

Invited guests: Michael Schwab, David Crowley

Chairs: Kieron Dennis, Natalie Willer

KD: Kieron Dennis

NW: Natalie Willer

MS: Michael Schwab

DC: David Crowley

JR: Jonathan Rabagliati

FF: Frederico Fazenda-Rodrigues

LT: Lorna Turner

HS: Helga Steppan

MV: Maureen Valfort

FC: Finn Campbell - Notman.

DS: David Sudlow

We have all grown up with the assumption that we know what a photograph is. We know it can tell us that our Mum and Dad wore big collars to a wedding in the seventies, it can even show us what Terry Wogan's bathroom looks like. Yet, the photograph is elusive because it is always pointing to something else. Indeed, the question of what the photograph is in itself has puzzled writers and theorists throughout the history of photography. In the past, the photograph was often conceptualised as a document of reality. The notion that "The camera never lies" was a belief grounded in the understanding that the mechanical and photochemical production of the photograph can escape the malignant subjectivity of man. It led many writers to believe that the impassive process of photography had the ability to record a 'real' trace of light information, like a fingerprint of reality.

Over the last fifteen years the digital revolution has colonised our entire culture, sweeping through every technical, social, and economic level. Writers and critics have responded by reappraising the traditional view of the photograph and generating new terms for understanding it in this expanded context. Now it is a widely held view that the photograph (and photography) has dissolved into 'the photographic image'. The term sounds familiar, but it is actually a new way of thinking about the photograph. 'The photographic image' can contain analogue photography as a component part, but it also contains the overarching possibilities of digital image production, manipulation and distribution. Now that the goalposts have moved, the issue is not, *what* is the photograph? But, *where* is the photograph? And with the digital revolution all but complete, the question is how can we relate to, work with, and *believe* in 'the photographic image' and who cares anyway if it all looks the same?

KD: Welcome to the eighth George Hanson critical forum, on the photographic image. Jointly chaired by Natalie and myself. I would like to introduce our two guests Michael Schwab, who is currently doing a PhD at the Royal College of Art exploring the current status of the photographic image. And David Crowley, who, as you know, is a writer and design historian currently

lecturing at the Royal College of Art. Michael Schwab will be bringing attention to the changes in the status of the photographic image in our contemporary culture: over to Michael.

MS: To develop the idea of how the photographic image situates itself within contemporary culture, I thought I'd start historically with a comparison between Walker Evans and Ansel Adams. They are two American photographers, who had their most productive phase in the first half of the 20th century. In Ansel Adams' work, the landscape is seen in a romantic way.

Walker Evans on the other hand shows a less romanticised view, by focussing on cultural signs within the landscape. These include billboards and other commercial graphics, such as posters, referenced as cultural signifiers. His work shows a particular relationship between nature and culture. Walker Evans is an interesting figure in the history of photography, because he uses cultural signs in their natural habitat. Walker Evans's photographs seem to jump across the line between a natural photograph and a 'cultural sign'. Coming closer to the present day, Richard Prince, who has been working as a conceptual artist in America since the late 1970's, takes a step further in traversing this line. Looking at the relationship between photography and advertising he zooms right into the cowboys and horses of the Marlborough adverts in the 1980s.¹

KD: So the natural world is excluded?

MS: Yes. Prince has made the decision to make photography visible as a completely cultural engagement. Prince has actually completely done away with a natural environment. By focusing right in on the billboard, he is recreating nature as an entirely cultural landscape.

KD: So horses are natural, but advertisements, which represent horses, are cultural statements.

MS: Andreas Gursky² uses the highly naturalised language of photography to create the possibility of a 'constructed' place existing in 'reality'. Of course it doesn't exist in 'reality', the appearance is entirely fantasised. Gursky achieves this vision by digitally cleaning up the image and adjusting the composition. By doing this, one could say that he has created a completely 'cultural' landscape. Gursky's instinct, however, is to turn the image back into a naturalised form. The central idea with these images is that they are pretending to exist in reality. A good example of Gursky's working process is the photograph of the River Rhein³. He said of this image that he just couldn't find the right situation. He knew in his head what the river should look like, but there was no stretch of the river that looked how he wanted it to look. Usually, Gursky is not wildly composing things. For him, it's all very much a cleaning up process, trying to create a photograph that will be as close as possible to a certain vision that he has.

KD: This question about nature and culture in the photographic image reminds me of the English gardener, Capability Brown. He manipulated the landscape to create an Arcadian image of what he thought the countryside should look like. The way he

¹ Richard Prince, *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 1980 - 84

² Andreas Gursky is an artist who works with the medium photography and digital technology. All his large-scale photographs are computer manipulated. His work has been showed widely including his solo show at the Serpentine Gallery, London, 1999.

³ Andreas Gursky, *Rhein*, 1996

re-sculpted land forms, and repositioned trees seems very similar to the way that Gursky contrives natural elements in his photographic images.

MS: Yes, that is probably a good analogy. Gursky's photographs are in the style of the natural but are highly constructed. Another artist who uses the photograph as a construction is Jeff Wall⁴. Jeff Wall's images look like they have been shot in one go, though knowing his work and interest in the photographic medium, one knows that he makes use of the process of montage, where he falls back on a number of source images to create one piece. You never really know whether his image has been manipulated or not. An example of where he pushes our uncertainty to the extreme, is his piece 'The Crooked Path'⁵. It is an image that looks completely normal, but then if you look closer, it's got this funny bend in the path. It disturbs me when I look at it. Jeff Wall uses this subtle disruption to change the way in which we see reality in the photographic image.

In 1978, Jeff Wall made another interesting image, a photograph of a destroyed room⁶. On careful inspection of the image, you can see that the room was obviously a stage set. He has created an image of violence as it might have actually happened, but this scene has been entirely constructed. If we look up close, we can see the beams supporting the walls of the room. One could read these beams as cultural supports, holding this 'naturalised' room in place. The image gives the appearance of something apparently natural, but it is literally held together by constructed cultural forms. Photography itself went through a 'construction' phase that underpins our contemporary understanding of the photographic image. But this is, again, changing as we enter the digital realm. Early photographers maybe felt they could just go into the forest and take a picture and have some kind of a contact with nature and bring that into the living room or onto the gallery wall. But now, even this activity carries the possibility of producing fake and highly constructed images.

KD: So you are saying that the photographic image always has the possibility of being constructed. But I would say that the goalposts shift when one thinks of personal photographs. I think there is a subtle, but marked, difference between ones personal images and those images that are reproduced or distributed for others' consumption. Our own personal photographs can become objects, and are linked up with our sense of identity and memory. I think our cheesy snaps encourage and support the idea that all photographic images have something real about them; perhaps a 'style of the real'.

MS: In my paper⁷, I've developed the term 'documentary style', which I've taken from Walker Evans⁸, into the notion of a 'photographic style' that is achieved when an image presents us with 'reality', as we know it, from photography and in particular from our own, personal photography.

HS: It seems to me that there can be no such thing as a documentary photograph. To include something or exclude something in the framing of a subject always involves a level of manipulation of reality.

KD: Walker Evans was critiquing this idea right back in the 1930's even when the idea of the photograph as a document of reality was widely accepted. He was aware that the very action of taking a picture and framing a subject affects its meaning a

⁴ Jeff Wall is an art historian and conceptual artist who is exploring the relationship of photography and painting.

⁵ Jeff Wall, *The Crooked Path*, 1991

⁶ Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978

⁷ Michael Schwab: "The Digital Image: Photography and Photographics" on <http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/cri/adrc/research2/pixelraiders/papers/papschw.htm>

great deal, and is often politically and socially motivated. But it is hard to get away from a perception of 'reality' in photographic images. It always seems to hang on somehow, no matter how constructed the image seems.

MS: Concerning realism, I think it is important to mention that I find the more constructed images of Jeff Wall 'realer' or 'truer' because they're bringing attention to their construction. By actually indicating the construction of the image, he's in a way, critiquing a traditional notion of realism. There is something in Wall's image that convinces me much more. I am talking about a 'style' in which the photograph has set up. This style gives you a certain feeling, and you can look at it, being aware of your cultural environment and how things might be changing, and make certain decisions. It is Jeff Wall's connection with a wider cultural context that makes his images real to me.

KD: Do you think it is a natural consequence of the digital age that it makes us question the integrity of the photograph?

MS: I think the computer is secondary, and can often mislead the reasoning of the 'photographic real'. I would suggest that the history of the photographic image has a profound affect on the way we perceive reality, although this history is not detached from the recent digital history.

KD: Yes it's like the idea that a bees honeycomb is regarded as natural, whereas a motorway bridge is not. In the same way nature and culture are not easily defined in the photographic image. I think Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky cause us a certain amount of anxiety, because they break up the surface and make us question the reality of the photographic as a document. But it is also interesting that there is a kind of realism here in the way that the images exist and are constructed in the context of today.

JR: In your writing you have identified the term 'Photo-*graphics*' as representing a merged space inhabited by both *image and text*. It seems that it's not just to do with Photoshop where everything is converted into pixels so that they exist side by side in the same 'rasterised field', but that text can start to function both as an image itself and/or become integrated with images into a hybrid graphic space.

MS: Yes, the photograph, as it has been known, has dissolved into the 'photographic', and become a new thing in itself, but I would suggest that the feeling of the 'photographic style' as it produces a 'photographic reality' is very important in the context of 'Photographics.'

JR: So you would accept a heavily 'photoshoped' image as real.

MS: For me the *photographic real* is now a photographic *style*. This *style* can be produced whatever medium you're using - digital or photograph, or even photo as painting, as long as you reference the way reality is constructed in photography. Personally, I find the photographic style is entirely relative and it's more like a feeling. From the point of view of an artist, it might mean that you either discard that feeling of reality or you can enhance it and make it a feature of your work. Meaning that you can even include very graphical devices, like a typeface into the photograph. If you feel it has been put in there like a sign or something that just sort of melts into it and it feels part of the photograph, it can actually occupy, like you say, a

⁸ In an interview with Katz in 1971, Walker Evans made a distinction between the photograph as a document, like in police photography, and a photograph that is done in a 'documentary style', as which he characterises his way of working.

position in the construction of photographic reality. In a different way, a montage can collapse different worlds into one, but it may still carry the feeling of a photograph, and we can accept it as photographically real, even though there may be a strong abstract language.

FR: I see a parallel in the world of architectural presentation. For instance, when an architect presents a rendered image that looks as if it exists in reality – or when they present an image to the public as a reality, when in fact it is a proposal. It can create a dialogue or conversation that is based on the speculation of a false 'reality'. People talk about this place as if it existed, and you are almost forgetting that the photograph or the techniques of the photographic underpins the faith or belief in the projected view.

MS: This is a very good and very interesting point, because it shows, how the 'photographic real' as a construction changes not only what we think is real, but also our environment in a very material way.

FR: There is also this notion that technology is always striving for a glossier, better picture of the intended building, and the inference is that the better the picture, the more likely it is that it will be built because it exists in a kind of reality of its own already. Also this striving for a better picture seems to be saying that architecture can change the picture of the world. I suppose there is a kind of realism there, if you think about it. Architecture might soon learn to use the style of the medium of photography to present images of building that have yet to be built, as retrospective documents, perhaps self consciously looking like old photographs with scratches and stuff, perhaps in an effort to regain the territory of the real. When one is focusing on aspects of the media, one is only focusing on what they do or how you persuade people to believe in them. The belief in some pictures of buildings is stronger than the real thing.

MS: That is the argument I am trying to make, that reality is constructed photographically. I mean, the way that we think something is real is photographic. We carry the notion that if something is real, then we should be able to see a photograph of it. That is understood and used, as you say in city planning or architecture. I think it would be interesting to research what kind of impact the 'photographic real' has in the way planning decisions are made and what buildings are built -or not. Often a building can be enjoyed much more when it is in a photograph. A photograph can describe how it works and how it appears visually.

FC: This is interesting, because similarly we look at documentary photographs as representing something that is real. It is one of documentary photography's qualities to pre-suppose there is objectivity, when in fact, it is very subjective, as someone has to make a choice about where to place the camera and when to press the shutter.

NW: There is something about the way this supposed objectivity of the photographic image is used in newspapers; no matter what the status of the photographic is in a critical debate, you will still find that these pictures in the newspapers are representing something that has happened or has once been there.

KD: No matter how crazy it seems today, perhaps we can never really escape from the idea that the camera never lies.

JR: It reminds me of a quote: 'People now prefer adverts to the news, because they *know* that the adverts are lying'. For example, one now feels one can't trust the BBC, whereas before one could just turn it on and assume that it was the truth, an objective kind of truth with which one was presented. As soon as you start having to question it, it becomes really

problematic. Equally, it becomes increasingly tiring going through London, as you are always having to keep these barriers up to decide what's real, what you believe, and what you distrust. All these images are coming at you. In a way, it's a loss of innocence.

MS: Yes, definitely! It is loss of innocence. But also, it is not binary anymore but a sliding scale. Things can be 'more real' or 'less real'. It's negotiable. Everything that plays onto the 'photographic real' uses all these conventions we've been accustomed to and have grown up with. You now don't so much have to decide whether a photograph is real or not, but rather you place it within the span of reality that's been opened up.

JR: But then perhaps things are changing now. The case of the photos of British soldiers allegedly abusing Iraqis shown in the Mirror⁹ brought the public debate on a bit. Instead of simply saying: 'Were they real or fake?' people were starting to question whether they might be true in the sense that although they might have been constructed, they might have shown what actually had happened.

FR. There are issues of constructed reality within the medium of photography but also in newspaper photographs; it is a little more disturbing, because newspapers, in a way, synchronise people into what's going on around the world.

JR: The other images that take precedence in newspapers are illustrations. In a way, to read an illustration you have to enter their reality. In order to read the photograph, you have to do the same, to suspend your disbelief. Traditionally we know that illustrations aren't reality; well, they do create a reality but we have to enter into their reality on a kind of trust. Traditionally we read photos as a confirmed reality to be entered into, but now, some of the feeling of illustration seems to have crept in.

MS: That's exactly the point, that some of that has crept in to the photograph. You now have photographs that still read in the same way as photographs did 50 years ago, although now they are constructed. That's why I push the term 'Photographics' to emphasise that photographs are now illustrations that reference the 'photographic real'. But for everybody who doesn't know how they are done, photographs still appear to be confirming reality.

JR: And this, I guess is what marks out Jeff Wall's and Andreas Gursky's images. Because you feel that they are constructed, you take a position in relation to them, rather than being seduced into accepting them without questioning them.

DC: I think it's important to add here, particularly in relation to newspapers, but I think almost universally, that photographs almost never stand alone; photos are always mediated in some form. And we encounter most of them in a format where they have some form of words attached to them. So, automatically in some senses, photography is a kind of graphic process because it has this relationship with word and image. And one of the debates is maybe the issue of authority, the extent to which the right, and the responsibility, to add captions, or words to those photos lies with the photographer or lies beyond the photographer? Ansel Adams wanted to give a fairly neutral character to his photographs, whereas Jeff Wall uses ambiguity very strategically to give you uncertainty, so sometimes you are not quite sure what you're supposed to be looking at. And that seems to be a very strategic decision. Photos are very ambiguous and slippery, but we use words to, somehow, anchor them or control their meaning.

⁹ Images of British soldiers allegedly abusing Iraqi prisoners. The Daily Mirror on 1st May 2004

LT: Often it is the editors that supply the captions because in many situations they don't quite get the photographer to describe the scenario that they are after for their story. Isn't that correct? The editors often reinvent the scenarios for us.

DC: I was looking at the work of the Chinese photojournalist *Li Zhensheng*¹⁰. He worked during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution and was forced to go and photograph executions. People were being wiped out of history. He made the decision to keep a record of every execution in his diary. He made a very systematic attempt to make a record of anybody in the photo because the photograph alone wasn't good enough. Twenty years later everyone had forgotten who that poor guy was who was having his brains blown out. It was that action of recording and writing that was vital to make that photo the historical document that it sought to be. I think that was a significant element of Zhensheng's practice.

KD: The photographic image is a political weapon and a political tool. I wouldn't make a distinction here between the media and its images of wars or advertising. But I would like to pause here and try to bring the discussion around to how these ideas can relate to practice and application. Michael, I find it very interesting the way that your practical work relates to your theory; it seems that you use your own work to visualise and test out your ideas.

MS: In my own work I find it important to draw attention to the cultural climate in which the work is made and then seen, but also to think about ways of upsetting this economy, by playing with how these modes, in themselves, are actually constructed.

KD: Can you tell us a bit more about your working process and how you actually construct the image.

MS: In 'Remember Me'¹¹ I used found photographic images and reduced the image information to about 26 pixels square. As a result the images became very pixelated. I blew them up again in Photoshop using bicubic interpolation to 24x24 inches. The results are very soft Iris prints with a square-ish pattern showing the underlying pixilation. I find that these images are 'more real' or at least, that they are playing on the 'photographic real'. Though I know that they are to 99.999% constructed or calculated using Photoshop. The blurredness of the images is not blurred like a photograph would be blurred. An unfocused photograph loses its definition in a way. It gets weaker. Whereas using computer tools, I can actually enhance it. Although they are blurred, I think they appear stronger - stronger in relation to reality, but maybe also on an emotional level.

KD: It seems by actually constructing (or deconstructing) an image you are experimenting with how far you can unravel the photograph but still keep this notion of the 'photographic real' alive. The image itself becomes secondary to the construction and the actual act of looking. Looking at your images, the blurredness of the images seems to draw you in. It is difficult to know where the surface is.

MS: Using the computer, I find myself more able to relate to what I think the 'photographic real' is. Personally, I wouldn't know how to do that in photography. In this particular series, clearly there is a play on the 'sexual real' and the way the gaze is used and constructed. The difference to traditional photography for me lies in the blurredness and the way the eye works. One has to engage in the image to make sense of it. A certain distance to the image is taken away and that's an interesting working space for me.

¹⁰ Li Zhensheng's work was shown at the Photographers' Gallery in April/May 2004

¹¹ Michael Schwab, 'Remember Me', *photographic* series, 2000

JR: In a way you're saying that your work is taking a critical stance towards the medium. I'm just wondering how much of the work in the Communication Art & Design department actually takes a critical stance in relation to the medium. Does it just start from the position of saying, 'this is the status quo, let's use it and do something with it?' How much of it is actually taking that critique on in the work?

NW: Isn't this the nature of communication, to take on visual codes in order to convey or communicate something. So it's not actually a criticism, as such, about the medium one uses.

KD: That's interesting because one might say that there is an issue in communication practice because it seems to avoid commenting on the media it uses. Something is unsaid, left out or even unknowingly concealed.

DC: This throws up questions on whether there is an absence of deconstructive or self-reflexive practise within communications.

KD: Can you also see your work in the context of communication, Michael?

MS: Yes, in one image¹² from 'Remember Me' is now a book cover; it came out a month ago. It has a certain communication value and it has a certain message. The book is called 'Behind the Mask'¹³ and its title fits the image in a way.

I have no problem with using my work in different contexts, like a book jacket. But there are important questions for all our practices: What kind of images do we deliver? How do we want people to look at our work? How do we want to impact the way people approach our work? And how do we address the way in which it is read? These are all areas, which should not be neglected. In communication you're communicating something, but you're also establishing a channel. Both contribute to how people will understand a message and how they're supposed to see it and both should be part of a critical practice.

KD: I think that your point about work or practice that comments upon the way it's made, is slightly different in the communications environment. In a fine art context one often picks materials that best suit one's ideas. In the communications environment one has to do this slightly in reverse. One might find oneself doing other practices that might not necessarily directly fit one's own practice, such as designing a book cover or getting involved in interior design. So I think the point is, how can one make the most of the materials, or the way of doing things, but also be true to what one's ideas are in making them?

JR: It's like setting up the fine artist as researcher, who is challenging the media. The applied artist then takes it on from the point that they have reached and uses the result to communicate or make communication within the world. It's almost like setting up theoretical science against applied science.

KD: Jonathan, it sounds like there is another George Hanson there.

¹² Michael Schwab, *Remember Me 4*, 2000

¹³ "Behind a Mask" by Louisa M. Alcott, Doris Lessing (Foreword), Hesperus Press, London: 2004