Beyond

the Oatmeal Box

BERNICE HALPERN CUTLER

"Backyard with Broom," by Bernice Cutler, a gold-toned albumen print from a hand-built, five-pinhole panoramic camera. The five images overlap on 8 × 10 sheet film.

Not just a novelty anymore, pinhole photography is now a fine-art medium with a serious following.

Most pinhole photographers ascribe mystical properties to their chosen medium, perhaps because they've never gotten over the wonder of being able to make a photograph without a lens. Two thousand years of scholarly observation of the phenomenon dating back to Aristotle seem only to reinforce their notion. Such pre-photographic lore includes the familiar account from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. In them, he described the upside-down and backward view of the world created when a small hole was made in the outside wall of a darkened room—the idea behind the redoubtable camera obscura. It would be centuries before anyone figured out how to permanently record such an image, and by then the lens, a more efficient means of light-gathering, had entered the picture.

But technical advances have never stopped art-minded photographers from making pictures with a pinhole. Turn-of-the-century pictorialists reveled in the dreamy softness of pinhole imagery. "Straight" photography soon eclipsed such romantic styles, but in recent years a serious pinhole revival has occurred. This time, it's not an artistic vogue that binds pinhole enthusiasts—their work is enormously varied—but rather a reaction against the prevailing point-and-shoot mentality. By today's high-tech standards, pinhole is a retrograde technology, and that suits its practitioners just fine.

They particularly like the fact that almost any lighttight container can be turned into a pinhole camera. (See Closeup, page 83.) The traditional choice is a cylindrical Quaker oats box, but in the service of their art pinhole photographers use everything from crudely taped-up cardboard cartons to elegant (if quirky) hand-crafted wooden models. For some, the form of the instrument is as important as the imagery it's used to create. And for all, the long exposures typically required in pinhole photography seem to make it fundamentally different from photography with a lens. They argue that the extra time allows a visionary essence to enter the picture. They contend that the pinhole photograph is about an experience rather than a moment.

While charming, such metaphysics invite debunking. In terms of image quality and technical considerations, a pinhole really isn't all that different from a lens, if a lens could be stopped down to such a small aperture. The difference is really a matter of attitude: The things that lens-oriented photographers tend to regard as limitations—long exposures, lack of sharpness, unchanging and extraordinary depth of field—are viewed as useful aesthetic devices by pinhole photographers.

What follows is a look at how some of today's most creative pinholers have turned a time-honored technology into something new—and why they believe that low tech can be high art.

—RUSSELL HART

AGAINST THE GRAIN: Bruce Habegger

The obscure object of a pinhole photographer's desire is the pinhole camera itself. These tend to be large so that they can accommodate big negatives. One reason: A large-format negative makes it possible to produce the final print by contact, and this is essential for the many pinholers who prefer nonsilver printing processes, which don't permit enlargement. Enlarging a pinhole image also magnifies its lack of sharpness. Yet some photographers do enlarge their pinhole pictures, and Bruce Habegger is one of them.

Habegger, who runs the photography department at New York's City College, has replaced the lens on an old 35mm SLR with a small piece of copper shim stock that has a pinhole punched through it. One obvious advantage of this approach: The camera has its own built-in focal-plane shutter so that the pinhole doesn't have to be covered and uncovered by hand to control the exposure. Habegger's solution also allows many exposures to be made without reloading. (And reloading, when necessary, can be done in the light.) But an unexpected advantage of Habegger's "SPR," or single-pinhole reflex, is that the photographer can actually view through the pinhole, provided it's a sunny day and he uses a focusing cloth.

Habegger shoots Polaroid's Polachrome instant 35mm slide film, enlarging the slide onto Cibachrome paper. The impressionistic texture of his images (the result of the unorthodox color-producing technology of the Polachrome) creates a startling dissonance with the industrial fragments that define his pictures' deep space.

BRUCE HABEGGER

ILAN WOLFF

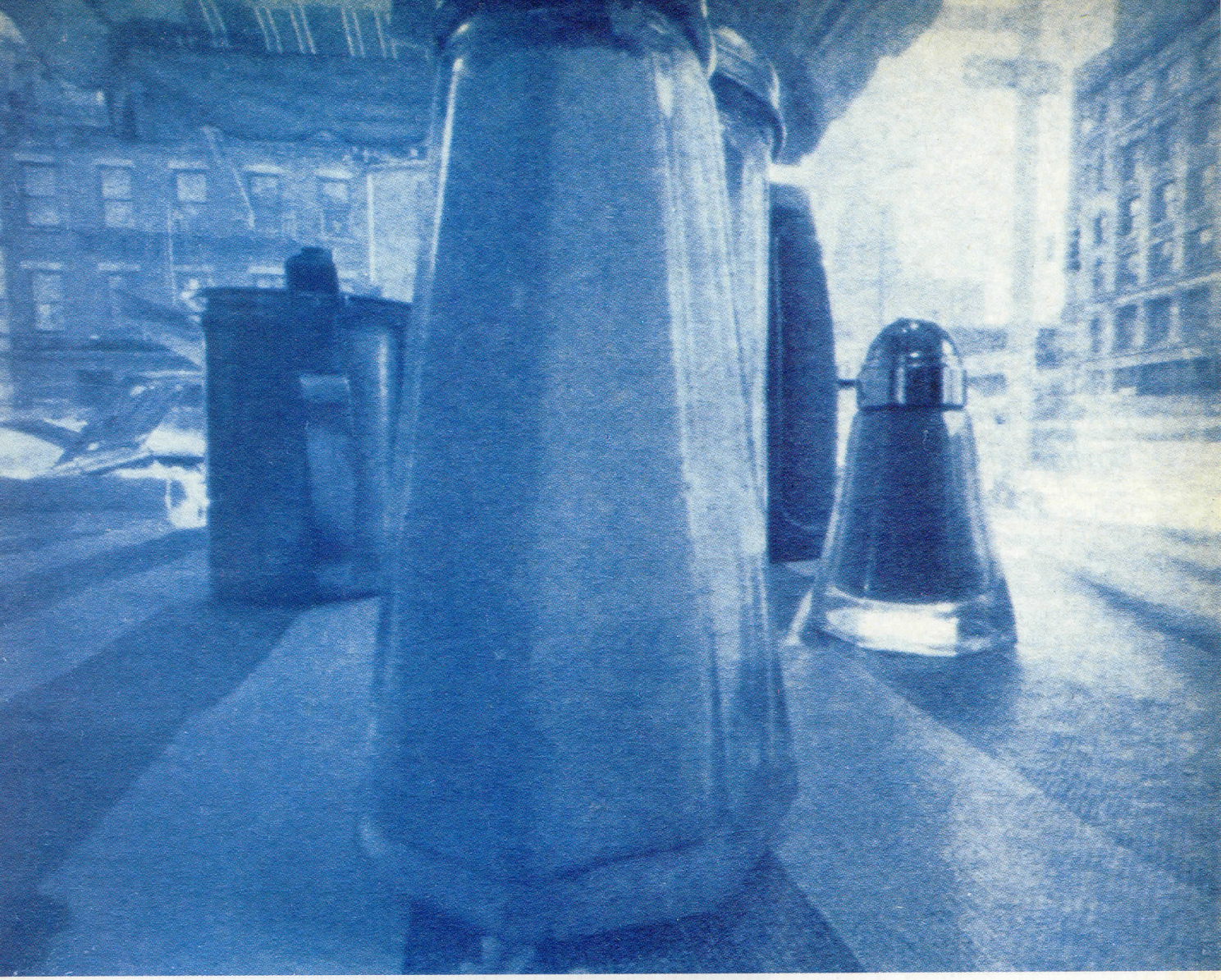
IN THE CAN: Ilan Wolff

Like many others, Ilan Wolff was introduced to pinhole imagery in a basic photography class. But when the other students moved on to factory-issue cameras, Wolff stuck with his homemade pinhole model. "Everybody started talking about equipment," he remembers, "which lens to use, and so on. No one talked about photography."

Wolff's early pinhole work was done in the usual laborious way, with a camera constructed from a heavy wooden box that had to be reloaded after every shot. But when *Stern* magazine called on him to create a pinhole documentary of Germany within two weeks—a project for which he ended up shooting some 300 pictures—he realized he had to come up with a more efficient way of working. Rather than use a camera that accepted commercial sheet-film holders—the obvious solution—Wolff decided to take along as many individual *cameras* as he could, loading them in his lighttight van. He bought 50 metal canisters from a factory that sold them as containers for potting soil, poked a hole in the side of each, and fitted them all with a homemade tripod mount.

The can camera has since become the sole photographic instrument for Wolff, who specializes in sweeping outdoor vistas. The powerful distortion in his 13 × 24-inch contact prints is due in part to the can's shape, which makes the film plane curved.

DANIEL KAZIMIERSKI



RHAPSODY IN BLUE: Daniel Kazimierski

Daniel Kazimierski says that the pinhole camera allows him to give ordinary objects the "enormous scale of buildings in New York." The photographer, who teaches at New York University, achieves this quality by placing his pinhole camera practically on top of his small subjects. He preserves a sense of environment, however, by keeping his "focal length"—the distance between film and pinhole—short enough to encompass a wide angle of view. This also makes his exposures short by pinhole standards—about two seconds in sunlight.

In fact, shortening focal length to make up for the pinhole's tiny aperture is a common strategy—one that has encouraged the mistaken notion that pinhole imagery is inherently wide-angle. It's simply the closer shooting distances invited by a broad field of view that create such looming perspective.

Kazimierski shoots most of his interiors with a 4×5 cardboard-box camera, sometimes lighting them with multiple bursts from an electronic flash. For outdoor pictures, he shoots 120 rollfilm in a twin-lens reflex fitted with a pinhole.

Kazimierski creates his prints with the cyanotype process, hand-coating his paper with an emulsion of iron salts that make the image blue—a color that enhances the elegant formality of his photographs.