

RUNNING  
FALLING  
FLYING  
FLOATING  
CRAWLING





## A Spin in Bayonne: Steven Pippin's *Laundromat-Locomotion*

GILDA WILLIAMS

The easy part was getting the horse into the laundromat. No effort had been wasted on securing permits for the animal; in fact, customers had not even been cleared from the New Jersey launderette. Locals continued to wash, dry, and fold while Southberry Mack galloped round the 12 central machines, converted for the occasion into fully operational photographic cameras. To be precise, the dozen coin-operated Wascomat Senior W125 Triple Loaders had been repurposed as Polaroid cameras, endowed not only with a lens and shutter to capture the image but a self-contained system to develop and print the negative internally too. Artist Steven Pippin carefully poured Kodak Dektol developer and fixer into the machines' soap compartments, taking full advantage of the high-precision temperature controls: HOT, WARM, and COLD.

The British artist was dressed in a featureless black suit and walked purposefully down the trip-wired aisle—like a bank clerk on his daily commute, or an apprentice undertaker late for the morgue. Each of the 11 sequences were documented in 12 circular prints. Once extracted from the Wascomat, the wet circular prints were aired together in a nearby tumble dryer fitted with a wooden collapsible drying rack and 48 clothes pegs which pinned the paper discs in place as they rotated in the industrial heat. Scarred at birth by the tears and creases inflicted by indifferent machines, the finished prints exhibited a weathered appearance suggestive of daguerreotypes, complete with ghostly doubles and shadowy mishaps. A late sequence featured a naked woman, lovely and ungraspable as she fled past in the semi-darkness—as if someone had spied her midnight flight through a keyhole and later enlarged the image, to get a better look. The complete group of 81 circular images—most featuring Pippin strolling or racing past in increasing states of undress—appear convex and magical: like giant drops of mercury reflecting the bizarre goings-on around them, or ancient photographs preserved as orbs in an immense locket.

The tough part was setting up all dozen machines. It took 5–6 hours for Pippin to modify all 12, so only one sequence could be shot per night. The laundromat was open to the public from 6am to midnight, and Pippin worked mostly after the place closed. In practice, he had a brief window around 5am—and only one







lucky chance—to capture that night's distinctive sequence before early-bird customers turned up. Sometimes, due to some unforeseen delay, Pippin was forced to work past the 6am curfew; the rare, bewildered customer occasionally appears incongruously in the background. You might think Pippin's curious technological feats would lift the abiding atmosphere of relentless ennui, but no. Nothing can relieve the laundromat's deathly tedium. In the late frames of *Running in suit*, a customer sat slumped in a white plastic chair, fixed in a familiar posture of resigned boredom despite the photographic miracles unfolding beside her. Most everybody ignored the odd black-suited Englishman, but one angry customer accused Pippin of stealing photographs of his gyrating clothes—plainly the victim of too many spy movies, where duplicitous foreigners concealed cameras in cakes or corsages or (why not) cleverly modified washing machines.

Many have seen *Laundromat-Locomotion* mostly as the culmination to the artist's previous laundromat experiments begun in 1991 with *Laundromat Pictures*. These evolved from his earlier improvised pinhole cameras such as *Bath Tub Converted into a Pinhole Camera*, 1984, or *Follies of an Amateur Photographer*, 1987: the toilet-bowl-turned-pinhole camera realized in the public lavatories of a moving London-to-Brighton commuter train. On those occasions the artist displayed similarly heroic levels of guts, precision, and planning acumen—plus a considerable tolerance for filth—required again in Bayonne. But *Laundromat-Locomotion* also connects to Pippin's subsequent work that conjured self-perpetuating revolving systems, such as *Black Hole with Time Warp*, 2004 (a time-cancelling device whereby a clock mounted inside a rotating structure revolved backwards at the same speed as the clock moved forward) or *Old Constellation*, 2007 (a battery-operated candelabra with rotating arms and planetary gearbox that mimicked the movement of the planets). In the same way, *Laundromat-Locomotion* described a perfectly self-sustaining galaxy, with 12 synchronized spinning planets. Pippin's technical drawings of the many components arranged in meticulous order hint at the patience of a clockmaker, orchestrating a smoothly functioning nano-universe wherein many circular elements are arranged in flawless alignment, like an eclipse. The resulting images, from a distance, look like phases of the moon—complete with the craters and random irregularities of the gray lunar surface.

Obviously, many have suspected the ghost haunting these machines is Eadweard Muybridge: another daring Englishman pushing his luck in the wilds of America, slicing up time and space into irresistible little pieces, like candy. In fact, long before the artist had ever heard of Muybridge, back when Pippin was a teenager, he photographed on a Leicester sidewalk a startling street-line-up of 8 washing machines—like blocky cyclops schoolchildren in metallic white uniforms, waiting for some unearthly bus. Both artists were weirdly attracted





to washing machines, of all things; Muybridge patented such a contraption in 1861. Both artist-inventors shared a shoot-now/look-later approach to photography, good-naturedly accepting whatever emerged from their experiments: a flying horse for Muybridge; a barefoot gentleman for Pippin.

Rebecca Solnit has pointed out how, in late 19th-century America, in the very period when Muybridge was splitting time into sequential frames that he gathered in pricey photographic books, robber barons were dividing up the Wild West into rectangular parcels and selling off the land, piece by stolen piece. Both operators were taking control of space and time, ordering them into neat grids to be converted into cash. In the late 20th-century American commerce that Pippin encountered, with tumble-dryers costing 25 cents for 10 minutes and laundry \$1.00 for 20 lbs (as announced on signs presiding over the Giant Bayonne Laundromat), the logic of chopping space and time into units for sale remained intact. The round, silvery results of Pippin's American adventure seem a giant currency, like enlarged versions of the shiny quarters feeding the machines, alchemically plucked from the darkness.

Both artists worked while seismic technological change was underway. In 1869, a year before Muybridge's documented galloping horse, pocket-watches gained a second-hand: both represent attempts at visualizing, mincing, and controlling time. Pippin worked across the dawn of the digital revolution; the documentary video of *Laundromat-Locomotion* shows a man in full command of an entire mechanical cycle—just before a vast planet-wide dematerialized technology emerged over which we quickly lost dominion. We may consider Muybridge's multi-year project as a more 'serious' endeavour than Pippin's Monty Python-ish walks; but recall, for example, Muybridge's absurd pair of Victorian ladies, unsmilingly engaged in an outdoor naked foxtrot. For both artists, the choice of subject matter was a secondary concern, mostly at the service of verifying an unprecedented, private, elaborate mechanical cosmos.

On that sunny New Jersey morning when Southberry Mack arrived from an upstate New York stable around 10am with rider and assistant, Pippin had only about an hour and a single shot at getting the sequence down on paper. Mack shat at the laundromat entrance—probably not the worst that floor had ever faced. The proprietor of the Bayonne Giant Laundromat (a still-operational business, despite fires on the premises in 2011 and 2016) tolerated whatever strange experiments the eccentric English tinkerer was concocting each night, providing the artist kept feeding 25-cent coins into the hungry machines. No appliances were harmed in the making of *Laundromat-Locomotion*: Giant's machines were instantly rinsed of developer and restored to their former purpose, resuming their day-job removing tough stains from New Jersey T-shirts and socks.





Almost miraculously, Pippin's thin body often occupied the dead center of each round print: sometimes as a spectral outline; sometimes doubled and sketchy; sometimes solid and absurdly purposeful. Behold Adam, alone in the universe at dawn, the spin-cycle's rips and tears serving as fig leaves over his exposed body. Or Vitruvian man, Leonardo's inscribed circular figure, ending a long shift and running to check his laundry.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Ever-practical, the Englishman could reverse his dark jacket and cleverly improvise an instant film-bag (complete with fitted armholes) in order to load sheet film into the machine drum in pitch-blackness.
- 2 Walking in suit. 2) Running in suit. 3) Walking without trousers. 4) Walking backwards. 5) Walking in underpants. 6) Walking naked. 7) Running in underpants. 8) Running naked. 9) Woman. 10) Horse & Rider. 11) *E R* (abbreviation for 'The Erection Sequence'—*not* Elisabeth Regina, i.e., Queen Elisabeth II, as the artist helpfully informs us.)
- 3 Pippin's nightly labour entailed painstakingly fitting each alternating yellow or blue machine with its own: trip wire; 1.5-inch convex lens; multi-part single-shot flash-bulb unit; bicycle inner tube (to ensure a light-and-air-tight seal); handmade wooden collapsible film holder for the specially cut circular film (diameter: 24.5 inches); delicate shutter assembly with spring; and spring-loaded trip wire mechanism. The artist rented a room nearby for two weeks, working nightly to complete *Laundromat-Locomotion*.
- 4 One imagines Steven Pippin years before, doing his laundry in some dreary English laundromat, bored out of his skull, staring at the machines and noticing their similarity to TV consoles, then starting to imagine the black holes staring back at him, revealing themselves as giant lenses and inspiring the whole *Laundromat-Locomotion* enterprise.
- 5 We might imagine that the clothes Pippin stripped off were then shoved into a nearby machine for washing, the whole describing another symmetrical and insular system of which the artist is clearly fond.
- 6 Muybridge too imagined commandeering his own private galaxy, having adopted the artistic pseudonym 'Helios', i.e., the sun-god who daily steered a flying chariot across the skies, ushering in day and night. Detergent brand names also allude to the mythological (Ariel; Fairy; Halo) and the planetary (Tide; Surf; Sun&Earth).
- 7 All Solnit's books are good, but my favorite is *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (2003).
- 8 The London-born, later San Francisco-based bookseller only turned to photography after sustaining severe head injuries in a stagecoach accident, somewhere in Texas, around 1860. In 1874 the maybe-brain-damaged Eadweard Muybridge murdered his wife's lover, Harry Larykins, but was acquitted on a verdict of 'justifiable homicide'. Born Edward Muggeridge, Muybridge unusually changed his name twice during his lifetime. *Eadweird* indeed!
- 9 Both artists seemed to have anticipated 21st-century philosophies: Pippin perhaps pre-empted Object-Oriented Ontology, capturing the world from the perspective of inert objects like washing machines and toilet bowls; Muybridge foretold today's post-human interspecies equivalencies, exploring human and non-human animal movement on identical terms. Recall that Muybridge's late work was within the University of Pennsylvania's Veterinary Department—not under the auspices of, say, art or the photographic sciences.
- 10 In practice, to shoot and develop each photograph cost \$2; thus, a minimum of 96 gleaming quarters represented another indispensable part of Pippin's circular equipment.







## *Running Falling Flying Floating Crawling*

Hardcover

9 x 7 Inches

300 Pages

\$30

Saint Lucy Books

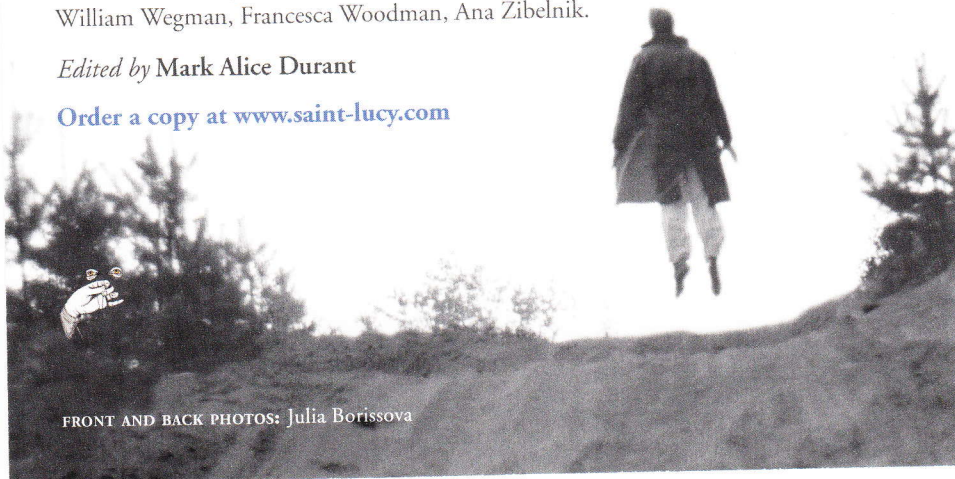
*Running Falling Flying Floating Crawling* is a loose compendium of photographs and texts that picture, examine, explore, and / or suggest the human body in states of abandon, helplessness, terror, subjugation, serenity, and transcendence.

**WORDS:** Kate Palmer Albers, Kim Beil, Tessa Berring, Jennifer Blessing, Susan Bright, David Company, Maud Casey, Leslie Dick, Jean Dykstra, Odette England, Jen Grow, Cig Harvey, Marvin Heiferman, Emily LaBarge, Jane D. Marsching, Carol Mavor, tamara suarez porras, Lia Purpura, Seph Rodney, Roula Seikaly, Diane Seuss, David Levi Strauss, Lynne Tillman, Gilda Williams.

**IMAGES:** Bas Jan Ader, Dieter Appelt, Atul Bhalla, Maura Biava, Anna and Bernhard Blume, Julia Borissova, Chris Burden, Harry Callahan, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Sarah Charlesworth, Denis Darzacq, Maya Deren, Jimmy DeSana, John Divola, Valie Export / Peter Weibel, Allen Frame, Nan Goldin, Cig Harvey, Susan Hiller, Peter Hujar, Aleksei Kazantsev, Martin Kersels, Andre Kertesz, Yves Klein, Stanislava Kovalcikova, William Lamson, Sigalit Landau, Gabby Laurent, Yael Martinez, Rania Matar, Lilly McElroy, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Raymond Meeks, Susan Meiselas, Gideon Mendel, Ana Mendieta, Andrea Modica, Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, Eadweard Muybridge, Paul Pfeiffer, Steven Pippin, Pope.L, Shawn Records, Alessandra Sanguinetti, Laurie Simmons, Aaron Siskind, Tabitha Soren, Clare Strand, Larry Sultan, Ruth Thorne-Thomsen, David Uzochukwu, Oliver Wasow, William Wegman, Francesca Woodman, Ana Zibelnik.

*Edited by* Mark Alice Durant

Order a copy at [www.saint-lucy.com](http://www.saint-lucy.com)



FRONT AND BACK PHOTOS: Julia Borissova