

Re-de- photography

Mark Prince argues that in our social media saturated culture, to photograph or film something has come to seem as not only evidence of having seen it, but also as a substitute for that same experience, as if one could not have occurred without the other.

How literally should pictures be taken? If this is likely to be construed as a question about the evolving ability of images to deceive us – that is, to be taken more seriously than they warrant – it may also refer to a tendency not to give their figuration its due, which is to not take them seriously enough. In defining fiction as language ‘used not seriously’, JL Austin – in his early-1950s lectures ‘How To Do Things With Words’ – may appear to have been derogating art, but he could as well have been providing a measure by which to protect it from being instrumentalised, in a spirit similar to WH Auden’s line ‘For poetry makes nothing happen’, which, I would argue, is a definition of artistic freedom, rather than a hobbling of it by resigning its powers. If, as Austin insisted, language used for artistic purposes is effectively ‘hollow or void’ – its instrumental potential neutralised by remaining within the bounds of artifice or figuration – how literally can artistic citation be taken? Bear in mind that *mis-*quotation may be among the forms that writerly authority takes when making over the world to how an author sees it. Would we be succumbing to contradiction if, despite concurring with Austin, we were to ask whether ‘quoting’ a photograph – as Sherrie Levine has done – could be analogous to what Austin calls a performative utterance ‘given in bad faith’, in that by exploiting the interchangeability of its form, the quotation so plausibly appears to be something it is not?

‘Performative’, here, defines forms of speech that ‘do’ as well as ‘say’ something; language that constitutes an action for which the speaker may be held responsible, rather than merely a description, which may be either true or false. Austin’s work has been cited to argue that pornographic images should be considered performative, in that – according to Judith Butler – ‘they do not state a point of view or report on a reality, but constitute a certain kind of conduct’, which ‘silences’ those it represents. The legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon writes that ‘pornography does not simply express or interpret experience; it substitutes for it’. Richard Prince might have been testing art’s ability to neutralise this form of action by assuming a critical or aesthetic remove from it, when, in 1983, he re-photographed a commercial photographer’s soft-porn image of a ten-year-old Brooke Shields, and sardonically titled it *Spiritual America*. He has since framed the appropriation in words that intimate photography’s ability to override such contextual

distinctions. In 2014, he commented, ‘For me this photograph had to do with the medium and how the medium can get out of hand.’

Indeed, our contemporary photographic vernacular – photography having become a predominantly vernacular medium in the smartphone age – brushes aside attributions of truth or falsity in zeroing in on the access it claims to what it represents. It is, in Michael Wood’s phrase, ‘the sign we can’t see because we so thoroughly take it for granted’. In a social media culture, to photograph/film something has come to seem not only a confirmation of having seen it, but a substitute for experiencing it, as if one not only delivered the other, but did not occur without it. The coincidence between the technologies of picturing and seeing (eye = pinhole camera/telescope) that emerged in the early modern period reappears, with image-making as the sharp end of a global online culture’s erosion of a sense of ‘the other’.

To concede that artistic image-making may be uniquely equipped to resist this presumption is not to deny that, at least in the form of photography and film, it can hardly prevent itself from being perceived on the terms it would resist. This ambiguity may grant it an equally unique ability to subvert those terms. Subjecting Prince to lawsuits for his artistic appropriation of images that were circulating in the public domain was arguably a category error, conditional on disregarding, or failing to appreciate, that post-Duchampian artistic transformation is a matter of context as much as content. If, however, one also considers that the graphic artist Chris Foss sued Glenn Brown for producing paintings based on his science fiction illustrations, the two cases differentiate according to the media they respectively involve, and how literally we are disposed to take them. Photography’s indexicality eclipses the impossibility of locating precisely where an artwork’s quotation begins and ends and how literally it should be taken. Painting, by contrast, exemplifies the give and take between reference and translation that characterises the freedom with which art, in a healthy culture, can fluidly engage with its historical context. A painter’s marks are assimilated by the medium’s history regardless of their intentions, which are as likely to exploit those echoes as to resist them.

It speaks for Levine’s insistence ‘that what I’ve always made is pictures – to be looked at’ that when I applied to her studio for permission to reproduce her ‘After Walker Evans’ series, 1981 (‘re-photographs’ of Evans’s documentary pictures of Depression-era Alabama sharecroppers), I was informed that I would need the consent of the Evans estate. Anne Carson alerts us to the ‘amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labour’, and surely a photograph’s transparency is no less deceptive. Yet the Levine studio’s stipulation acknowledges the inevitability of the latter (transparency to its subject being photography’s essence), even as her series is predicated on exposing the delusion of the former

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Luc Delahaye, *L'Autre*, 1995-97

(the 'transparency of self' that a translator might imagine themselves cultivating). The paradox reflects photography's conflicted role in a mediated world - rife with image manipulation - as both the medium that most effectively dissembles its form in order to simply attest, and the one most likely to deceive with its evidential appearance.

Photography, at this point, should be distinguished from computer-generated imagery, which, although often designed to be taken for something it is not, rarely is. Ed Atkins (Interview AM417) sees the characteristic plangency of his CGI videos as a consequence of the medium's failure to look real. A wall text for his recent Tate Britain show quoted him on the subject of his own work: 'in asking digital technology to conjure things it cannot truly represent or experience it becomes intrinsically pathetic'. This is a pathos of the unachieved - not the inaccessible - because the world is never in view. Flagrant verisimilitude combines an excess of signification with a suffocating absence of reference. To take Atkins at his word, computer-generated imagery is painting by other means, which only fails if the plausibility of its representation is compared to that of photography, which it is frequently intended to simulate. Ultimately, however, the extent of art's rights of access to what it represents, and with it the 'experience' (as Atkins eerily puts it, transferring a history of empirical thought into the 'mind' of technology) it claims to embody, hinge more on whether we grant Austin's view of it as a kind of game - its claims only pertinent within the limited context of play - than on the distinction between an image's figurative and literal qualities.

Art's limiting of an image's application to its own frames may double as a curb against representation's indiscriminate entitlement by implying a contrast between the licence that should be extended to the

figuration of artistic content and the potential consequentiality of language that operates outside that domain. To proscribe an artwork's remote view as cavalier or presumptuous is a prescription for isolationism, or - worse - purity. That Vincent van Gogh never visited Asia does not make his 'orientalism' irresponsible. The representation of vicarious experience can comprehend its own artifice, exoticism, or even - God forbid - escapism, as artistic allusions to other artworks can exploit their own inaccuracies. After publishing the novel *Madame Bovary* in 1856, for which he was litigated against for treating a subject too close to home too literally, Gustave Flaubert turned his attention, in *Salammbô*, to ancient Carthage - a subject he calculated no one cared enough about to object to. Although having visited Egypt, his intention was to adopt a setting so far-fetched that his book could only be interpreted as an exercise in pure style. He described his ideal as 'a book about nothing'. That assessment may not prevent it from being open to the censure of our contemporary hyper-vigilance to the trespasses an artist commits in usurping the language of others. The author could, for example, be judged to have implicated himself in the contemporaneous French colonisation of North Africa, of which Carthage was historically a part.

Jose Montealegre's exhibition at the Kölner Kunstverein, in 2022, included copper sculptures based on illustrations of plants from a botanical archive produced during the Spanish colonisation of Mexico in the 17th century. Sculptural reproduction ushered the illustrations from two into three dimensions; from drawings, which the intervening centuries have given the plausibility of records, to what resembles jewellery, or, by association, loot. The process is metaphorically analogous to the assigning of new names, in conformity with alternative systems of classification, to flora and fauna native to South America once they were relocated to Europe by 17th-century colonialists. Most of these genera had not existed outside of the Americas until they arrived on the cargo ships of Spanish conquistadors. If we are inclined to dismiss this process as a mere matter of words - and, as the saying goes, they can't hurt you - naming has been seen as 'performative', in that it alters the identity of the thing or person it names. If language does not actually shape the world, it structures our view of it, which is all we ultimately know. Plants were renamed for transplantation to Europe, while indigenous Mexicans were saddled with the languages of their invaders, their realities reordered to accommodate a system of nomenclature that had evolved to describe the landscapes of another continent.

Montealegre frames artistic appropriation as analogous to cultural theft. How 'unserious' can artistic representation be when it can assimilate the forms of equally figurative representations (drawings), which are synonymous with violent actions? The palpable material difference between his sculptures and the illustrations they represent is in any case secondary to that of context, but it would be ironed out by using photography instead of copper leaf to represent them, leaving Levine forced to invest her artistic interventions in the relatively substanceless intention she brings to them. This is the slippery recourse on which the concept of the Duchampian readymade was based. If art, by that measure, is only to be defined as what we *intend* as such, photography's unique attributes allow artists to *appear* to endorse the access its representations claim, only to rebut it as figurative - if only nominally - in being designated as art.

Levine's re-photographs operate on this basis. Pictures of catalogue reproductions are secondary statements masquerading as primary, by virtue (or vice) of a medium that forges a first-hand relation to its subjects in all instances. Images that in Walker Evans's hands look one way – at what they denote as phenomena to be documented – look the other, back to Levine and her cogitations, her sense of herself in relation to a significant predecessor. Erich Franz rejects the 'appropriation' tag, and calls this idiom an 'imposition of ... inaccessibility'. In his *Subway Portraits*, 1938–41, Evans adopted subterfuge himself, but for the purpose of *extending* access to his subjects: subway passengers oblivious of being photographed. These are pictures that instead of utilising their art status to retract their medium's reach, use that status as justification for the access they claim. Concealing a camera in the folds of his overcoat, Evans calculated, would produce a 'truer' image than a posed shot. Consciousness of being photographed was perceived as a barrier to a portrait's potency. The camera could show how things are, as opposed to how they are represented. Art's dressing is perceived as obscuring life – the unadulterated latter, according to these terms, being the camera's true domain.

When Luc Delahaye adopted Evans's method for the pictures that appeared in his 1999 publication *L'Autre*, he credited Evans as having avoided 'the vulgarity of sentimentalism, the dumbness of trying to have a "style"'. But the ideal of deaestheticised access is itself aesthetic, admitting art by a back door, which deceiving the subject leaves open. Bringing the bone he picked with 1960s Minimalism to bear on photography of the 1990s, Michael Fried interprets the hidden camera idiom as shunning the 'theatricality' of self-consciousness. Yet one person's release from artifice may be another's invasion of personal space. What may be seen as stalking, if taken as literally as photography asks it to be, is presented as a metaphor for the need for tact in an image world in which being visible is to have no control over one's image. Dorje de Burgh uses a 500mm telephoto lens to photograph distant strangers: a man lingering on a balcony, a distracted child. Only the grain of the high-speed analogue film, which the distances demand, belies an impression of intimacy. Other shots, in similarly deceptive close-up, show police in visors and riot gear, supervising demonstrations. The account is evened out by observing, without their consent, those cast in the role of superintending others without their consent. An artist's duplicitous self-concealment is simultaneously self-exposing, if only when the pictures are seen as artworks.

Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne*, 1980/94, (Interview AM163) figures an attempt to thwart artifice in the most artificial of forms: melodrama. Combining text and photography, the publication narrates her meeting a man in 1980 at an opening in Paris and following him, without his knowledge, to Venice, where he mentioned he was about to go on vacation. She tracks him down, dons a disguise (blond wig, vamp make-up), and follows him on tourist jaunts, taking pictures from a distance, until she accidentally strays into the orbit of his view, her cover is blown, and he responds by turning to photograph her, raising the possibility of a reversal: 'As if, in fact, I had been the unconscious victim of his game, his itineraries, his schedules...' As long as he remained apparently oblivious, he appeared indecipherable: the paradigm of the inaccessible subject. Unlike Evans and Delahaye, swept up by



Luc Delahaye, *L'Autre*, 1995–97

creative relish, Calle intimates both sides of the divide: the seductiveness and dubiousness of untrammelled access, and how it may heighten awareness of a subject's opacity, rather than exposing their essential self. The stillness of the still image connotes experience inaccessible to the temporal confinement of its form, and finds it figured in the inchoateness of a face unprepared for scrutiny.

I find that the photographs of Vito Acconci in pursuit of the targets of his *Following* performances of the early 1970s – for which he spotted strangers in the street and followed them, without their knowledge, until they entered a building to which he had no access – resemble stills from a TV drama, shot on a hand-held camera by someone in rapid motion, as if the blurred effect were being exploited to enhance the realism of a fiction. It is ironically photography – that essentially literal medium – that returns Acconci to the fictional tropes he had been trying to escape in conceiving of an art that left him no control of its outcome. On which side of a moral divide his pursuits fall depends on the credence given to the artistic context they were designed to elude: he is either a performer, exonerated from blame by the figuration of his art, or a stalker, deluded by a narrative he has spun without consulting the people it most concerns, and oblivious to the potential consequences of treating them as pawns in a game, the rules of which they have not been apprised of. If the fictional air of his documentary images nudges this balance from fact towards figuration, it is despite the convention of using photography to deny ephemeral art's transience by substituting it for an event that has passed.

Acconci's art could be lodged as an appeal against Jacques Derrida's view that structuralist logic is unable to take account of the bewildering contingencies of linguistic usage: the vicissitudes of temporality and subjectivity. Unlike much art of the 1960s and 1970s,



Sharon Lockhart, *Gary Gilpatrick, Insulator*, 2008, photograph

in exposing the medium on which its illusions were conditional, Acconci did not neglect to expose the exposé. Sharon Lockhart's take on structuralist filmmaking also redresses this imbalance. The location of *Eventide*, 2022 – Gotland, a Swedish island in the Baltic Sea – was selected for its lack of light pollution, a self-contradictory purpose: to find somewhere accessible to her crew, which did not manifest signs of their access. She was bringing to the place what she had chosen it for lacking: signs of the impact of human beings on their environment. The film was shot from a static vantage over a shoreline. As twilight dims, figures emerge from out of frame and roam, their boots clinking in the shingle. Each holds a torch, and directs it at the vegetation. Are they engaged in research or performing for the camera? On balance the latter seems more likely, the analogy between what they are doing and the filming of it too neat to be coincidental. They appear as a collective long arm of the filmmaker, creating the view in the form of its image by generating the light that renders it visible to her camera. In doing so they imply that what lies outside the range of their torches might be a landscape free of artifice. And this is how the film ends, with the figures having wandered off frame as ruminatively as they entered it, leaving a landscape succumbing to darkness: the transcendental given of nature unqualified by human interference. This 'purity' ironically corresponds to invisibility, structurally proscribing the image's grasp of it. Yet these given/made dichotomies break down as soon as they are scrutinised: if the torches are synonymous with light pollution, how do their beams essentially differ from moonlight? Humans and their doings are, after all, part of the natural continuum.

Lockhart's ecological subtext grandly associates the overreach of the anthropocene with photography's ability to shape the world in its own image. The megalomania of this analogy is tempered by her admitting her own culpability as filmmaker. Structuralist self-reflexivity is a corrective applied to the notion, gaining currency in the context of ecologically themed contemporary art, that art should be measured by the extent to which it proves functional in raising awareness of the climate crisis, and doing its bit to reverse its trajectory. It is the false promise of the 'performative' artwork's agency: judge art by its function and it is reduced to a tool for partisan causes, however commendable.



Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénitienne*, published by Siglio, 2015

Lunch Break, 2008, explicitly spatialises Lockhart's critique of film's claim of access to its referent: in this case, the quotidian existence of blue-collar workers in a far-flung corner of the US. A feature-length slow-motion tracking shot creeps across an ironworks in Maine. Workers take breaks alone or in groups on either side of a long aisle, their conversation coming in and out of earshot. This could be what Jean-Luc Godard had in mind when he quipped, 'tracking shots are a question of ethics'. Radical deceleration resists the claim of the camera's reach into a setting and, by extension, the right to represent it. The ambient soundtrack is credited as 'composed' (a collaboration with James Benning), the workers as a 'cast'. Performance – if only mooted as a possibility – moderates the entitlement of the documentary image's air of can-do. An appendage to the film – a series of still-life photographs of the workers' lunch boxes, battered by decades of use – objectively represents the tension between the found and the made. If individualising the boxes embodies their owners' subjectivity as a surrogate portrait image, Lockhart's portrayal of them blocks her medium's assumption of a licence to represent those subjects. Her self-cautioning is diametrically opposed to the uninhibited rapacity of the Evans/Delahaye hidden camera idiom. The particularising of mass-produced objects implies the Duchampian claiming of them, by the camera, as art objects/images. What makes them representative of their owners – by metaphor or association – is precisely the means photography has no use for, predicated as it is on the directness of its representation. Lockhart deploys her media *against* their defining strengths, with slow-motion film – or, in *Eventide*, an inhabited landscape's almost-stillness – yearning, it seems, for the condition of the still, as the photographs are conversely saddled with a medium that blocks access to the subjects they imply – the lives of the workers – while identifying the camera as helplessly literal, incapable of extrapolation from the humble materials on which Lockhart trains it.

Stills can imply the penetration, or disinterestedness, that film neglects in its headlong flight towards resolution. Innately artificial (time stops for no one), they turn the image back onto itself or its producer. Simon Lässig described to me his modification and recontextualisation of filmic images as 'a triangle of artist and viewer looking together at something that is already there', as distinct, that is, from

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'a viewer looking at a piece and imagining the artist behind it, who crafted it'. His partiality corresponds to that of the filmmakers from whom he quotes, and implicitly to that of his audience, to which the internet has granted equal access to existing film material. Levine's 'gap' between replica and original – corresponding to that between herself and her artistic predecessors – is configured into a simultaneity.

At Kunstverein Munich this summer Lässig presented a series of stills from films produced in the 1970s in the orbit of the Béla Balázs studio in Budapest. A young girl's profile is snatched from a fleeting filmic transition. The prints equivocate between the aggregate of the original analogue frame and a digital clip's pixelation of it, producing an effect like that of viewing the world through smoked glass. The viewer and medium are held back; a medium – photography – which in its nature appears to hold nothing back. What is lost in definition is gained in connoting his excerption of the frame: a measure of his limited access to its source, as well as of the subjectivity of his engagement with it and what it represents. Reduced to stills, the moving image becomes a sitting target for this scrutiny. In digitally treating it, Lässig assumes responsibility for his adaptation, one that art based on art-historical precedence often dodges by means of the irony with which it disdains to grant its source more quiddity than that of a convenient repository of reference. The process generates (mis)information and (mis)interpretation, compensating for its reduction of narrative momentum to framed almost-abstractions. Rather than 're-photographing', Lässig 'de-photographs'. Minimal differences between a series of prints – the girl's profile variously discernible – suggested

a highly compressed sequentiality, the distance between the prints further attenuated by the sparse hang. Time is fragmented by space: an equivalent of Lockhart's use of slow motion to convert a brake on filmic momentum into an obstacle to traversing a physical space.

Lässig escapes the image's acquisitiveness, and the responsibility it puts into the artist's hands, into an associativeness native to painting, and its freedom from the bind of a causal link to its referent. The corner of a tablecloth resembles an animal's snout, while a hold-all bag on that table, its strap looping into the image, could be a black cat, its eye brightly reflecting. The documentary essence of the process – a forensic probing of film's structure – is eroded, even as that process reflects its source: the clips derive from a filmic culture that challenged boundaries between documentary and fiction. Hungarian 'quasi-realism' used documentary tropes – a social-realist agenda, the casting of non-professional participants, sourced from the milieu being documented – to undermine or ground the dimensionless space of fiction.

As if to underscore the equivalence of image and text as mutual languages, both structured by temporal syntax, the Munich installation included photocopies of pages from books or online texts, redacted with a marker before being re-copied. They resemble modernist poetry, in a lineage reaching back to the dislocation of the line by Stephane Mallarmé in his poem *A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*, of which Marcel Broodthaers made a redacted version in 1969. Laid in piles on tables, the sheets could be reshuffled by visitors, thereby resisting the consecutiveness of reading/writing. The redactions – unlike Broodthaers's hard-edged, printed blocks – double as gestural drawing, implying a personal edit and the hand making it. Language is qualified as comparatively figurative by the unequivocally 'performative' act of crossing it out.

The fragmentation of text corresponded to the separation of frames across the walls. Springing signifier and signified apart, the white of the wall and the black of the marker had corresponding functions: to de-photograph the images as to un-write the texts. But in Derrida's terms, both the black redactions and the storms of marbly grain, into which the film clips are transformed, are forms of writing, free to separate out from the writer as, conversely, speech remains tied to an individual speaker's voice and the occasion of speech. That separation disrupts the functional chain of denotation, which drives the engine of contemporary media. Representation's reach is revealed by defining its limits. The intermittent stills and phrases are like the trail of pebbles the abandoned children of the Brothers Grimm fable left to trace their way home, the attenuation of a linear syntax as much emphasising the significance of the goal as its separation of them from it.

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José Montealegre, 'Nervous System', installation view, Kölnischer Kunstverein, 2022