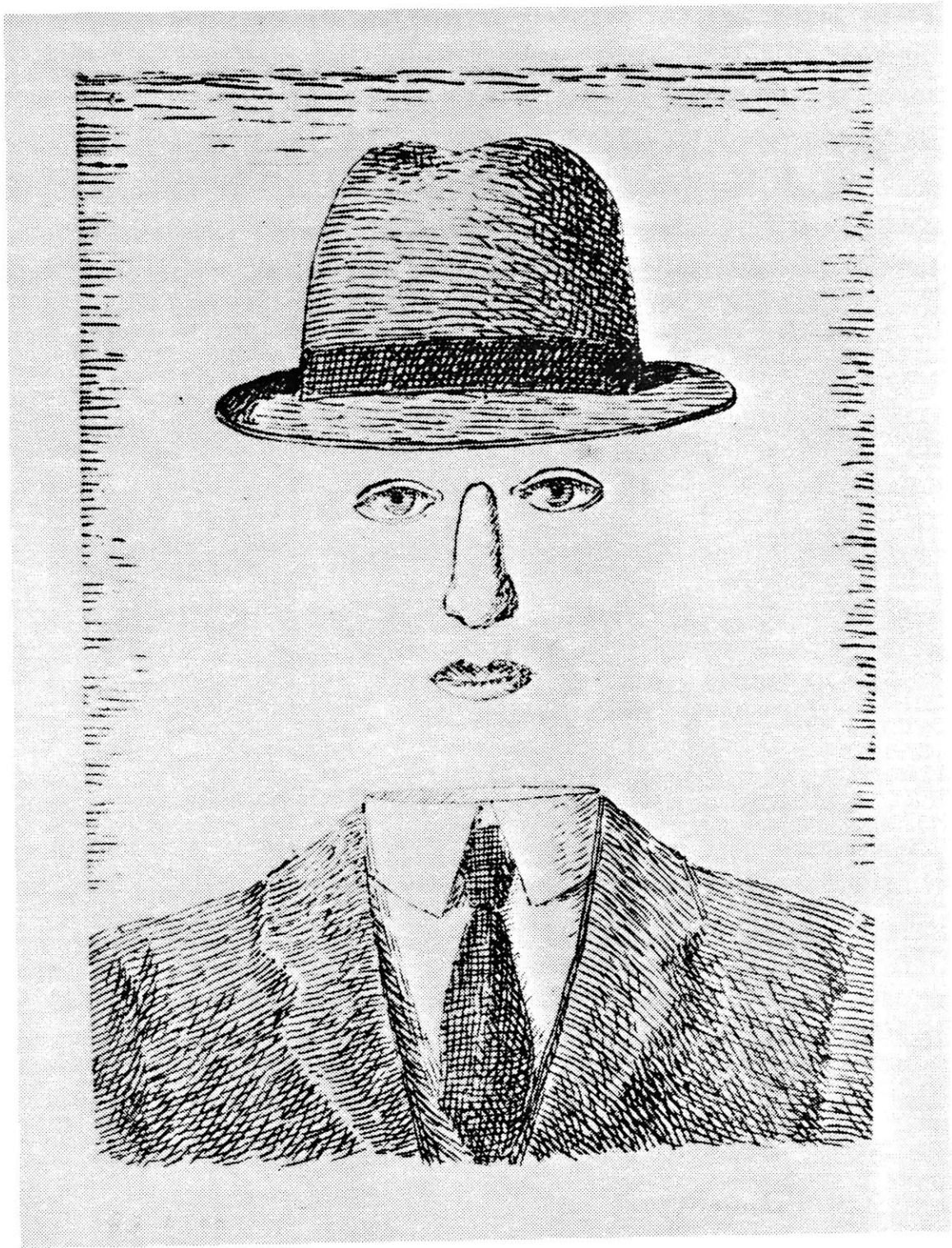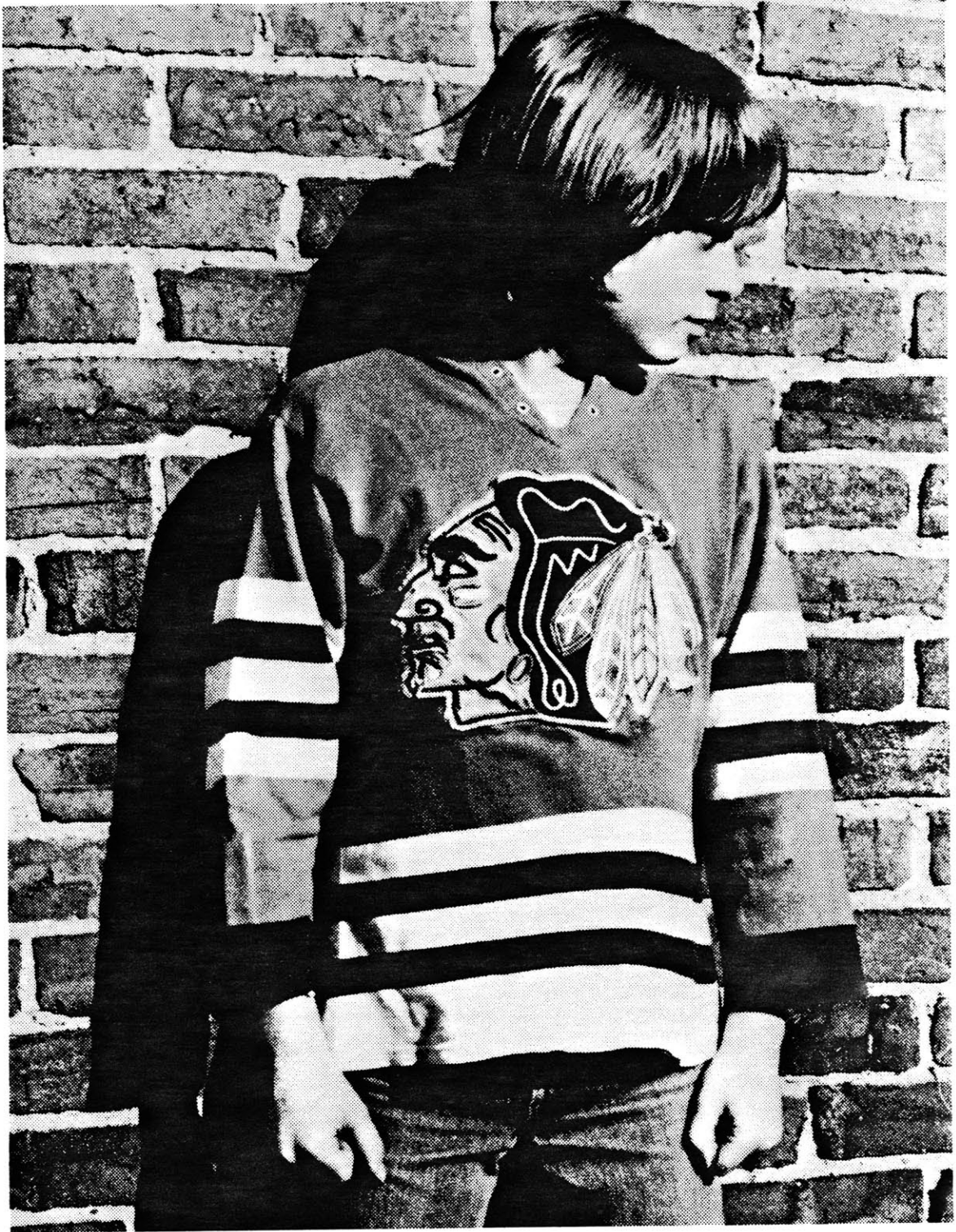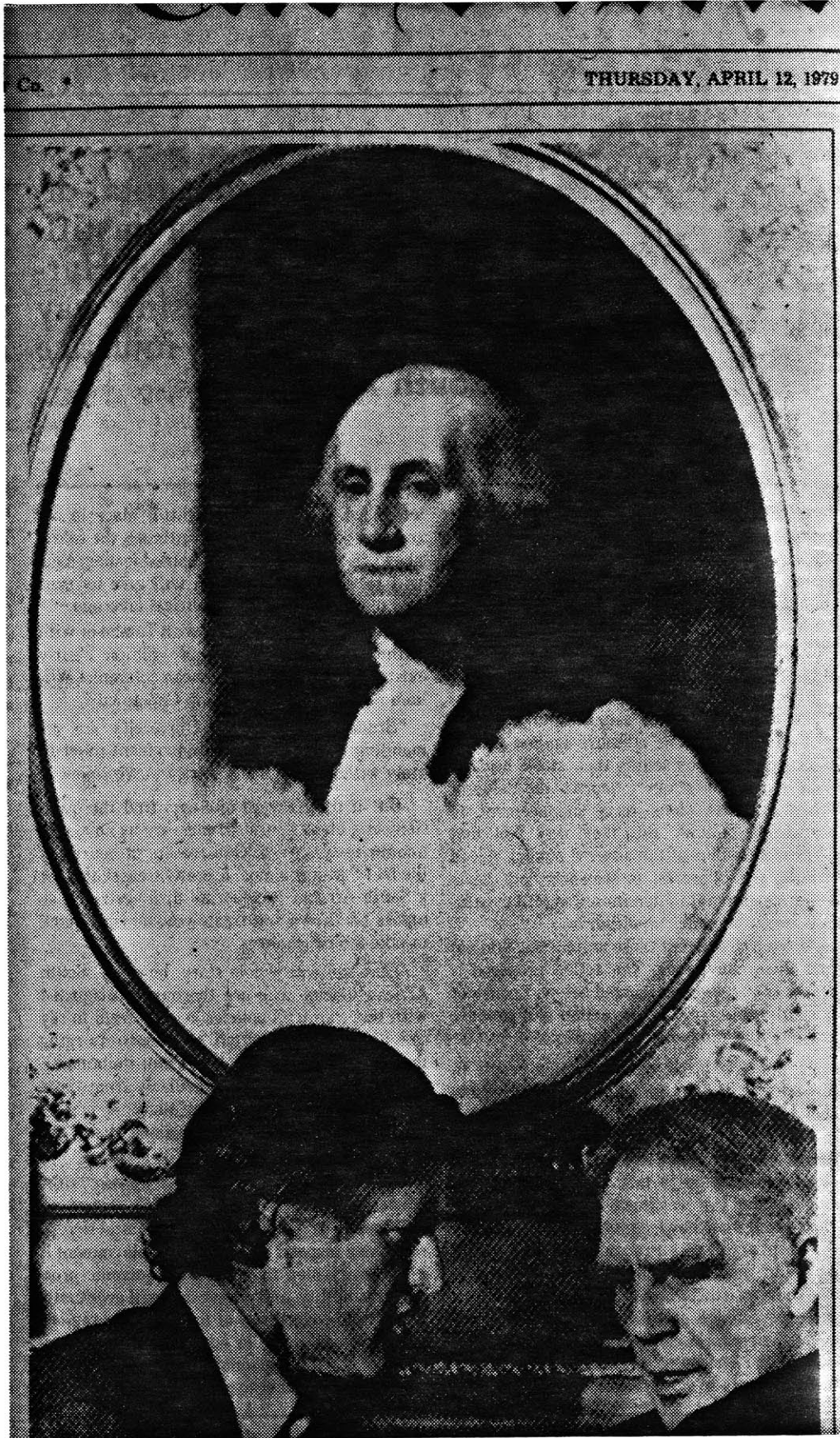
LIGHT
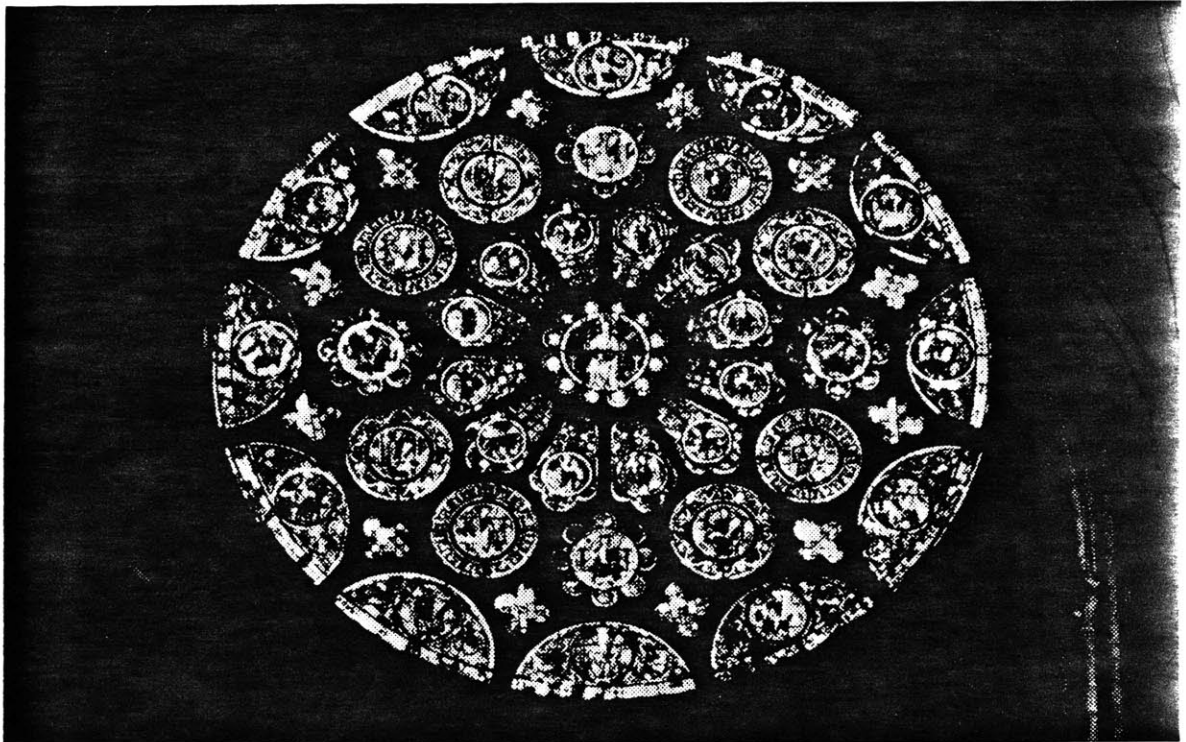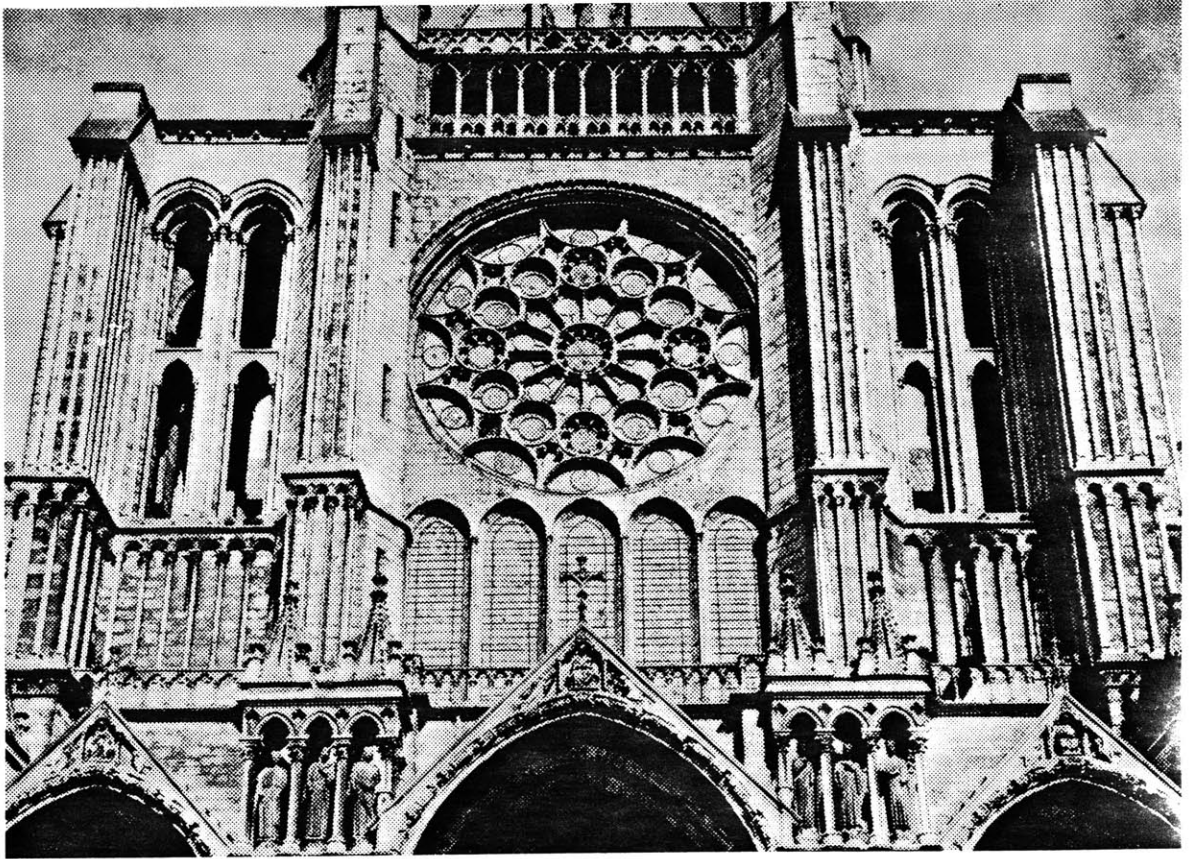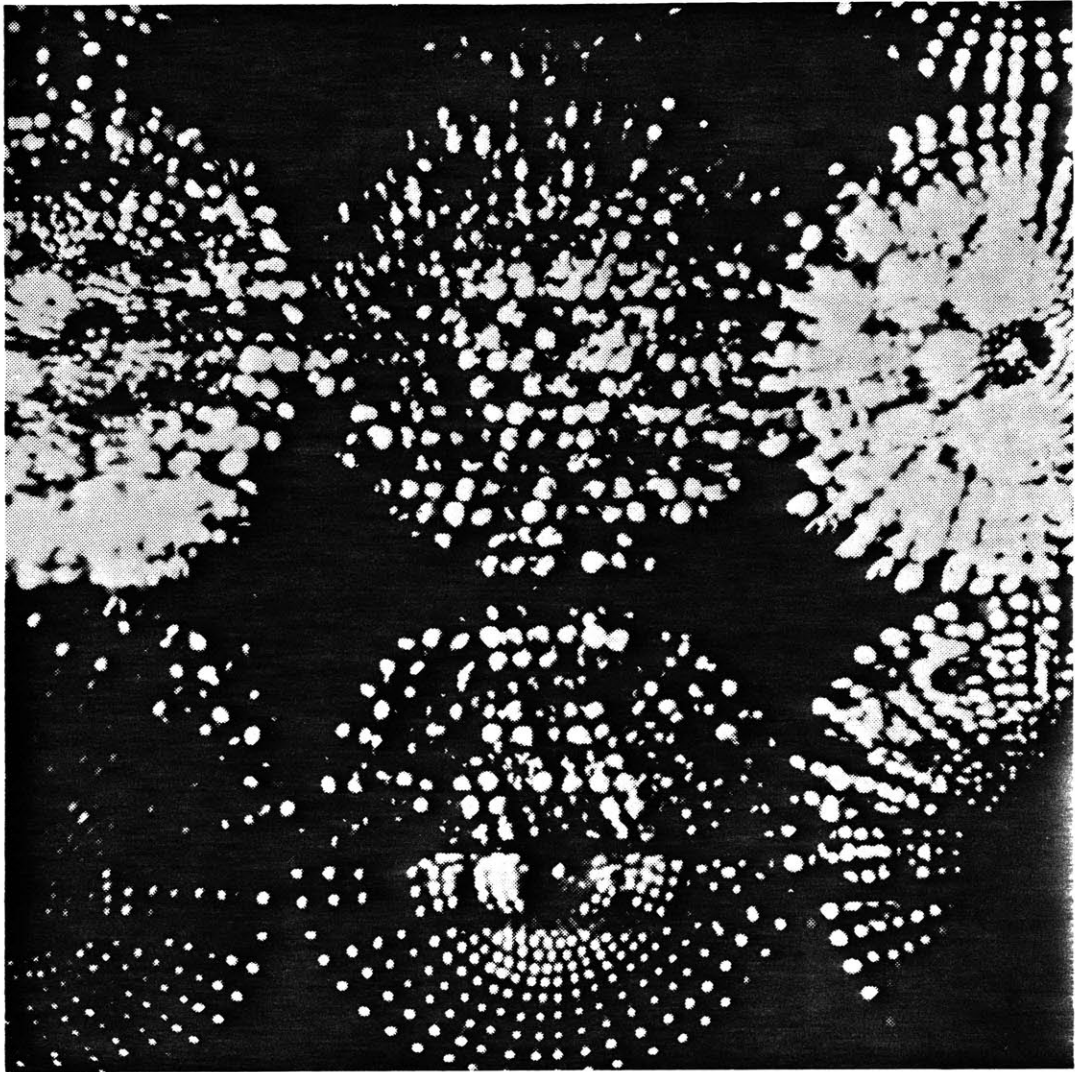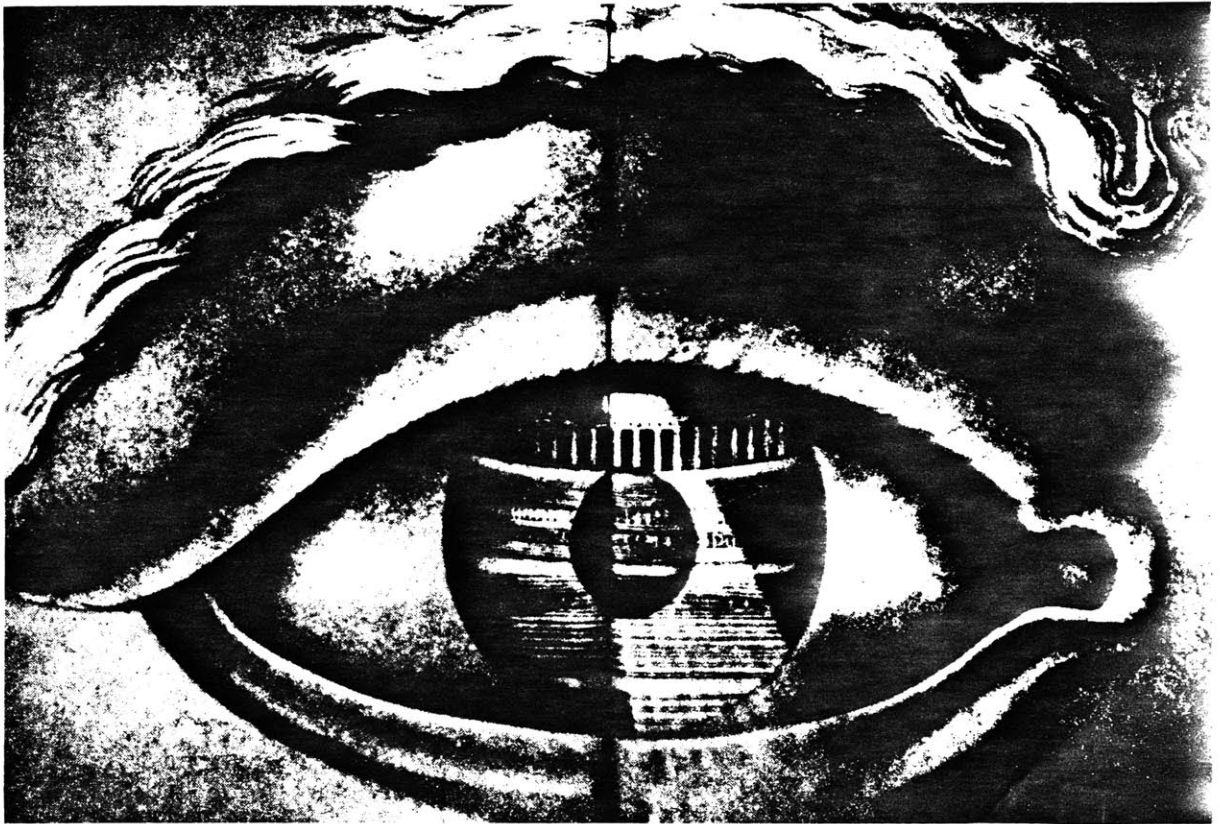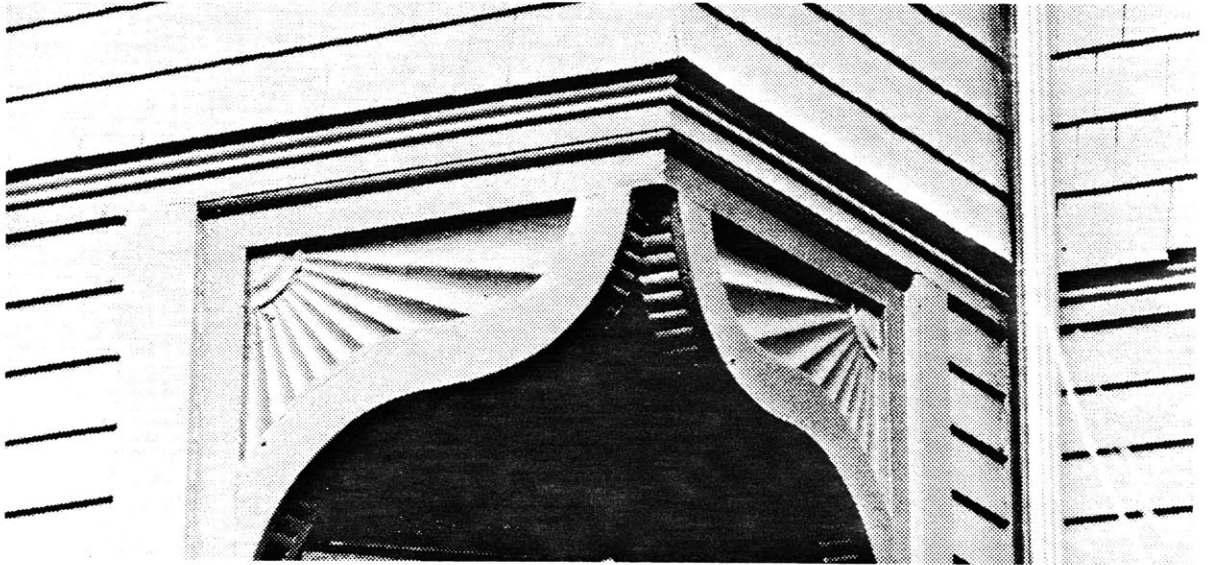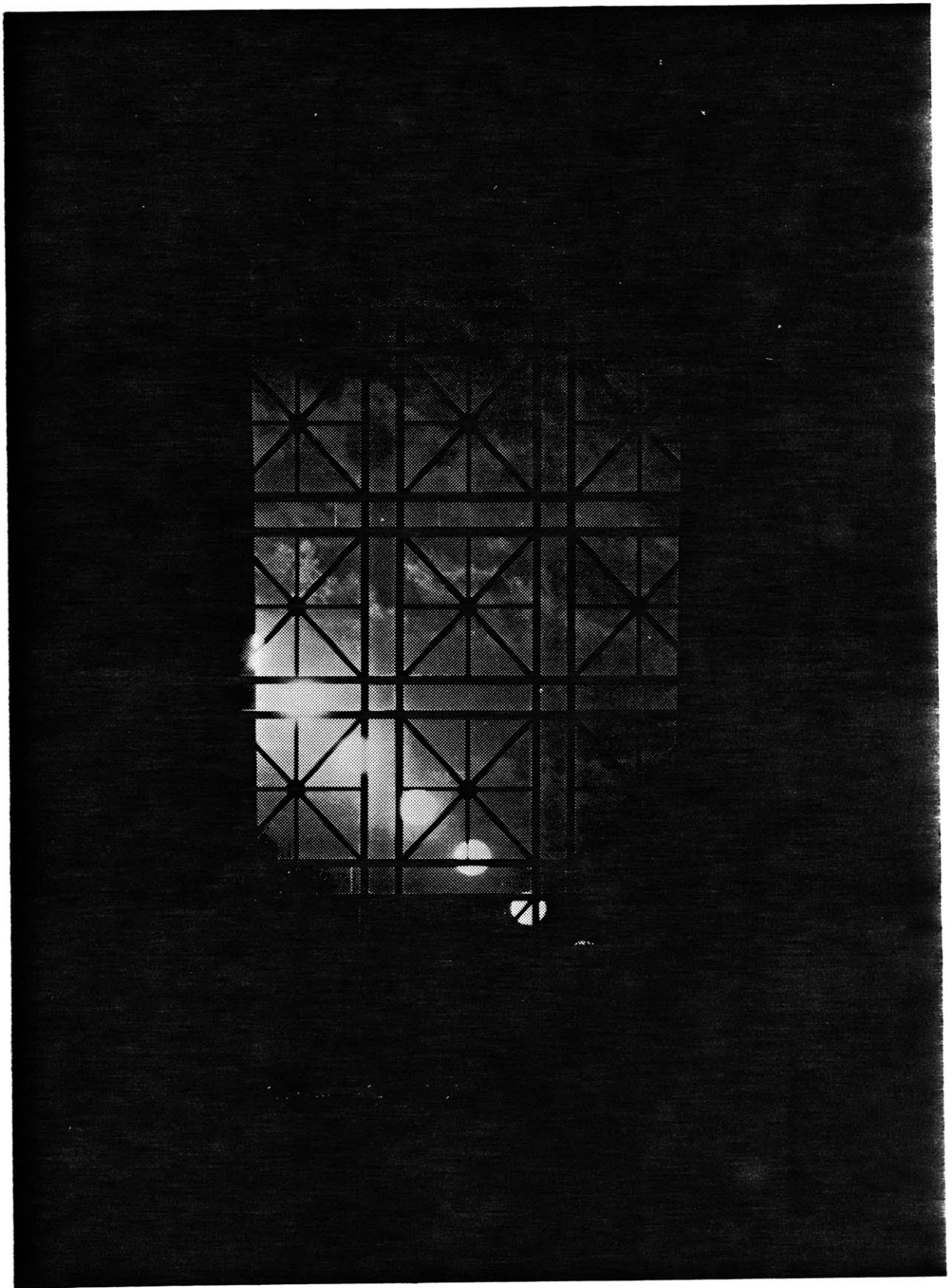
CONTE DU GRAAL

Et leans avait luminaire
Si grant con l'an le porrait faire
De chandoiles a un ostel.
Que qu'il parloient d'un et d'el,
Uns vallez d'une chambre vint
Qui une blanche lance tint
Ampoigniee par le mi lieu.
Si passa par endroit le feu
Et cil qui al feu se seoient,
Et tuit cil de leans veoient
La lance blanche et le fer blanc.

And, within, the hall was bright
As any hall could be with light
Of candles in a house at night.
So, while of this and that they talked,
A squire from a chamber walked,
Bearing a white lance in his hand,
Grasped by the middle, like a wand;
And, as he passed the chimney wide,
Those seated by the fireside,
And all the others, caught a glance
Of the white steel and the white lance.

Christian of Troyes, 1175

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"When everything that is called art was well and
truly riddled with rheumatism, the photographer lit
the thousands of candles whose power is contained in
his flame, and the sensitive paper absorbed by degrees
the blackness cut out of some ordinary object. He had
invented a fresh and tender flash of lightning."[15]

Tristan Tzara 1922

"The Small Beginning"

"There exists, by now an enormous store of ma-
terial, the accumulations of centuries of imagery;
we have machines at our disposal which permit us to
capture the most insignificant, most fleeting image.

A camera counts for more than a paintbrush.

Each day, science makes some fresh discovery;
already, the laser beam has introduced the principle
that something may be real yet intangible. We can
begin to get light headed. The magnet, the motor,
the neon tube are just a small beginning."[16]

Pol Bury

"We make a map of our experience patterns,
an inner model of the outer world, and we use this
to organize our lives. Our natural "environment"
- whatever impinges on us from outside - becomes
our human "landscape" - a segment of nature
fathomed by us and made our home."

Gyorgy Kepes[17]
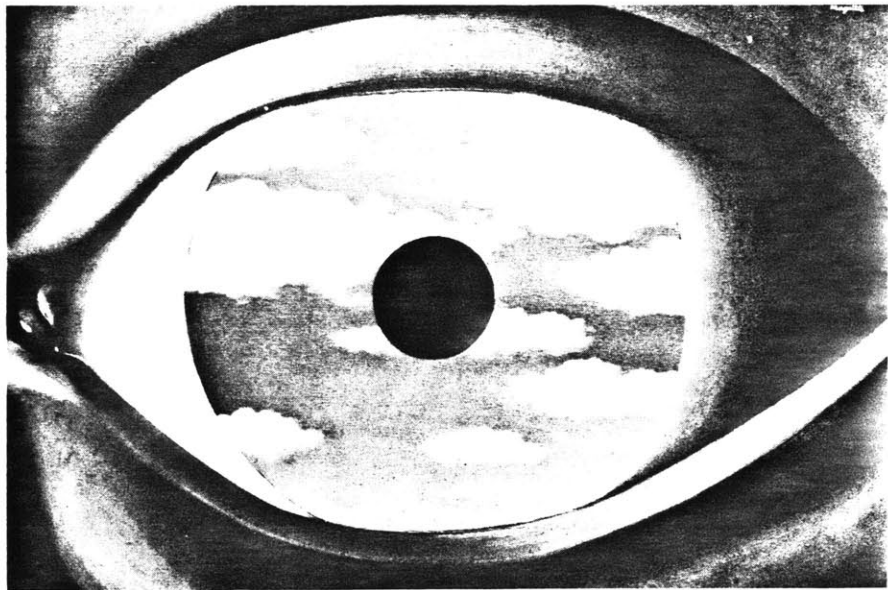
THE COLLAPSE OF THE BAROQUE WORLD
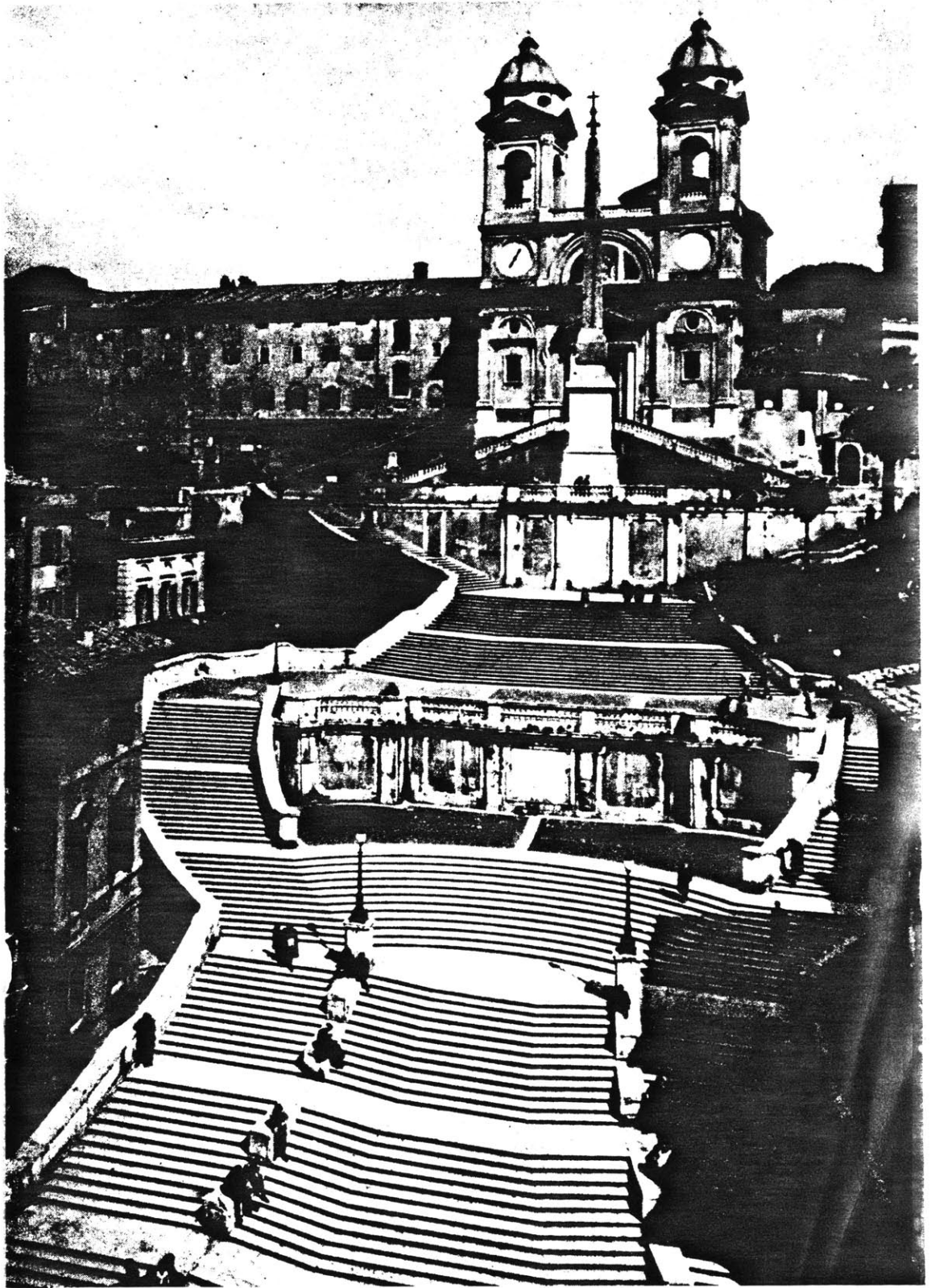
"Modern architecture is a product of Western civili-
zation. It began to take shape during the later eighteenth
century, with the democratic and industrial revolutions
that formed the modern age. Like all architecture, it
has attempted to create a special environment for human
life and to image the thoughts and actions of human beings
as they have wished to believe themselves to be. In these
two fundamental attempts the modern man has faced psychic
difficulties unparalleled in the West since the time of
the breakup of Rome. The old, Christian, preindustrial,
predemocratic way of life has progressively broken away
around him so that he has come to stand in a place no
human beings have ever quite occupied before. He has
become at once a tiny atom in a vast sea of humanity and
an individual who recognizes himself as being utterly
alone. He has therefore vacillated between a frantic
desire to find something comprehensible to belong to and
an equally consuming passion to express his own individu-
ality and to act on his own. Modern architecture has
mirrored the tensions of this state of mind and has it-
self embodied the character of the age that produced them.
It has acted as much more than a simple reflection of its
society. Like all art, it has revealed some of the basic
truths of the human condition and, again like all art,
has played a part in changing and reforming that condition

itself. From its first beginnings it has shown us to
ourselves as modern men and told us what we are and
want to be.

"The 'we' though dangerous methodologically for the
historian, is necessary in speaking of modern architec-
ture, as is the present tense, because it is an image
we can recognize as ourselves that we must seek as we
attempt to define the beginning of an art that is our
own. First, we might travel backward in time until we
reach a chronological point where we can no longer iden-
tify the architecture as an image of the modern world.
This point occurs, not at nineteen or even eighteen,
hundred, but about the middle of the eighteenth century.
For example, the Spanish Stairs in Rome, of 1721-1725,
embody the character of the Baroque, not the Modern, age.
They create an active but totally controlled environment
within an ancient European city. They are spacious and
swelling and present an open invitation to the drama of
movement. At the same time, their spaces, which seem
so free, are in fact symmetrically focused by the solid
shaft of the obelisk above them, behind which the church
towers themselves can move for the pedestrian's eye.
This may roughly be taken for an image of the Late Baroque
architecture as a whole. All movement is around fixed
points. It is a union of the opposites of order and

freedom. The order is absolutely firm, but against it
an illusion of freedom is played. Secondly, for all
the sculptural plasticity and humanistic imagery of the
solids, it is in fact the space that governs the design,
and the solids are entirely at the service of its drama-
tization. It is therefore an architecture that is in-
tended to enclose and shelter human beings in a psychic
sense, to order them absolutely so that they can always
find a known conclusion at the end of any journey, but
finally to let them play at freedom and action all the
while."[18]

With the collapse of the Baroque world "Men became
small in a threatening environment of terrible masses,
and that vertical element, the column, against which they
had been accustomed to test their size and uprightness,
now disappeared. It is already the end of the old,
humanist, man-centered world with its fixed values - and
the beginning of the mass age of modern history, with its
huge environments and rushing continuities."[19]

Faces

The Stairway Seven Project

in

Environmental Kodaliths

The most important considerations in the Stairway

Seven project at M.I.T. were -

     1 -   the shape of the architectural space

     2 -   the traffic patterns of that space

     3 -   who were the people using the space

     4 -   the quality of environmental light

The architectural space itself is high and wide and

generally not unpleasant except for its blankness. The

people who most often use the space are of course students

ascending and descending; the quality of light I found

most interesting.

There is a very large window made up of opaque,

rippled glass blocks, each a foot square, combining nine

across and fourteen high to an area of one hundred twenty-

six feet. Each step past or toward this glass produces

a very subtle change in its pattern, and the intensity

of this quality depends upon the existent environmental

light. The ever-changing perceptual effects caused by

this light and the people who used this space were my

prime considerations.

Kodalith is another word for copy film - large or

small sheets of film that is generally used in its posi-

tive form (after being exposed to a negative) to transmit

typographical or visual information to a plate for repro-

ductive printing on paper. My interests lie solely in

the transmission of visual information from a thirty-five
millimeter negative to the kodalith, and its environmental
context.

I chose at random, and with their permission, ninety
people who happened to be using that stairway at various
times throughout the day, and took their photographs.
Their human participation in an otherwise totally imper-
sonal space, combined with the existing quality of light,
was my way of communicating what already existed within
the space.

Ninety foot-square portraits set within the grid of
one hundred and twenty-six glass blocks was the outcome
of this project that I took great pleasure in doing.

The Stairway Seven project augmented further research
in the technology involved in the development of kodalith
itself, and posed the question of how far into visible
reality I could push the human photographic image con-
tained in a thirty-five millimeter negative.

My experiments with the full figure thus far are
life-sized, and the photographs serving to illustrate
these studies have been shown in their original environ-
mental context.

I plan to continue to work extensively with environ-
mental kodaliths. This work will involve large groups
of people in their environmental context.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross, Gargoyles and
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    (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), p. 15.

2. Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Farrar,
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3. Ibid., p. 155.

4. Jean Bony, French Cathedrals (Boston: Houghton
    Mifflin Co., 1951), p. 5.

5. Sontag, op. cit., p. 80.

6. Ibid., p. 68.

7. Henry Adams, Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres (New
    York: The Limited Editions Club, 1957), intro-
    duction, pp. vii-viii.

8. Ibid., p. viii.

9. Ibid., p. ix.

10. Ibid., pp. ix-x.

11. Ibid., pp. x-xi.

12. Bony, op. cit., p. 6.

13. Michel F. Braive, The Photograph: A Social
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14. Ibid., p. 62.

15. Ibid., p. 303.

16. Dore Ashton, Pol Bury (Paris: Maeght Editeur,
    1970), p. 137.

17. Nathan Lyons (quoting Gyorgy Kepes), "The New Landscape," The Great West-Real/Ideal, Sandy Hume, Ellen Manchester and Gary Metz, eds. (Boulder: Department of Fine Arts, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1977), p. 14.

18. Vincent Scully, Jr., Modern Architecture (New York: George Braziller, 1961), p. 10.

19. Ibid., p. 12.

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