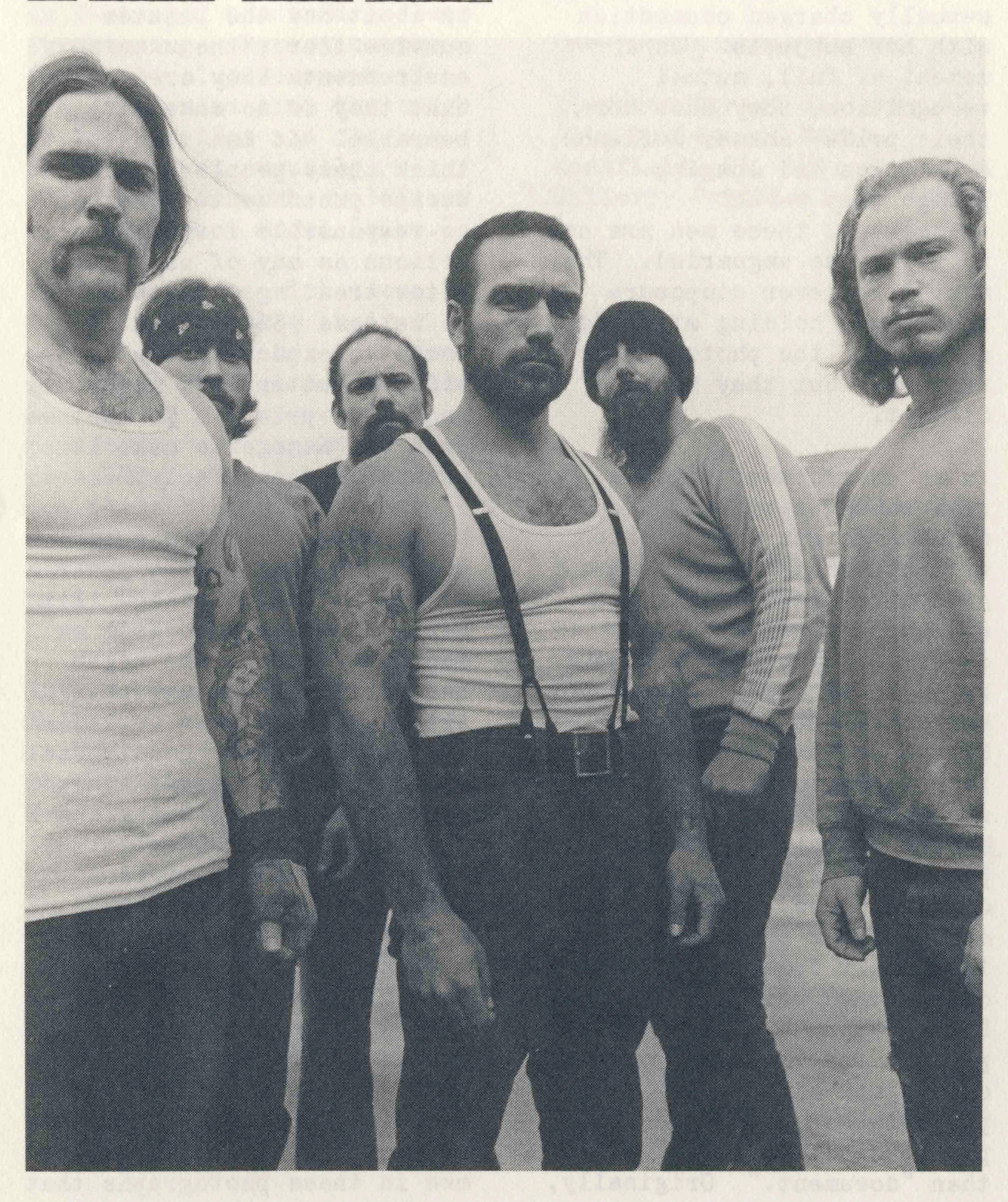
Ruth Morgan MATRIX/BERKELEY 87

University Art Museum late September - November 1985

San Quentin: Maximum Security, 1981-84



Ruth Morgan's attentiveness to the prisoners at San Quentin and to the formal and psychological aspects of their surroundings provides them with an ironic version of the "fifteen minutes of fame" that Andy Warhol predicted for each of us in the age of pop media. Working with a tripod and the long exposures required by slow film, Morgan makes an unhurried yet live and often sexually charged connection with her subjects. In a moment of full, mutual recognition, they show her their pride, shame, defiance, submission and longing. Though they reveal themselves, these men are not in any sense unguarded. They muster whatever composure they have, holding still for as long as the photographer requires, but they remain distant.

In an environment where a real woman is a foreign object, Morgan communicates with her subjects through gutsy instinct, compassion and sophisticated social concerns. These qualities bring to mind photographers Morgan admires--Lewis Hine, Eugene Smith and Dorothea Lange. Certainly Morgan succeeds, as they did, in making compelling human portraits of the disadvantaged. However, the scale of her photographs sets them apart from traditional documentary work. Photographs this large that project the emotional tension of subject and/or photographer have a raw power, becoming more "art" than "document." Originally, Morgan printed her work in conventional ten-inch-square format, but found the result "too pretty, not at all the prison experience."

At four feet by four feet,
these cell-scale prints bring
to mind Richard Avedon's
work. But unlike Avedon,
Morgan grants her subjects
permission to be themselves,
much as Diane Arbus did in
her revelatory and
disconcerting portraits.

Morgan also expects to disconcert. "I see the work as distilling the prison experience," she says. "It is about how the inmates survive there, the environments they create and what they do to make it bearable. It isn't that I think these people should escape punishment. They re as responsible for their actions as any of us. Yet after treating them this way we release 95% of them into society, expecting that they will be better than when they went into prison. To me the ones who manage to make it outside are a miracle."

Morgan's interest in social conditions and in the penal system is longstanding. Like Lewis Hine, she studied sociology before she began her career in photography. Although Morgan has worked at the San Francisco County Jail since 1979, she negotiated for months before being allowed into San Quentin. Connecting with individual prisoners immediately by explaining her purpose and returning with their portraits, she established the rapport that characterizes this work.

In spite (or because) of this rapport, there are not many men in these photographs that we would like to bring home to dinner. Look at the shaded, lascivious gazes of two cellmates who lounge without relaxing in their claustrophobic quarters.

One's foot nearly touches the camera; the other man sits on the toilet, only inches from the pin-ups on the rear wall. While Morgan's technique makes the electric light almost tender, it doesn't spare us the harshness of the walls and the banality of the bric-a-brac and prison-issue bedspread and linoleum.

Standing outside his cell, the handsome young man with an X-stamped headband is less frightening. We notice the feminine voluptuousness of his ornamented arm, the tough set of his lips and the childlike yet sexually suggestive clasp he maintains on his elegant model "bike."

Morgan connects with these men, yet documents their separation from her and from society. Through her insight and daring a fundamental paradox is once again revealed: although human qualities bind us together, social, political, physical and emotional factors place us at unfathomable distances from each other.

Ruth Morgan, who lives in Berkeley, received her B.A. in sociology with a minor in photography from San Francisco State University in 1969. In 1983 she received a grant from the San Francisco Foundation for her photography. The California Arts Council also has awarded her yearly grants from 1979. She has worked since 1982 as Arts Coordinator at the San Francisco County Jail, where she began as Artist-in-Residence in 1979.

Jean McMann

Works in MATRIX:

San Quentin: Maximum

Security, 1981-84, a series
of 10 gelatin silver prints
mounted on linen,
approximately 4 x 4' each.
Lent by the artist.

One-person exhibitions:

Eleventh Street Gallery, NY, '81; College of Marin, Kentfield, CA, '84; Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, OR, '85.

Selected group exhibitions:

Mission Cultural Center,
S.F., '79; Minnesota Museum
of Art, Minneapolis, West 81,
'81 & West 82: Art and the
Law, '82 (catalogues); Otis
Parsons School of Design,
L.A., '83; Triton Museum,
Santa Clara, CA, Crime and
Punishment, '84 (catalogue);
Women's Building, L.A., Women
Photographers in America, '85
(catalogue).

Bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under group exhibitions):

Albright, Thomas.

"Letting the Art Fit the Crime," S.F. Examiner and Chronicle, March 17, '84.

ArtStars, (Portland, Ore.), Feb. 6, '85.

Bellon-Fisher, Linda.

"A Compendium of Images,"

Artweek (Oakland, CA), April 27, '85.

McMann, Jean. "Cultural Contexts: The Work of Ruth Morgan and Jim Goldberg,"

S.F. Camerawork Quarterly

(S.F.), Vol. 12, No. 2,

Summer '85.

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