

1. *Turn In* (2002) names a series of large-scale colour photographs showing the flop-house beds and hostel interiors that intermittently shelter the homeless populations of Cardiff and Dublin. The images themselves are composed according to a rigorous formalism: four-foot-square print, upper two-thirds to three-quarters all wall, bed at bottom, natural lighting, sharp focus. The only variables are the walls' colours, chips and scratches, and the mattresses' covers, spreads and patterns. The logic of the series is clear; it is about limiting options.

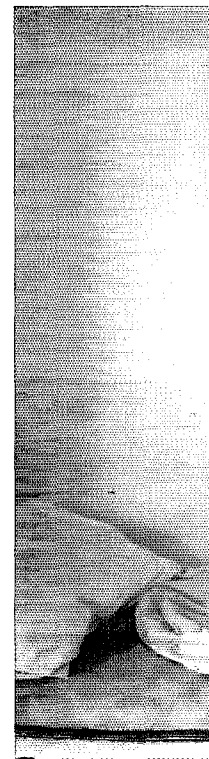
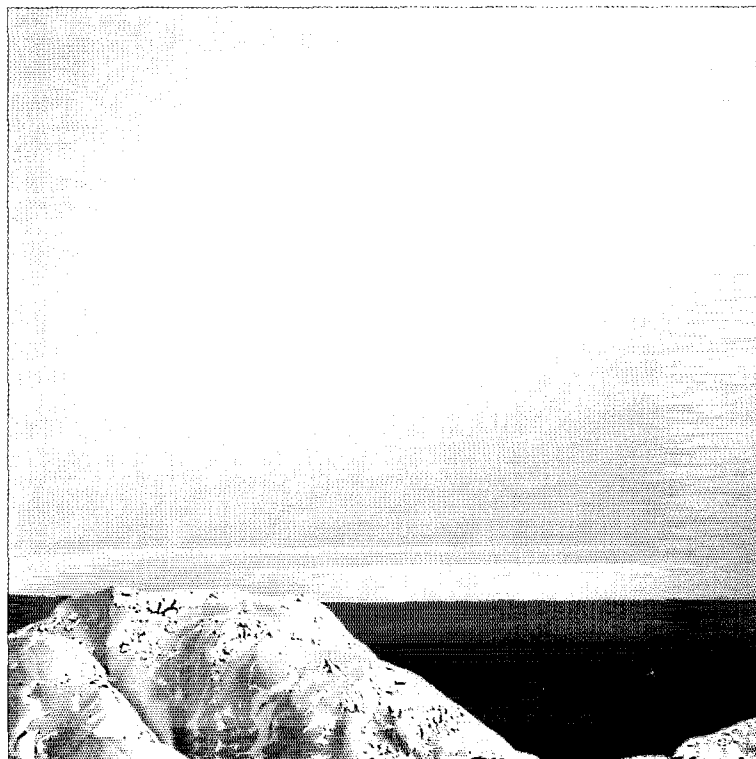
2. Americans, as if developing a reaction formation to binary oppositions, no longer appear content to live here or there; it's now here *and* there, with second, and even third homes. If being 'bi-coastal' is the pinnacle of this 'and', then no little irony attaches itself to Martina Mullaney's first solo show in the

United States. For how else is one to approach a series of photographs, the ostensible subject of which is 'homelessness', when the show itself has two homes: the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco and the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York?

3. Mark Durden, in an otherwise astute essay on the ethics of documentary photography and Mullaney's flirtation with its strategies, points to Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled* (1991), the artist's billboard of a slept-in bed, as an important precedent for Mullaney's photographic iconography. But Gonzalez-Torres' bed was shared. The identical soft indentions in its neighbouring pillows are a testament to this, and to the politics that attend to the rituals of sleep, private though they seem to be. 'A single bed,' Mullaney notes, 'is not designed to be shared; it is intended for the solitary

sleeper.' A reminder that shelter and discipline go hand in hand, especially when administered by the state.

4. For art historian Leo Steinberg, Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955) indexed a fundamental shift in painting's mode of spectatorial address. From the vertical veil of the picture plane, Rauschenberg's work brought painting down to the mattresses of what Steinberg called the 'flatbed horizontal'. It is tempting to read Mullaney's photographs according to such a confrontation between vertical and horizontal registers, between the wall as the analogue of vision and the bed as the analogue of the unconscious. But her pictures are at once too shallow and not shallow enough for such a reading: too shallow insofar as any and all psychic depth is pressed out of the thin and nearly absent pro-filmic space; not shallow



# Emerging Artists

## Some Notes Towards the Exhaustion of Photography

Martina Mullaney's *Turn In*  
by Jonathan T.D. Neil

enough insofar as that absence is immanent, and it is not too difficult to tell that the marks and scratches belong to the surfaces of the walls and not to the photographs.

5. The dialectic of appearance and reality, of surface and depth, is a hallmark of modernist painting, and its spectre haunts Mullaney's prints. But another spectre is present, too. *Turn In* appears bent not on pictorial aestheticization but upon photographic serialization. In this, it follows in the steps of Bernd and Hilla Becher's feverishly archival taxonomy of Europe and North America's shared industrial architecture, but Mullaney's images capture an alienation of a different sort. Homelessness, after all, is a category for industrialized nations.

6. Serialization doubles the absence of the photographic subject. Like Uta Barth's skilful use of focal length to absent the

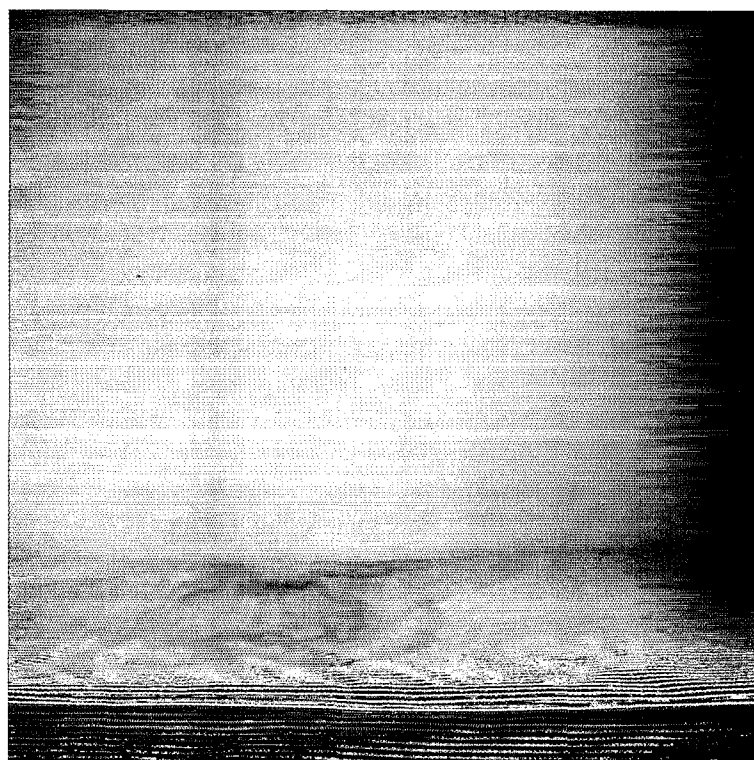
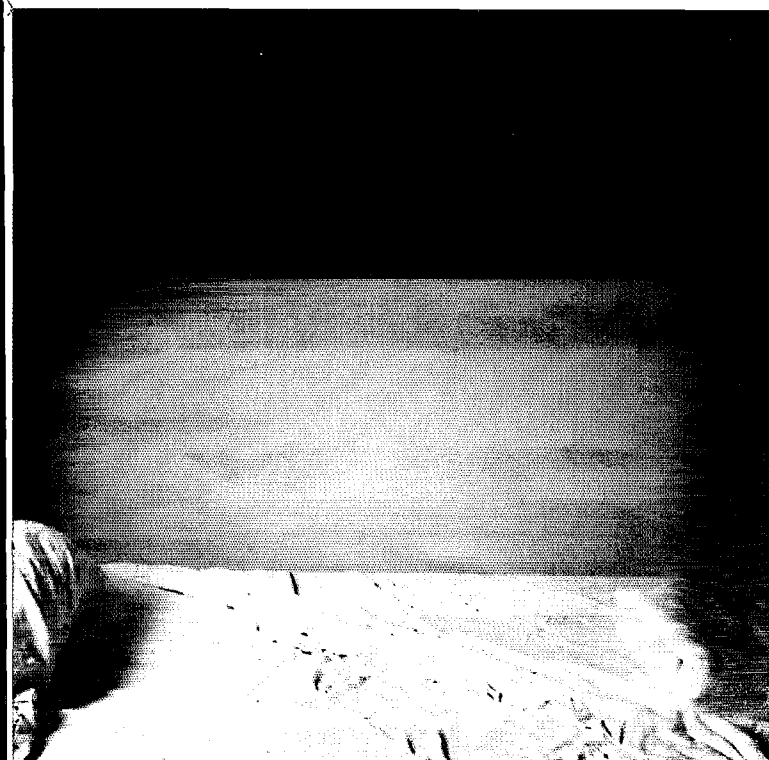
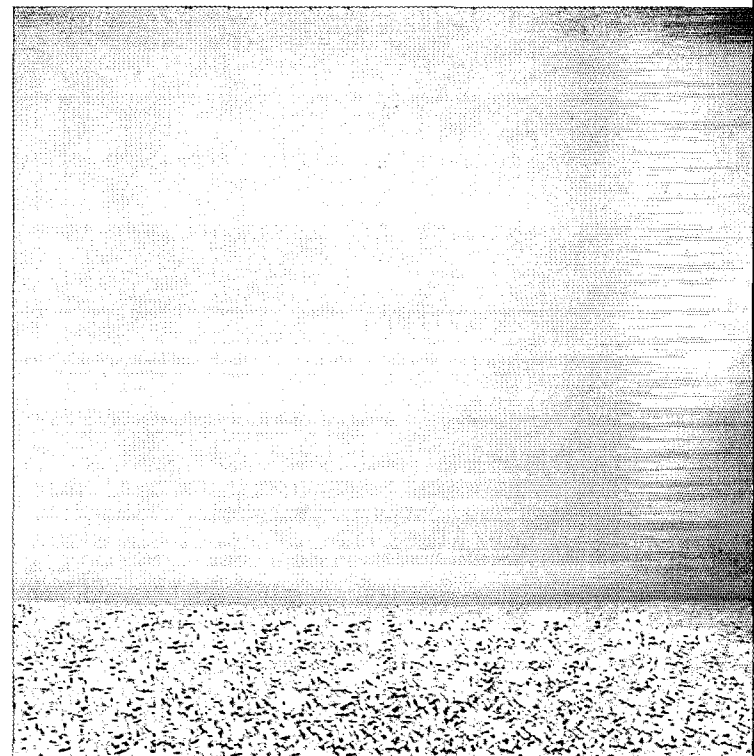
place of the subject in her 'backgrounds', as in series such as *Ground* (1994-7), the repetition of Mullaney's empty beds, or even the empty plates of her earlier work, *Dinner for One* (1999), point to the place where subjects should be but from which they have been occluded, on both sides of the lens.

7. 'The tired person can no longer realize, but the exhausted person can no longer possibilize'. So wrote the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, as he approached the exhaustion of his own life due to a pulmonary condition. When exhausted, one is forced to confront that radical materialism which is the body, especially as it brushes against mortality. Exhaustion is a state of no options: it is not cancellation (what one chooses not to do, for instance, when one is tired), but foreclosure (what one cannot do, or even conceive of

doing): it is beyond possible. Perhaps it was only once confined to his single hospital bed, restrained by his own ill health, that Deleuze came to a full understanding of what it meant for life to take on the weight of what he would call 'pure immanence', or, following Beckett, 'the Exhausted'.

8. Like Beckett's 'Unnamable', the Exhausted defy representation. They are the system's surplus, its too much and its not enough. If Martina Mullaney's large-scale photographs figure such Beckettian exhaustion, then it is not solely because she was born in Ireland, nor because her photographs approach another unnamable through their thoroughly *unheimlich* domesticity; it is because only a series can be exhausted and, with *Turn In*, Mullaney has found the proper subject of, and a proper medium for, such exhaustion.

*All images*  
Martina Mullaney *Untitled*,  
2002, from the series  
*Turn In*, C-prints  
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TITLE: Some Notes Towards the Exhaustion of Photography:  
Martina Mullaney's Turn In  
SOURCE: Modern Painters My 2005  
PAGE(S): 50-1  
WN: 0512101632019

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