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Curating Contemporary Art

STUDY VS. DIALOGUE

In Henri Lefebvre's seminal essay, "Rhythmanalysis," the author disseminates the notion of rhythm in public spaces as an indicator of " the everyday temporal structures and processes that (re)produce connections between individuals and the social."[1] He develops the principle that "everywhere there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy; there is rhythm."[2] The contemporary arts exhibition, not simply as a public social space but a visual experience is unique as it incorporates the aspect of conscious perception. It has a rhythm which does not naturally "emerge" but is intently formulated toward the act of contemplation. Rhythm transforms the exhibition into a performance: an effervescent, dynamic expression, instead of simply a static occurrence. If it is the task of the curator to arrange components in space, setting the foundation for the achievement of rhythm in an exhibition by accounting for "place and time," it is the public who completes it by contributing the energy of physical movement and intellectual work, turning the exhibition from an arrangement of objects into an environment. Viewers influence and transmute rhythms in exhibition space as active participants, responding to and becoming elements within this very space/time. Regardless of the precision in a concept's execution or display, it does not come alive without being influenced by the viewer's interjection.

I became interested in the rhythmic understanding of an exhibition when I visited two concurrent productions at the Photographer's Gallery: "Men and Women," a solo retrospective by Tom Wood, and "Shoot! Existential Photography," an examination of the carnival shooting gallery as a conceptual motif. My own, sudden realization and experience of the fact of spatial rhythm as a force directing my own perception of the exhibition incited me to examine the aspect of place, time, and energy, as curatorial formulations. I was especially intrigued by the idea of centering in on the rhythmic relationship between the display environment and the public, as an alternate means of gauging the effectiveness of an exhibition. For example, these two shows demonstrate an oppositional usage of linear vs. multidimensional forces in the pedagogical environment. This essay is alternately an account of my subjective impressions (the influence on my own rhythms as an individual viewer) during my viewing of these exhibitions and an examination of their display techniques.zd

I: "This is a study, not a dialogue"

Tom Wood's solo retrospective, "Men and Women," is a single-file parade of faces and figures against a bleary, grey background. 55 photographs beat out a straight, continuous trail across 4 walls at eye height, establishing a steady rhythm of control and symmetry through the space. A

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[1] Edensor, Tim. "Thinking about Rhythm and Space: An Introduction." p. 2.

[2] Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*. London: Continuum, 2004. Print. p.

diagram of the space in Figure 1 demonstrate that the ensemble is articulated in a charging linearity, akin to the even, gradual progression of a scale. (Figure 2) The series fires off in a single-file, rapid military staccato from a curt, introductory wall text to the left of the entrance, interspersed by gaps and pauses, and the occasional fire escape - a tense fermata.

Those we see are figures without names but titles, marked by occupations, locations, and positions. Wood's photographs are everyday scenes of the Northern English working class, captured with a voyeurism often bordering on the intrusive - he catches them asleep, with their children; laughing on public transport. However, these are less dramatic portraits as exercises in exactitude - balanced orchestrations of detail, light, and exposure. His "men and women" are a part of a landscape, propped up on the dark angles of doorways, shadows, machines. The psychological charge of the photographs occur in their familiarity, made strange in the interplay between the innocent objectivity of the mechanical eye and the photographer's nascent desire to enter into a personal reality. He is interested in a world of things "as they are," as plain and matter-of-fact as the simplification of people to "men and women."

Wood remains consistent in 30 years of work[3] in establishing an aesthetic character less interested in eclecticism as control through formal composition. As dry as it may be, it is in fact distinctly unified with the retrospective's spatial organization. Though we see the exhibition may include minor deviations in measurement in the form of spatial hiccups or gaps, it still employs a mode of presentation overwhelmingly familiar and formal: that of the classical white cube. Our attention is centered on a single image at a time, as we recognize the even sequencing of images as the canonical gallery experience. It evokes the same, flat, processional conditioning as a film reel or slideshow, allowing Wood's work to appear digestible, straightforward, and approachable; even legitimate, in the exaltation of its clinical environment. Blank space is minimized as photographs continue incessantly along the wall, forming an impenetrable sheath. This is even enforced by the straight rectangular wall space, requiring very little transition in corners or between pictures. Whether this linearity is a strategic, or a default curatorial decision, it does succeed in providing the viewer with an immediate, intuitive position: that of a passive looker, obediently crowding along the walls. Some move on faster than others, who linger back, for there is no place to stop, sit or rest. (The center space is occupied by three vitrines of monographs in a haphazard diagonal.)

Yet, for such straightforward articulation, it is curiously difficult to find a thread to follow, and indeed, there is no discernible classification of Wood's work, as affirmed by the curatorial statement.[4] There is no pattern - not in color, in series or theme. I have arranged defining traits of Wood's aesthetic into codes in Figure 3, yet they reveal no sensible order in sequence. I arrange these codes into a a musical composition: its tune is coherent yet somehow erratic; producing the oddest sensation of humor (Figure 4; Audio File 1). Like a fumbling bureaucrat, it hangs between intense clarity and spontaneous cacophony. What causes the paradox is the dissonance between the

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[3] The Photographer's Gallery. Administration. *Tom Wood: Men and Women Press Release*.

"Since 1973 until the early 2000s, Irish born Wood has been continuously recording the everyday lives of the people of Liverpool and the Merseyside area."

[4] The installation of the photographs will reflect the sequencing of the books mixing the different formats, styles and processes. This arrangement will highlight the formal correspondences and relationships between pictures as well as Wood's prolonged involvement with his subject matter. His photographs include both candid and posed portraits of people alone or in groups.

promise of consistency in the positioning of elements, and the elements themselves; spontaneous, indecipherable and broken. The order is random. The rhythm of the wall space is not.

Ensnared in the linearity of the room, I proceed along the female side of the wall, observing the ways in which Wood's gaze crosses his subjects - young and old, lively and neurotic, posing and unaware, in their homes and in public. He is interested in women up close, observing the lines on their faces, and the complication of their gazes back at his camera: at once sexy, innocent, hard, soft, indifferent. At one moment I am alienated totally, the next I am entranced. My own comprehension is confounded into dysfunction with that of the exhibition. I move backwards and forwards, frustrated by my own impatience. Then, suddenly, I reach a photograph on the upper left hand side entitled "Whispers," depicting a gaggle of young girls queuing at a whirling fairground carnival.

I notice two of the girls, more solemn than the others, delineated by pauses in space. One leans into her friend's ear, almost too close for comfort. One can almost see the other girl feeling her friend's sudden breath as she speaks, alarmed, as the world around them buzzes alive. I see this moment as I experience mine - an instant which wreaks the same graceful havoc as in Renaissance paintings, where Jesus, drawn into a loving embrace, is tenderly informed of his betrayal. It is here at the very center of this photograph, in the huddle of this banality, in the space between lips and ears, where time stops. Seeing the reluctant mystery of what is being said being captured being seen not heard that we shall never see nor hear, I find in "Whispers" amid the rest of the exhibition such a devastating and discreet sense of vertigo.

The source of this collision which causes rhythm to fall into place for an instant, I realize, is caused by my instigation to engage with the nuances of the work itself. This is my experience of unity with Wood's voyeurism. The true punctuation in Wood's work occurs in the reluctant psychodrama of the photographs themselves, which, as the exhibition unfolds, ebbs and tides in consistency and intensity. The exhibition resembles a study because the viewer is empowered to conciliate disjunction through his/her own means, for the given concept - this men/women dichotomy - is alternately clear and confusing, providing no answers.

What moves me is the intimacy and distance that this mode of display allows me have with the pictures - it forces me to come close and to search, to study, and to find, looking straight and plain at people with blatantly little interest in being seen. I notice that in this relentless rhythm of photos of the isolation of the working class in the urban environment, isolation in company, in family, at work, even in the banal task at hand, suddenly there is something very tender, immediate, and startling - like dignity, like pleasure, like a sudden real intimacy which emerges - something even/especially subconscious, which causes creative association in the viewer. The exhibit ends with "Charlie and Alan," the single photo of tender masculine camaraderie: a father and son are sprawled on an armchair, the son absentmindedly strokes the father's wrinkled brow as the older man looks sidelong into the lens, barely concerned. Somehow, I find the urge to romanticize, to exploit, and to mythologize difficult to resist. The linear organization of the exhibition does not simply enforce hierarchies, it creates the situation of a one-sided conversation. In Sartre's "No Exit," four people are trapped in a similarly small, stark room (a version of hell) to grapple with one another for eternity. The closed room seals them off and in this isolation, they become mirrors of each other, their interaction descending further and further into madness and neurosis. In "Men and Women," I find my resonance emerging from a similar claustrophobia, being positioned as a

neurotic Self against a voiceless Other, coerced into mutual reflection. The viewer is activated almost out of discomfort in this proximity, in the face of the onslaught of this ceaseless linear rhythm. I am forced to grapple with my own instinct of poignancy, rebelling against passivity by seeing longingly, wildly and blindly.

II: "This is a dialogue, not a study"

The second exhibition one floor above, "Shoot! Existential Photography," instead of being an intensive examination of one artist's work, takes the form of a thesis. It brings its own conclusion and diffuses into a polyphonic choir of voices and influences across history and geography. Here, we are less concerned with art photography as simply art. Its object is the motif of the carnival photo shooting gallery, a trite funhouse game doused in fatalistic humor - players aim their guns at the trigger of a camera, and upon hitting it, win a picture of themselves, eyes winced in concentration, pointing the gun out at the viewer of the picture. It is certainly a potent, if obscure metaphor for the complication of gazes in the act of viewing photography. Curator Clement Chéroux's hand is clearly visible here, as he attempts to communicate the metaphor of existentialism within this game, emphasizing the the latent reflexivity and self-consciousness of the mirroring of shooter and victim, and viewer and object.[5]

Using Western works of all media to demonstrate the different ways in which this metaphor has been employed in both modern and contemporary artistic practice, including a few examples of the original machine-generated photographs, this is almost the same exhibition on the photo booth, "Behind the Curtain," organized by the same curator in 2012,[6] but with a philosophical bent. Chéroux is certainly tuned into the certain amount of popular culture needed to appeal to a general public audience. As the main attraction of the Photographer's Gallery for the winter season, "Shoot!" offers more than a little sensationalism as a headliner. He rather eagerly blows up a photograph of Sartre and de Beauvoir partaking in the game setting it as the main promotional photograph, almost as if it were a justification of his concept, and advertises the opportunity for the viewer to play the game themselves at the end of the exhibition. While Wood's rather restricted show may have seemed articulate and repetitive to the point of anxiety, this is a multifarious visual bouquet, every bit as dramatic and resplendent as the description may imply. Taking place in five rooms on two floors, the exhibition makes full use of the variety of spaces at its disposal.

Figure 4 is a plot of the exhibition's first and second floors. In the first, it is divided into three areas by a partition - the first is where the entry of the exhibition opens onto an introduction of the theme, with the requisite wall text and Sartre photo, as well s a collection of examples from fairgrounds the 1920s to 1950s across Germany, Italy and France. The photographs are small and precious, our anonymous assassins encased preciously as artifacts, arranged in a double row formation. They are there simply to situate the object in history. To the right in a small crevice is a repeating slideshow of photographs of various celebrities, from Man Ray to Bressai, playing the shooting gallery game, almost a testament to the show's popular accessibility.

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[5] The Photographer's Gallery. Administration. *Shoot! Existential Photography Press Release*.

"These include existentialist French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, surrealist Man Ray and photographers Robert Frank, Henri Cartier- Bresson and Brassaï among others. Many of these famous figures were believed to be fascinated by the mechanical process used in photo-shooting galleries and the philosophical ideas it alluded to such as a duel with the self and destruction of the ego."

[6] Musée De L'Elysée. *Behind the Curtain: The Aesthetics of the Photobooth 17.02.2012-20.05.2012*. Lausanne: Musée De L'Elysée, 2012. *Elysée Lausanne: A Museum for Photography*. Web.

To the left, behind the partition, begin the series of contemporary works. Photographic installations by Sylvia Ballhause, Emilie Pitoset, and Eric Kessels are arranged on this first floor. These works directly invoke the shooting gallery as a motif, The various formats of the work causes their articulation to be more or less intuitive - Kessels, with his large series of photographic panels, occupies two and a half entire walls, while Pitoset's tiny frames inhabit a corner. These three artists treat the shooting gallery as a motif within their own work - whether as a historical marker, an automatic sculpture, or a performance. Upstairs in a large square room are works by Rudolf Steiner, Jean-Francois Lecourt, Steven Pippon, Niki de Saint Phalle, Agnes Geoffroy, and Christian Marclay. This part of the exhibition extend their focus from the shooting gallery the act of "shooting" itself. Presented in the same manner, we learn from wall texts that Steiner creates a sense of fluidity between the concepts of optics and ballistics. Lecourt and Pippon engage with the physical act of "shooting:" this vernacular term in photography to explore the idea of theatricality, destruction and violence in their works. Saint Phalle's work is a mere reminder of the gun as sexual object, terrifyingly attractive, while Geoffroy provides a surrealist take on the gun as symbolic object. The choice of elements is concise. Each work is explained in conjunction with the theme, guiding the viewer's experience. They take the piece out of the context of the artist's practice, and confines them their relation to this exhibition's idea. We are asked to consider the artwork instead of the artist, and in a sense, this helps the exhibition to control the viewer's attention. Instead of being allowed to lose ourselves in the work of any one artist, we are limited to a singular interpretation of one work. We are not asked to sensually engage, not to respond, but simply to follow.

As a viewer, I find an extent of repetition not in the format of the display but in the constant reiteration of the overarching concept, echoed in each artwork. As I enter each room, I am not asked to proceed along any path. Rhythm in "Shoot!," does not take the form of a progression because we are approached at once, from all sides, by elements that resemble entire compositions rather than simple notes. I interacts with the exhibition as an idea rather than directly with any one piece, and it seems my physical presence or mental engagement is secondary to the dialogue taking place between the works themselves, supporting Cheroux's thesis. Perception is filtered and mediated, and the negotiation taking place between the constellation of elements - wall text, artifact, and work of art, allow no room for personal interpretation.

The metaphorical "climax" of the exhibition can be said to be Christian Marclay's four panel video installation, "Crossfire," which also seems, (in line with the knack for stylish metaphors) to parallel the dynamic of the entire exhibition. Using images from Hollywood cinema of the act of shooting into the camera, the experience encloses the viewer in the killing field as he/she is aggressed from all sides, by famous faces shooting into the camera. The drama builds with the audio, as war, science fiction, and Western films flash erratically in a crescendoing pulse - the sensation of fear at once grips then slowly subsides, as our senses are deadened to the deadly sound. Within this darkened vacuum, the viewer fights the instinct to hide or run. The installation soon becomes an orgiastic ringing of gunshots, the viewer finds him/herself wide awake within an oblivion, activated yet helpless, violated yet unharmed. This is perhaps the only existential experience that can be attributed to the exhibition.

There is indeed, not much of existentialism being expounded. Instead, we are to see simply existentialism being embodied by the photographic act, to contemplate it as the shooting gallery,

without ever truly entering into the experience of its epiphany. The exhibition succeeds in striking a sensible balance - well executed and sparse, historical and modern, educational and entertaining, it fulfills the requirements. However, even as it allows us to pay three pounds to play in a photographic shooting gallery at the end of our tour, it does not take hold in the way Wood's exhibition might.

III: Conclusion of Study vs. Dialogue

The essential paradox within every exhibition is the alternating dialogue of the internal and the external, the seen and the thought, fact and analysis. In both exhibitions, Study and Dialogue, there is an asymmetrical rhythm between the articulation of the idea and the perception of the viewer. What I have learned from my analysis of rhythm in the above exhibitions, recognizing that insofar as this essay has attempted to estimate a psychology that cannot be measured, is that the subjectivity of perception will not be tamed under a system of weights and balances. My impression of viewer rhythm vs. exhibition rhythm resulting in a specific dynamic, if anything, is intensely personal, contingent on the state of my body, the conditioning of my mind, and my environment. Therefore it is my own conclusion that something counterintuitive lies in the fact that "Men and Women"'s traditional linearity may provoke more of a response than "Shoot!," which attempts to creatively bring a historical game out of obsolescence. It may be that providing the viewer with something to resist creates a heightened energetic resistance, which emphasizes an exhibition's rhythm and allows the viewer to become aware of him/herself as an actor. As it would seem, Wood's exhibition ended up the theatrical, existential experience that Cheroux's aimed to be, while "Shoot" possessed the very simplicity that Wood's was designed to have. "Study" became a truer sort of dialogue, which "Dialogue" itself, in the intense, self-centeredness of its ambition, became noise.

What may be most useful of this analysis, however, may be within its very practice. The visualization of the exhibition as a living cycle, which entails "a repetition of movement and action, entanglement of linear and cyclical rhythms, and phases of growth and decline"[7] allows it also to become a process of continuously disturbing and reanimating history from its state of rest - and it is perhaps in this consideration that we should strive to include rhythm more systematically in our experience of exhibitions. Natasha Ginwala suggests, in her investigation of the rhythmic experience of time, that "the sighting of rhythm forms lends temporality a flesh. For, the figurative demands of rhythm urge an inhabitation of history rather than simply becoming transcribed subjects of it."[8] It is social rhythm, a collective expression of urge and restraint, which results when an audience does not simply passively observe but wholly embodies the weight of an idea, in taking into account their own rhythms in space. In the comparison of these two modes of organizing a photographic exhibition, we witness different ways in which curators may attempt to animate history as a "sensual complex, rather than petrified chronicles."[9] The viewing experience is a culmination of forces; a messy vector which will not be wrangled. Yet considering it as an integral, rhythmic whole - an entity akin to a eukaryotic cell which respirates, oscillates, and proliferates,

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[7] Edensor, Tim. "Thinking about Rhythm and Space: An Introduction." p. 3.

[8] Ginwala, Natasha. "The Museum of Rhythm." p.3.

[9] [9] Ginwala, Natasha. "The Museum of Rhythm." p.3.

may bring us closer to finding alternate ways for its elements and ideas to thrive, instead of simply exist, as the field of curation develops.

Works Cited

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Figures

Audio File 1 - **http://picosong.com/3BRy**

Figure 1

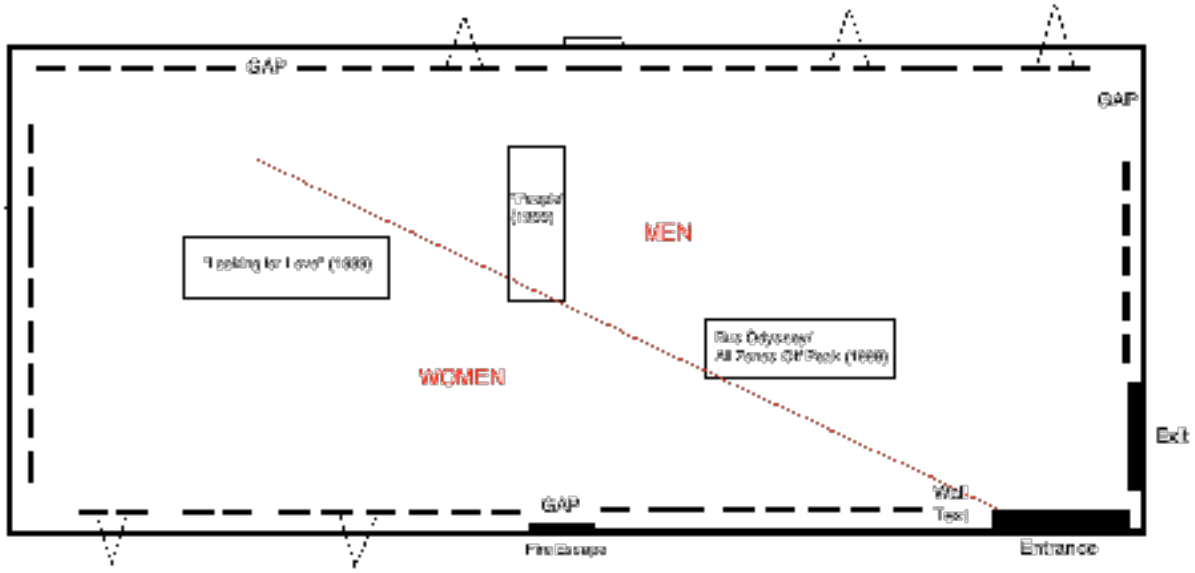


Figure 2

Figure 3

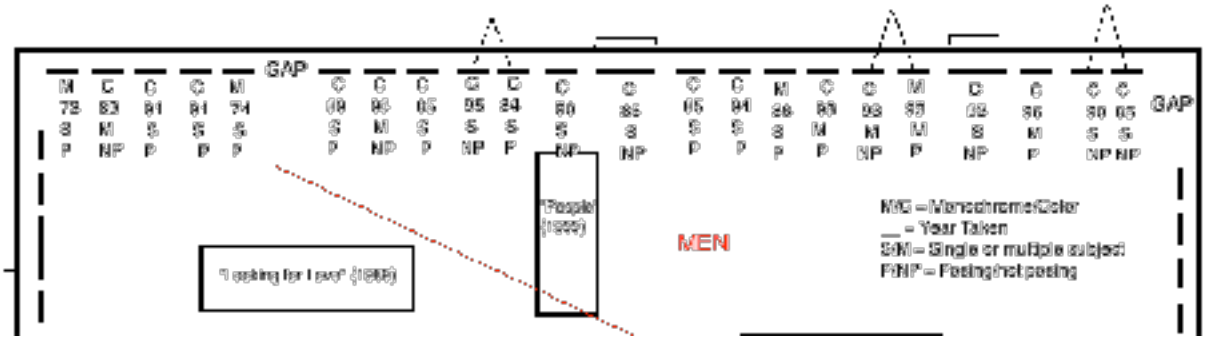
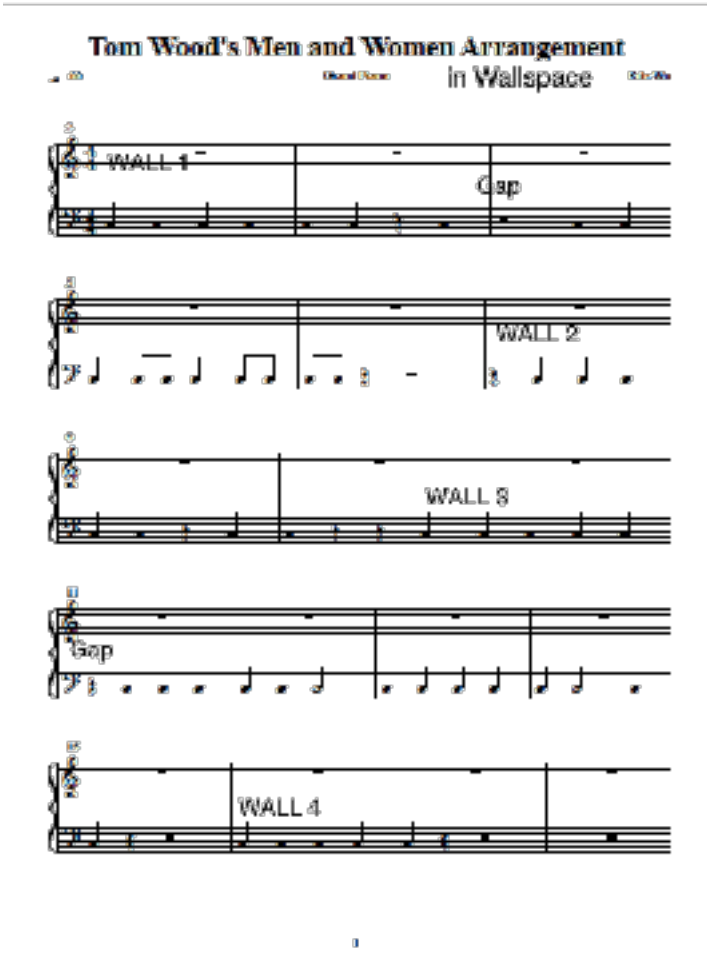
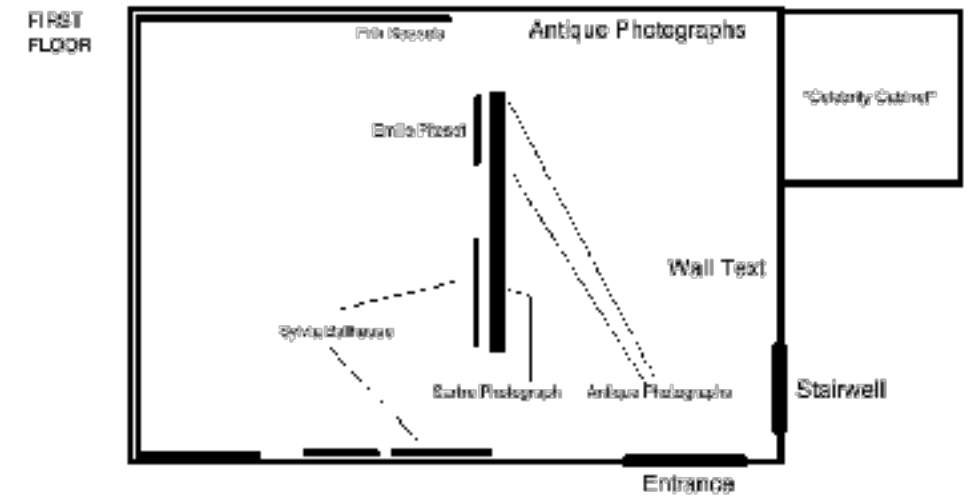
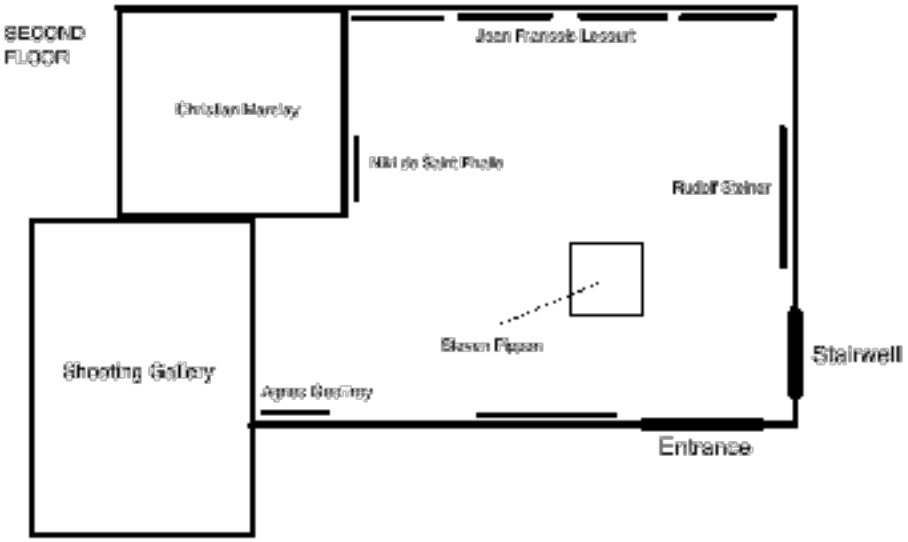


Figure 4


Tom Wood's Men and Women Arrangement
in Wallspace
WALL 1
Gap
WALL 2
WALL 3
Gap
WALL 4


FIRST
FLOOR
Antique Photographs
Wall Text
Stairwell
Entrance


SECOND
FLOOR
Jean Francois Lesourt
Rudolf Steiner
Shooting Gallery
Stairwell
Entrance