

NOTHING TO SEE HERE...

Text by Christopher Young, 2009

The ... subway car that [Jack] Kerouac boarded that day in July [1947] was probably grimy black from the steel-on-steel dust ... and was outfitted with yellowish rattan seats, overhead fans and functioning windows ... it had probably been in service since before World War I.¹

Using a small camera hidden under his jacket, Walker Evans made a series of secretive images in the New York Subway from 1938 to 1941.

It was his hope to use this *pure recording* to make images of people as they really were.²

Evans waited 20 years before publishing a selection of these extraordinary images for fear of being sued by those portrayed.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia explored similar ideas in a series of images made in New York's Times Square using a telephoto lens and hidden strobe lighting.³

In contrast to the bleak, rather sombre images of Evans, in diCorcia's work the figures are bathed in a euphoric light.

There is an almost anthropological fascination in these faces. We marvel at their expressions, clothing and features yet this intimate intrusion also disturbs us. We might not immediately see ourselves in these images but we do recognise the vulnerability and helplessness of being trapped by another's gaze.

In both projects, the protagonists were unaware of the camera's presence and the images are arguably *factual*.

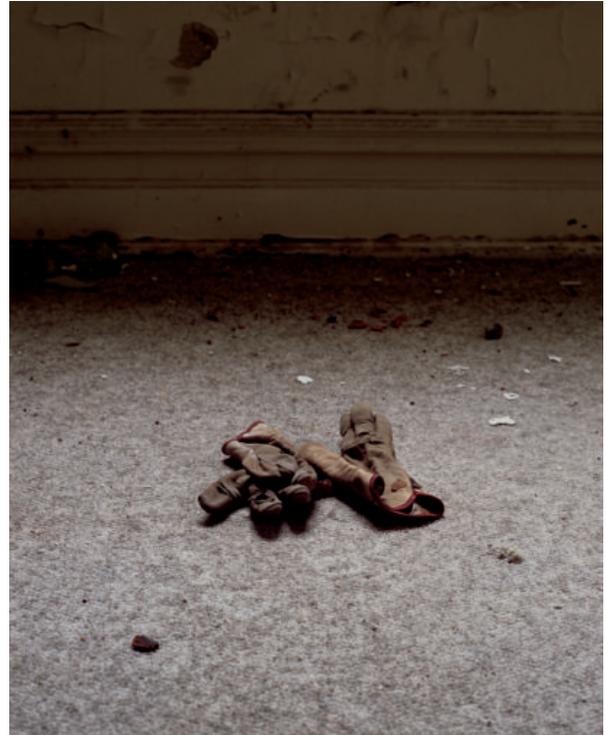
That said, we must use caution with our trust, as the questions as to how editing, cropping, context and other forms of manipulation were applied are very much applicable.

An assemblage of objects, whether simply portrayed or shown as ready-mades, plays on this trust and experiential reference points. Responses to objects are accumulated over the course of a lifetime so a simple, yellow chair functions further than being an *assemblage of wood*.⁴

It might remind us of a childhood event or an image⁵ we studied at school. Because of this, it and other objects are loaded with a multitude of emotive triggers.

Objects also function as cultural symbols, metaphors and intellectual reference points. As such, each viewer engages with them on a many differing levels and with varying complexities. Artworks that employ objects therefore create a space to show what's *necessary for a thought, not the thought itself*.⁶

The object can be at the same time an artwork, a utilitarian vessel and an artefact depending on when and by whom it is encountered.



Artists who compile *objects and spaces transfigured through memory recall* remind us that *memory is not only what lingers after the object becomes absent, but it activates our reception of each new object*.⁷

Assemblage – in a sculptural sense – is the *collection and arrangement of preformed natural or manufactured ... objects, or fragments not intended as art materials* by artists who utilise such elements in order to *undermine the striving for permanency*.⁸

Similarly, a photographer gathers motifs, rearranges and frames them utilising the available tools and then creates a new but decidedly non-unique object – a photograph. The source object(s) are then devalued – or paradoxically given value – by the act of their reproduction.

*The richness of the photograph is in fact all that is not there, but that we project or fix onto it.*⁹



Further to the arrangement of objects into an assemblage that can then be documented, the photographer also arranges themselves around objects via their choice of viewpoint, focal length, depth of field, lighting and a multitude of other rendering devices.

The viewer experience of the source object(s) is distilled, filtered and/or censored in the process of producing the new art-object.

Ambiguity, absence and metaphor become even more critical than in sculptural assemblage as the photographer is inherently subjective in their interpretation of that which they frame. How much and what they are willing to show manipulates the experience of subsequent viewers.

Assemblage equates to a re-evaluation of the relationship between the art-object and viewer via a *reconquest, but by a different means, of the realism that abstract art replaced*.¹⁰

However, factual representation is illusionary given that an objective rendering is very much a utopian ideal.

*... the way in which [photography] comes to write and inscribe truth, power, knowledge, is predicated as much on desire and memory as it is on its mechanical, would-be objective, reproduction.*¹¹

Just as there is no such thing as objective history, there is also no real *truth* in photography. Both are coloured – consciously or otherwise – by the social, psychological, ideological and emotional traits of the historian, artist and spectator.

Further to this, all images and objects suffer equally from a before and an after. They can't escape time and should be seen as mere snippets of multiple narratives.

There is no singular viewpoint – that is, the right spot to stand physically or otherwise – but only that which the artist chooses for a particular image.

Whilst the artist – at least – should be aware of the lack of objectivity, the spectator's lack of disconnect to that which is portrayed (the 'content') is widely exploited.

The illusion of truth is fundamental to work created by many contemporary artists and they often use these simple, but very powerful, tools to manipulate the emotional responses of spectators.

*It is the doubt about what is actually being represented, and the deconstruction of what a photograph essentially is and how it functions, that are core to [Jeff Wall's] work and ... others of his generation.*¹²

Ambiguity – especially in those photographs grounded in a documentary or factual style – *gives images their power*.¹³



References

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3. *Heads* (2000): Philip-Lorca diCorcia was sued unsuccessfully in 2006 by Ermo Nussenzweig, an Orthodox Jew who objected on religious grounds to diCorcia's exhibiting/publishing a photograph taken of him without his permission.
4. Bright, S.: *Art Photography Now* (Aperture, 2005). Quote from Richard Wentworth.
5. See Gogh, V.: *Van Gogh's Chair* (c. 1888).
6. Bright, S.: *Art Photography Now* (Aperture, 2005). Quote from Thomas Demand.
7. Gregg, S.: *Ok with my decay – encounters with chronology* (Artlink, volume 29 no 1). This essay and 'the artists' in the reference relates to the work of Susan Milne, Izabela Pluta, Annie Hogan and Hannah Bertram.
8. Seitz, W.: *The Art of Assemblage* (Museum of Modern Art, 1961).
9. Morin, E.: *The Cinema or The Imaginary Man* (University of Minnesota Press, 1956/2005).
10. Seitz, W.: *The Art of Assemblage* (Museum of Modern Art, 1961).
11. Marsh, A.: *The darkroom: photography and the theatre of desire*.
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13. Bright, S.: *Art Photography Now* (Aperture, 2005).