In the beginning I couldn't believe he was still alive, and in the end I couldn't believe he was dead. The line between living and dead seemed tenuous then, out there in the desert, where we talked.

I had first been introduced to Frederick Sommer's photographic work in 1974 by Jeff Weiss at Goddard College; and then in 1976, when I was studying with Nathan Lyons at the Visual Studies Workshop, concentrating on the relation between words and images, someone gave me a little book called The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics, by Sommer in collaboration with Stephen Aldrich. It was an unassuming, plain little volume, with gray laid covers stapled over cream-colored paper, and no images. The main text consisted of eight unnumbered pages of aphoristic writing separated by as many blank sheets. On the first page appeared these lines:

Words represent images:
nothing can be said for which there is no image.

Linkages between images exist a priori
and are the logic of display.

Linkages between words are the logic of grammar.

Images can be named; linkages can only be displayed. Images and their linkages are states of affairs.
Words and their linkages are propositions.

Words occupy language structure as display of grammar:
what can be said can be seen as represented image.

To a young poet and philosophy student recently enamored of photography, this lapidary text arrived with the force of revelation. I read it first as poetry, then as philosophy, then again as poetry. The poet Michael Palmer once noted that "aphorism is, when interesting, an aspect of philosophical skepticism. It relates to poetry because philosophical skepticism also has a lyrical and condensed character to it, as in Nietzsche or Wittgenstein, or at moments Derrida." Sommer's Poetic Logic was the most serious attempt I'd yet found to articulate a poetics of images that was both philosophically skeptical and lyrical. From that time on, I looked for an opportunity to engage Sommer's work in depth, and finally, almost twenty years later, it came.

In 1993 I was awarded a Visiting Scholar Research Fellowship by the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson, to spend a month in their archives, photography collections, and libraries doing research on Sommer's work. To underscore Sommer's warning that "photography cannot afford an iconoclasm of ideas," I wanted to draw connections between Sommer's images and ideas and the writings on images and aesthetics by Italian Renaissance philosophers Marsilio Ficino and Giambattista Vico; Benedetto Croce's Aesthetic (1902) with Antonio Gramsci's commentaries; sections of Nietzsche's The Will to Power as Art with Heidegger's commentaries and his Poetry, Language, Thought; and sections of Henri Bergson's Matter and Memory (1908),
especially chapter 3, "Of the Survival of Images," with Gilles Deleuze's commentaries in Bergsonism (1966). I also wanted to relate Sommer's Poetic Logic to that of the poet Jack Spicer, whose *logos* is the dark brother to Sommer's *logic*, and whose poetic syntax is very close to Sommer's. I found that *Poetic Logic* had connections, too, with the work of the artist Jess, whose visual and linguistic borrowings and translations are akin to Sommer's and whose "paste-ups" operate within a similar poetic logic to Sommer's collages. Basically, I wanted to connect Sommer to a host of related endeavors beyond the stifling confines of American art photography; to bring him back into the larger world of art and letters from which he had come. Most of all, I wanted to ground this inquiry in a close viewing of his images in the magnificent collection at the Center in Tucson. As Minor White said: "A superficial glance at [Sommer's] pictures reveals about as much as a locked trunk of its contents." So as not to remain in the area Sommer called "thinking about thinking," but to move into "using thinking about thinking as a means to serve images," I wanted to apply all of my research toward closer readings of those images.

When I was awarded the fellowship, the Center's director, Terry Pitts, called to make arrangements for my stay in Tucson. After we'd talked for a while, he suddenly asked me if I'd like to meet Fred. I gasped and almost dropped the phone—until that moment it hadn't occurred to me that Sommer was still alive. He'd have to be, what, a hundred years old? Terry Pitts informed me that Fred was, in fact, very much alive, and continuing to work at his place in Prescott. In June of 1994, I wrote to Sommer telling him of my plans to come to the Center, and asking if I could come up to Prescott to speak with him during that time. Sommer's principal assistant, Naomi Lyons, immediately called me back and suggested I come to Prescott first, to "get the goods from the master himself," before going on to the archive in Tucson. I flew into Phoenix and drove two hours north to Prescott on the morning of September 12, 1994.

When Naomi gave me directions to the Sommer place, she described it as "a small, modest house," and she was right—a grey, one-story converted summer cabin, with a sloping roof and one large picture window facing north that I never saw opened to the light. When I drove up, Naomi came out to the car to greet me and led me to the door, where Sommer was waiting, dressed in a worn robe. I thought he looked like a bird, perhaps a raptor, with a face that came to a point and piercing eyes that coldly scrutinized me. He was polite but wary. I was terrified. He immediately led me into his workroom (the room with the always-curtained picture window), which contained a small table covered with brown craft paper, a few chairs, and a daybed.

He sat on one chair, motioned me to take the other, and said we could do this any way I liked. I said I'd like to ask him some questions and we could proceed from there. He consented to being recorded, and as I began to set up the tape recorder and microphone, he asked me how much time I had. "As much time as it takes," I replied. He laughed and said he hoped he had that much time left. He'd celebrated his eighty-ninth birthday a few days before I arrived. As it turned out, he would live another four years.

As I continued to set up, he leaned over to touch my arm and whispered that he had only one request: that we not talk about trivial things. He used the word "pedestrian," a term of opprobrium that he would often employ in the days ahead to refer to something not worth our attention. I became very aware of the pressure of time passing. But as soon as I asked my first question, about the persistent strain of anti-intellectualism in some of the old art-photography community and its effect on him, he loosened up and...
ABOVE: Discovery of Brazil, collage, 1994.
OPPOSITE: Chicken Parts, 1939.
concentrated on the task at hand. In our first talks, he was sententious and did occasionally resort to old scripts, and certain well-worn turns of phrase that he'd obviously used many times before. But then he would catch himself, stop, and ask for another question. That first day he acted like an old man, tapping his forehead when his memory failed, interrupting his speech periodically with "Now where was I?" or "What were we just talking about?" But by the end of the day we had progressed far enough that he asked me to return the following morning, when he would be fresh.

The second day was very different. It soon became clear that he wanted to have a conversation, not an interview, but for that, he needed to know the person he was talking to. He asked me many questions about my background and interests, and put me through a series of tests, to gauge my knowledge and determine my level of commitment. When we resumed taping, his manner and attitude had completely changed from the previous day. He became much more animated and demonstrative. When we began to get into more serious philosophical discussions and his active intellect was engaged, age dropped away and the fifty years separating us collapsed. By lunchtime, he was speaking with great enthusiasm about "our work here together."

Our conversation over the next two weeks ranged over many subjects, from the relation of aesthetics to ethics ("a coherent sense of interrelationships over our actions generally") to the "sexual selection system" of machines, but we kept coming back to the poetics of images. At one point he said he thought the thing he'd done that might have the most lasting impact was putting "logical display" and pictorial logic in relation to "linguistic logic" as "the act of art." He was very excited about the possible extensions of these fundamental ideas into an educational context—for the education not just of artists, but of everyone.

I also spent a good deal of time pressing him on certain contradictions I saw in his work and life. To me, the principle Sommerian paradox was that he had always sought, in art and life, to achieve integration of the most disparate things, but at the same time his fundamental stance was one of resistant and sometimes intractable difference, leading ultimately to relative isolation. These two motivations were always in conflict, and this conflict formed the art—a fundamentally impure art, in which one gets these tremendous contrasts, like extreme innocence and the grittiest of experience. This is, I think, what Sommer meant when he said: "My things are not pure: they are a seething wealth of imperfection." And this made it difficult for those in the photographic establishment who preferred resolution in their images to accept his work.

In "The Linguistic and Pictorial Logic of General Aesthetics" (1979), Sommer wrote: "More and more people are realizing that the coherent way of investigating any field is to examine its possible relatedness to other things." Sommer did not see photography as separate from other arts. His work was as influenced by painting, drawing, poetry, and music as by other photography. He paid attention to the underlying structure of visual works, regardless of their medium of display: "If it were possible to remove the occupiers from an image and look only at the positions where subject matter was located, we would see structure. A photograph is a given and a construct, mapping the logic of display."

Sommer has mistakenly been called an iconoclast, something he never was. He was involved in the transformation of images, not in breaking them. His transmutations of everything from chicken entrails and coyote corpses to musical scores and Dürer woodcuts follow certain well-articulated compositional principles. His alchemical understanding of the transformation of matter put him in touch with Bruno and Paracelsus. In order to change matter, one must first see its foundational structure, and thereby glimpse something else in it, as when Sommer saw Leonardo's Virgin and Child with St. Anne and Infant St. John in a quarter-sized lump of melted metal. What was once a discarded piece of a wrecked Chevy became a vision of amity and grace. And this transformation was effected within a strict economy of gesture, Sommer's definition of elegance.
After lunch, I sat at the table in the workroom while Naomi showed me the medical collages that Sommer had been working on very recently (the first ones were made in 1989). I found them extraordinary. When Sommer came into the room, I said: "Nothing you do is ever very far from the anthropomorphic." These collages are all a reconstitution of the human figure, and yet operate as new, freestanding organisms. Emmet Gowin said they all have to do with "leverage, rather than weight." Later, Naomi talked to me about Sommer's relation to his own body, about the elegant way he moved. He was remarkably agile for a man in his ninetieth year. I remembered then that this somatic elegance was something Sommer himself remarked on in regard to his two most direct and persistent artistic companions: Edward Weston and Max Ernst.

The primacy of placement and position was not just a philosophical abstraction to Sommer. One day, as I was setting up the tape recorder and microphone between us on a low table, Sommer got up, moved his chair a half-inch to one side, and sat back down. Then he reached over and moved the microphone stand a quarter of an inch. As I watched him, I realized that a faulty arrangement—a bad composition—actually caused him physical pain.

Sommer spoke about how Michelangelo often went a little beyond reality in his depiction of sinew and muscle to make the whole composition stand on its own. When I asked him if he thought Michelangelo was getting closer to the Real in this way, or further away, he said "the infinitely near is as far as the infinitely far."

After our second conversation, Sommer asked if I'd like to spend some time looking through his library, since I'd mentioned it in my initial letter to him. I said I was very eager to do this. He pointed out that the books were arranged by size, not by subject (position being more important than occupier). I spent a good deal of time in subsequent visits going through Sommer's library and recording its contents. Some of the things I found confirmed my imaginings of sources and affinities—in German: Hegel, Freud, Nietzsche, Novalis, Hölderlin, Heidegger, and Paracelsus; in Italian: Vico, Bruno, and Croce; in French: Nerval, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Jarry (Oeuvres Complètes in eight volumes), and Valéry; in English: Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Hopkins, and Joyce. Then some surprises: Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics, Borges's Selected Poems, Luis de Camões, Johann Georg Hamann, the metaphysical vaudeville of Nestroy, and lots and lots of Leopardi. And the pointed absences, including any postwar American vanguard poetry. No Pound, Olson, Williams, H.D., Zukofsky, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, George Oppen, etcetera. I was surprised by this, and it
OPPOSITE: Young Explorer, 1951.
ABOVE: Flower and Frog, 1947.
became a bone of contention in my conversations with Sommer. Why was there not more conversation between him and the poets of his generation? After I'd been pressing him on this for some time, he finally ended the conversation by saying: “I am not overawed by things that don’t give me pleasure.”

It was only after that I remembered that Sommer had created the image of Charles Olson’s Maximus. In the first book publication of The Maximus Poems, by Jargon/Corinth in 1960, Jonathan Williams had printed Sommer’s image on the title page, with this note: “A word on the title-page device: this ‘glyph’ becomes Olson’s ‘Figure of Outward,’ striding forth from the domain of the infinitely small; and, also, a written character for Maximus himself—the Man in the Word. It is (really, like they say) the enlargement of a sliver of perforated tin ceiling found on the floor of a bar room in a ghost town in Arizona. Frederick Sommer made the discovery and the photograph.”

There were times when Sommerland seemed to me like a ghost town, and I felt like a premature historian, wandering around in the archives before the subject had quite left, picking up slivers and glyphs as he looked on, amused. Sommer told the organizers of a show in Delaware at about this time that they should treat him “as if I were dead.” This was hard to do in proximity to a still very much alive Sommer. At one point he said to me: “You know, I’m going to be doing the ultimate disappearing act sometime pretty soon.”

When he did, in January 1999, we were left, once again, with nothing but the work, in words and images—marvelous discoveries in meticulous arrangements.

*Life is the most durable fiction that matter has yet come up with and art is the structure of matter as life’s most durable fiction.*

—Frederick Sommer,
The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics ©

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*Untitled, drawing, 1944.*

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