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BILL OWENS - ANTHOLOGY

Interview by Claudia Zanfi at GALLERIA CARLA SOZZANI, Milan, Italy

For the first time in Italy an anthological exhibition dedicated to the American photographer Bill Owens, which permits the vision of the complete cycle of works regarding the American middle class life style, realized from the beginning of the Seventies till now.

The photos exposed belong to the most revealing nucleus of Owens pursuit, form the first images realized in California in 1966-67, during cultural riots in the '68, at the first Rolling Stones concert, over the Suburbia cycles of 1972 to Our kind of people of 1976, to Working (I do it for money) of 1978, as far as the big fresco of the free time with the title Leisure: Americans at Play.

Unpublished and particularly indicative images are represented in the last Owens' search: A photography journey: 115 days across American. A lonely and long trip all around America, 4 months traveling, 12.000 miles, more then 3.000 photographs.

So a new piece joins the representative American, human, social and urban environment.

For the first time in expositive Owens career, a series of the mini digital movies- short poetical and ironic stories of the author idea regarding the American society- will be shown.

Starting from the Sixties, Owens is witness of a social phenomenon of a huge importance: the immigration wave to the US western coasts. Regarding the fast urbanization process following to this phenomenon, urban area were systematically planned with geometrical profiles, streets identical one to each other, prefabricated house, double garage and small swimming pools. Owens documents the development of those places, people who live them, revolving his work of some stereotypes of the urban life style: meetings organized by housewives at home for the selling of Tupperware products, parades, garden party. The result is the volume Suburbia, published in the 1972. It's a photos collection of

individuals proud and satisfied of their own style of life and of the rituals of their community. The documentary images of Owens, with an anthropological and cultural style, show the physical spaces and the ideology of the American "middle class" focused on the American dream realization.

On the success wave obtained with Suburbia, Owens published in the 1975 *Our kind of people*, dedicated to the different social organizations: political, religious, sports, scholastic groups and their rituals. In the 1977, the photos collection *Working (I do it for money)*, a social and ironic picture, but at the same time crude about the people who works "from nine to five".

The project, that Owens recently finished working with an important book, *Leisure: Americans at Play*, starting at the same time in the Seventies, is on the contrary dedicated to the relationship between the Americans and sport and in particular to "special" events as the "Indianapolis 500 miles", mammoth truck races, wrestling matches and so on.

The search made by Bill Owens isn't directed towards formal and aesthetic values: the author makes with his camera a sort of "visual anthropology". His references are Diane Arbus, Walker Evans, Weegee.

It's important to underline that the photos of the exhibition belong to cycles never shown before in Europe.

## BIOGRAPHY

Bill Owens was born in San José, California in 1938. In 1964, after the graduation in "Industrial Arts", he has been travelling for two years between India and Jamaica. Here he becomes keen on anthropological and social photography. From 1967 he starts collaborating with various newspapers of the "Bay Area".

During these years he his witness of a social phenomenon of a huge importance: the immigration waves to the cost of the "fabulous west". The first photographic project comes out: *Altamont*, dedicated to the cultural sequences of California of the '68. The big

project Suburbia follows, published by Straight Arrow Books of New York in 1973.

The book was an incredible success: more than 50,000 copies were sold, with three reprints distributed all over the world. On the success wave obtained with Suburbia, Owens publishes in 1975 Our Kind of People dedicated to the different social organizations: political, religious, sports, scholastic groups and their rituals. In 1977, the photos collection Working (I do it for money), a social and ironic picture, but at the same time crude about the people who works "from 9 to five". In 1976, obtains the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship and, afterwards, two scholarship of the National Endowment for the arts.

From the 1978 to the 1982 he works as a free lance photographer, with reports published on "Life" and "News Week".

In the first Eighties lives the professional photography for becoming beer producer. "Buffalo Bill's Brewery" and, three years later, founds the magazine "American Brewer Magazine".

In the 1999 starts again to dedicate himself full time to the photography. The project he finished nowadays to work to, Leisure: Americans at Play, begun in the seventies too, is on the contrary dedicated to the relationship between the Americans and sport and in particular to "special" events as the "Indianapolis 500 miles", mammoth truck races, wrestling matches and so on. In the 2003 he begins a lonely journey by car towards the United States. From this experience, the most recent cycle of works comes up A photographer journey: 115 days across America.

From 1996 till today Bill Owens' work was shown at the San Francisco Museum of modern Art, the San José Museum of Art, the Saloon of Photo in Paris, the Centre Photographique de l'Île de France and at the Robert Koch Gallery on San Francisco, Greg Kucera in Seattle. Bill Owens is currently represented by James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY.