

# The Absent Origin

An email conversation

John Hunting and Paul Litherland

November 2014



From: Paul Litherland <email>  
Subject: intentism  
Date: October 10, 2014 at 6:59:02 PM GMT-4  
To: John Hunting <email>

Hi John,

I am referring to this concept in work I am making for the upcoming exhibition at Concordia.. If you are in the mood to read it and have a chat, I'd be very happy to do that with you, as much as I am able at any rate

Hope you are well otherwise

xo

Paul

[http://www.culturewars.org.uk/index.php/site/article/intentism\\_the\\_resurrection\\_of\\_the\\_author/](http://www.culturewars.org.uk/index.php/site/article/intentism_the_resurrection_of_the_author/)

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: RE: intentism  
Date: October 11, 2014 at 9:51:57 AM GMT-4  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

Hey Paul,

Its pretty long and I don't have time to read it but sure let's talk. My first reaction however is that unless the work is about 'intentism' it would be odd to put this in an artist statement to describe the work.

I'm not sure what is at stake here in wanting to save the idea of artistic intent from the clutches of postmodernism.

Artists have intentions, sure, and they are more or less clear about what they are doing (it all depends on the artist), but the value of the work is often thought (correctly I think) to have less to do with what the artist intended (or what he or she thinks about it) and more to do with the result, the value of which will depend entirely upon the context of its reception.

If you are looking at the work from a historical point of view, what the artist intended or thinks about it may have little or no relevance to its

value. And if someone stages a 'happening' over which they don't want to have any control, to reduce what happens to the intentions of the artist is to not say very much, actually it is to miss the point. Accidents similarly are not reducible to intentions because they are valued; what is valued is the accident, not what ever sense we may want to make of it after the fact. There is also art work that challenges the limits of meaning (or better the meaning of meaning) and once again to reduce this project to intentions is to miss the limitations of the intentional.

But it all depends on what you think the value/telos of making art is in the first place and it all depends on the work you are looking at.

As I understand it you have taken photos of the backs of art work, the intent being is to show up that the value of art works is inseparable from their historical and broadly speaking cultural locations. What is potentially interesting here (I think) is you don't show the 'work' (is that right?) suggesting I think that the cultural context in fact exhausts its meaning/value. Not only is the intent of the artist irrelevant but the occasion of seeing it (often thought to be irreducible) is also questioned if not dismissed.

Not sure how intentism can help you here, in fact it might contradict your intent? But this is all conjecture...I haven't seen your work or read the article!!

later j

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From: Paul Litherland <email>

Subject: Re: intentism

Date: October 12, 2014 at 1:07:12 AM GMT-4

To: John Hunting <email>

Hey John,

Thanks for writing back on this. I shouldn't have said that I am referring to or responding to intentism directly. I should have said that I encountered the concept of intentism after getting this project started and am interested in thinking about it as it relates to this project.

Hmmm. It was my impression that the dialogue isn't about discounting

critical points of view formed independently of the artists intention, just that if the artist's intention is available, it shouldn't be discounted. Otherwise I understand your comment to mean that the meaning of a work is created by everyone except the artist.

In the case of me photographing the backs of other artists paintings. I am being much more selfish than you give me credit for! I am way more interested in the idea of where the value of my work lies. I am interested in how the value of something changes when it's copied. In my case I'm seeing if any of the value of the original work transfers to mine. Also seeing if the attention I'm giving to the back of the original changes the way the original is seen.

cheers  
Paul

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: RE: intentism  
Date: October 12, 2014 at 12:53:44 PM GMT-4  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

hey, the article begins with Barthes' famous "the author is dead" which it wants to challenge. The debate hinges on whether or not you think "subjectivity ever coincides with itself" such that you could be one with, the same as, your intentions. Derrida, Foucault and others challenged this unitary/self-same subject which they attributed to Husserl and other phenomenologists. Levinas is on the same page as Derrida on this; the subject wrongly assumes that it is self-same, that its actions or even that consciousness itself ever coincides with itself. Presumably intentism wants to bring back the subject (as coincident with itself) in some way but I'm not sure why or how so?

How does the value of something change when it is copied? For Levinas everything that is presumed to exist (to have a being) is already a copy of itself. Think of being as a verb. To 'be' would be a be-ing. But for a thing to persist in be-ing (for consciousness) it must copy itself in an on-going way, or already be a trace of itself. Anyway the point is that there is no original anything. So your question "how does the value of a thing change when it is copied?" is already complex I think.

Drawing attention to the idea of the original and copy in art, in Sherrie Levine for example, has been intended to deflate the very idea of the original. So that is one thing that can result from copying. But of course quotation has been used as a trope to critique originality but also to honour the original in some new way. So I guess one question for you would be what kind of value do you think might be transferred from the 'original' by photographing its backside? Once the original is thrown into question, however, it is no longer clear what you are actually 'copying'...it would all depend on your assumptions about 'the original' and about originality per se. I would assume, to repeat what I said, that by photographing the backside and by asking us to reevaluate the 'original' from that point of view, that your intent would be to situate originality per se in some discursive/historical context. Given we cannot see the work I don't know what else could be at stake really?

As far as what might be 'transferred' I'm not exactly sure what you are thinking about, but it would depend again on what value you are assuming the 'original' has (to be transferred) presumably as 'art' or as an already 'valued art object'. As a viewer I would assume that the exercise is designed to invite viewers to question the whole idea of originality as well as how it is that we value things in the first place (given, perhaps, that everything is already a copy).

later, J

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: psychological and formal readings?  
Date: October 14, 2014 at 9:44:51 AM GMT-4  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

Hey ,

the new site is great! your commentary is often 'psychological' in orientation (it always surprises me because you often seem to want a more 'postmodern'/self-reflexive agenda or practice) ...and so I thought of another reading of the 'backs of work' project...too obvious perhaps, that you are interested in the underside of things...that which is not seen...the inner you?

Then there is a more formalist register sometimes (beautiful garbage) and I thought the backs might function like abstract works for you. How are they being 'framed'? what size? guess I will have to see them....tightly cropped and life size might have a strange spatial/mirroring effect, putting the viewer in the wall so to speak, inviting us to look for ourselves beyond the painting....but we are absent. This would seem to put the viewer in a kind of 'impossible viewing position' - but it would only really work if the reference is to the 'original' /frontal viewing position, so I'm thinking it would have to be cropped tightly and life size. Seeing but not seeing, the viewing subject there and not there; once again this is a self non-coincident with its viewing position. This engages me more than ideas about the status of the copy or the presumed historicity of things although they are not unconnected. Leanne and I saw similar work in NYC, (the guy had photographed the backs of paintings but also had them leaning against the wall so we could only see the back) and this was the context in which they were put. I am more phenomenologically inclined (although Levinas leaves the Husserl's account of phenomena behind).

I'm around until next Fri...when is your show?

later j

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From: Paul Litherland <email>  
Subject: Re: psychological and formal readings?  
Date: October 14, 2014 at 11:59:45 AM GMT-4  
To: John Hunting <email>

Thanks for your comments on the web site. Don's been doing an amazing job.

You're talking about Vik Muniz work, the ones leaning on the wall.

I have stretched the photos over canvas frames and so they have a dimension to them. Yes they are life size and fit the frame. I am interested in a state of "wanting to be" as opposed to just "being" . The masquerade idea keeps reappearing in the way I approach things. I want there to be a bit of insecurity about whether or not my work is real art, or just an illusion.

xo  
Paul

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: RE: psychological and formal readings?  
Date: October 14, 2014 at 2:05:05 PM GMT-4  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

Ranciere had a funny way of putting this (or something like this): he says people talk about art like art is a person named Art...I think that is funny...he says there is no such thing...only “distributions and redistributions of the sensible” is the way he puts it...anyway “operations” “exercises” in a field of potentialities...but as I understand it there could be no ‘real art’ because art is not a “something”. Again this is part of what happens when there is no ‘origin’. I like the idea of masquerade not because of what it hides but because of its investment in surfaces. Your photo of the fur coat comes to mind. The work (photo) as a surface, expressing thereby another surface (fur), but surfaces are not origins, they can be read alternatively as materials (that have certain affects). One could also take a photo of a painting (the front) and stretch the photo over a frame. (a hypersurface?)

Life size, stretched and fitting the frame sounds great! ...a bunch of other associations for me. Wrappings? A camp investment in the pseudo or facsimile? A pseudo ‘object’? Impoverished? I can see how you might want to think of a photograph as an illusion but I don’t get how it could be illusory art or not real art; for me if someone says something is “art” it is, (sky diving, for example) only, paradoxically, we generally don’t have a clue what that means anyway, that is how it ought to be experienced or read, what its value is etc. Sorry but I guess I don’t understand either what you mean by “wanna be” as opposed to just “being”...do you mean like “wanting to be a man” ?

Stretching the photographic reproduction of the back....a pseudo object that prohibits us from seeing it?...something interesting going on here but I cannot put my finger on it...pretending to be something but not knowing what it is actually that you are playing at...funny...that sounds like a self....or a relationship!!

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From: Paul Litherland <email>  
Subject: Re: psychological and formal readings?  
Date: October 14, 2014 at 11:34:00 PM GMT-4  
To: John Hunting <email>

That would make it easier to think of art as a particular person. I guess that that happens in religious contexts all the time.  
Yes wanting to be a man, but just finding it impossible to actually accept any particular statement confirming that. The impossible pseudo object.  
John, you're amazing.

I was thinking I would like to read some version of Pinocchio, the original is much darker than the Disney version. Apparently Collodi, the author, had the original version ending with Pinocchio being hung for his crimes. He added another number of chapters to make it a more acceptable children's book.

Just wondering if you want to get together soon.

I have a job in the morning but will be at my studio in the aft, don't know what you are up to.

cheers  
Paul

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: dis-place-ments  
Date: October 15, 2014 at 10:43:46 AM GMT-4  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

I could pass by your studio at some point...not today however Paul...

I would say "man" is an empty concept, like "art" but also like "perception" "the visual"..."John" ..."reality" ... they are not just "open to interpretation" they confound "interpretation"....

in this respect art is like psychotherapy in that it occasions the mobilization of our beliefs, values and feelings only to question them....and above all to question what it means to question...the last point is important be-

cause the mobilization of questions may NOT be the point...for example art can be religious but it can also be simply entertaining...only a certain intellectualism requires a certain self-reflexivity (the artist statement!!).

an impossible pseudo object? I intended only that we believe in things we have made up without actually understanding what it is we have made....a paradox because we believe in things without having grounds to justify the belief. If that sounds like a religion it also sounds like a “self”, or a “man”.....pseudo is not really the right word here...and it may not be a good way to describe your project....

Actually I'm not sure why you have stretched images of the back side? stretching images of the front would be quite funny because so pointless or redundant, I mean because so close to the “laminated Monet”...I will have to see them...but there is something to it I think...both the back-sides and the copy/photograph are “displacements”...perhaps that's it...so there's a double entendre...but by stretching the image there is yet another reference to the original....so you have a bunch of indexical signs actually (either by likeness or proximity) that refer to the (original) work without presenting it. This is not unlike JoAnne Balcan's piece at Concordia in the Hall Building that assembles a bunch of indexical signs that refer to art and art spaces without showing them. As in your work (from what I gather) the very privilege of the 'origin' (the work but more importantly the presumed irreducibility of its being experienced) is challenged. So perhaps my first thought was on track, that by making the indexical sign explicit the historical is mobilized. Your object however retains the power to signify or to refer to how signification works (culturally/historically)... so is the whole exercise intended to implode (cynicism) or is it a fetish object, that is, some nostalgia for the lost origin? Clearly the former is often championed in the service of what is in fact the latter.

So when you say you are interested in what value is transferred from the original to your own perhaps you intend to mean you are interested in how copies (but the idea of the index will also include the relevance of the backside and stretching) both preserve and make problematic their origins; but that is exactly what I think is interesting about what a photograph IS. all for now...

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From: john hunting <email>

Subject: the absent origin or trace

Date: October 16, 2014 at 9:07:06 AM GMT-4

To: Paul Litherland <email>

Hey Paul,

Leanne says you said you wanted to photograph the backs because there was a “story” there, notes, signatures, comments etc. I’m thinking these are also indexical signs that also refer to past ‘origins.’ The index you can say is a trace (signature, photo as trace). There is also a reference to you the photographer, (the photograph indexes you and your reasons for taking the picture). So there would seem to be lots of indexical signs going on...But here is also a way to think about intentism. Now the image can be understood as an expression of an interest or desire you have to better understand the stories attached to the thing. But it suggests to me then a kind of archaeology...that is a search for lost origins. A certain pathos is attached perhaps. You have spoken of the garbage photos, on the street or in the dumpsters as “forgotten”, “out of place” or “not seen” and the backside of the paintings too function in this psychological register. Perhaps this is closer to how you have been thinking about it? If this is the preferred reading or motivation it is not clear to me now however why they need to be life size or stretched. These various engagements perhaps can be reconciled around the idea of the absent origin, your wanting to have it but knowing you cannot. The psychological meaning becomes inseparable from the cultural and historical. The ‘economy’ of image making (especially photography perhaps) would promise some kind of immediacy (origin, the story behind the story) but fails in fact to deliver the ‘goods.’ In this way images trade on our desires. This sounds very 80’s of course, so if the psychoanalytic thing still works for me it is because I am DATED....

I cannot believe it is Thurs already!!

have a great day, j

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From: Paul Litherland <email>

Subject: Re: the absent origin or trace

Date: October 16, 2014 at 9:58:27 AM GMT-4

To: John Hunting <email>

Hi John,

Yes my original impulse was to photograph the backs because I found it to be the “living” surface of the work. In the case of the two Rembrandt’s I photographed, there was a kind of living history on the back of the work. A few stickers about exhibitions or previous owners. Yes of course it’s about my desire. It’s all I have. I did mention before I have a reflex to move to the contrary. If the group goes one way, I will almost invariably want to go the other way. The world wants to look at the front, then I will look at the back. But I really like your observation about the pathos of a search for lost origins. In terms of the stretching or mounting of the images, and how that works as opposed to just framing or pinning the works to the wall. I see it as imbuing the work with a sense of wanting to fit in (to the world of contemporary art that the front of the work exists in) on it’s own terms but fails. I want the work to be a beautiful failure because I couldn’t possibly handle the idea of success. As we speak, I am trying to decide on the quality of mounting that I want to aim for. Quick and poorly done, to make the viewer doubt that I am in control, thus evading responsibility for a controlled delivery of my ‘message’ or reasonably well done, so that it’s invisible. Or super well done, so that this work has the possibility to achieve precious object status in it’s own right. I’ve never been attracted to the fetish aspects of the super well produced artwork, it seems to be as much of a distraction from any ideas that might be going on in the work.

x  
Paul

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: reluctant participants  
Date: October 16, 2014 at 2:16:10 PM GMT-4  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

Fried’s distinction between theatricality and absorption comes to mind. If theatricality is staging (what is seen) and absorption is some unmediated participation (in the seen) it is interesting that you seem caught between concerns about how the ideas are being staged -framing, pinning etc.- (and consequently how they will be read) and a concern for a more

personal logic (for want of a better way of putting it), which the whole turn to the backside is about. The frontal, the facade, virtuosity, mere staging, theatricality and fitting in (being successful) are all cast as “distractions;” they are described actually as being “dead”- only what is below the surface is “alive.” (This interests me because it is almost the very definition of melodrama; mere surfaces are broken through in overwrought expressions of feeling). The “beautiful failure” sums up your effort to negotiate these terms; fitting in and not wanting to fit in. But you know that the work will be read one way or another, so the theatrical staging cannot be avoided. “Staging failure” would be another way of putting it, but its a contradiction because presumably a well staged failure would be a success. Simply pinned or put together poorly will be read as such, as a sign of your hand, impoverished etc. but it in no way escapes Fried’s logic of the theatrical. Staging a lack of control is exercising control. (Again this resonates with melodrama; the only thing that matters is if the out of control expression of feeling is for real, that is if we sense the utter commitment of the actor). To be sure the pristine can be part of the equation without reducing to distraction or a mere desire to fit in. It can be a way of honoring what is precious about the underside, of elevating what is not usually seen to what ought to be seen or needs to be seen. For instance one could take pictures of garbage and frame/display them in grand/pristine terms. Courbet did this with “Stone Breakers” painting peasants on a scale usually reserved for Royalty. In any case I’m not sure if it is actually helpful for you to think about your interest in lost origins in terms of failure as far as the presentation of the image is concerned. The preoccupation with failure, I suspect, has more to do with a personal refusal of success, that is, a refusal of all the trappings of a conformism you associate with being “dead”. But this psychology is not so easily translated into images I don’t think. Virtuous fitting in for you is in fact a kind of ‘failure’ and impoverished garbage etc. is a ‘successful refusal of norms’ that needs to be championed. Success for you personally has entailed the failure of not fitting in, but images are never so clearly failures or successes. Perhaps you need to go with what you intuit will best articulate what the backside is all about for you? That the personal investment in failure, lost origin etc. must be staged there is no doubt but I don’t personally think the personal is ever reducible to the rhetorical terms of its expression. But that’s me. If you want to comment on the backside, lost origin, failure etc as a theatrical event then you have to think through the rhetoric more carefully, essentially you will be staging the staging of the lost origin. But that is one way to read the explicit assemblage of indexical signs ? This could be read as a kind of hyper/obsessive/ endless preoccupation with the lost

origin (more and more and more photos of garbage), so the failed staging of the backside (the origin never actually appears) ends up looking like something desperate. Wanting the piece to be beautiful/pristine etc in psychological terms could be all about the beautiful/prized love object you cannot have, namely the loved parent ....who typically disappears for example behind some caricature (your father?) or depression (your mother?). (By the way the psychology of all of this is very familiar to me!!) Make them pristine but don't hang them, have them leaning against the wall, reluctant participants in this economy of desire, loss, love and the beautiful/staged failure.

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From: Paul Litherland <email>  
Subject: Re: reluctant participants  
Date: October 16, 2014 at 5:25:24 PM GMT-4  
To: John Hunting <email>

Wow.

You rock.

Just chewing on the successful refusal of norms as a measure of success. I love this statement; I don't think that the personal is ever reducible to the rhetorical terms of its expression.

Well, part of the challenge is to bite off a small enough chunk that you can work around something

I'm afraid that when you end up seeing the work you will be disappointed. But then maybe I should count that as a success!

John, thanks for taking up this conversation with me. It's exciting.

cheers

Paul

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: RE: reluctant participants  
Date: October 17, 2014 at 1:13:34 AM GMT-4  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

I'm in to it, talking about art that is...

Levinas seems to be coming together. The key elements may be in place, at least as best as I can frame them.

Perhaps we can meet at your studio Sat or Sun AM? let me know..

J

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From: john hunting <email>

Subject: some more comments

Date: November 11, 2014 at 5:57:16 PM GMT-5

To: "email" <email>

Hey Paul,

Could we not say that the illusory aspect of your 'photographic objects' functions like a back lit projection in a movie? In both cases, a material, spatial or three-dimensional context supports or 'gives new life' to the indexical reference. If viewers have an impulse to touch the work it is because of this spatial dynamic/proximity that simply underlines the material/indexical reference. What results, is a stronger than usual tension between the photograph and its referent, a tension that is expressed in our disappointment when we realize the 'object' has no texture in fact. Only then do we see the photographic paper at the expense of the referent. Similarly when back lit projections are seen as such, the diegetic space they were designed to sustain disappears. In both cases the illusory presence of the referent can be as compelling (or more compelling) as the sober understanding of what is really going on. But it is interesting to me that the photographic referent is clearly supported by the spatial device (alleged view or object) because the photographic already expresses spatial relations, that is, an exposure (or alleged exposure) to the light reflecting surfaces of objects. Photographs result from the capacity of cameras to record the light to which they were exposed but to look at photographs, as a result, is to be oneself exposed to those luminous affects. It is this spatial dynamic, proximity or better receptivity that the 'photographic object' or back lit screen makes explicit. What results however is the specifically affective response; the 'mere' image presents as touchable or as a space that could be entered. However my point is not that photographs and film can function like views (perceptual analogues), rather what is interesting is how the view or perceptual analogue depends upon the idea of the

world as undergone, that is, as a materiality that issues certain affects. The work we might say is redundant, both the illusory object and the photograph index the referent but the combined result is telling I think; if I want to touch them it is because seeing the representation (virtuous or otherwise) is not what is at stake; feeling exposed to the material thing is what counts. (If out of focus I imagine viewers might think that there was something wrong with their glasses or eyes). No doubt this is why back lit projections can work so well despite their obvious lack of 'realism.' And similarly while no one will be fooled for long about the status of your objects, the desire to touch them won't go away, that is, the forcefulness of the photographic index will keep coming to the fore as a power to affect. later, J

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From: Paul Litherland <email>  
Subject: Re: some more comments  
Date: November 11, 2014 at 6:53:31 PM GMT-5  
To: John Hunting <email>

Hi John,

I think you have nailed an aspect of my interest in photography pretty well. The idea that the photographic already expresses spatial relations. In a way I think of it as a double mirror. Yes the space in the photo is a kind of unmoving reflection, that exists independent of time to a degree. With this work, my hope is to upset the idea that the referent is from a different time, but pretends to be active in the present, that it is real. Pretending to be real would be a theme that I deal with in work and life in general I would say! :-)

Paul

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: RE: some more comments II  
Date: November 11, 2014 at 9:26:09 PM GMT-5  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

Hey,

Interesting. Sartre argued that an imaginary consciousness destroys perception; that is, you cannot actually perceive the contents of a photograph because its contents do not persist as actual perceptions do. Images



impute rather than discover; they literally image the world in their own image (letting us see what we want to see so we can believe what we want to believe, as he said). So it makes sense that if the viewer is fooled in to thinking the thing is real, he or she will not be looking (momentarily) at an image or mere re-presentation, as you say, of something from a different time. What is mobilized is the present affect...I like this.

But what is real about a photograph? What happens when an image we thought was a photograph turns out to be a painting? Its not the verisimilitude that is lost, its the indexical relation. That's what preserves the existential relation to reality as something exterior or undergone. If presenting as photographic (no matter how contrived) I would say the image must bear this sense of being a recording. But a recording is not fake, its a registration of something of what one could have seen (or heard) or indeed something of what one would have to have seen or heard had one also been there during the recording. If your objects present initially as real it means that they look a lot like real objects. But they could do this without being photographs. For me the illusion in itself is less important than the photographic reference.

I don't know what is at stake for you in things "passing as real." To be sure it is rare that the contents of photographs are mistaken to be real, that is, as actually present. Presumably it is only because the backs of the paintings are already flat objects that they can have this affect. This in mind some of the stickers on the backs are striking for their verisimilitude and it is because they are already photocopies that the difference between the appearance of the real sticker and the photographic recording may be so close as to be indistinguishable. Handwriting similarly seems to lend itself to the presumed surface. You could apply real stickers to the photographs or actually write on them and the illusion of being real could go the other way, viewers being led to believe that what is real is fake. But I'm not sure what would be at stake in these deceptions. For me the work is most interesting when the illusion fails and yet persists as a photograph, i.e., as an indexical sign or better as after effects. If "passing as real" was the only thing at stake here wouldn't our interest drop off as soon as the trick was up?

Do you think reality is somehow always "pretend" or "fictional" -how we see the world, how we see ourselves and each other etc.- and that your work is about that slip between what we merely think is going on and what is going on in fact? I would say that whatever we think is going on

is just about as real as it gets and, this in mind, an 'actual perception' is already as caricatural or as picturesque as any image or photograph but it is no less real for being so.

not coming home until thurs, getting Alex at the aeroport at 10:00...coffee Friday AM?

John

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: RE: some more comments III  
Date: November 12, 2014 at 1:29:51 PM GMT-5  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

hey, the first association I had when you first described the work to me came back to me this morning, I had thought of those huge pictures of building facades that contractors sometimes hang down in front of buildings that are being renovated or rebuilt. I think the one that covered the Royal Bank at Laurier/Parc was on both faces, wrapped around the corner of the building. A literal kind of doubling of the object, as if one were to wear a mask that is a version of oneself. And this is interesting because there is something about your 'photo objects' that suggest faces to me but I do not know why that is. Sometimes packaging also includes life size images of the product that is inside. This is not so much a mirroring of the thing as a secretion of the thing, that is, an underlining of the way the thing already looks like itself. Am I responding to the idea that we are all caricatures of ourselves, that we double ourselves as a matter of course, playing at a face/facade without knowing it? Perhaps this is what you interpret to be "fake." I don't think it is fake, I think it is part and parcel of what it means to understand anything at all, that is to insist on a thing 'being itself.' That's not to say that the world or we ourselves don't admit other formulations or versions. And I'm thinking again of Fried's distinction between the theatrical and antitheatrical aspects of photos. If your photo objects are understood to stage themselves as pseudo objects (inviting viewers to experience the deception) this would be the very definition I think of theatricality; on the other hand the impulse to touch, that is the very mobilization of the material affects, introduces the terms of the sensuous seduction or Fried would say absorption in the thing's presence. I'm personally drawn to this aspect. They seem quite friendly, exposed,

showing themselves somehow; like an open face. They are not transparencies, there is no chance of looking through the surface to the referent as we often want to do with photographs. But this is exactly what I want from photographs these days, not the representation but the exteriority of the thing to which I am now myself exposed.

later J

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From: john hunting <email>  
Subject: the photographic  
Date: November 17, 2014 at 3:17:06 PM GMT-5  
To: Paul Litherland <email>

Hey Paul,

I'm getting in to the photography section now, looking at Fried a bit as I left all my readings out at my mom's! There is a little philosophy background here and then some questions. Maybe you can think of some other photographers or video artists I can refer to that relate to your work or to the Bustamante as I describe it here. Portraiture and close-ups in film will be central for me (the face as you may know is Levinas' central concept) but for starters the close-up evidently need not be of a human face, it has a specifically photographic significance, as is explained below. When I say I am having an experience of something I am reporting an experience of some 'object' of perception. (I am not talking about things out there in the world but our experience of them). Importantly these 'objects' or percepts (this shadow, that highlight, this taste, that sound etc) never happen all at once; in fact to insist on the persistence of some object already implies the duration of the insistence. What we end up seeing or hearing or tasting in fact is not a unitary thing (like a concept) but precisely a posited unity (or invariability) that must be posited as enduring across a temporal flow of ceaselessly emerging differences. The eye, for example, never stops moving, ceaselessly roaming over objects, now perceiving this aspect of some presumed unity, now perceiving something else, but the point is that these objects are never anything more than a kind of shorthand for certain posited unities. In this way consciousness insists on the selfsame but ironically this fundamental assumption of self-sameness or of some self-coincidence (of the object with itself) can only be achieved over time, the very passage of which introduces difference, indeed must introduce difference if some sameness is to be established

across that difference. As Levinas puts it, time must differ without differing. We can think of this insistence on the selfsame or self-coincidence of any object (or being) as a caricature. Everything that is posited to 'be itself' admits this identity in difference. And crucially consciousness must identify itself as selfsame across this temporal flow otherwise there would be no one for whom that persistence could take place. The posited unity of consciousness and of the objects it is a consciousness of...go hand in hand. The details of how consciousness posits itself and its objects (over time), is the phenomenological problem of intentionality.

So what are we looking at exactly when we are looking at a photograph if the objects we can see in it do not endure as perceptual objects must? Sartre says that an imaginary consciousness always destroys perception. Hence to imagine something is to impute certain beliefs about the world or to create certain objects but in both instances nothing in the imagining is properly speaking discovered, except perhaps one's own powers of imagining. A paradox results; what we see in a photograph cannot be seen, at least not in any ordinary sense. What we see is an (alleged) trace of an effect, like a fossil or death mask as is often said. The photograph in this sense is not an image of the world in the way a perception is -it intends nothing- rather the photograph is a trace owing to the world, in other words it is a mere impression, registration or record of effects. But it is impossible to not also see a photograph as a perceptual analogue, that is, to see in it images of such and such. This is also true of a representational painting or sculpture but to look at a photograph is to always look at something of what one could have seen or better would have to have seen had one been similarly exposed to those optical effects. (That the image might be transformed digitally is immaterial; all that matters is if the image is intended to be seen as photographic, that is, as a recording). Sartre refers to the objects in a painting or photograph as quasi-objects to get at this idea that they cannot be perceived as such but only imagined thus, that is imagined as perceivable in this way. Referring to this same idea that imaginary quasi-objects do not endure, Levinas calls them caricatures. Images therefore reinstate the self-same (like any caricature), only they do so in a way that is very much unlike perception insofar as (self-same) objects of perception must be posited over time.

So once again what are we seeing when looking at a photograph? When experienced as a trace and a perceptual analogue do we not see the visible itself as undergone? Once again what results is a kind of impossible 'perception.' As my eyes pass over the contents of a photograph there is

not a concomitant temporal progression in what I am seeing; unlike a real perception there is no beginning, no passing, only an intractable contact. What is imposed in short is the moment of contact that produced the image in the way it did. Or in other words, to look at a photograph is to undergo that which was undergone, it is to experience the visual itself as undergone. (Change the lens, camera etc etc and you get a completely different image with completely different associative meanings but this is also immaterial as far as the recorded aspects are concerned, without which we are not talking about a photograph). Note however that this is a radical passivity; the photographic refuses the temporal progression that consciousness requires to be conscious of anything at all. No doubt this explains why it is so strange to look at a photograph as something more than just an image.

These thoughts in mind I'm wondering what is potentially interesting about photographs, (like your Life Size or B-side series) that focus surfaces to the exclusion of any real depth. I'm also thinking of Bustamante's Tableaux series of Cyprus trees (I believe there were 21 virtually identical images in the exhibit).

My first thought is the way the referent seems to 'come to the surface' of the photograph, as if it is not an image at all. But because it is an image I sense this denial can tell me something about the photographic itself and its relationship to the world. What is it? My intuition is that my experience of these photographs illustrates how the visual world itself imposes itself, that it is first and foremost undergone. But if I am correct every photograph would already succeed in demonstrating this. What is different about these photographed surfaces? I sense that it has something to do with the way the photograph is itself a material surface; one surface is standing in for another. This is like a painting, the way paint isn't just made to resemble but reinstates the materiality of things. To be sure the photograph is doing this too, both looking like the surface it is a photograph of and reinstating that surface in its materiality. The photograph however is doing something more; it doesn't just look like the surface (as a painting might) it is also its trace. The trace is of its luminous/material effects. But here in the image of a more or less flat surface the materiality of the effects leave the represented object and speak for themselves, detached from their object: that is what drives the inclination to want to touch them, and in the case of Bustamante's Cyprus trees that is what orchestrates the immersive affect. This is more common in painting because we are usually led directly to its surface and its affects. In these photo-

graphs however it is the referent itself that is made to issue its affects and for me it is only these affects that matter, that is, the way the world of the representation is given up for the material presence of that world. Another way of putting this is when a photograph is a close-up the referent itself is more likely to be read as the undergoing of materials as opposed to a view of some world. This will provide important insight for portraiture and close-ups in movies insofar as they too may be said to underscore the very exposedness (to alterity) of the photographic. Fried, then, is correct to point out that Bustamante's Tableaux are akin to colour field paintings but he doesn't explain why. The reason is because both issue colour and the materiality of the world, not as signs of some recognizable object but as sensuous materials that are working in an affective register, irreducible to the perception of some object.

Does Bustamante's Tableaux series make you think of any other photographers working in this vein, that is, that focus the materiality of the referent at the expense of all else? Perhaps the most mundane and 'uninteresting' of photographs do this best? I'm looking at a photo of the palm of my own hand for example that only I would know who it is of or when it was taken. And I'm flipping through Gerhard Richter's Atlas of photos; I've always loved these close-ups of paint, or random close-ups of the surface of moving water. To be sure these references to the 'purely contingent' have their own history but I like them for this nonetheless. I want as little context as possible. Maybe you only need to be told "this is a photograph or was part of a photograph."

Did you see Thomas Hirschhorn's "Touching Reality" at the MAC...I guess you did. What did you think of it? Just curious.

take care, John

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John Hunting (BA Trent University, BFA Concordia University, MA University of Ottawa, PhD McGill University) is a Humanities teacher at Dawson College. He received a PhD in Communications from McGill. His dissertation *Affect, Melodrama and Cinema: an Essay on Embodied Passivity* explored the relevance of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas for melodrama and cinema. His research interests include the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, phenomenology and the phenomenology of cinema and photography.

Paul Litherland (MFA Concordia - photography) is a visual artist/performer living in Montréal. His practice incorporates themes of masquerade, vulnerability and machismo, explored through photography, multimedia performances and installations. Recent exhibitions include *B-Side* at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Montréal, 2014, *Family Workstations* at Art Souterrain, Montreal, 2013, and *Force Majeure* at Galerie Clarke in Montreal, 2010. He has secondary careers as a commercial photographer and professor, teaching visual arts and communications, at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1994-95), John Abbott College (2009), and the University of Toronto (2011-12).