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In an extended essay for *London Grip* (2008), artist and art historian **Ruth Rosengarten** starts with a visit to the **Hayward Gallery** in London to explore how its director **Ralph Rugoff** curates an exhibition that enquires into what painting makes of photography.

## The Painting of Modern Life: Contemporary Photography and the Everyday by Ruth Rosengarten



Johannes Kahrs, *La Revolution Permanente*, 2000.  
Saatchi Gallery, London. DACS 2007.  
Courtesy of the artist & Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp.

**Writing in 1863, Baudelaire proposed** a novel programme for the "painter of modern life", one in which the grand subjects of history and myth were replaced by "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent". Based on his observation of the practice of the now lesser-known artist Constantin Guys, Baudelaire's famous text champions an art that focuses on the present, a form of visual reportage that incorporates not only "battlefields strewn with the debris of death" or the pomp and display of official ceremonies, but also the absorption of the individual into the crowds of the new urban centres, or the seeming trivia of fashion: from this he marvelously extracts the "poetry that resides in its historical envelope". Yet because he still wished to link the transient and circumstantial to the "eternal and immutable" that was more traditionally the mandate of aesthetics, Baudelaire was suspicious of the new medium of photography. A century later, owing to its very distinct material properties – its unique representational status with regard to the real – it was of course photography itself that was most intimately linked to "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent".

*The Painting of Modern Life*, an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London and then travelling to the Castello di Rivoli near Turin, is an ambitious endeavour to explore how Baudelaire's project might be considered today. Curated by Ralph Rugoff, the American director of the Hayward Gallery in London, it finds its point of departure in the notion that photography took over from painting not only as the outstanding vehicle of pictorial mimesis, but also as the principle medium for the representation of modernity. Indeed, as this exhibition makes explicit, photography became the favoured medium for imaging a modernity already mediated by photography itself. Of all Baudelaire's hyperbolic, romanticised prototypes of modernity, (the rag-picker, the soldier, the dandy, the prostitute), it was, as Walter Benjamin later recognised, the *flanêur*, the idle man-about-town, dreaming and window-shopping, that was to become the icon of alienated humanity on the brink of commodity capitalism, paving the way for the first embodiments of a celebrity culture enamoured of brand shopping, and wrapping its own transience in glamour. What better than a photograph – and Andy Warhol was the first to grasp this – to capture such evanescence, and grant it, through that very capture, a kind of banal grace?

Rugoff turns to painters whose attention to the social textures of urban milieus is conveyed not only by scavenging photographs for raw data, but also by absorbing the conventions of photography – the sleek, deadpan, un-belaboured look of its physical surface – in a bid to portray consumer society to itself. In both Pop Art and Photorealism, in the work of artists like Richard Hamilton, Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, Malcom Morley, Vija Celmins, Richard Artschwager, and, a little later, David Hockney, Franz Gertsch and Robert Bechtle, a distinctly contemporary subject matter is granted iconic status as painting absorbs photography: a "fast" medium becomes "slow", and in that retardation, a whole series of givens, especially those clustering around the testimonial nature of photography, are sabotaged.



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Malcolm Morley, *On Deck*, 1966.  
Magna on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
Reproduction from catalogue *The Painting of Modern Life*,  
The Hayward Gallery, London, October-December 2007, and  
Castello di Rivoli, Turin, February – May 2008. (Hayward Publishing, 2007).

The ordinary becomes epic – if perhaps ironically so – as the transient is framed and materialised by a medium embedded in its own historic trajectory. More than a meditation on modern life, this exhibition is an exploration of the ways painting ennobles photography and grants it permanence. For Richter, for example, the act of painting rescues photography from an invisibility rooted in its status as index, be that status inherent (as Barthes would have it), or socially assigned (as Bourdieu would have it). “Perhaps because I’m sorry for the photograph,” he writes in his *Notes, 1964-5*, “because it has such a miserable existence even though it is such a perfect picture, I would like to make it valid, make it visible, just *make it*.”

Following Richter, Warhol, Celmins and Morley, contemporary painters, Rugoff’s project suggests, often choose to paint their subjects not from “life”, but from photographic sources, whether personal snapshots, or images available in the media or on the internet. The intense bombardment of the modern subject by photographic imagery, and the commonplace availability of means of image-capture on digital cameras and mobile telephones, has meant that photographic sources have not only proliferated exponentially, but also become more casual, less composed. Whether losing or underlining the accidental quality of the source photograph, what such paintings invariably invoke is a sense of alienation, in part owing to the extraction of the painted “model” from the exchange of gazes that characterise a living relationship (model/painter). A fascination by some artists, following Richter, (Johannes Khars, Judith Eisler, Eberhard Havekost) with the overlap between abstraction and the conventions of photographic realism, is pitted against looser, more painterly renditions of the contrasts between shade and light that constitute a photographic image, in paintings that nevertheless maintain the flatness and the informal nonchalance of the photographic referent (Martin Kippenberger, Luc Tuymans, Peter Doig, Marlene Dumas, Wilhelm Sasnal).



**Left:** Judith Eisler, *Smoker (Cruel Story of Youth)*, 2003, oil on canvas. Collection of Nina and Michael Lynne.  
**Right:** Luc Tuymans, *De Wandeling (The Walk)*, 1991. Oil on canvas, private collection, Tervuren, Belgium.  
Both reproductions from catalogue of *The Painting of Modern Life*,  
Hayward Gallery, London, October-December 2007, and  
Castello di Rivoli, Turin, February – May 2008. (Hayward Publishing, 2007).

In furnishing painters with the image as readymade, photography has also sponsored in painting a kind of purposeful sloppiness, an apparently careless de-skilling (Elizabeth Peyton or, not in the exhibition, but equally apposite, Karen Kilimnick, Chantal Joffe, Stella Vine), whose emotional pitch invokes (even if to clash with) the inanity of the celebrity photograph it mimics.



Elizabeth Peyton, *Arsenal (Prince Harry)*, 1997.  
Oil on board. Private collection, London, and Sadie Coles HQ, London.  
Reproduction from catalogue *The Painting of Modern Life*,  
The Hayward Gallery, London, October-December 2007, and  
Castello di Rivoli, Turin, February – May 2008. (Hayward Publishing, 2007).

Making my way through this seductive Hayward Gallery exhibition, I gradually came to feel that it was unable to decide about the nature of its content. Was it asking what kind of relationship may now be forged between a technology apparently threatened by its own obsolescence (as the technologies of

mechanical reproduction are rapidly substituted by digitisation, and as the dark-room gives way to the computer as the site of image management and production, the photochemical procedures of true photo-graphy become redundant) and a medium considered by some to be already long dead? (Famously, the French painter Paul Delaroche greeted the invention of photography with the proclamation, "From today, painting is dead.") This question is entirely pertinent, if one is to argue, as I would, for the continued vitality and relevance of both painting and photography, while allowing the epistemological ambiguity that has arisen between them over the past few decades to vex our received ideas about both. Or is it exploring the tropes through which "modern life" might be represented in painting today? Modern life – modernity – is itself, as French sociologist Henri Lefebvre has influentially shown, simultaneous with and connected to the quotidian – as he puts it, "the one crowning and concealing the other, revealing and veiling it" – even if the two are apparently opposed (the quotidian being humble and taken for granted, the modern brilliant and transient). If, as Rugoff's show suggests, contemporary painting cannot deal with issues of contemporaneity except through deferring to photography, what is the relationship of photography itself not only to the contemporary, but also to the commonplace, the everyday?

While early photography styled – and stylised – its objects by borrowing some of the genres and conventions of painting, photography's privileged relationship with the real – its grounding in the empirical – has meant that photographs early on began to perform as metaphors for the processes of perception itself. The unprecedented referentiality of a photograph, its status as a trace of the real and its apparent transparency as a sign, granted it a literalism that has, in many ways, proved burdensome. It is that literalism, that empiricism, that has come under scrutiny in the last few decades, giving rise to widespread theoretical elaboration, and also to a photography that, in acknowledging its structural status as a copy, has not only facilitated the quotation of the original, but, in Rosalind Krauss's succinct formulation, "splintered the supposed unity of the original 'itself' into nothing but a series of quotations." Such processing, which first emerged in the 1960s, also the starting date of the exhibition at the Hayward, released photography from its empirical, or uniquely documentary, moorings to become, still in Krauss's formulation, a "theoretical object" through which to explore not nature, but "the reinvention of nature as 'myth'". The second nature of the photographic sign hides, in other words, behind a mythical structure that wraps up denotation in a connotative or rhetorical code and inserts photography in discourse, in ideology; it also suppresses from sight those very operations of history and politics that frame photographs and grant them meaning. Frequently, though by no means ubiquitously aligned to text, photography as a theoretical object distresses the naturalization of photographic meaning – that is to say, photography as it has come to be deployed by conceptual and post-conceptual artists from the 1960s and 70s on, from Joseph Kosuth, Dan Graham, Marcel Broodthaers and Martha Rosler, to Victor Burgin, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Allan Sekula, Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski, Jo Spence, Lorna Simpson, Gillian Wearing, James Coleman and countless others.



Sophie Calle, *The Chromatic Diet*, 1998.  
Extract from a series of seven photographs and menus,  
courtesy Galerie Emanuelle Perotin, Paris.  
For six days, Calle ate a diet of food of a single colour.  
Reproduction from Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*,  
Thames and Hudson, London, 2004.



Gillian Wearing, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say*, 1992-3.  
Series of C-prints. Reproduction from brochure of exhibition *Gillian Wearing*,  
Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela, 2001.

But equally, and perhaps paradoxically, once excised from its purely denotative, empirical function – and this had already happened in surrealist photographs, or those of Alexander Rodchenko and Laszlo Moholy Nagy, or the Dada photomontages of John Heartfield and Hannah Höch – photography came to capture the everyday in all its bewildering perceptual stimulation and strange detail. This was in part because the camera – the photographic eye – could be positioned in places that could not be occupied by embodied human agents, and because shutter speed could freeze an action that was not perceivable by the naked eye. Similarly, editing and montage allowed for a kaleidoscopic range and juxtaposition of frames, providing a material correlative to, rather than a mimetic representation of, the perceptual stimulation undergone by the city dweller; while cinematography allowed for a slowing down of natural movement, and again, the capture of what was not normally within the scope of the visible. Walter Benjamin recognized and theorized this as early as the 1930s, in his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. It seems that the trade-off for the loss of aura of an original (the “plurality of copies” that, Benjamin observes, replaces the idea of a “unique existence”) was that, unlike painting, photography could reach not only individual members of an elite, but mass audiences, while representing the perceptual experiences of the dramatically new environments of early twentieth century cities. Furthermore, it could not only replicate a perceptible slice of life, but also deliver the shock of an encounter with an optical unconscious, with something that the naked eye cannot see but that nevertheless resonates as a truth.

For Benjamin, the “hidden details of familiar objects” were made available by stills and moving films (the close-up and slow motion respectively introduced such novel perceptions) in ways that were akin to the theories expounded in Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, that vast field of insignificance that Freud undertook to reclaim. This work, as Benjamin recognized, “isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception.” Such details, alive with new significance, provoke a perceptual disturbance or disorientation, uncovering uncanny equivalences, the likes of which we find in the works of surrealist (or proto-surrealist) photographers such as Karl Blossfeldt, Man Ray, J. A. Boiffard or Raoul Ubac, equivalences that, however obliquely, still take as axiomatic the empirical foundations of photography.



Jacques-André Boiffard, *Untitled*.  
From Big Toe series for *Documents*, 1929. Reproduction from online source,  
[http://www.sauer-thompson.com/junkforcode/archives/2004/02/surrealism\\_photography.html](http://www.sauer-thompson.com/junkforcode/archives/2004/02/surrealism_photography.html)

However, with the idea that “photography” describes a speculative or theoretical object rather than simply a material one, thus encompassing not only photochemical procedures but also the digital ones that simulate them, we are confronted with details that, more strangely still, might attest not to an underlying desire, but to pure randomness and lack of meaning. Such objects operate as surface without depth; and what, better than photography, to grant such surface the seductive sheen – and the transience – of a commodity?



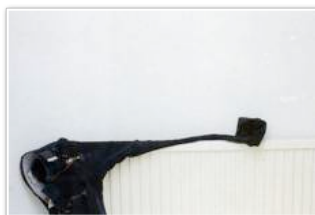
**Left:** Richard Wentworth, *Genoa, Italy*, 2004, unique colour photograph, courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.  
**Right:** Gabriel Orozco, *Rolling Life’s Hand Line*, 2003, C-type print, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.  
Both works reproduced from Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2005.

It is difficult to find images that so sharply focus on the meaningless, the lack of connectedness between one thing and another, as those by Wolfgang Tillmans. His photographs, widely varying in scale and subject matter, avoid the habitual, fetishizing trappings of gallery display by mixing framed and unframed photographs of diverse genres, simulating the casually contingent way that people use snapshots in albums and on walls: as mnemonic traces or triggers. While, for instance, there is a

sense of the delicious tactility and sculptural seductiveness of prosaic objects (furniture, drain covers, domestic appliances) in the photographs of Richard Wentworth, or a haunting, allusive delicacy in the intense close-ups of Gabriel Orozco, Tillmans excavates the everyday for the almost disembodied, careless beauty of the overlooked or unimportant. "If one thing matters, everything matters" is the resonant title of the publication – an overview of his work conceived, designed and compiled by Tillmans himself – accompanying his show at the Tate Gallery in London in 2003. Both the title and the layout of the book in small thumbnail-type reproductions, set down Tillmans's programme for an apparently undiscerning eye, cataloguing the human and natural world in all its phenomenological plenitude.

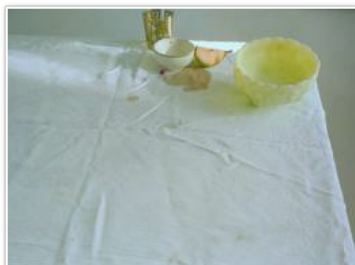


Wolfgang Tillmans, *Strümpfe*, C-type print, 2002, courtesy Maureen Paley. Reproduced from Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2005.



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Trousers on Radiator*, 1999. Reproduced from the catalogue *If one thing matters, everything matters*, Tate Publishing, London, 2003.

Paradoxically, underlying this appearance of the casual, spontaneous and meaningless, is a pristine sense of abstract composition that matches that of the most diehard modernist. An even more heightened sense of design underlies the photographs of Laura Letinsky, where, almost nacreous or phosphorescent in the exquisite lighting, the casually discarded remains of meals (an orange peel, a crumpled up napkin, a plate with drying gravy) announce the precarious and the fugitive, while simultaneously invoking the arrested baroque splendour and moral intent of seventeenth-century painting.



Laura Letinsky, *I Did Not Remember I Had Forgotten: Untitled no. 63*, 2002. Digital C-print, courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery. Reproduced in Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2005.

But if Letinsky and Tillmans' work evinces an underlying design, linked to an iconographic purpose in the case of Letinsky, detached from such purpose in the case of Tillmans, other artists over the past three decades have likewise focussed on the non-eventful, while eradicating the last sign of purposeful design or composition. The bathos of such a strategy might be compared with, or played off against, three interweaving strands of contemporary photography that all draw upon the everyday: first, the hyperbolized performance of ethnic and gender identity in works of artists like Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura, Lorna Simpson, Collier Schor or Catherine Opie;



Yasumasa Morimura, *Elizabeth Taylor 2*, 1996.  
The photograph shows the male Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura as Elizabeth Taylor.  
From online source <http://membres.lycos.fr/morimura/>

second, the observation or appropriation of the familiar or banal in the work of artists with a deconstructive social/political agenda, such as Martha Rosler, Victor Burgin, Jo Spence, Adrian Piper or Tracey Moffatt; and third, the construction of quasi-scientific classificatory systems in accordance with what Hal Foster has called an "archival impulse", a drive to archive the ordinary, as in the work of Marcel Broodthaers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Christian Boltanski, Sophie Calle, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye, or, again, Martha Rosler. In the works of all these albeit diverse artists, one finds an eschewal of the spectacular (they focus, metaphorically at least, on week days rather than feast days; the plain and the straightforward rather than the extraordinary), a turning away from that "decisive moment" that, following Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa, came to characterize a long tradition of photojournalistic photography.

Here, perhaps, lies the difference between "photography as art", or "art photography" as it was to become, and "photography as theoretical object": photography in the hands of artists who harness it for its conceptual richness - its alignment with the real rendering it particularly interesting as a representational object. The effect, if not the declared aim, of such work is to destabilize the expectations generated by the medium itself. The documentary or evidential power of the camera – the way it seems to volunteer as a witness – while continuing to be embraced by some (Nan Goldin, Beat Streuli, Richard Billingham or Boris Mikhailov), is radically spurned by artists whose take on the everyday purposefully breaks with a positivist tradition.



**Left:** Beat Streuli, *Osaka 03 66/11*, 2003, C-print, courtesy Gallery Eva Presenhuber. Reproduced in Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2005.  
**Right:** Nan Goldin's self-portrait after being beaten by her lover, *Nan After Being Beaten*, C-print, 1984. Reproduced from *Nan Goldin: The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Aperture, New York, 1986.

Such a tradition is frequently invoked in theoretical explorations of the political order of the image. While in his critique of the practices of everyday life, and with his assumption that naturalistic photography has a privileged claim on ideological persuasion, Henri Lefebvre advocates the class-conscious photographic document as the true presentation of the "facts", from Walter Benjamin to Susan Sontag, John Berger, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula and Victor Burgin, artists and theorists alike have been unsettled by the ways in which photographs without verbal moorings (captions, texts) become detached from their political and historical contexts and, more importantly still, that photography takes otherness (in work, war, sex, suffering) and shapes it into spectacle.

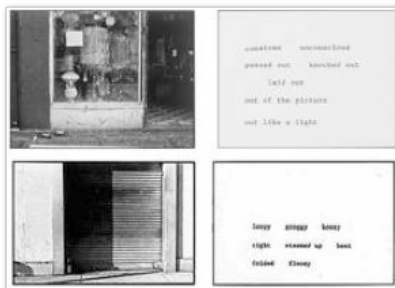
Perhaps, then, the most disconcerting of contemporary photographs of everyday life is that which severs its links from the documentary tradition at the point where it seems most closely to resemble it; manipulates and resists truth value where it seems most trenchantly to declare it. It also, through artfully feigning candour, detaches itself from the manifestly spectacular or dramatic. Frequently, this is effected through the imaging of spaces devoid of visible material human presence, as though to picture the human would be immediately to ensnare the photograph in overloaded psychological or social meanings. (Tableau pictures – pictures that, like a *tableau vivant*, seem to distil the fundamentals of a narrative – like those of Philip-Lorca diCorcia, though cinematic in their acknowledged artifice, play upon just such nuance). In some cases, as in the work of Candida Höfer or Andreas Gursky, the result is of a breathtaking aestheticism.



Left: Andreas Gursky, *Rimini*. 2003.  
 C-print, courtesy Monica Sprüth/Philomene Magers.  
 Reproduced in Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2005.  
 Right: Candida Höfer, *Teatro Nacional de São Carlos, Lisboa I*, 2005.  
 C-print, courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York.  
 Reproduced from online source,  
[http://www.artnet.com/Artists/ArtistHomePage.aspx?artist\\_id=691911&page\\_tab=Artworks\\_for\\_sale](http://www.artnet.com/Artists/ArtistHomePage.aspx?artist_id=691911&page_tab=Artworks_for_sale)

In other cases, however – I am thinking, for example, of the work of Jean-Marc Bustamante or Thomas Struth – we see the strong residue of a photo-conceptualism that owes itself both to documentary or photojournalistic practice, and to the pedestrian opportunism of the snapshot, the dull amateurism of ordinary citizens for whom cameras have become adjuncts to all experience. Rosalind Krauss speaks of the brutish look of such amateurism in relation to work from the 1960s – Ed Ruscha, Dan Graham, Douglas Huebler – whose photographs have a less glossy look than, say, Struth's, but we find it as early as 1928 in Jacques-André Boiffard's photographs for André Breton's *Nadja*: photos, that, like Eugene Atget's, capture not an event, but the place of an event, only in Boiffard's case, of a quite startling banality. A similar banality was later frequently to be captured by Martha Rosler.

While in the 1930s, what Walter Benjamin admired in Atget's repeated returns to the empty streets of Paris was the sense of a place drenched with un-described incident, an emptied "scene of crime", Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Representational Systems* (1974) is, like Boiffard's Paris, purposefully deadpan. Rosler's aim in the Bowery project was to highlight something else that Benjamin had recognized, and that is photography's inability to represent the specificity of social relationships. Taking as her object a street in Manhattan famous for the drunk and unemployed who have made their home there, Rosler fixes her gaze on uninhabited porches, windows and doorways that disclose nothing; not even a hint of maudlin sympathy or even of faux-sociological objectification. Simply nothing. Meaning is garnered from juxtaposition of image with associative texts in which Rosler has typed single words that are, as she puts it, "epithets, metaphors, about drunkenness and drunks" in what she considers to be, at least in part, "a poetry project". Here, as in many of Rosler's other works (for instance her extended series *Rights of Passage* of the mid-1990s) the blandness of the image serves a moral or ideological purpose, as a route for querying our access to history.



Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-5).  
 From online source <http://home.earthlink.net/~navva/photo/index.html>

Rosler's strategies, her use of the principle of collage/montage, or contrariwise, her deployment of the deadpan aspect of amateur photography, are particularly noteworthy in the context of a burgeoning interest in the spectacular possibilities offered by digital means of image production and manipulation, means that allow for a seamless fusion of real photographed objects and those generated or synthesized by the computer. The recently emerged technologies of image-making have, for many, presupposed the dismantling of the traditional claims for the truth value of photography. But Rosler argues, both explicitly in her critical writings, and implicitly in her practice as an artist, about the extent to which digital image production draws upon the received conventions and codes of older media. For her, the inherent manipulability of digital images should be seen not as heralding the end of photography as we know it, but as participating of a longer history of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century mass media, a history of the mass production and consumption of images as commodities.

It is true that the technologies that make virtual reality possible have also engendered speculative propositions about the nature of images, for virtual reality represents, ultimately, an aspiration not only to dissolve the testimonial nature of photographs, but, more radically, to remove any material interface between vision and image. And yet, ironically, numerous artists working today with "photography", or with its digital simulacra, return precisely (if ironically or circuitously) to that which had defined an older, "purer" photography, with its implied evidential status and its subsequent generation of stable meanings imbricated in a particular, fixed viewing position. This is what is thought of as "photography after photography". Their works query the rhetoric of the image precisely at the point where they seem to elude such rhetoric, through their own apparent contingency, the look of a transparent sign.

We see this visual trope artfully worked by artists who laboriously construct the setting for an

apparently casual photograph. Thomas Demand's photographs of unremarkable, empty architectural interiors and inanimate objects are the end product of a lengthy procedure of model building, with Styrofoam, paper and card. The building of a naturalistic, life-size set whose only end is to be photographed, warps the expectations of immediacy of naturalistic photography. Sometimes, Demand leaves small flaws in his constructions – a tear in the paper, or some such gap – as a means of signalling the artifice.



Thomas Demand, *Salon (Parlour)*, 1997.  
C-print, courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro Gallery, London, and 303 Gallery, New York.  
Reproduction from Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2004.

Two other photographers, Anne Hardy and James Casebere, also construct sets in the studio: discarded objects in the case of Hardy, or empty institutional spaces in miniature in the case of Casebere. Their photographs, while similarly seeming to be the outcome of a casual and indeed random photographic gesture, are in fact carefully staged performances of the everyday.

Foremost among such constructed performances of banality is the influential work of Jeff Wall, whose large-scale photographs, back-lit in boxes more generally associated with the display of advertisements, not only mimic the snatched, pseudo-aleatory moment of the film still, but also self-consciously don the mantle of "painting of modern life". Cinematography and painting inform his work more significantly than the history of photography. Aiding him in his bid to break away from the assumed aesthetics of photography, is not only the intellectual baggage of photo-conceptualism but also a conjunction of technologies, older and newer, not least, the large-format camera and artificial lighting equipment that permit him to achieve the fine-grained, brilliant sharpness of focus that characterises his works. Carefully lit and staged to simulate the most un-rehearsed and contingent of scenes – a man making a racist gesture on the streets, people picnicking under the overpass of a motorway, milk squirting from a packet in the hands of someone slouched on the ground – these photographs, like the slickest of oil paintings, hide the traces of their own facture. In other words, in abandoning the flash of a decisive moment, they also erase the evidence of their own making. Places, scenes, figures: these are all recorded in painstaking, time-consuming individual shots and then assembled, either by traditional photographic means or digitally, to form, within individual frames, composite pictorial entities. Wall also spends a long time rehearsing the performers (usually amateurs rather than professional actors) who act to his directorial prompts. The whole is put together with such ineffable insouciance, that we feel ourselves to be witnesses to the haphazardness and apparent lack of design of what we consider to be the everyday.



Jeff Wall, *Mimic*, 1982.  
Transparency in light-box.  
Reproduced from online source <http://www.utata.org/salon/19585.php>

There is here, then, a reversal, whereby the fast time of photography is converted into the protracted, slow time of painting. "Part of the poetry of traditional painting", Wall has said, "is the way it created the illusion that the painting depicted a single moment. In photography, there is always an actual moment – the moment the shutter is released. Photography is based in that sense of



instantaneousness. Painting, on the other hand, created a beautiful and complex illusion of instantaneousness." Computer montage, Wall acknowledges, has erased the barrier between the time of painting and that of photography: the composite time of his photographs is closer to the illusion of instantaneity of a painting than to Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment". In "photography after the age of photography", in other words, the photograph may well approximate the condition of painting, not in its appearance, but structurally. The relationship with painting, in Wall's work, is frequently underlined by specific allusions to (often canonical) works (Delacroix, Poussin, Hokusai, Dürer, Goya).



Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind*, 1993. Transparency in light-box. Made over numerous sessions, the work recreates a scene from a print by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese artist, Hokusai. Reproduced from online source <http://www.utata.org/salon/19585.php>



Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, 1979. Transparency in light-box. The work recreates Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergere*. Reproduced from online source <http://courses.washington.edu/hypertext/cgi-bin/12.228.185.206/html/viewer/shooter.html>

In his avowed interest in transforming Baudelaire's "painter of modern life" into someone in command of contemporary media, where "painting" is understood as more than just a condition of the medium, it is not surprising that Wall frequently leans formally and compositionally on Manet, whose work, many believe, more than that of Constantin Guys, is described by Baudelaire's famous essay.

Wall's re-assembled, carefully casual scenes – the staged but seemingly naturalistic photograph – unlike the tableau photography of other artists who are profoundly influenced by painting (Cindy Sherman, Justine Kurland, Dinos and Jake Chapman), explore social and political themes by deferring not to the overtly political or the histrionic or the hyperbolic, but to the unassuming. While recognizing the extent to which the singularity of an everyday event reverberates with social significance, he is also intrigued with the social embeddedness of the non-event: "With [the] notion of the everyday came the idea of the unspecial people, the unchosen people. The unchosen is the more profound condition", he has observed. The amateur, whose photographic practice Wall craftily simulates, becomes the figure *par excellence* of a kind of indecisiveness – better, a non-decidability – that is profoundly linked to what we think of as the everyday, the way it absorbs the meaningful into the flow of the trivial.

Importantly, what characterises the "everyday" in the theoretical speculations of writers as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre or Michel de Certeau, is the idea of an urban condition, one that presupposes both work and leisure, set against the background of consumption. But more than anything else, for Wall, for whom the imagery of the Painting of Modern Life is a declared programme, the concept of the everyday conjures up an idea of proximity and familiarity: it is the opposite of the faraway or exotic, the antithesis of the unusual or the extraordinary.

Wall also appropriates from Baudelaire's programme, and in particular from Benjamin's famous and influential reading of it, the notion of healing – the idea of a potential for redemption – that is linked to history, linked to the idea of the past as citable, but especially, linked to the romantic notion of art as a means of making "the weight of shame, amnesia and failure" palatable. If, for Baudelaire, redemption in modern painting resides in that bit of permanence that underlies the random and the contingent, for Wall, as Thierry de Duve suggests, it is *photography* that grants the painting of modern life "a *redeeming* transparency." What we see in the work of Jeff Wall are photographs not of the everyday, but of the staging, via painting and also via cinema, of history itself as it unfurls in the banality of the quotidian. Wall's works are, in other words, images of the meeting of the painterly and the cinematic within the photographic, in ways that dramatise the crisis of photography, not only as mimetic art, but also as political tool. How, they ask, does the apparently small and insignificant

moment function as a signifier of the social relations and psychic structures of which it is a symptom? How is the ordinary historical? In the age of digital reproduction, the quintessential painter of modern life – the imager of the everyday – has become the person who most adroitly asks these questions by manipulating the very concept of the photographic.

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