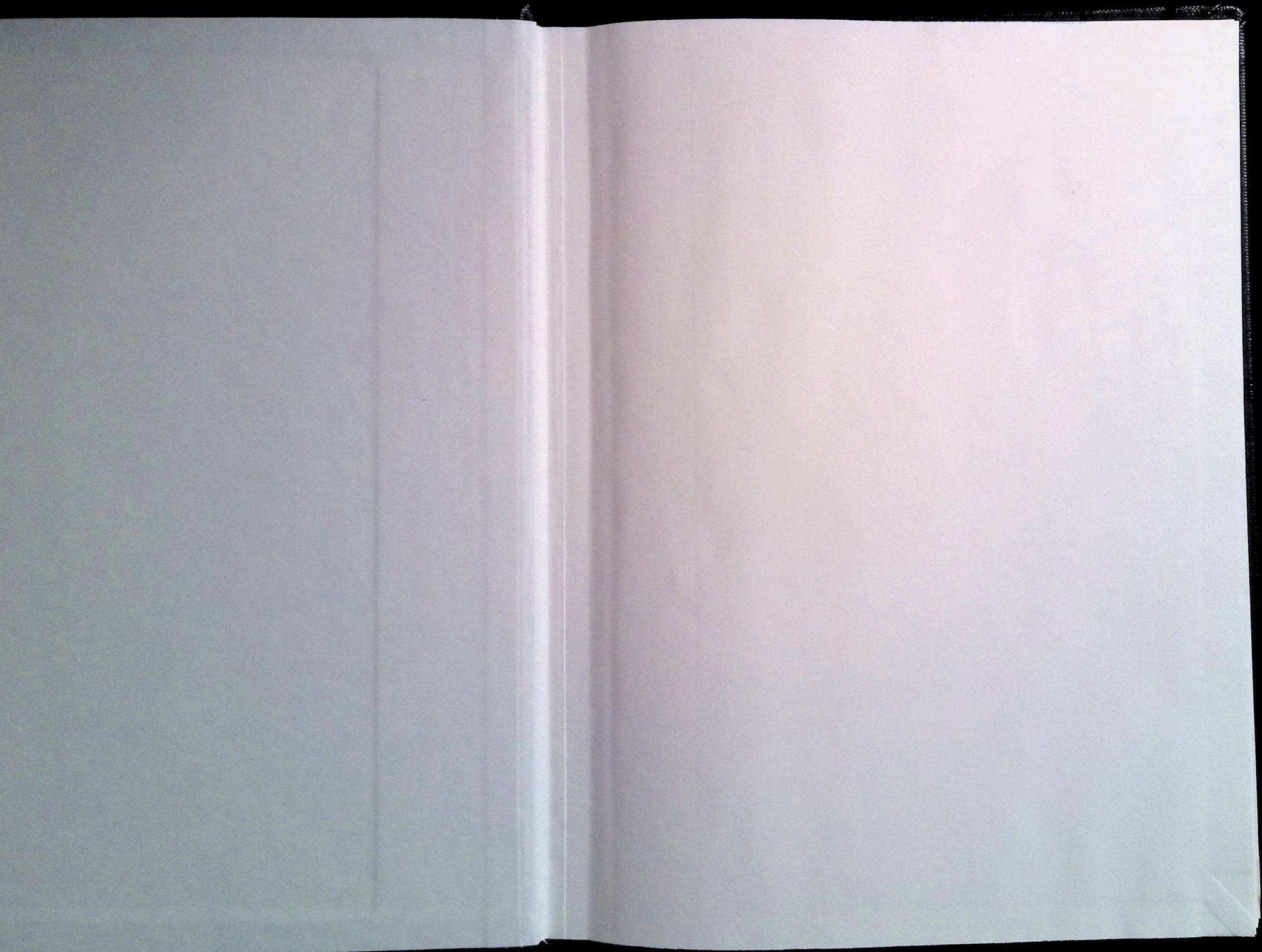


FIVE MINUTES IN MEXICO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK COHEN

SORD GA
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1989



FIVE MINUTES IN MEXICO

FIVE MINUTES IN MEXICO:
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK COHEN

Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes College
May 14 through June 11, 1989

The Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art
Ursinus College
March 15 through April 16, 1990

An exhibition organized by the
Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes College
and supported in part by a grant from the
Pennsylvania Council on the Arts

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The text is set in Schoolbook.
Type composition, duotone negative preparation, and
printing by Penn Creative Litho, Old Forge, Pennsylvania.
Design by Annie Bohlin.

Introduction and Acknowledgements

It is a rare pleasure for a college gallery to organize an exhibition of works by a member of its own academic community whose reputation and contribution to his field has international ramifications. This is the case with the current exhibition, *Five Minutes Photographs by Mark Cohen*.

Cohen is well known for his black-and-white photographs of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, their environs and inhabitants, in the tradition of the street photographer who captures the "decisive moment" first made prominent as an art form by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Cohen uses a 35 mm camera and prefers the immediacy of the silver print to a more subtle platinum print. His one man show in 1973 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and his participation in the International Museum of Photography in New York (1974) and the Art Institute of Chicago (1975).

For short periods in 1981, 1982, and 1985, Cohen made trips to Mexico: the brevity and intensity of those trips is reflected in this exhibition. Like the photographs of Pennsylvania, the pictures are fragments of everyday life, charged with Cohen's sometimes confrontational energy. But a gentle side of the photographer is also revealed in pictures of amazing textural richness, detail, and compassion.

I thank Mark Cohen for collaborating in this exhibition, for his participation in every phase of the exhibition, from the selection of photographs to making suggestions for the catalog. Annie Bohlin contributed to its success. Annie Bohlin assisted in the selection of photographs for the exhibition, designed the catalog, and determined the order of the photographs reproduced here. Her sensitivity to Cohen's work and careful overseeing of the catalog production resulted in a publication of high quality. Marvin Heiferman, who has followed Cohen's career since the 1970s, provided an insightful essay which gives us an informed view on Cohen's Mexican photographs. The staff of the Zabriske Gallery in New York helped in the early planning stages and made the photographs available to us for loan. The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts provided matching funding in support of the catalog and travelling

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Cohen is well known for his black-and-white photographs of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, their environs and inhabitants. In the tradition of the street photographer who captures the "decisive moment" first made prominent as an art form by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Cohen uses a 35 mm camera and prefers the immediacy of the silver print to the more subtle platinum print. His one man show in 1973 at the Museum of Modern Art led to others at the International Museum of Photography (1974) and the Art Institute of Chicago (1975).

For short periods in 1981, 1982, and 1985, Cohen made pictures in Mexico: the brevity and intensity of those trips is reflected in the title of this exhibition. Like the photographs of Pennsylvania, the Mexican pictures are fragments of everyday life, charged with Cohen's uneasy, sometimes confrontational energy. But a gentle side of the photographer is also revealed in pictures of amazing textural richness, humor, and compassion.

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On behalf of the administration of Wilkes College and the
Advisory Commission of the Sordani Art Gallery, I am pleased to be able
to produce this exhibition.

Judith H. O'Toole
Director

A DIFFERENT TRI

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A DIFFERENT TRIP

It's hard to believe that only one hundred and fifty years have passed since the announcement of the invention of photography; but what is even more remarkable is that in that very short period of time (the photographic era being only the tip of the iceberg of recorded development), we've become so image-dependent. We read less, but always want to see more. So, more and more magazines are published yearly and in each magazine more and more ad pages are sold and more and more images are reproduced. And we continue looking, like addicts, as the tally of pictures mount. We watch movies in theaters and then drive home through landscapes polka-dotted with satellite dishes, only to shove more movies into the VCR.

Not only have we become mesmerized by photography in all of its incarnations, we now actually *need* the camera's particular brand of vision, truth, and history. If we live so furiously in a hectic present that we forget the past, photography helps us remember. If our lives seem repetitive and small-time, photography reminds us of the larger world. And if that bigger world starts to move too fast, photography stops it. Photography even shows you how to be someone else, when you don't like who you are. When life seems totally out of control, when there are riots downtown or plane crashes at the airport or outrageous instances of child abuse in the house next door, photography calms us as it transmits the bad news and the chaos, all within four neat, straight borders. And, most of all, photography gives us a second crack at reality.

So, no wonder we enjoy pictures — taking them, being in them, looking at them. Photographs encourage us to remember what has been seen and to study what we never could have noticed: the expression on a face turned away from us, but toward the camera; the full outline of the leg that only attracted our attention from the corner of an eye; the shape of a raindrop unintelligible in the commotion of a storm, but frozen on film.

We can now see that the history of the medium has gone full circle. A century and a half ago, we invented photography. And now, the influence of the photographic image is so pervasive that it is becoming obvious that it is the pictures that are defining us.

□

Nowhere in the history of photography is this symbiosis between image and identity clearer than in the startlingly ideosyncratic work of Mark Cohen. We like to think of photographers as explorers, visionaries in search of the exotic, documentarians in search of some universal

truth, or as magicians armed with all the visual tricks that can make life more photogenic than, in fact, it really is. But for Cohen, the beauty of photography has always meant something quite different.

Photographing for two decades in Wilkes-Barre and in the cities and towns of eastern Pennsylvania, Cohen has assembled a unique travelogue of his own Kafkaesque reality, a remarkable body of work that is built upon split-second impulses and reactions. Because his work is so instinctive, and so internalized, he has seldom needed to travel to find subject matter. In his work, the unusual has always existed close at hand. Often just around the corner.

Cohen's photographs are challenging. There's always just enough of an edge of visual violence in his work — rudeness, nervous energy — to continually confound our expectation of what photography might tell us and what we should be looking for. Using a hand-held camera, pointing it in directions we would never think of, Cohen has compulsively overturned Cartier-Bresson's notion of "the decisive moment," giving each picture an exquisitely surreal American spin. In his photographs, the decisive moment is never that slice of time in which human nature is revealed, but is the instant that clarifies the distance between what is noticed and what is understood.

In Cohen's American photographs, people tend to look either uncomfortable or, in one way or another, seductive; they are often angry at the camera's (and Cohen's) intrusion. Common objects seem isolated, mysterious, menacing. Cohen's pictures, frequently illuminated by the artificial light of a strobe, are expressions of distraction, masterpieces of the unresolved feeling we all have, but would rather not acknowledge, let alone display. He seldom fails to remind us how far our lives are from how we would choose to have them remembered.

It's ironic that an artist who takes pictures as if he were a tourist in his own day-to-day reality should travel to a foreign country to make calm photographs. But in the images included in this exhibit, made in Mexico in 1981, 1982, and 1985, that is exactly what we have the rare opportunity to see. There is no terrifying sense of urgency in these pictures. Mexico is just foreign enough to insert a little distance between Cohen's mind and his nerve endings. His guard is down, he's relaxed. So, what we see is Cohen figuring out how to situate himself in an environment, rather than define himself against it.

Look at the faces of the Mexicans depicted as they look back into the camera. For them, Cohen isn't butting in. He's just another gringo

tourist, a harmless guy on holiday who will soon disappear with some pictures they will never see. They're amused by his presence. At most, they're mildly curious about what he might be looking at. While they are used to this situation, he is not. And we are not. It's a revelation to see how Cohen works when he has the freedom of a visitor and has nothing to lose.

As he shows us street life or people at work and at rest in cafes, what we recognize is Cohen's curiosity and sense of wonder at work. The pictures don't explode, they just seem to happen. They have an odd sweetness. A stuffed alligator floats high on a restaurant wall, unexpected yet benign. Electrical wires dangle elegantly. And there are pyramids everywhere, from the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán to the yogurt display in a shop's display case, from piles of fruit in a market to beehives piled up at the edge of a highway, from a folded white napkin that has fallen on the street to a Christmas tree being carried down the street.

People dance, do their chores, live their lives. There are no major confrontations, just leisurely and assured observations. There no impending terror, none of the connoisseurship of little terrors that we've come to expect in Cohen's work.

In Mexico, Mark Cohen is a stranger, an outsider rather than a participant. What a relief for him, and for us. The Mexican photographs provide us with a peaceful opportunity to identify the strength, the grace, and the formal assurance that form the underlying structure in all of Cohen's work, but are often overlooked.

Neither he, nor we, can presume to know too much about the people or the lives that have been recorded. There are no existential mini-dramas in any of the images. We are not encouraged to measure our lives against those of the subjects photographed. But what we are presented with is a rare opportunity to watch how a difficult, brilliant photographer navigates the unknown — with an ease, dignity, and intelligence that we all might envy.

Marvin Heiferman

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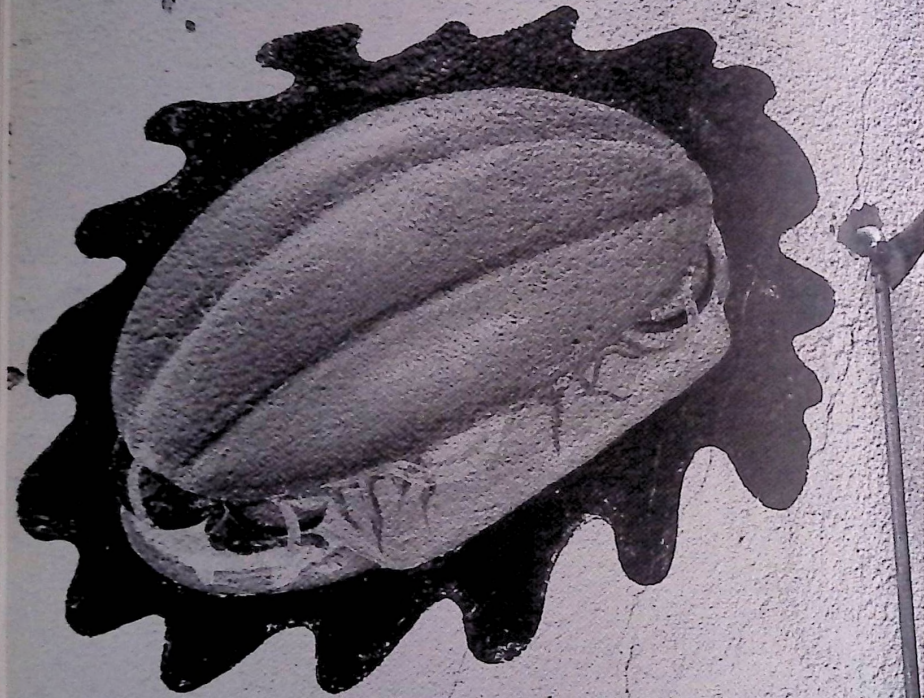
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Marvin Heiferman

1981
MEXICO CITY



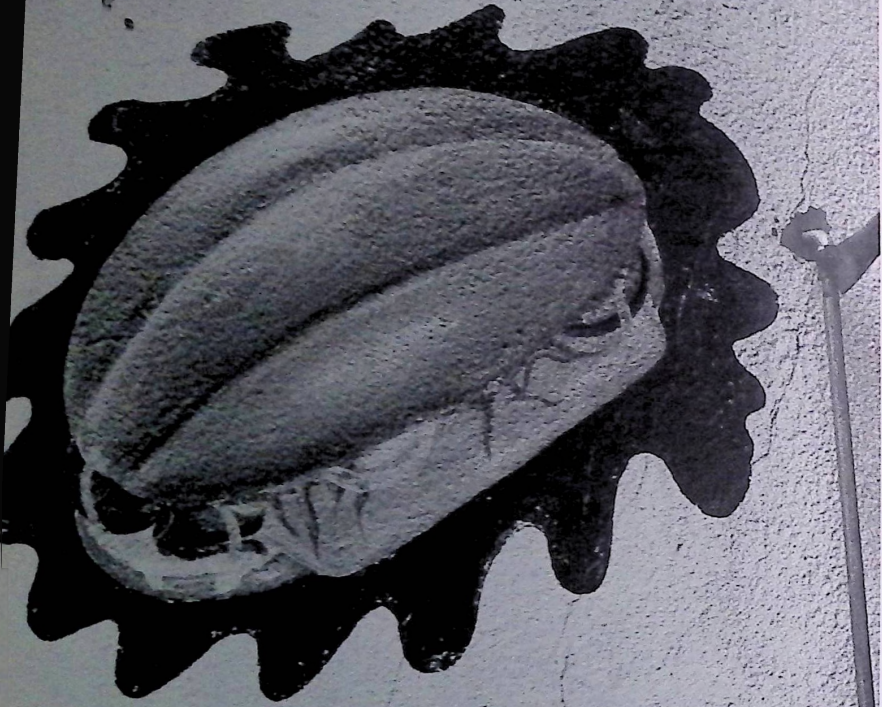
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TORTAS.



RICAS

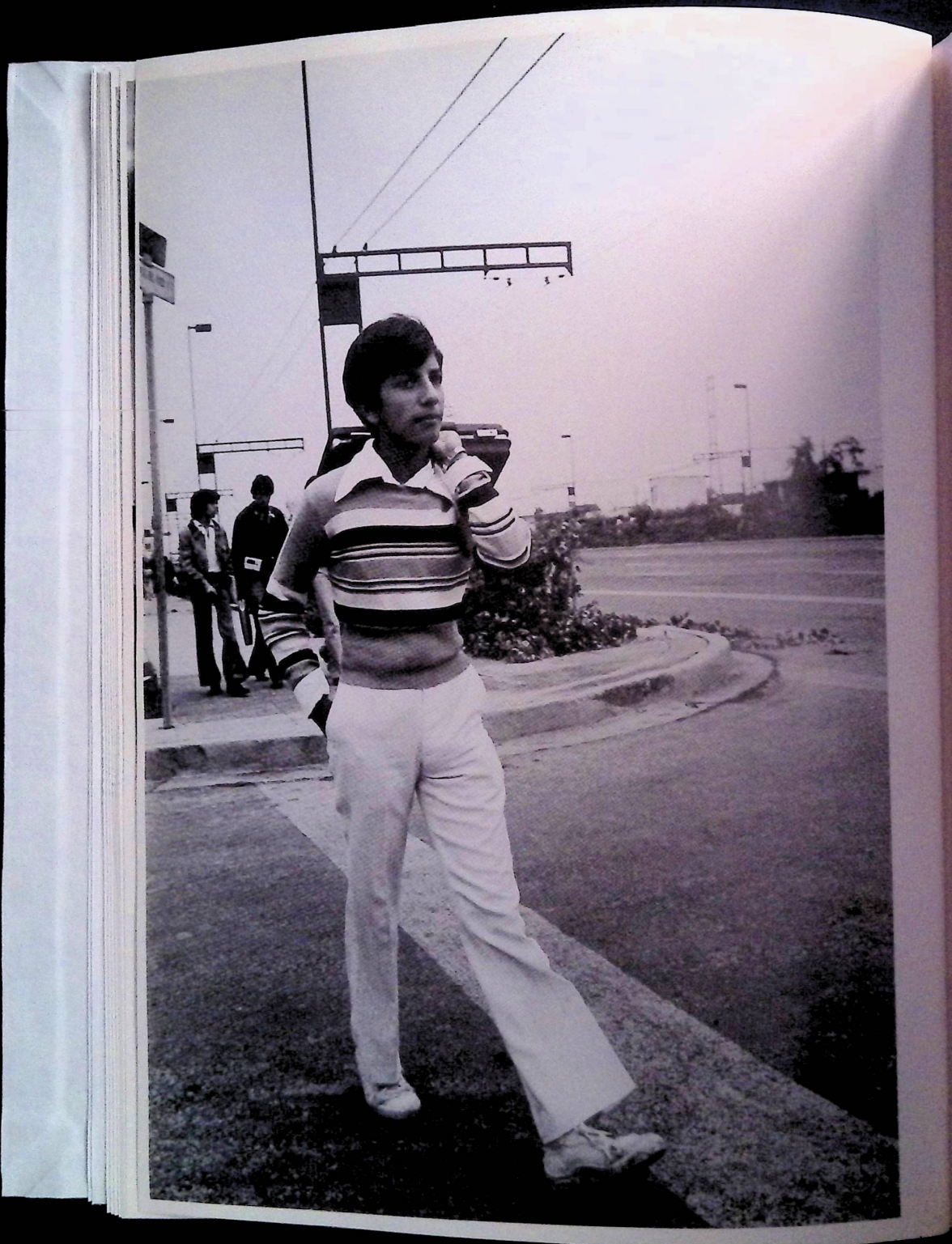


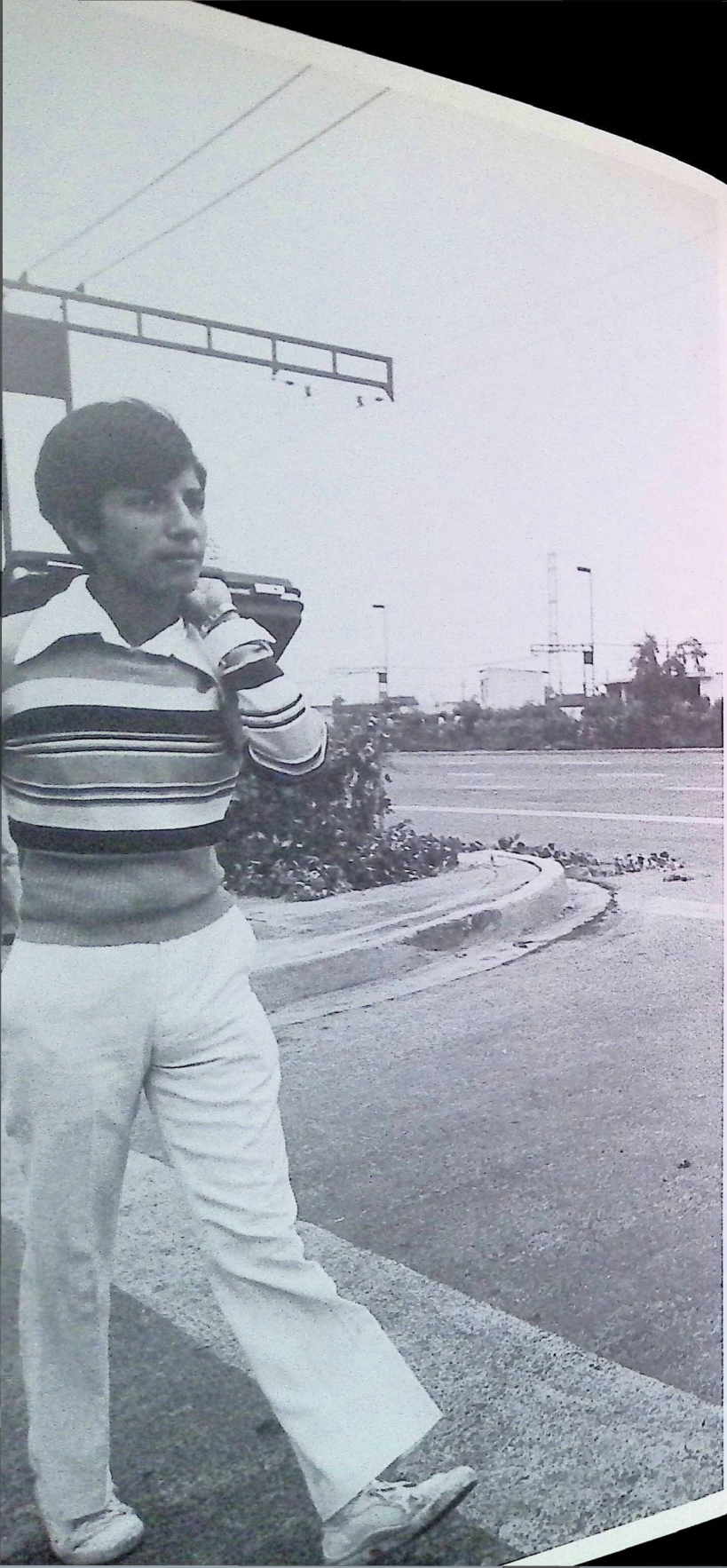
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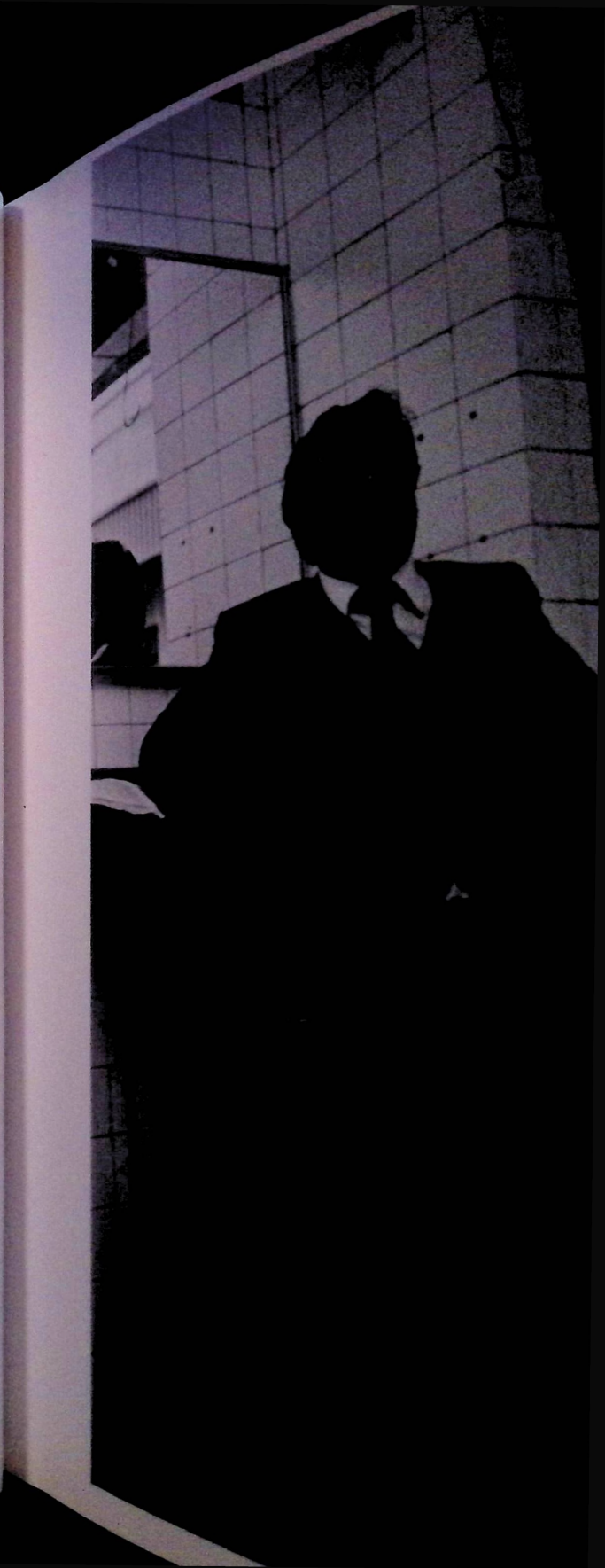
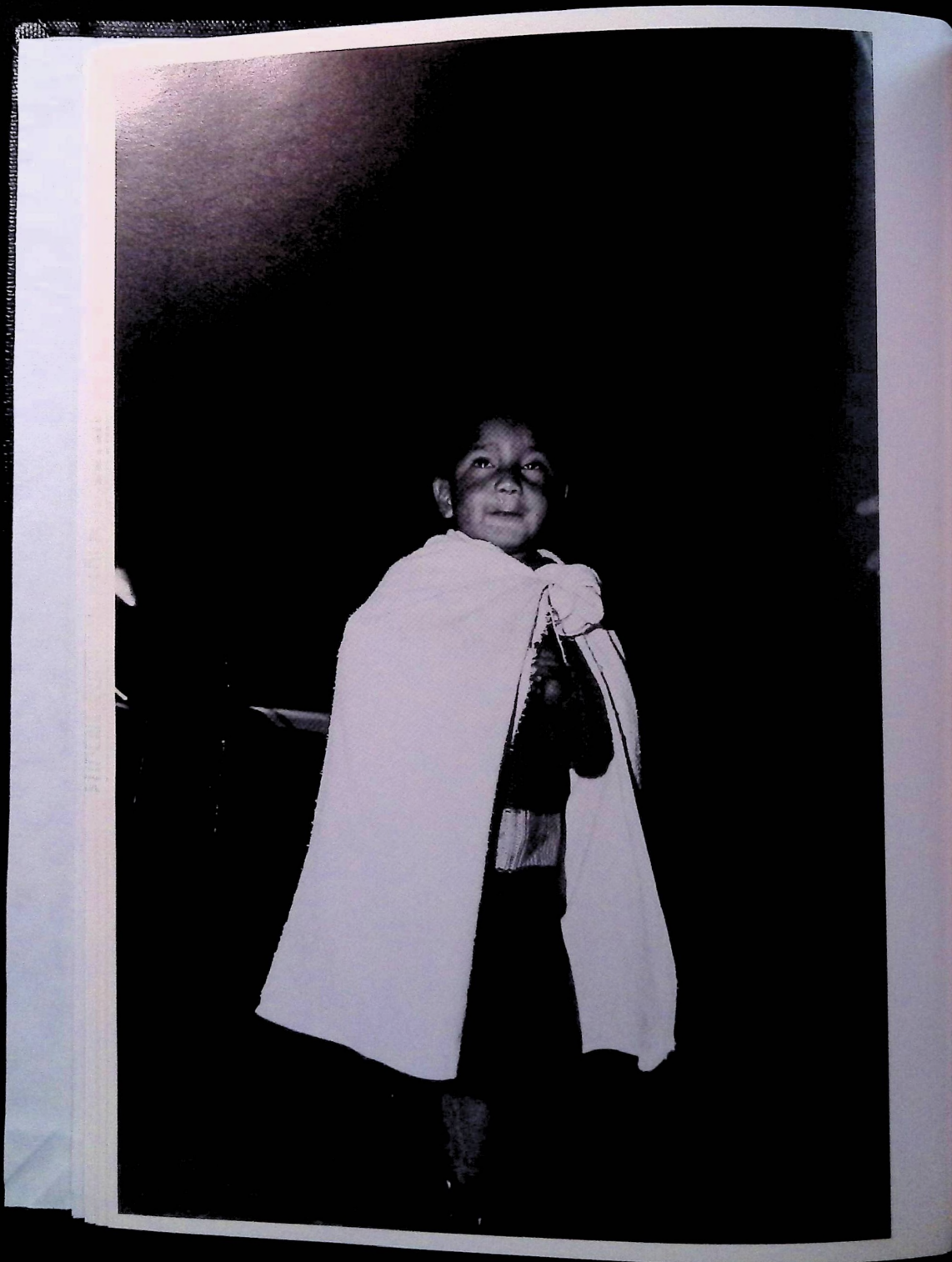


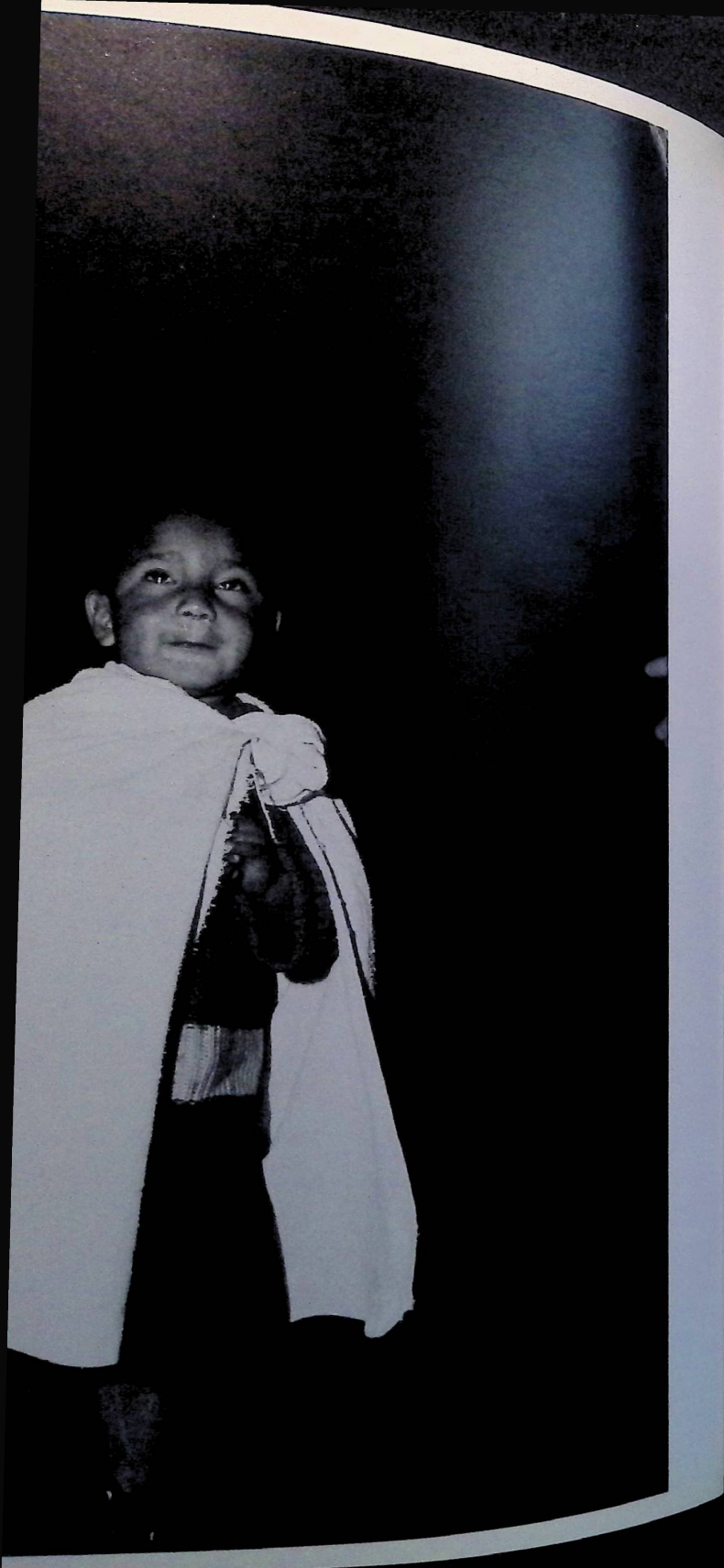




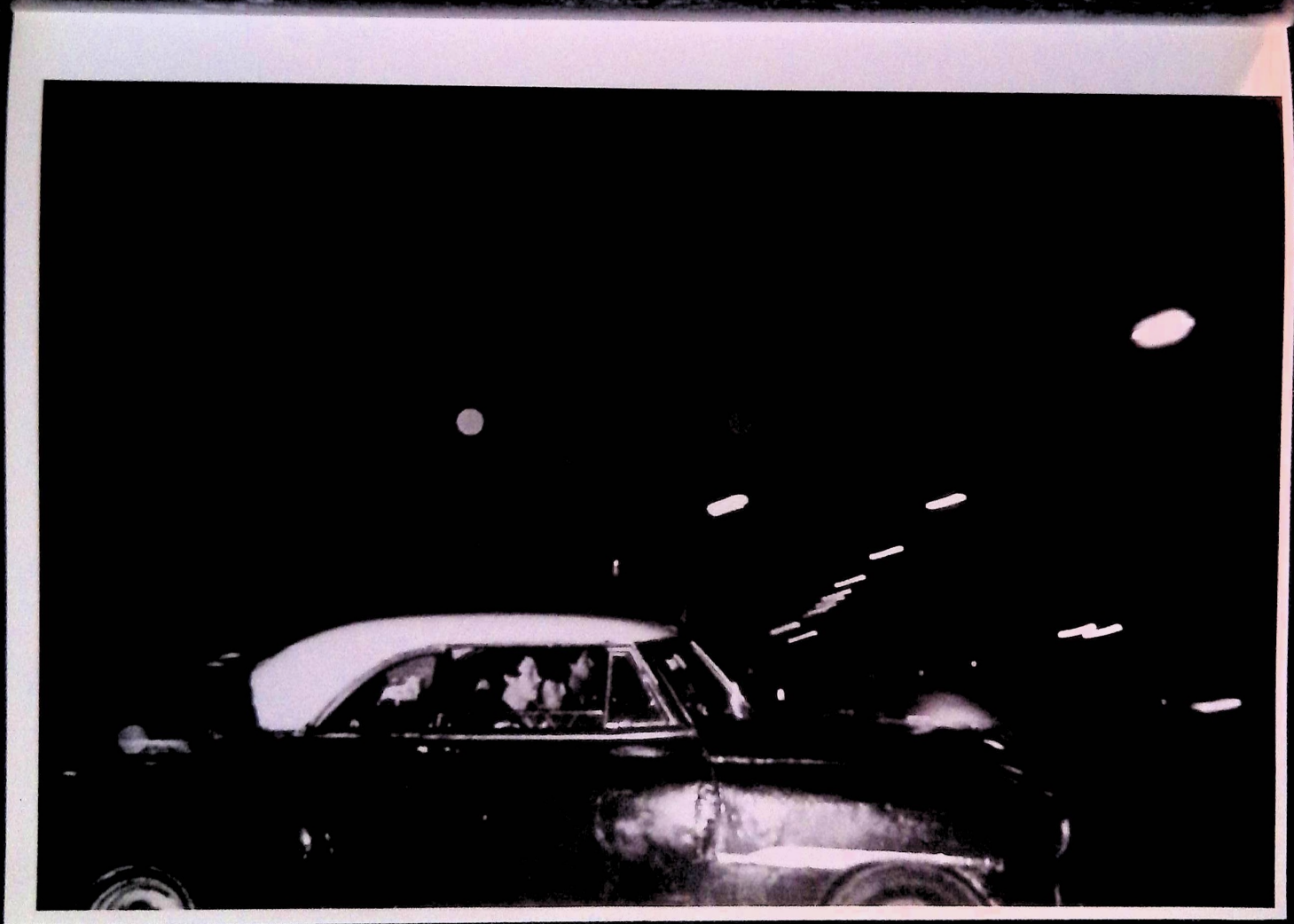








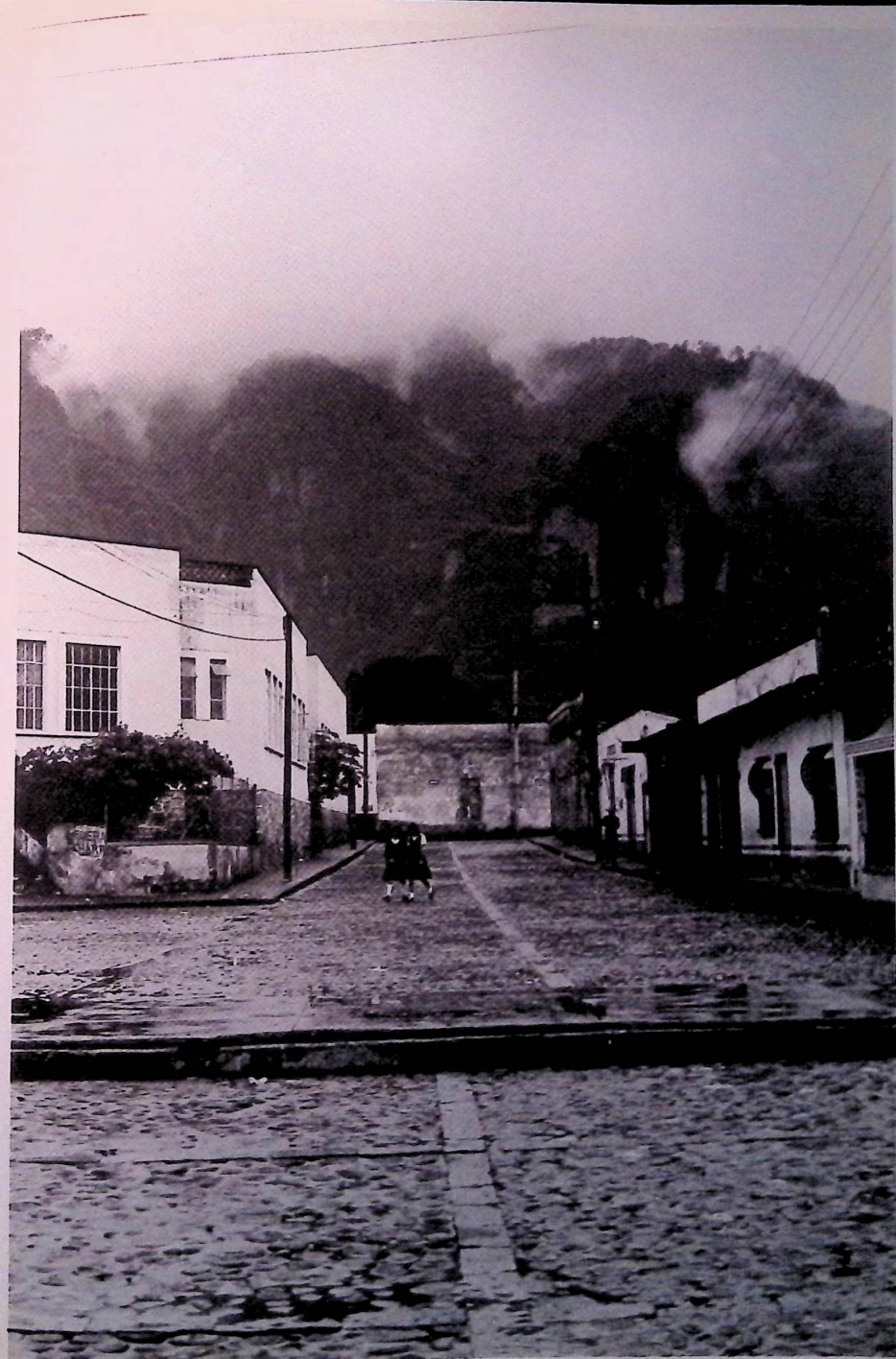
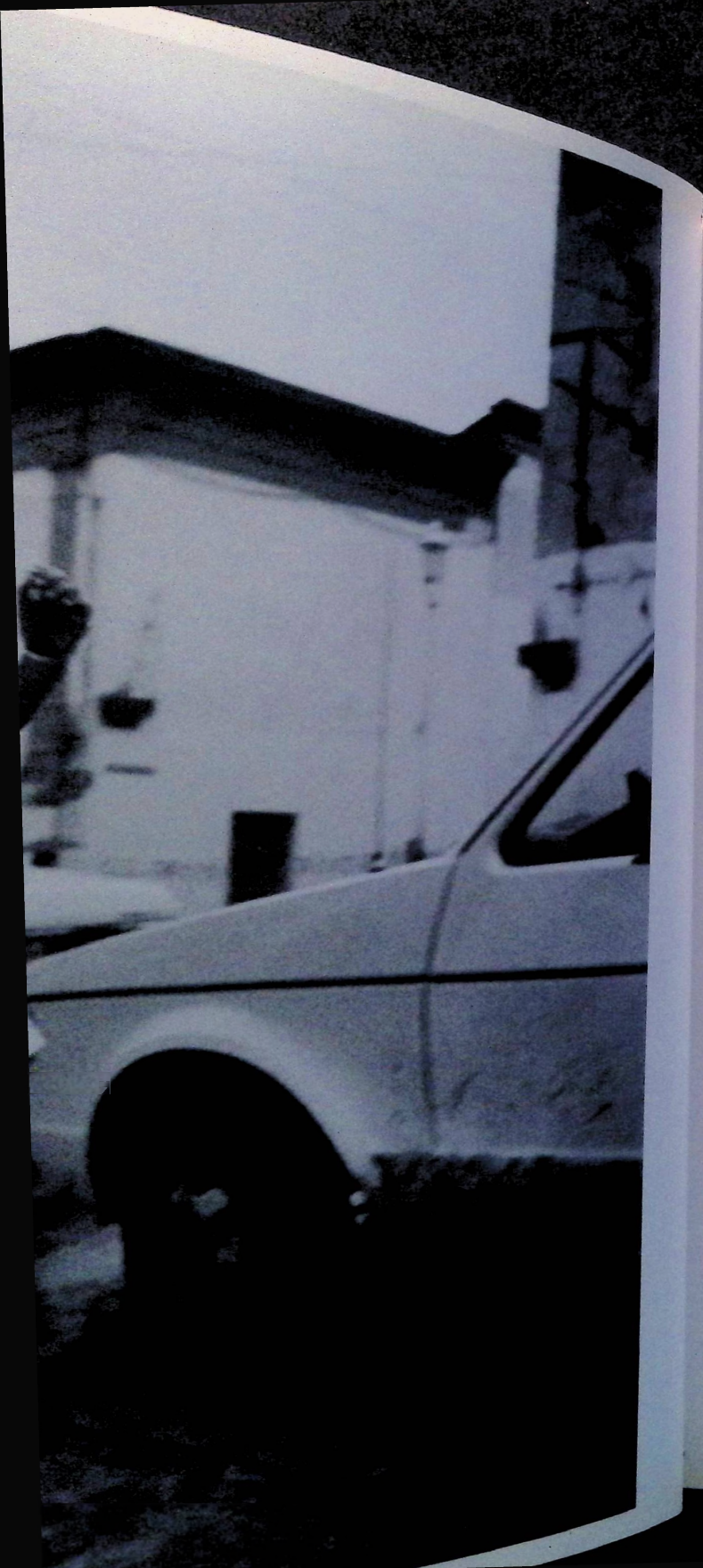














SORTEO SUPERIOR 1119 CON PREMIOS EN DÓLARES

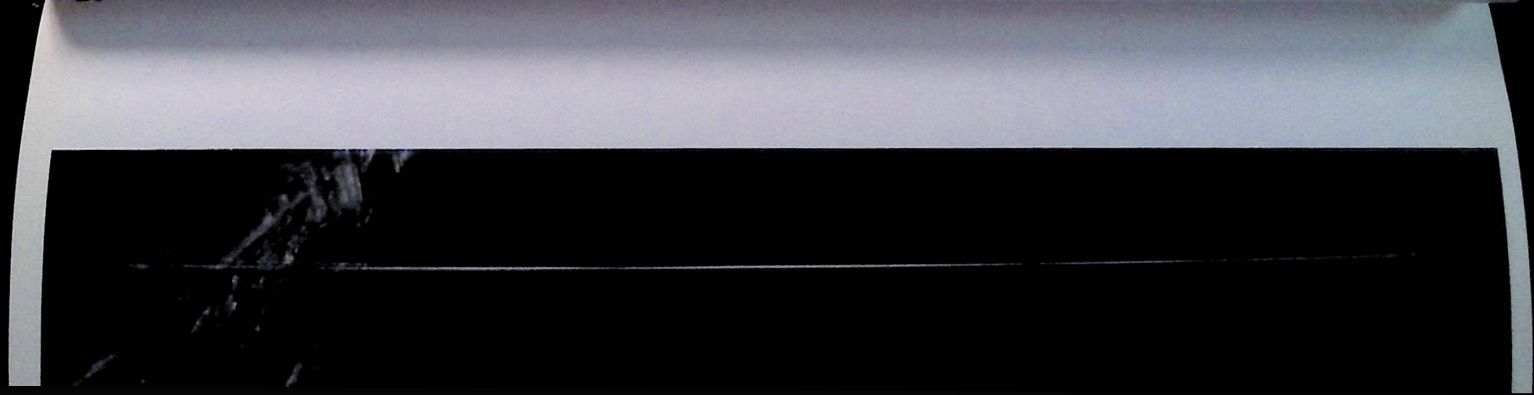
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\$0.03	1	1
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SORTEO SUPERIOR 1119 CELEBRADO A LAS 21 HORAS DEL DÍA 22 DE JUNIO

1982

MEXICO CITY

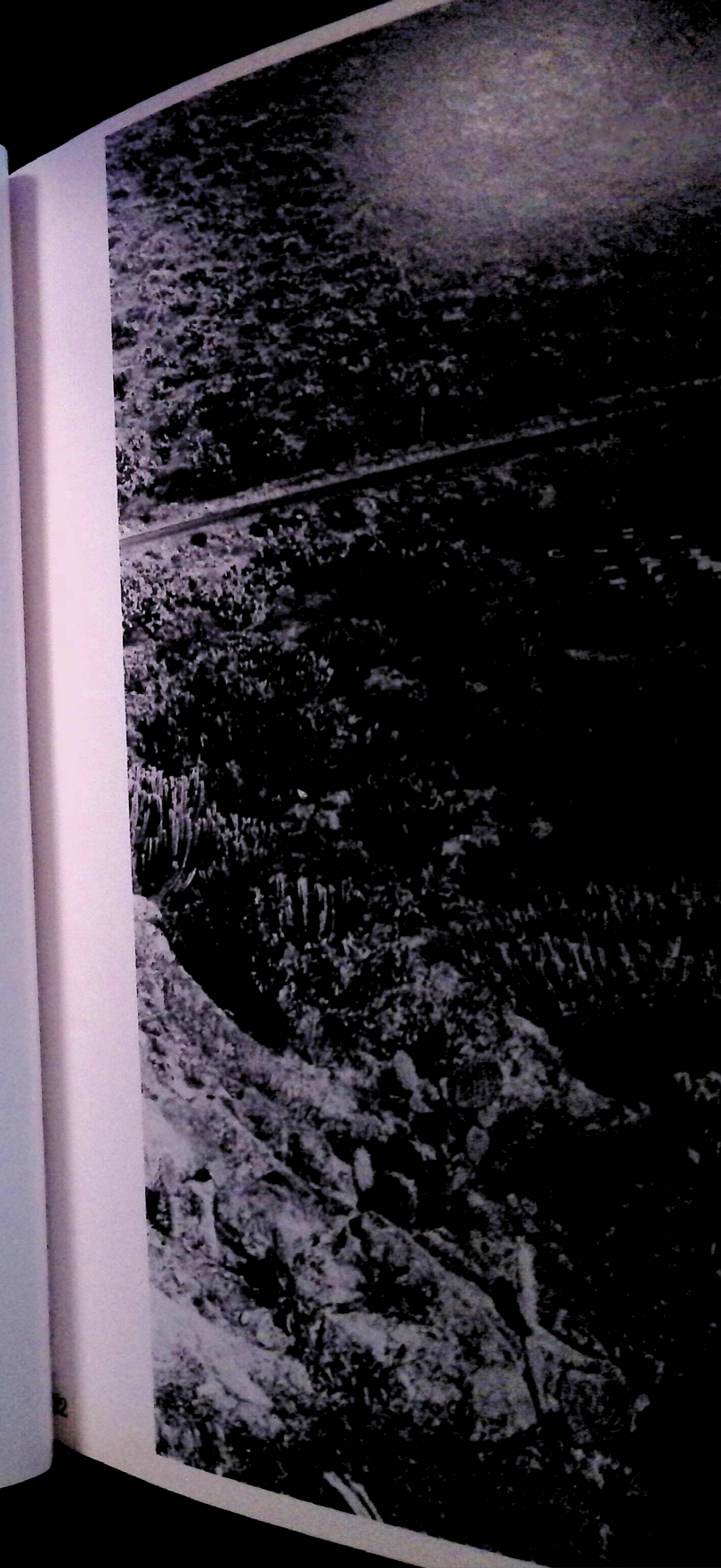
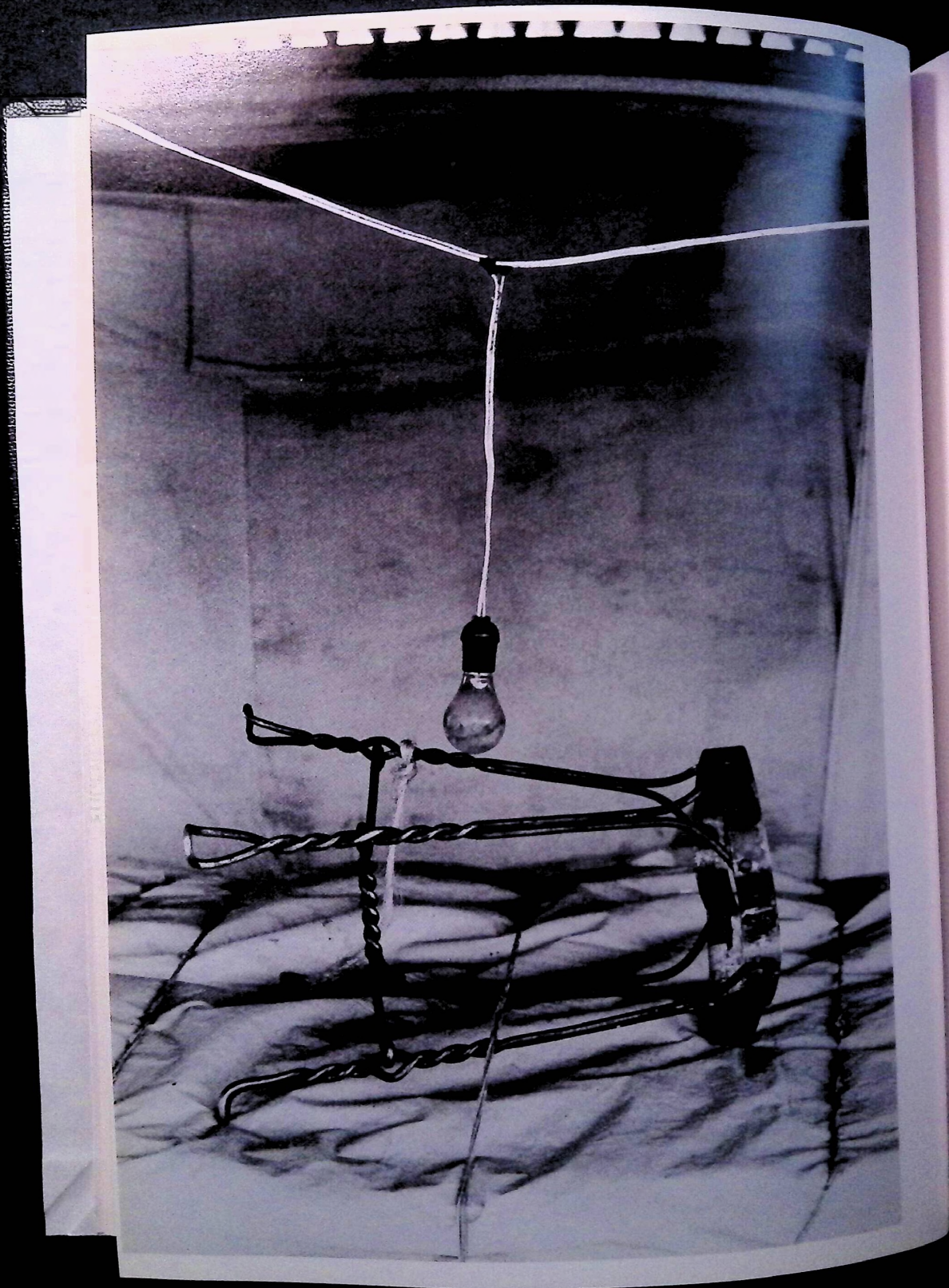


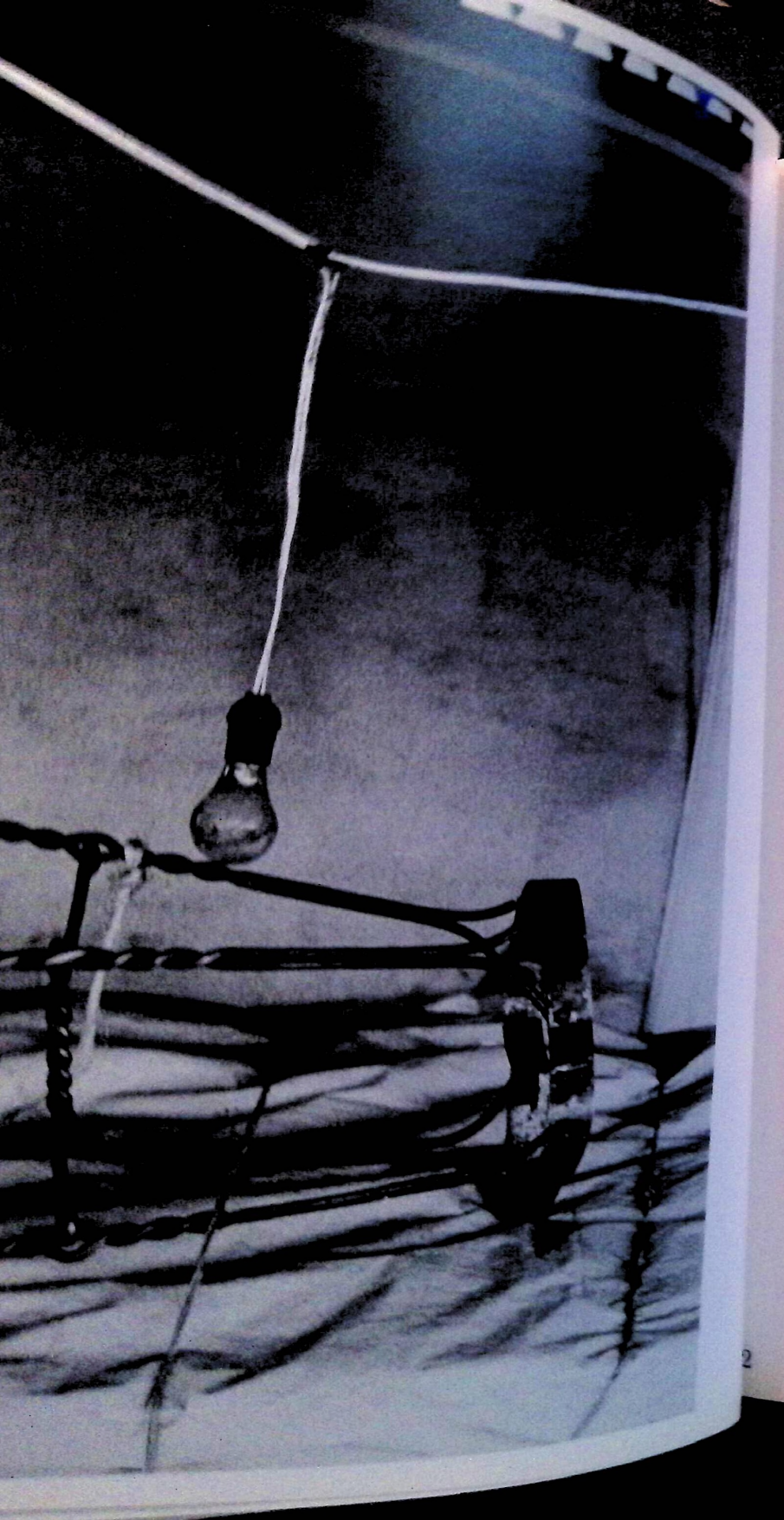




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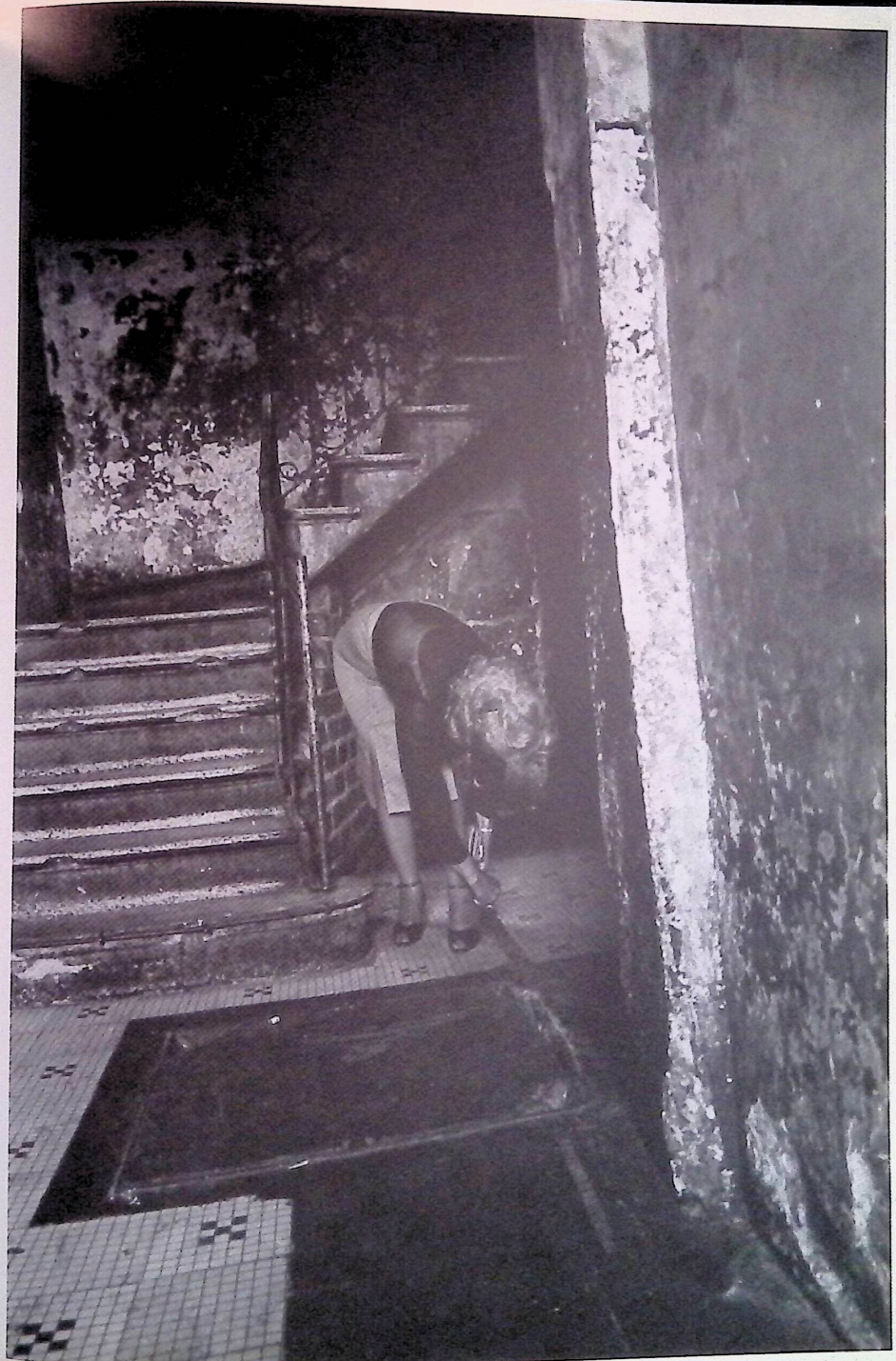




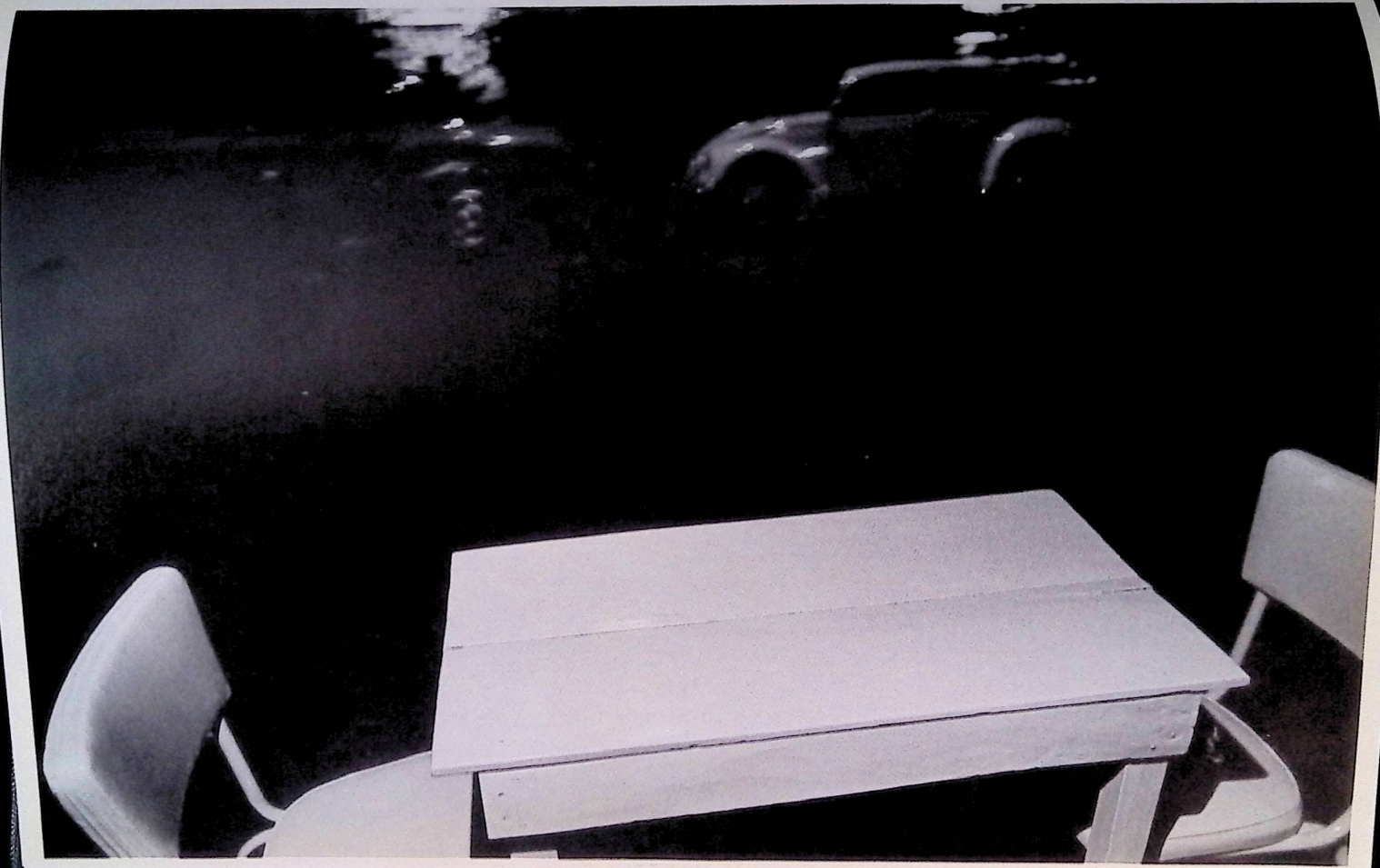
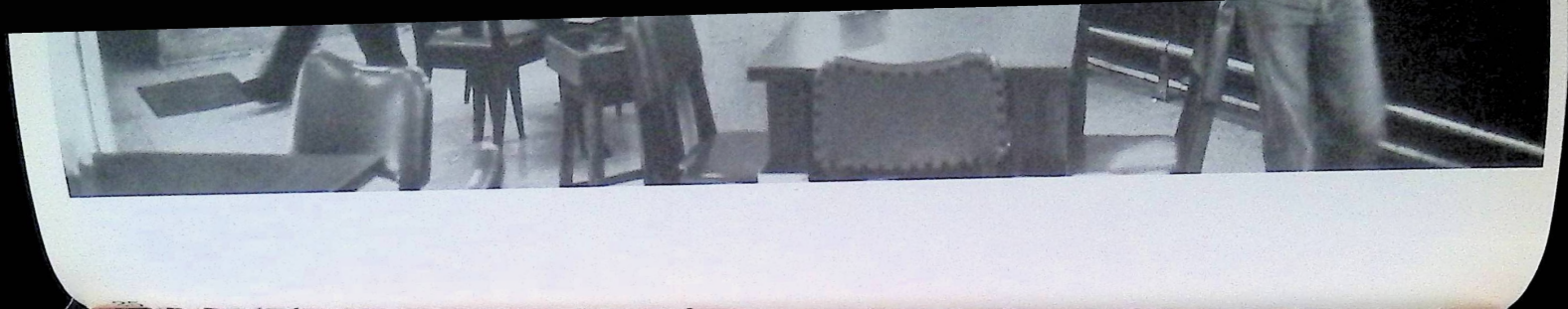


Control room of the radio station in the city of Moscow



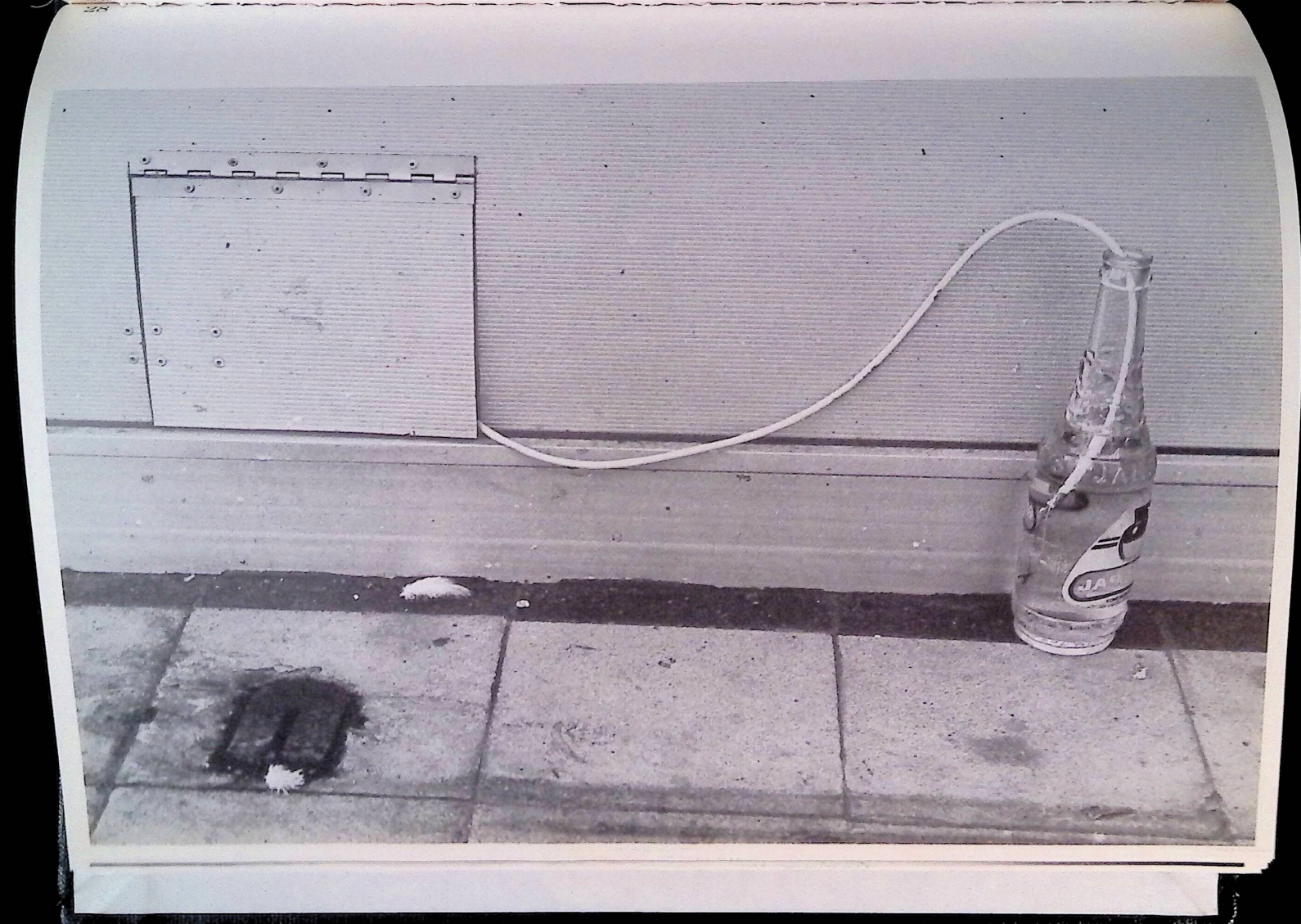


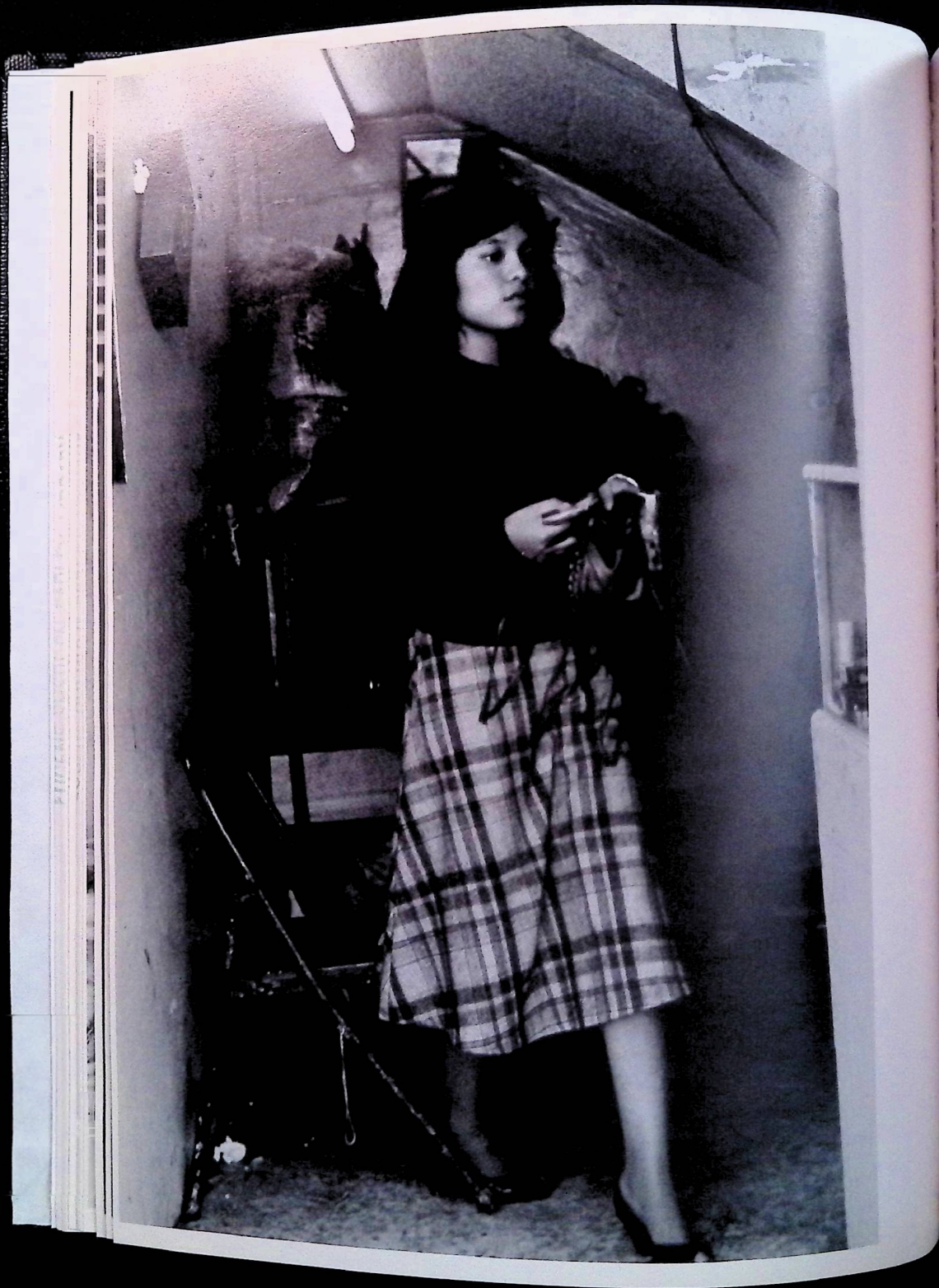


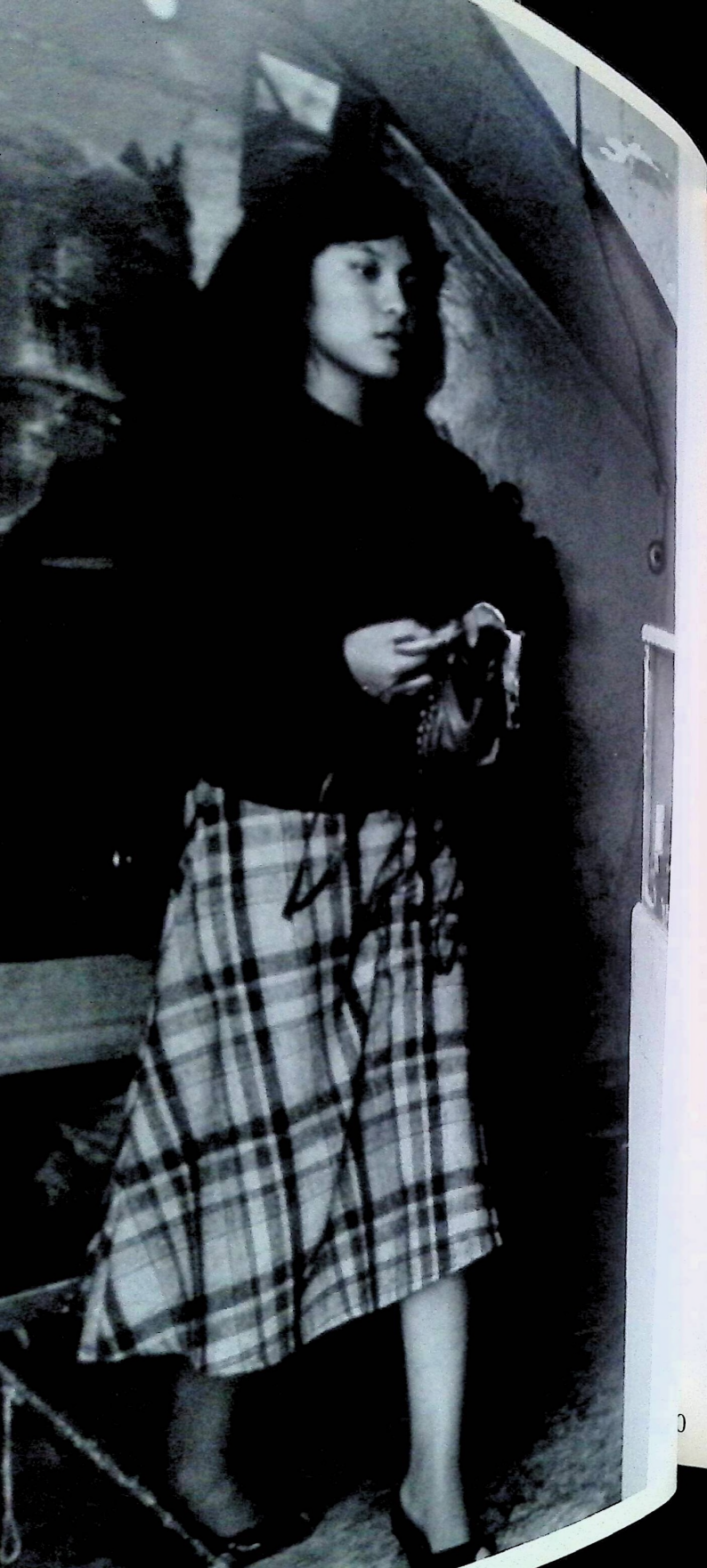


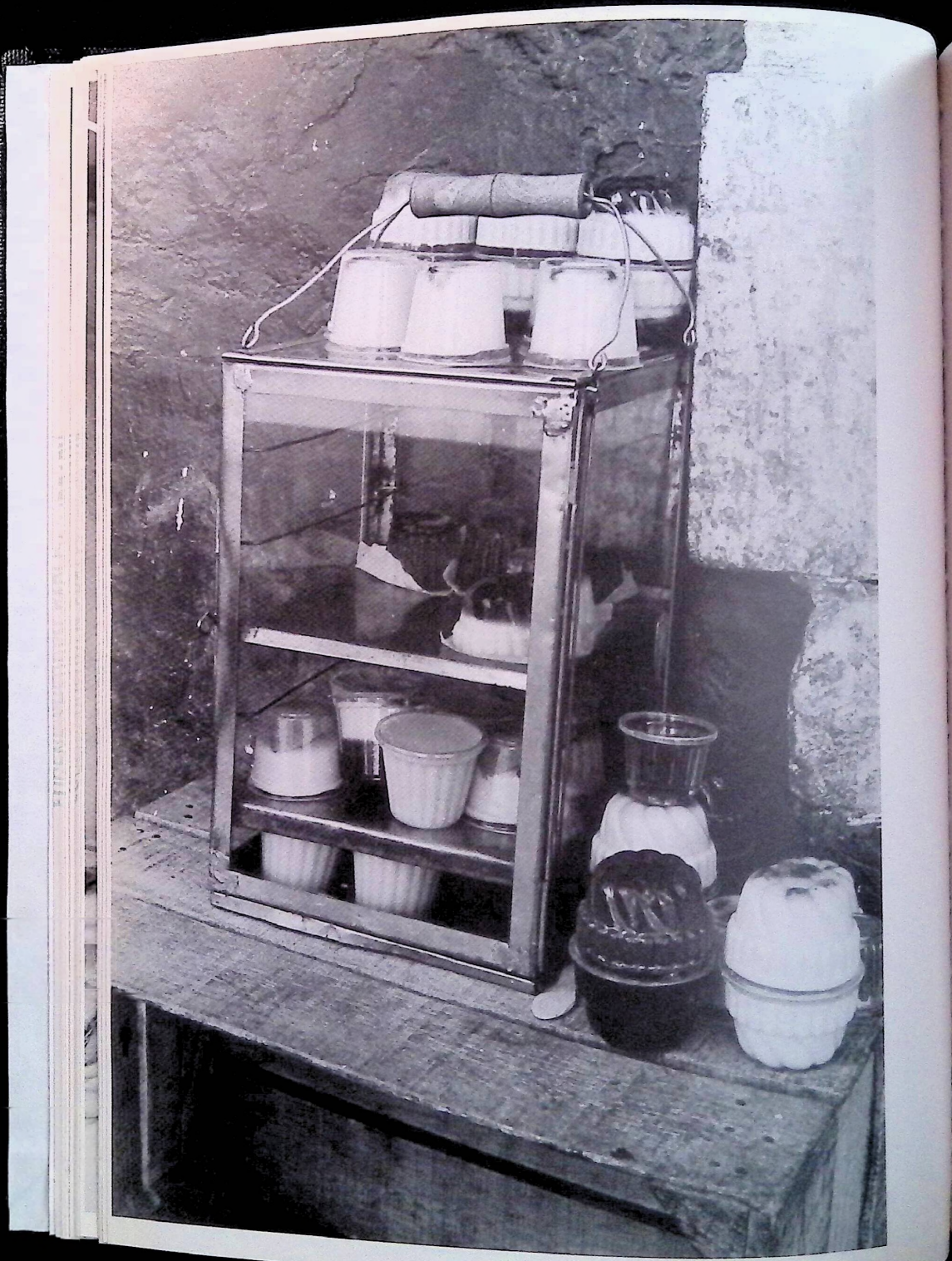
La rosa blanca





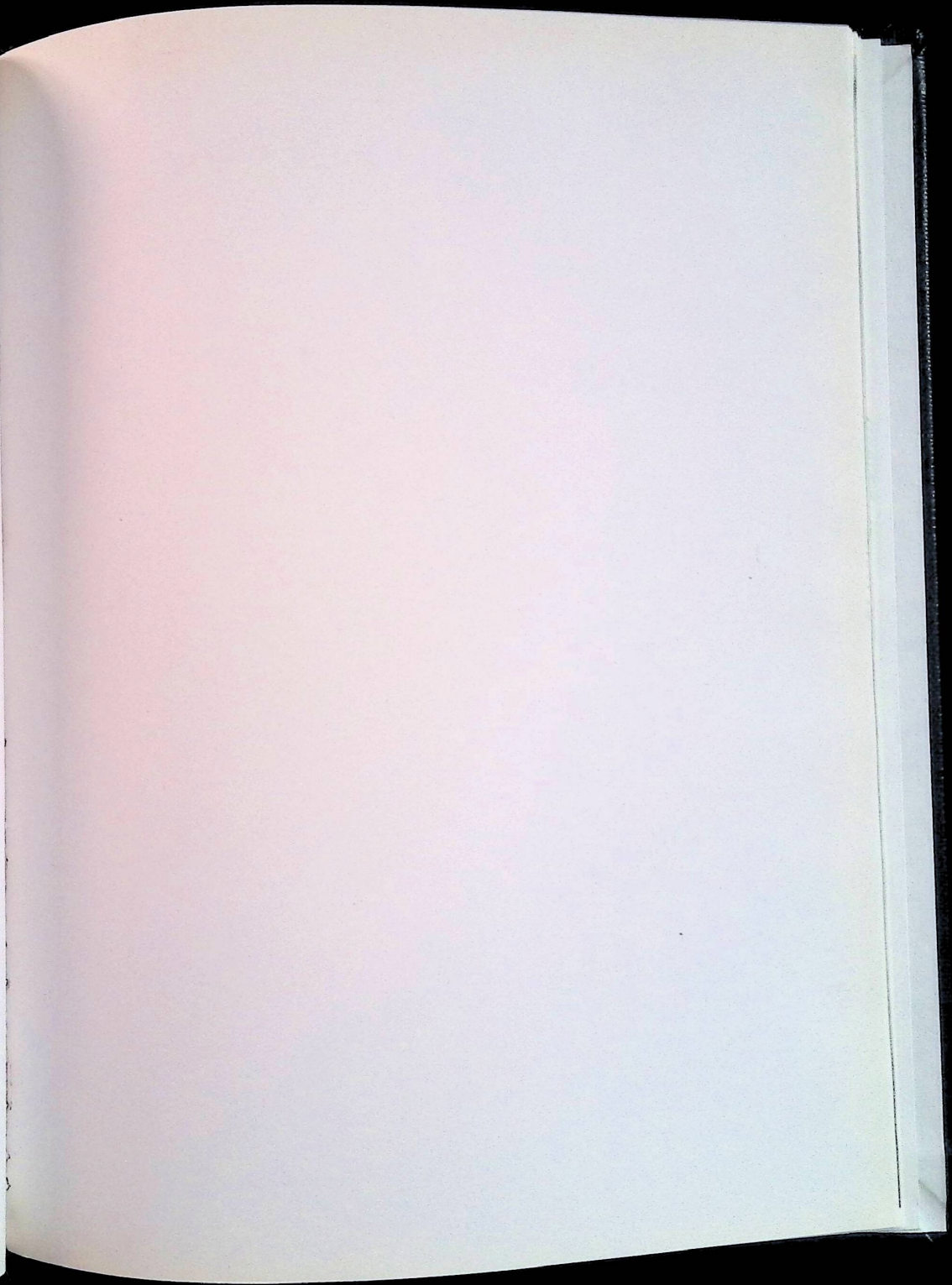






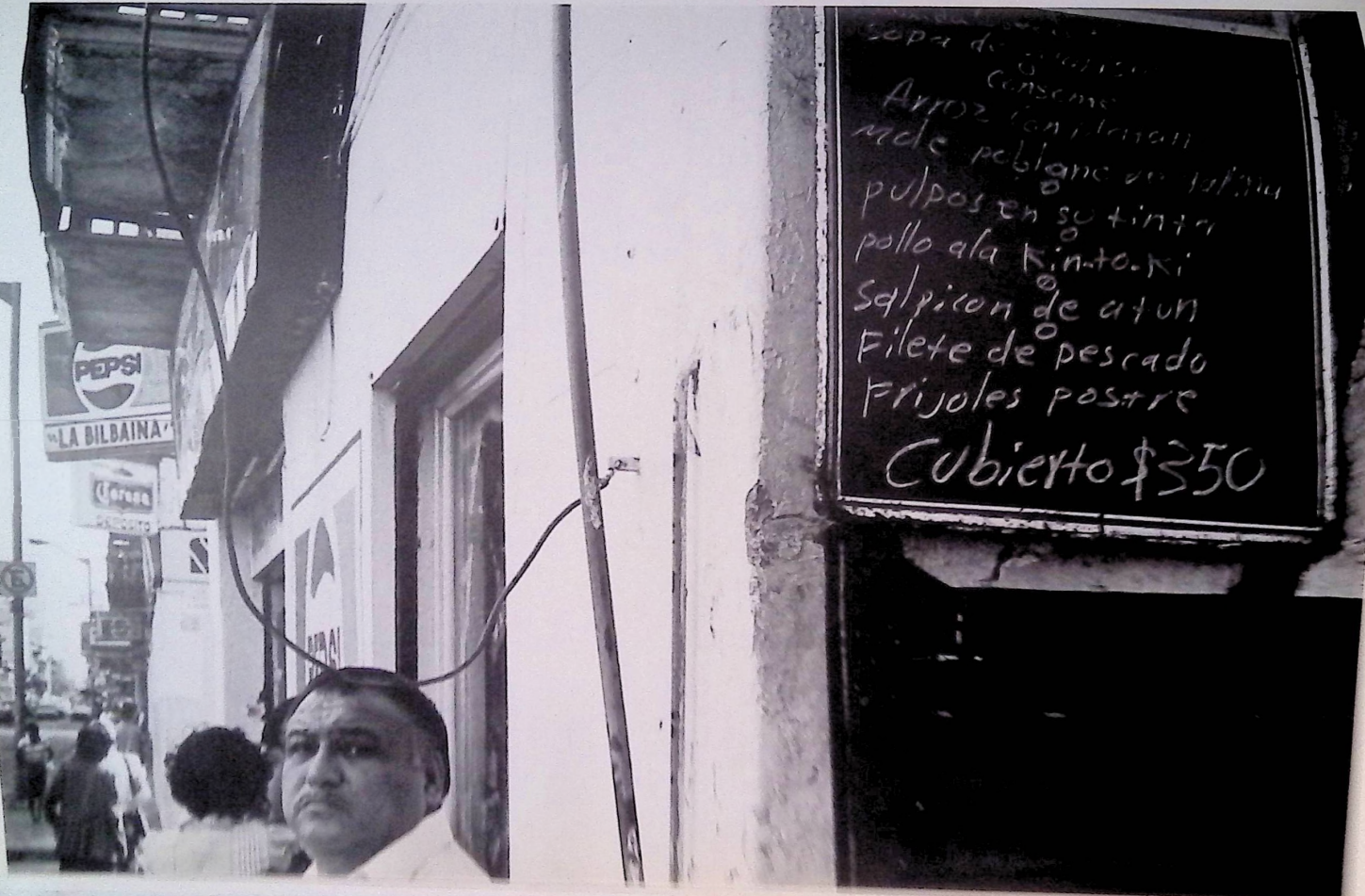






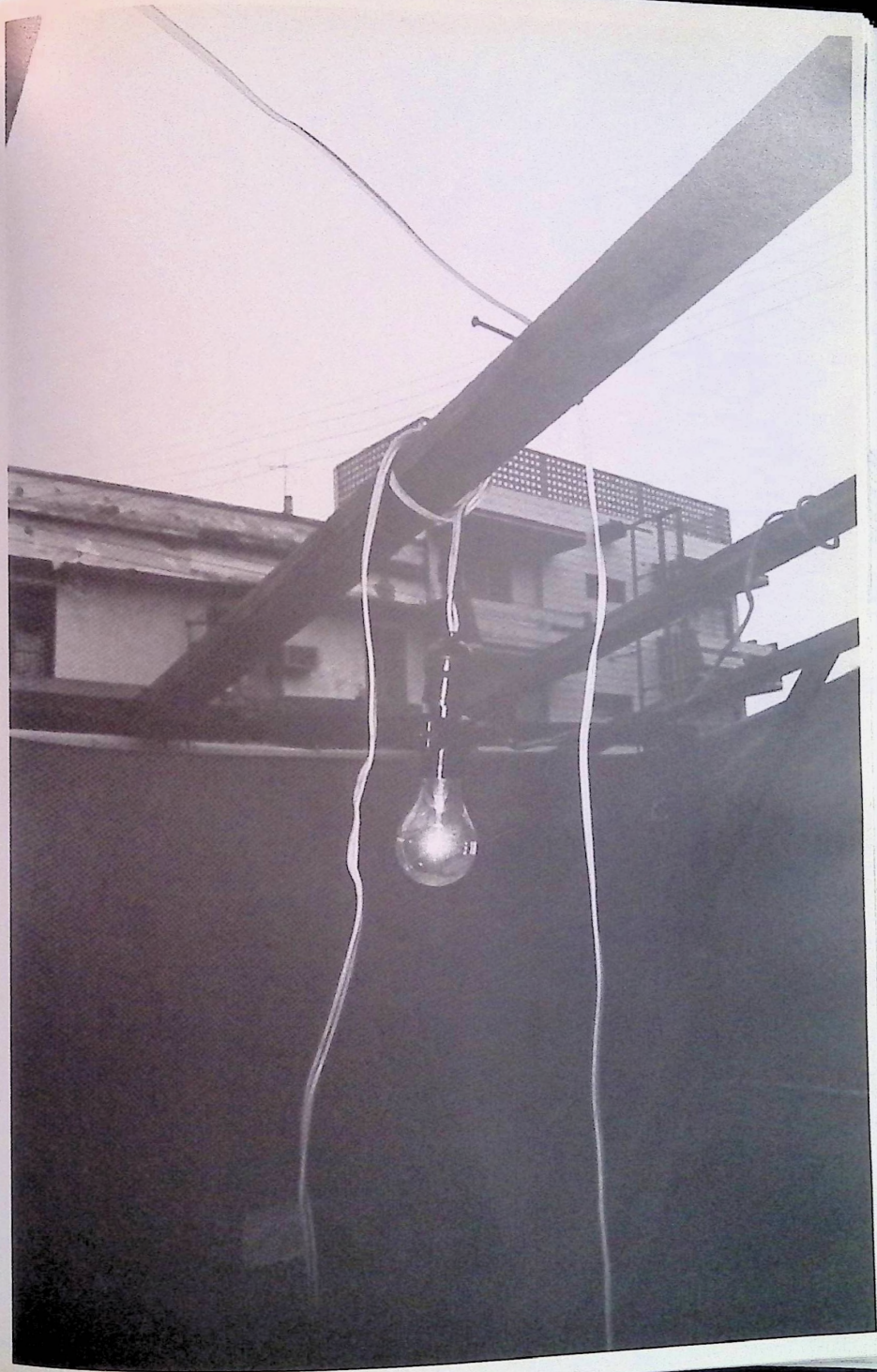
1985

VERACRUZ



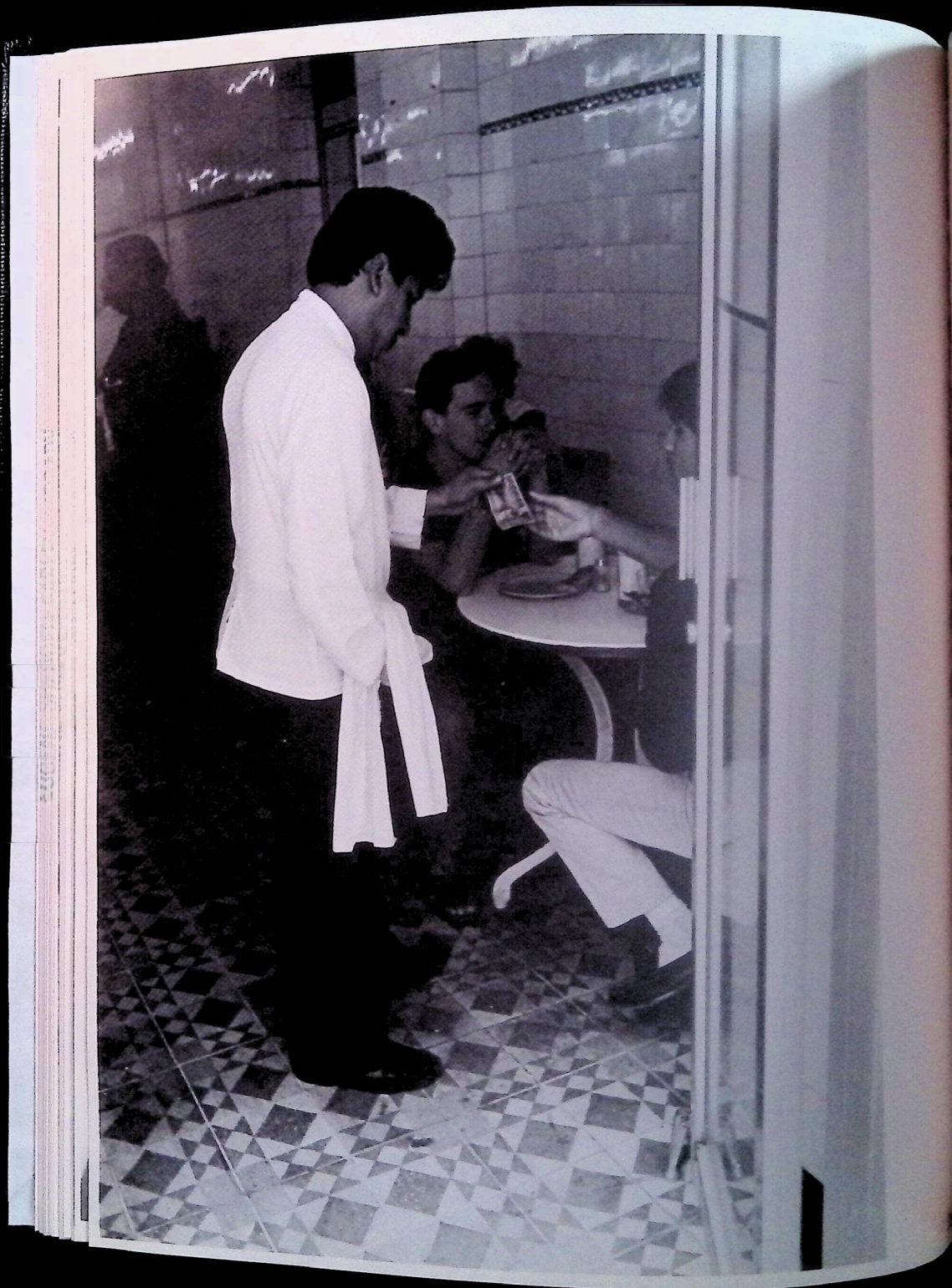
sopa de...
consome
Arroz con...
mole poblano...
pulpos en su tinta
pollo ala kintoki
Salpicon de atun
Filete de pescado
Frijoles postre
Cubierro \$350

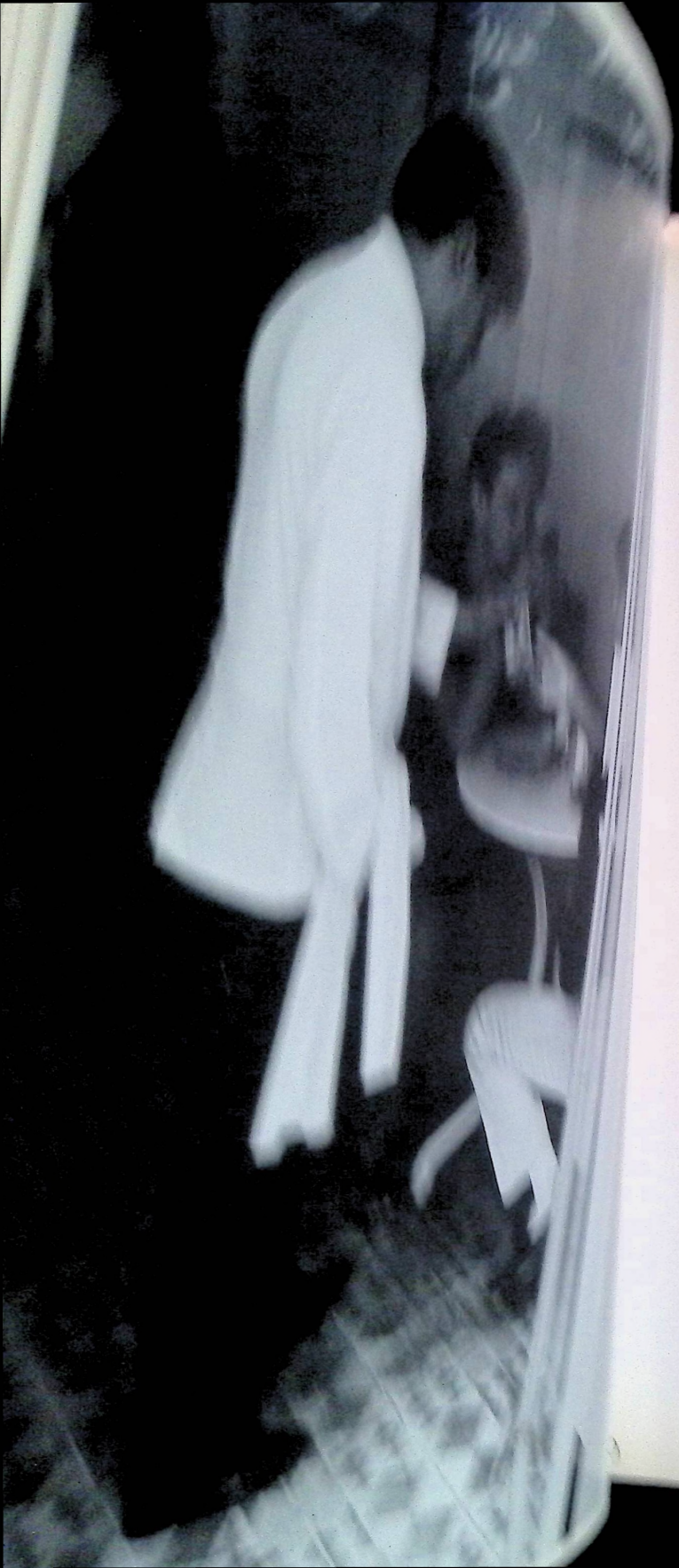




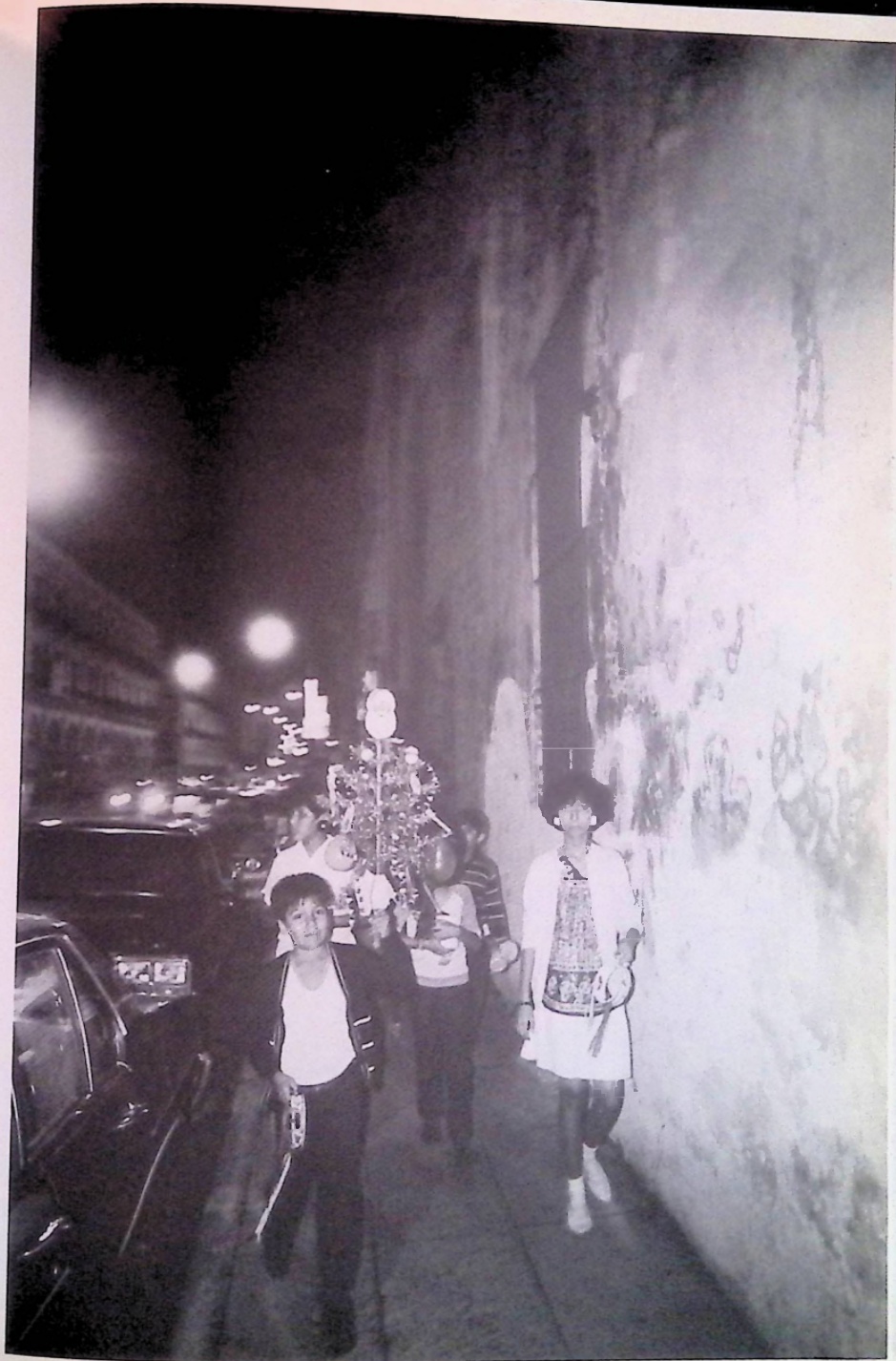


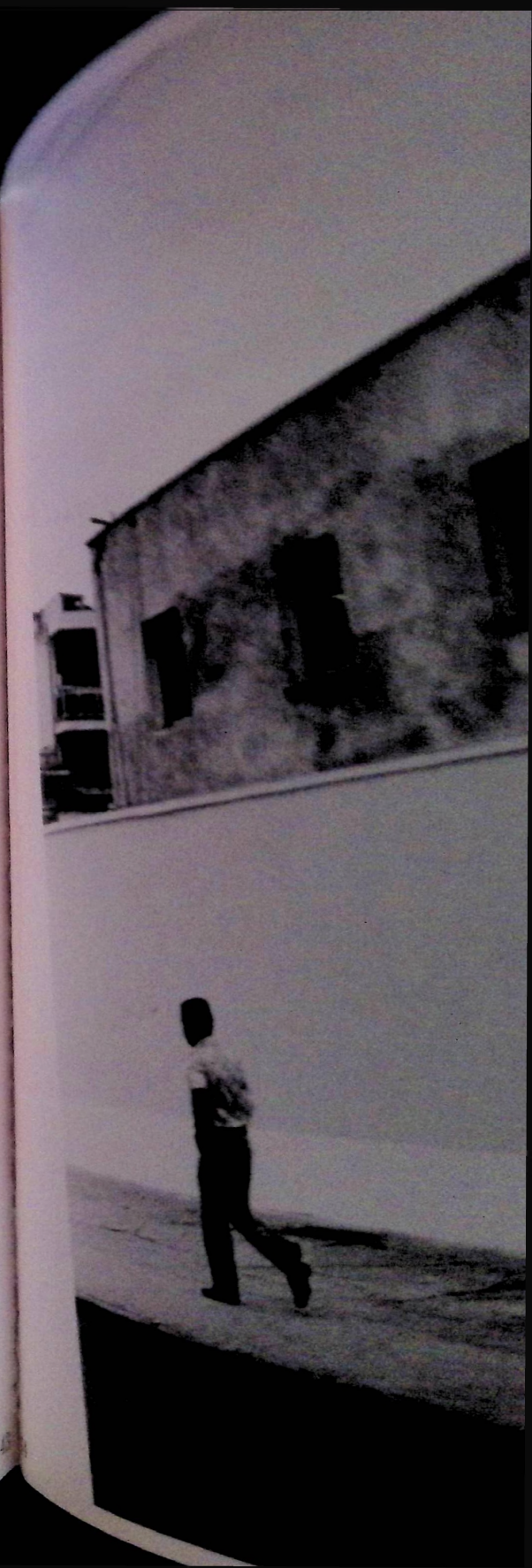
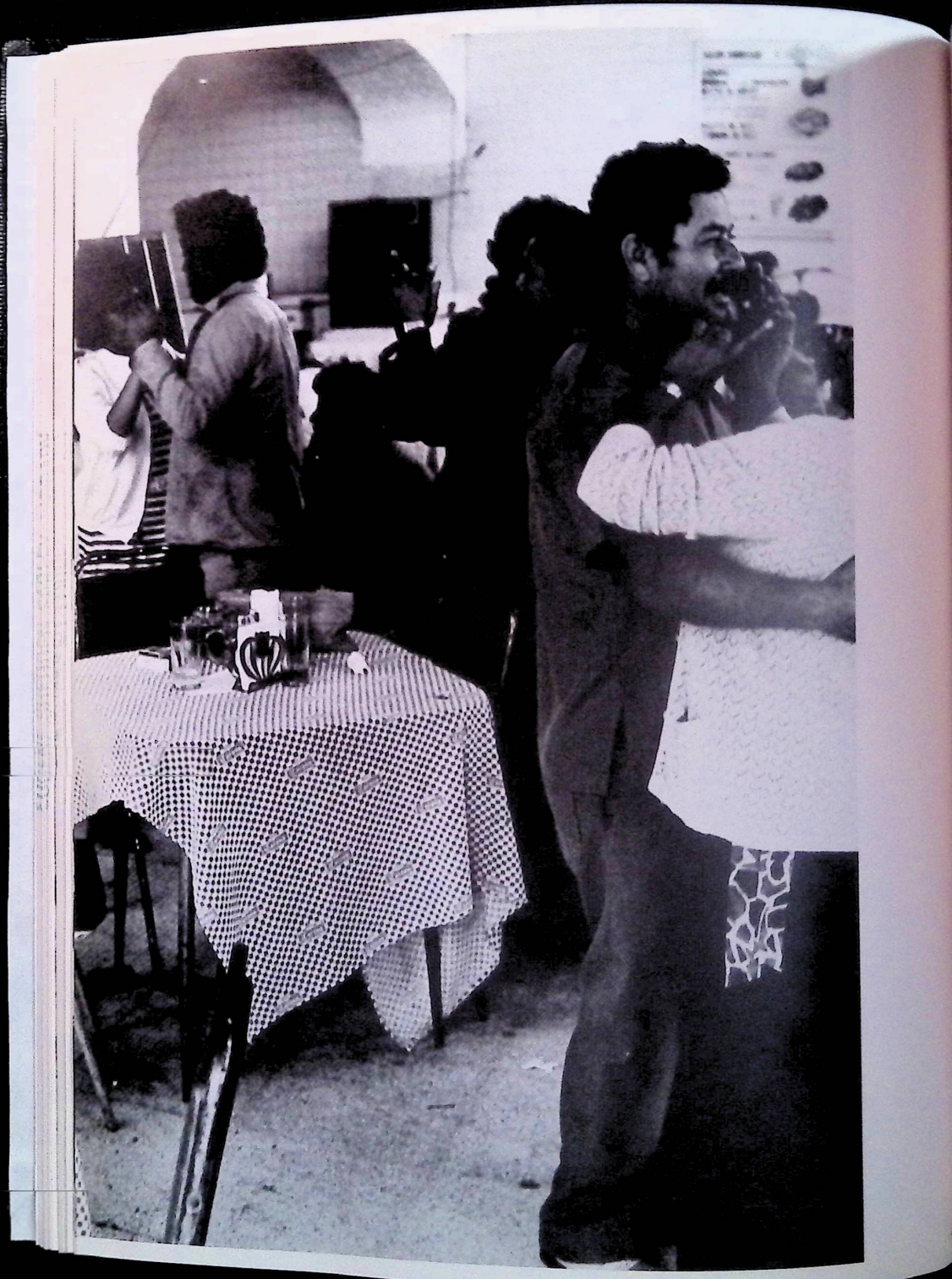


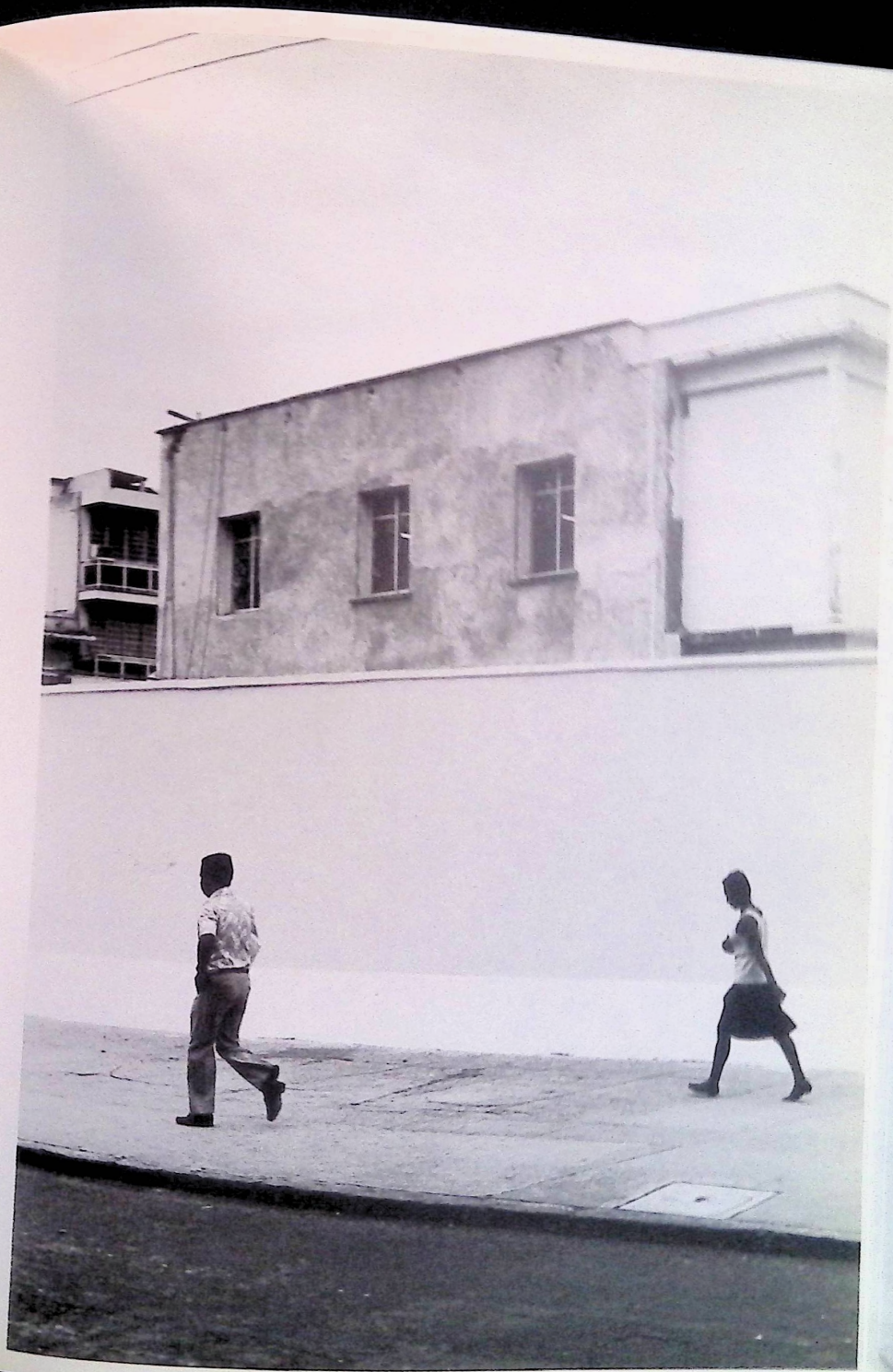
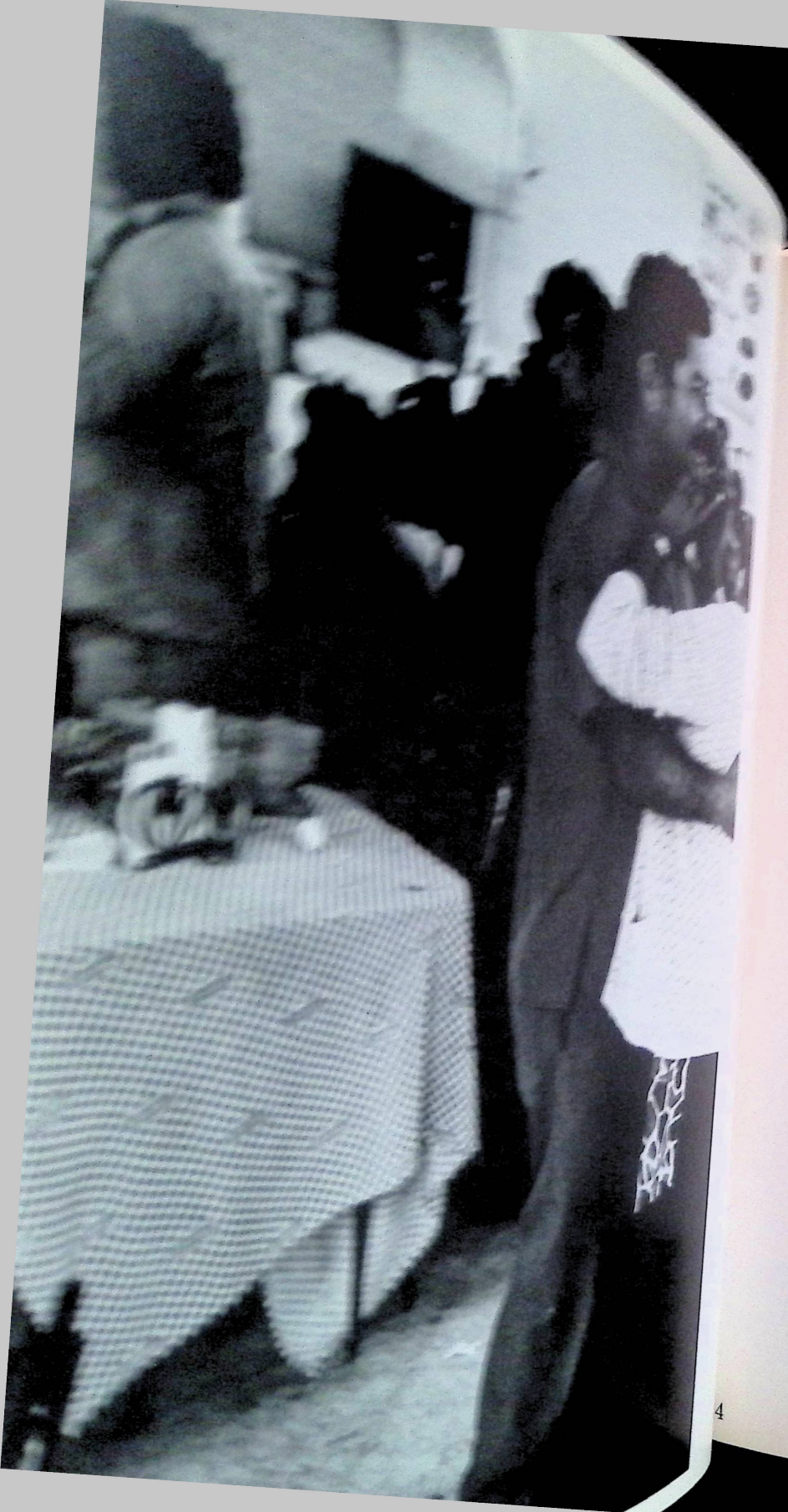


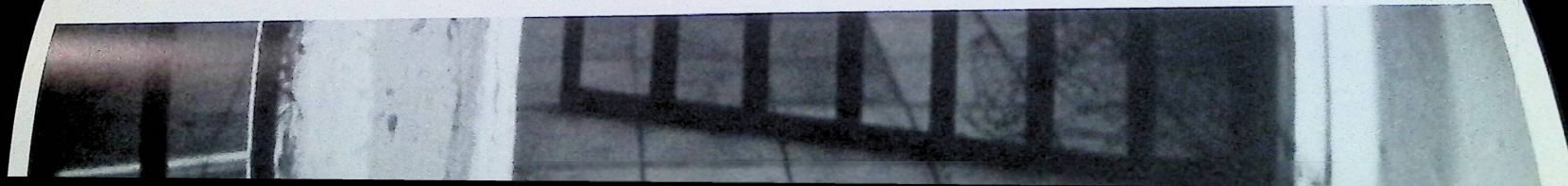
















CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works are untitled black-and-white silver prints,
16 x 20 inches (image size 12 x 18 inches).

Mexico City

June 16 - 23, 1981

1. [Crowd watches comedian], 1981
2. [Ricas Tortas], 1981
3. [Alligator], 1981
4. [Four men/opera], 1981
5. [Couple talking in tree], 1981, Malinalco
6. [Kid in white slacks], 1981
7. [Two women/opera], 1981
8. [Young child in white cape], 1981
9. [Dark proud man], 1981
10. [Repairing Pyramid of the Sun], 1981, Teotihuacán
11. [Kids in old car at night], 1981
12. [Girl carrying Ritz Crackers], 1981
13. [Boy in bag-vest approaches white line], 1981
14. [Girl in the white dress skipping], 1981
15. [Two girls in school clothes], 1981, Tepoztlán
16. [Pyramids of fruit], 1981
17. [Lottery sheet], 1981

Mexico City

October 25 - November 2, 1982

18. [Horizon with truck and VW], 1982
19. [Woman on telephone], 1982
20. [Wires/flash/moon], 1982
21. [Hanging light bulb], 1982

22. [Bee hives/highway], 1982
23. [Fuses and meters], 1982
24. [Woman straps shoe in old building], 1982
25. [Local bar], 1982
26. [Table and chairs in street; flash], 1982
27. [La Rosa Blanca], 1982
28. [Wire lead into soda bottle], 1982
29. [Girl in small shoe repair], 1982
30. [Local restaurant and coffee], 1982
31. [Snack in steel case], 1982
32. [Napkin in shadow], 1982
33. [Girl in black skirt], 1982

Veracruz

December 12 - 19, 1985

34. [Chalkboard menu], 1985
35. [Beauty shop], 1985
36. [Hanging light bulb], 1985
37. [Boy laughing; teeth], 1985
38. [Plastic sheet], 1985
39. [Water and money], 1985
40. [White sock], 1985
41. [Young girl eating], 1985
42. [Kids on sidewalk], 1985
43. [People dancing], 1985
44. [People walking sidewalk], 1985
45. [Soda truck at gas pump], 1985
46. [Dog in shadow], 1985
47. [Napkins in glass], 1985

Photographs are courtesy of the Laborer

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION
All works are untitled black-and-white silver print
16 x 20 inches (image size 12 x 18 inches)

Mexico City
June 16 - 23, 1981

1. [Crowd watches comedian], 1981
2. [Ricas Tortas], 1981
3. [Alligator], 1981
4. [Four men/opera], 1981
5. [Couple talking in tree], 1981, Malinalco
6. [Kid in white slacks], 1981
7. [Two women/opera], 1981
8. [Young child in white cape], 1981
9. [Dark proud man], 1981
10. [Repairing Pyramid of the Sun], 1981, Teotihuacan
11. [Kids in old car at night], 1981
12. [Girl carrying Ritz Crackers], 1981
13. [Boy in bag-vest approaches white line], 1981
14. [Girl in the white dress skipping], 1981
15. [Two girls in school clothes], 1981, Tepoztlán
16. [Pyramids of fruit], 1981
17. [Lottery sheet], 1981

Mexico City
October 25 - November 2, 1982

18. [Horizon with truck and VW], 1982
19. [Woman on telephone], 1982
20. [Wires/flash/moon], 1982
21. [Hanging light bulb], 1982

22. [Bee hives/highway], 1982
23. [Fuses and meters], 1982
24. [Woman straps shoe in old building], 1982
25. [Local bar], 1982
26. [Table and chairs in street; flash], 1982
27. [La Rosa Blanca], 1982
28. [Wire lead into soda bottle], 1982
29. [Girl in small shoe repair], 1982
30. [Local restaurant and coffee], 1982
31. [Snack in steel case], 1982
32. [Napkin in shadow], 1982
33. [Girl in black skirt], 1982

Veracruz

December 12 - 19, 1985

34. [Chalkboard menu], 1985
35. [Beauty shop], 1985
36. [Hanging light bulb], 1985
37. [Boy laughing; teeth], 1985
38. [Plastic sheet], 1985
39. [Waiter and money], 1985
40. [White sock], 1985
41. [Young girl eating], 1985
42. [Kids on sidewalk], 1985
43. [People dancing], 1985
44. [People walking/sidewalk], 1985
45. [Soda truck at gas pump], 1985
46. [Dog in shadows], 1985
47. [Napkins in glass], 1985

Photographs are courtesy of the Zabriskie Gallery, New York.



