ALL ACADEMICS AND STAFF AT UC SAN DIEGO

SUBJECT: Passing of Professor Emeritus Phel Steinmetz

The Department of Visual Arts is saddened by the loss of one of its early faculty members, Professor Emeritus Phel Steinmetz, who died on October 30 at 69 from complications related to Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

Phel joined the Visual Arts Department faculty in 1971. In his early years, he and fellow faculty member Fred Lonidier defined the photography program as one that combined art practice, criticism and theory. The program had a tremendous impact almost from the beginning. Phel was among UC San Diego artists who are widely regarded as pioneers of conceptual art in California. The group also includes David and Eleanor Antin, Helen and Newton Harrison, Allan Kaprow, Fred Lonidier, Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula--both Martha and Allan enrolled as graduate students shortly after Phel's arrival.

Phel studied photography with Ansel Adams and Bennett Meyers. Like Adams, he became a master of the darkroom process, and his early photos were clearly influenced by Adams. Shot with a large-format view camera, they focused on pristine natural landscapes. Soon after his arrival at UC San Diego, however, he began to explore San Diego's backcountry and became fascinated with the steady march of development over previously empty terrain. The juxtaposition of man and nature became central to his work. On occasion, "nature" might include tigers, coyotes and other wildlife he came across during his photographic treks.

Typical of Phel's photos are one that depicts a sliver of road through a sweeping desert, and another of a palm tree-like cell tower that stands next to three palm trees with their tops removed. Known for his wit, Phel subsequently published some of these shots in a book that he titled "Landscrapes".

Over the years, his photos were shown at the Museum of Modern Art and the downtown Whitney Museum in New York, the San Francisco Art Institute, and at galleries and
museums in Italy, Germany, and other international locales. His shows were reviewed in Artweek, Art in America, the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle and other publications, and his photos were published in numerous books, journals, and magazines. The importance of his work was recognized with UC San Diego Academic Senate Research Grants, a Distinguished Teaching Award, a Muir College Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts grant.

Within the visual arts department, Phel was always active in shaping programs and policies related to media research, graduate admissions, and the photography curriculum. Phel also devoted time to the campus community. At various points, he was a member of the Academic Senate, the Campus Community Planning Committee, the Community on Educational Policy's Subcommittee for Students with Disabilities, and advisory committees for the design of the music department's Conrad Prebys Music Center and the visual arts department's Structural and Materials Engineering Building (shared with the Jacobs School of Engineering). Phel's father was a contractor so he had a special interest in architecture and construction.

In retirement, Phel continued to gather footage for documentaries on the elements of fire and water, and a documentary on the life cycle of the black widow spider was ready for editing, Barath said. A personal video documentary, Gene Pool, was completed before retirement, his first digital video, following one of the many camping/photo trips over the past 20 years that he took with a group of friends who were also photographers.

At the time of his death, he had recently completed the manuscript for "Narcissus' Brother," a book of his color photography.

"He had a lifelong interest in the metaphysical and made an extensive study of research in that field," his wife Esther Barath said. "Narcissus' Brother is, in my opinion, a playful, intimate visual/textual narrative integrating his profound connection to land and spirit.

Phel Steinmetz was born Feb. 20, 1944, in Des Plaines, Illinois. He grew up on a small ranch in El Cajon, a few miles east of San Diego. He decided to become a photographer at age 11 following a mystical experience viewing a photograph.

"It was a black and white photo his grandfather had from a friend who had visited Kenya, of three people on the Serengeti Plain," his wife recalled. "Phel said it was the sharpest, most detailed photo he had ever seen. But what was most remarkable for him was that he was instantly transported to the spot the men were in, standing in front of them, feeling a warm breeze and the sun on his back."

Phel is survived by his wife Esther Barath, daughter Traci Wagner, and grandson Timothy Wagner.

A private memorial was held for family and close friends. A memorial exhibition of his work is planned for winter quarter at UC San Diego, sponsored by the visual arts
department.

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