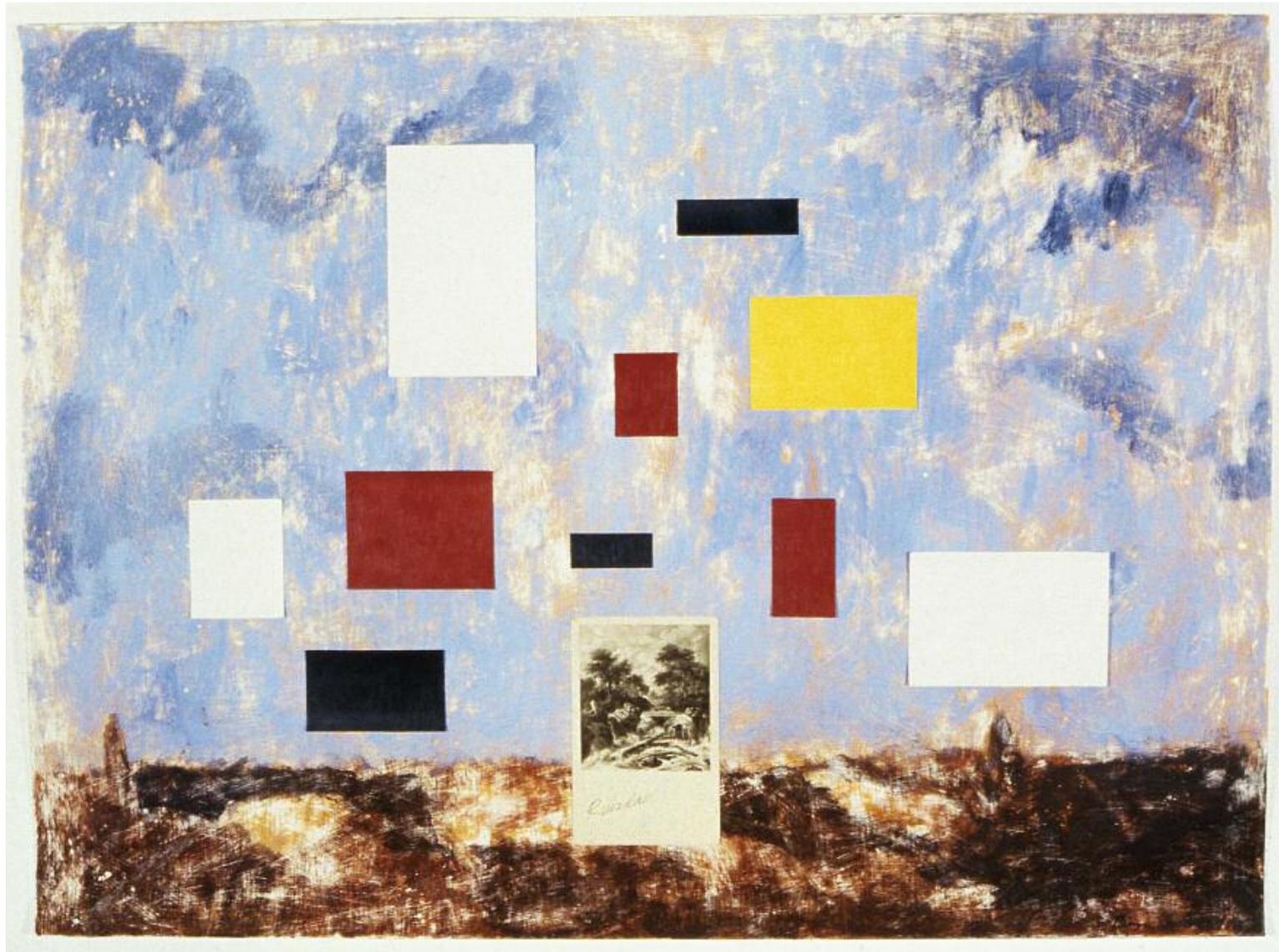




Buzz Spector: **Cards and Letters**

Postcard works 1973 to 2009

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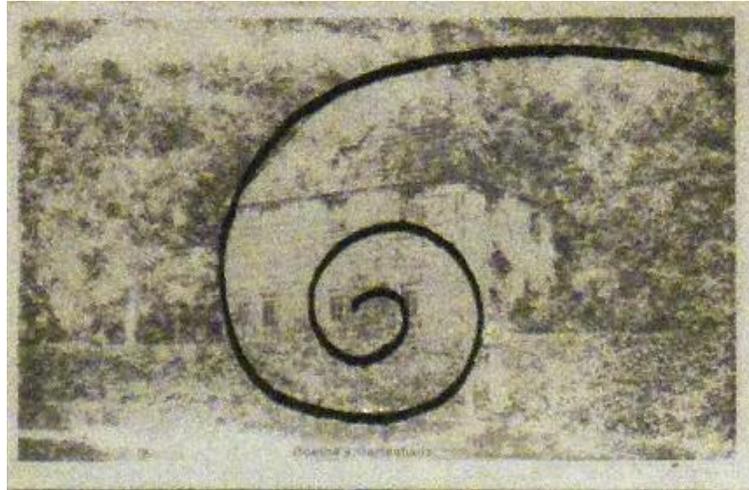


**An Atlas of Proximity and Distance:
Buzz Spector's Postcard Works,
1973 to 2000**

That Buzz Spector regards postcards as simultaneously a literary and a visual medium is immediately evident in his collage, *Postcards From Gracchus* (2000). Not only does this piece include 16 dust jacket photographs of authors, each affixed to a postcard, but its title also alludes to Kafka's story, *The Hunter Gracchus*. Spector has elsewhere noted that postcards are "the only novels most people ever write." This collage manifests a number of important characteristics of his work. Spector is a master of ironic doubleness, and the piece invites us to participate actively in its twists of playful thought, witty questions and serious, intellectual speculation. Puns thoroughly permeate *Postcards From Gracchus*: some are strictly visual, like an author striking the same pose as a person in the postcard; some rely on more obscure references, like the image of Betty Smith, author of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, on a postcard of a farmer plowing his field; and some are slowly, quietly disturbing, like Kafka on a postcard of a library that because of its high-contrast printing begins to look like a prison.

This postcard collage is a diverse crowd of jostling images. One postcard depicts an Eastern European ghetto, another a lascivious putto on an artist's palette. Spector invites us to actively interpret, see connections, construct stories. Is that Graham Greene, or John Dos Passos? And why does this other author appear to have horns? We are willing to engage it like this because we can tell that the work is not arbitrary; it is a structure created through numerous acts of careful selection and calibration. Like all collages, the recontextualization of diverse materials brings with it numerous points of rupture, and these are also points of engagement. *Postcards From Gracchus* seems hard to pin down – our speculations are contingent, provisional, in constant flux.

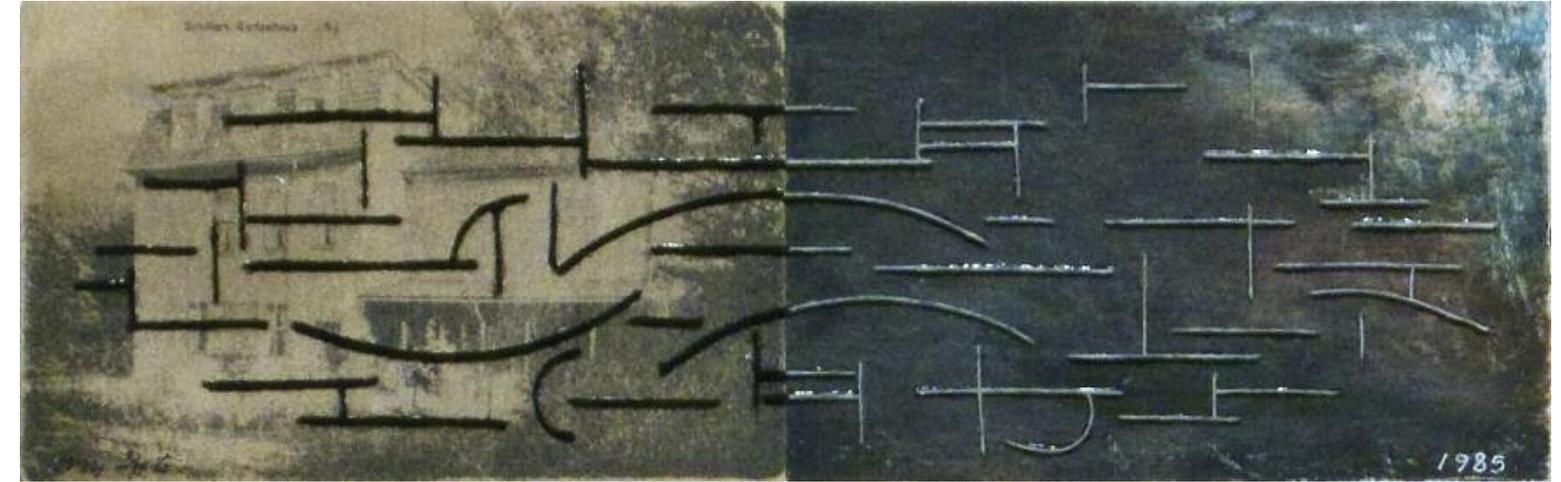
This collage is one of the later pieces in the exhibition, an exhibition that includes four distinct bodies of Spector's postcard works produced from 1973 through 2000. The earliest piece, *Boulder Dam* (1973) is typical of the collaged postcards that he sent to friends and other artists who did "mail art" at the time. From 1981 to 1987, his postcard pieces consider various art historical narratives, referencing in particular the De Stijl movement, specifically the art and theory of van Doesburg, Mondrian and Vantongerloo. These



Goethes Gartenhaus, 1984, paper relief on acrylic and postcard collage

postcard works question one of the mythic, core movements of modernism, a movement that dogmatically preached a purity of form. Spector quotes some of its most iconic imagery in the context of the visually impure world of a contemporaneous Dutch postcard; in others he replaces a rectangle of “pure form” with the messy referential presence of a postcard, again an image of Dutch landscape or culture. What we get is two parallel, opposing past histories, a witty critique of art, culture and modernism that is, however, marked with clear signs of respect – a meticulous, reverential care in their production, their own formal elegance and a serious meditation on the meanings of De Stijl.

In 1988, Spector moved from Chicago to Los Angeles, and, perhaps not coincidentally, his work moved from the more refined, restrained postcards of the De Stijl series (Spector’s own kind of purity) to postcards with an excess of sentiment, indeed, sentimentality – floral cards, ruins, vulgar joke cards, erotic imagery. In his writing he examined the prevalence of material excess in the art of the time (for example, his 1989 *Artforum* essay, “A Profusion of Substance”). His interest in postcards gravitated to what he describes as the “subtly sinister and erotic aspects” of their conventional sentimentality. In the collage *French Letters* (1990), the postcard images depict a highly clichéd, melodramatic narrative of two lovers, one burning her letter, the other clasping it to his heart. Alternating cards create a checkered, gameboard image that can also be read as an accumulation of postcards that are themselves physical markers of sending and receiving. (Of course, the interspersed postcards of the Eiffel Tower playfully maximize the double entendre of the title.) If *French Letters* is lightly erotic, the collage *Anatomy Lesson* (1991) is an



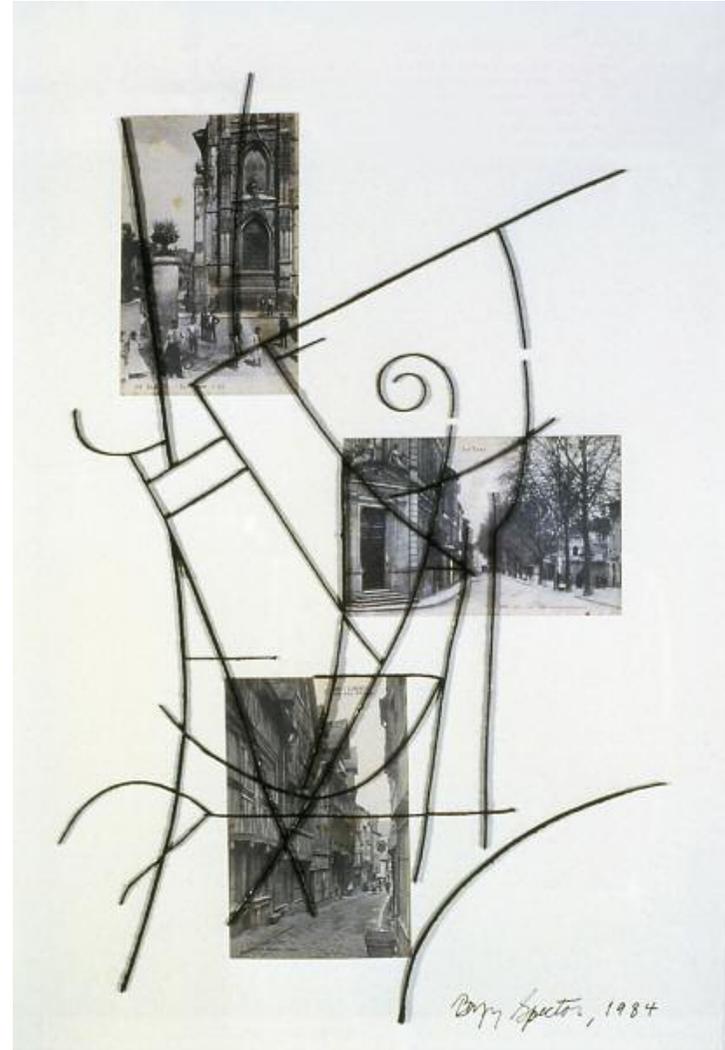
Schillers Gartenhaus, 1985, paper relief on acrylic and postcard collage

example of the more sinister. It consists of a grid of 56 congratulatory postcards of roses: “Best Wishes,” “Congratulations,” “Birthday Greetings.” And on the surface of the postcards is a pink, linear diagram of a severed leg and arm. From a distance, this anatomy book image is barely discernable. To its right, an embossed, black postcard of a faceless woman is superimposed on the grid. We slowly recognize this profuse bed of roses as a memento mori.

With a few exceptions, Spector stopped working with postcards after 1992, but in 2000 (and having returned to the Midwest) he began a series of postcard pieces in which a grid of similar postcards is sanded and altered. A transparent ink or watercolor silhouette of a book or books is painted over the grid (once again implying a conflation of text and image).

The collage *Atlas* (2000) consists of 24 postcards in which everything but the water in the images has been sanded off, erased; trees and buildings remain only as reflections in the water. The silhouette of a large open book is painted over them in transparent ink. Is the book an atlas? Are its contents also lost in its watery, shadowy shape? Or are the postcards the atlas? In their spaced arrangement they resemble displays of the painter Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas*, a massive image bank that functions as reference material for his paintings. But what kind of image bank are these postcards? Trees and buildings perceived indirectly. They seem so completely unreliable, so uncertain as references.

In fact, postcards have some intrinsic qualities that reinforce this uncertainty, qualities that Spector deftly exploits in his work.



Portrait of an Army Doctor (after Albert Gleizes), 1984,
paper relief on acrylic and postcard collage

and turned them back into actual photographs, images with an "aura." They have also been reduced and blurred in the process (making them more pathetic and personal). He has made them into souvenirs, he has made them nostalgic. Spector is playing here with one of the canonical works of 20th-century art theory, Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). The moment we notice this, the nostalgia has become ironic.

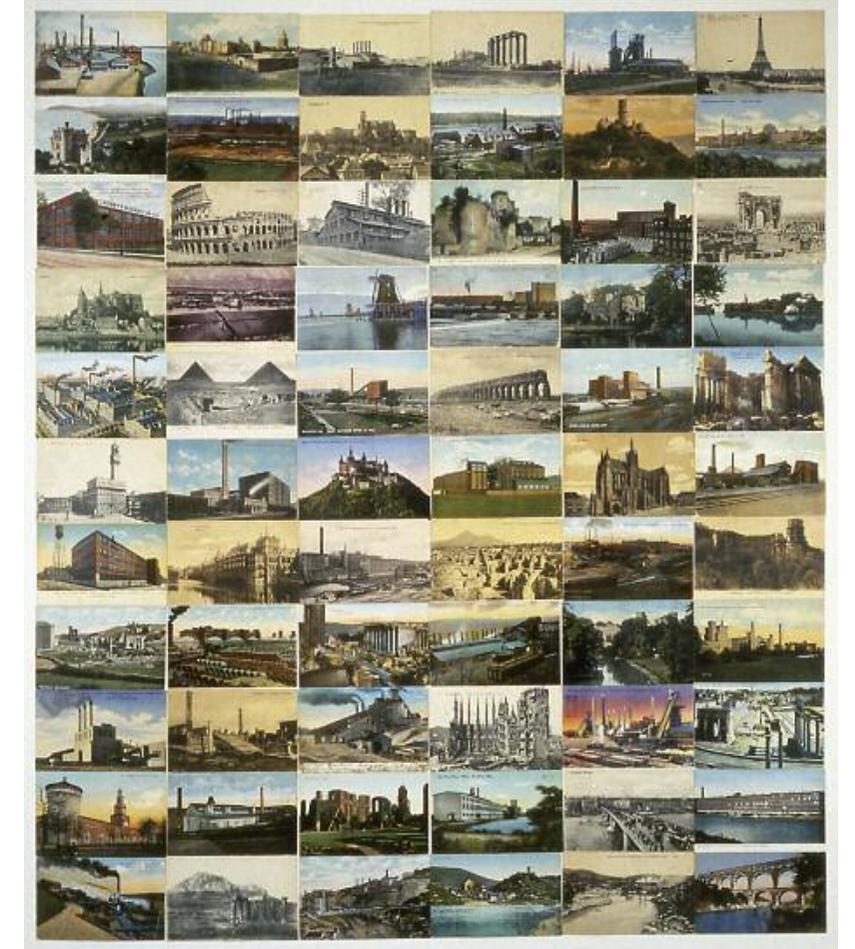
Near the end of Kafka's *The Hunter Gracchus* is a line that gets at the heart of what postcards are and perhaps to the deeper meaning of Spector's postcard works. In the parable, because his funeral boat became lost on its way to the afterlife, the dead hunter is resigned to an endless floating through the world of the living. The tired, dead hunter says, "I am here, more than that I do not know, further than that I cannot go." These are the phrases that initiated *Postcards From Gracchus*. Spector was drawn to the way in which the hunter's Kafka-esque attitude parallels the uncertainty of position and time found in postcards, the way postcards mark a simultaneous proximity and distance. Their place is indeterminate, unfixed, like Gracchus they are always "here." But where's that? On some deep level, all postcards (roses as well as Dutch landscapes) and the work that uses them suggest a perpetual displacement, an unsettling state of flux, and yet they somehow simultaneously declare, "I am here," or "I was here," or "Wish you were here."

Timothy van Laar
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Buzz Spector

Buzz Spector's art has been the focus of exhibitions in such museums and galleries as the Art Institute of Chicago, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA. His work makes frequent use of the book, both as subject and object, and is concerned with relationships between public history, individual memory and perception. Spector has published a number of artists' books and editions since the mid-1970s, including, most recently, *Time Square*, a limited edition book whose text is taken from a sequence of Google searches on the nature of time, published in 2007 by the artist and Pyracantha Press.

Spector was a co-founder of *WhiteWalls*, a magazine of writings by artists, in Chicago in 1978 and served as the publication's editor until 1987. Since then he has written extensively on topics in contemporary art and culture, and has contributed reviews and essays to a number of publications, including *American Craft*, *Artforum*, *Art Issues*, *Dialogue*, *Exposure*, *New Art Examiner* and *Visions*. He is the author of *The Book Maker's Desire*, critical essays on topics in contemporary art and artists' books (Umbrella Editions, 1995), and numerous exhibition catalog essays, including Dieter Roth (University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1999) and Ann Hamilton: Sao Paulo/Seattle (University of Washington Press, 1992).



66 Ruins, 1992, postcard collage

Spector earned his B.A. in art from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in 1972, and his M.F.A. with the Committee on Art and Design at the University of Chicago in 1978. In 2005, he was awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Printmaking/Drawing/Artists' Books. Among his other awards are a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Fellowship in 1991 and National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Fellowships in 1982, 1985 and 1991. Spector is dean of the College and Graduate School of Art in the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis.

Cover: *Atlas*, 2000, watercolor on postcard collage

Inside front cover: *De Stijlscape 2 (Ruisdael)*, 1987, watercolor and acrylic postcard collage

Inside back cover: *Anatomy Lesson*, 1991, silkscreen and ink on postcard collage

Buzz Spector: Cards and Letters
(Postcard works 1973 to 2009)

Thursday, Sept. 3 to Saturday, Oct. 10, 2009

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank the artist, Buzz Spector, the writer, Timothy van Laar, Zolla Lieberman Gallery and the collectors for their generous contribution and creativity in developing this publication and exhibition.

Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator



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