

THE DRIVE TO ARCHIVE

Conceptual documentary photobook design

The term Conceptual Documentary has been used increasingly in recent years in response to certain shifts in documentary photography. By making sense of the world via an emphasis upon documentation, selection, editing and a cool, distanced and analytical aesthetic, Conceptual Documentary photography can be understood as a symptom of the archival impulse that pervades contemporary culture. This paper will address the particular implications of Conceptual Documentary photobooks as expressions of this archival impulse. With a focus on the books of the photographers Stephen Gill, Mathieu Pernot and Matthew Sleeth, it will assess the possibilities and limits of photobooks as alternative sites for the exhibition and reception of contemporary documentary photography.

In his “Billboards” series from 2002–04, the British photographer Stephen Gill takes a single idea – to photograph the backs of billboards – and repeats it over and over again. There are seventeen photographs in this series, and each one is marked by Gill’s deadpan aesthetic and dry sense of humour. Surrounding one billboard (see figure 1) is a quiet office building, an empty, slightly dingy street, a defoliated tree, and a Dona’van Kebab and Burger van with its wheel clamped and its shutters tightly locked. By using the text from the concealed face of the billboard to title the photographs in this series, Gill sets up a series of ironic relations between the fantasy world of advertising and the empty or squalid urban spaces that the billboards obscure. This photograph is named after the DWS Investments billboard which proclaims: *Your money should work harder, not you. Make more of your money*, but it seems that nothing is working hard on this early morning street. A muddy scrap yard piled high with tyres, mufflers, broken car bodies and detached doors is hidden behind another billboard promising that there’s *No need to keep the receipt. A diamond is forever* (see figure 2). Collectively, these one-liners explore the dark underbelly of consumer capitalist desire. Fuelled by lack and a seemingly endless series of promises of fulfilment, it results in a culture of excess, waste and decay. Through repetition, Gill’s series reframes the billboards as not so much vehicles for directing advertising outward but as screens that conceal a far less appealing physical and conceptual realm.

Gill’s interest in using repetition and series is part of a much wider, international trend in contemporary photography that is known as Conceptual Documentary. The term Conceptual Documentary refers to the cool, distanced and analytical approach to documentary photography that is also associated with the work of Frank Breuer (Germany), Paul Shambroom (United States), Matthew Sleeth (Australia), Hans van der Meer (the Netherlands), Raphaël Dallaporta (France) and Mathieu Pernot (France)



Figure 1



Figure 2

FIGURE 1 Stephen Gill, *Your money should work harder, not you. Make more of your money – DWS Investments* from the series “Billboards” (2002–04), Crystal C-type print, 508 × 406 cm.

FIGURE 2 Stephen Gill, *No need to keep the receipt. A diamond is forever* from the series “Billboards” (2002–04), Crystal C-type print, 508 × 406 cm.

amongst many others. The British Magnum photographer Martin Parr is a prominent promoter of Conceptual Documentary, and dedicated much of his curatorial programme at the 2004 Arles photography festival to this style of photography. According to Parr, Conceptual Documentary photography is characterized by a desire to explore a single, often banal idea from many different angles (Parr interview). Rather than submerging themselves in dramatic events, Conceptual Documentary photographers seek out and frame their subjects according to a pre-determined idea or scheme. Processes of repetition and categorization are central to Conceptual Documentary. As a result, it must not be delimited simply as evidence of what Charlotte Cotton describes as the “deadpan” aesthetic that pervades contemporary photography. The central idea is made evident over a series of photographs and there is less emphasis upon the singular photographic moment.

Parr argues that Conceptual Documentary is the most pertinent form of documentary practice today because it addresses a desire for order in a visually chaotic world. In a context in which we are bombarded with thousands of images every day, Conceptual Documentary responds with an aesthetic based on careful selection, repetition and classification (Parr, *Arles Recontres de la Photographie* 12). Consequently, Conceptual Documentary can be understood as a symptom of the larger “archival impulse” that pervades contemporary culture (Foster 22). Archives and collections have long been a major part of photographic history, but have also become prominent features of contemporary art practice and theory. The work of artists such as Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean, Walid Raad and Sam Durant are indicative of this trend, and the many recent exhibitions dedicated to archives and collections, including “Deep Storage” (1998) at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre, New York, “Archive Fever” (2008) at the International Centre of Photography, New York and “Order and Disorder: Archives in

Photography" (2008) at the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, attest to the prevalence of this theme in contemporary art (see also Dalton 63–70; Enwezor). This drive to archive extends well beyond the art world. Hal Foster suggests that the popularity of archives and collecting in art is the product of a larger "archive reason" that characterizes contemporary culture (22). From official archives that document medical histories to immense unofficial Internet archives like YouTube and Flickr, an archival impulse informs even the most mundane aspects of our daily lives.

Given the importance of the series, collecting and categorization in Conceptual Documentary, it is not at all surprising that many Conceptual Documentary photographers choose to present their work in book form. Stephen Gill's "Billboards" series features in his book *A Book of Field Studies* (2004) (see figure 3), alongside seven other series of very straight, dry photographs of urban life: "Lost", "Gallery Wardens", "Day Return", "Trolley Portraits", "Cash Points", "Road Works" and "Audio Portraits". Gill is conscious of the different conceptual possibilities associated with books and exhibiting prints, and puts much time and energy into book publishing. In recent years, Gill has published numerous photobooks including *The Hackney Rag* (2009), *Warming Down* (2008), *A Series of Disappointments* (2008), *Hackney Flowers* (2007), *Archaeology in Reverse* (2007), *Anonymous Origami* (2007), *Buried* (2006), *Hackney Wick* (2005) and *Invisible* (2005). The Australian Conceptual Documentary photographer Matthew Sleeth similarly emphasizes book making as a central part of his practice, and has produced eleven photobooks since 1998. Regardless of whether his photobooks are limited edition artist's books, like *Red China* (2005), or offset printed books, such as *Ten Series/106 Photographs* (2007), Sleeth considers his books as art objects in their own right rather than documents or records of art that exists in its "original" form on the gallery wall (Sleeth interview). Along with the French photographer Mathieu Pernot, who has also produced some compelling publications, these photographers and their conceptual documentary photobooks will be the focus of the following article.

The rising status of photobooks as art objects in their own right is becoming increasingly evident in collecting and curatorial practices. Amongst the recent

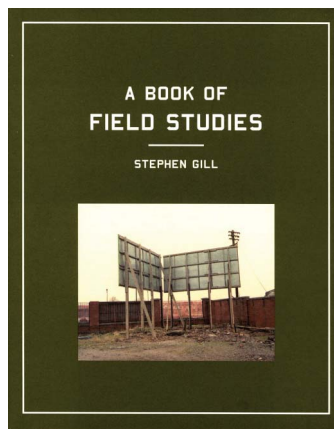


FIGURE 3 Stephen Gill, *A Book of Field Studies* [cover]. London: Chris Boot, 2004.

museum exhibitions that have focused on books are: “The Open Book: A History of the Photographic Book from 1878 to the Present” (which was toured internationally by the Hasselblad Centre between 2004 and 2006),¹ “Published, Exhibited: Photography from the Book to the Museum” at the National Museum of Art of Cataluña in 2005, and “Few are Chosen: Street Photography and the Book, 1936–66” at New York’s Met Museum in 2005. Prices for photobooks have also skyrocketed. Classics on sale at Christie’s May 2007 photobook auction often doubled or trebled their estimates. A signed copy of Ed Ruscha’s *Various Small Fires* (1964), for example, was estimated at £2,000–£3,000 and sold for over £7,200 (Christie’s n. pag.). The total sale price at Christie’s rare photobook sale in New York in April 2008, which exceeded US\$2,600,000, highlights how photobooks are becoming increasingly fetishized in the marketplace. Andrew Roth’s *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* (2001) and Martin Parr and Gerry Badger’s two-volume *The Photobook: A History* (2004 and 2006) have no doubt helped to produce a canon of historical photobooks, and reinforced the commercial value of these books as highly sought-after objects.

Despite their popularity both in the marketplace and the museum, the unique possibilities of photobooks as alternative sites for the exhibition and reception of photography have received far less critical attention. Curiously, contemporary critics and curators tend to focus on the books’ formal characteristics such as design, paper stock and reproduction quality, or the historical importance of the photographs that are reproduced in the books, rather than their particular epistemological or ontological implications. This emphasis upon formalism in design and the book’s status as a record is evident in the promotional blurbs for “The Open Book” exhibition which describes how the books were selected by the international jury:

Their selection was based on such criteria as photographic content, reproduction quality, choice of paper stock, graphic layout, typography, binding, and dust-jacket design, as well as the work’s importance in the history of photography. Concepts such as originality and beauty also played decisive roles, as did the photographer’s personal contribution to the production of the book.

(N. pag.)

Similar selection criteria inform Andrew Roth’s *The Book of 101 Books*. Roth writes:

The basis for my selection was simple. Foremost, a book had to be a thoroughly considered production; the content, the mise-en-page, choice of paper stock, reproduction quality, text, typeface, binding, jacket design, scale – all of these elements had to blend together to fit naturally within the whole. Each publication has to embody originality and, ultimately, be a thing of beauty, a work of art.

(101)

Such generalized criteria for attributing value to photobooks as works of art, based on the supposedly essential qualities of beauty, originality, form and authorship, have an equalizing effect in which the specific character of individual photobooks and their relationships to particular cultural, historical and artistic contexts are effaced.

The tenacity of formal modes of photobook analysis may be a legacy of European modernist experiments with the printed page. When interpreted as an extension of other formal artistic experiments, photobooks are subsumed into the category of modernist Art. North American modernist tendencies to valorize authorial expression reinforce the fetishization of photobooks as markers of the photographer's unique sensibility. Distinctions between the mass-produced artist's book and the hand-crafting of the traditional *livre d'artiste* are evident in histories of photobooks (Parr and Badger Volume II, 2006 131), but the intensification of the cult of authorship means that cheaply printed books, such as those made by Ed Ruscha during the 1960s, can fetch thousands of dollars. Much like the canonization of photography as a modernist Art during the early to mid-twentieth century, the recent movement of photobooks into the museum and the art market is bound to a series of formal discourses that have preceded the development of more critical and discursive modes of analysis. The challenge when exploring this new critical terrain is to centre research on specific photobooks or genres, locate them within changing historical contexts, and acknowledge how they may work differently to exhibitions as a mode of presenting and viewing photography.

On a practical level, a book's potential for travel marks one of the key advantages of publishing over exhibiting (Parr in Lane 15). Books can reach a far wider audience than most exhibitions, and may offer a valuable means of bringing together a much larger number of photographs than what is often feasible within the limits of a gallery space. However, as important as these practical issues are for Conceptual Documentary photographers and fans alike, far more compelling are the conceptual possibilities of Conceptual Documentary photobooks and their implications for how we understand the relationships between photography and archives in contemporary culture.

What is particularly interesting about Conceptual Documentary photobooks is that the archival impulse to which they allude is intimately connected with a self-reflexive approach towards photography. Photography's power to freeze time, isolate subjects from their surroundings and place them in a new context where new associations and meanings can be forged is exploited in Conceptual Documentary. Indeed, as evinced by Gill's *A Book of Field Studies*, it underpins the very logic of Conceptual Documentary. The short descriptive statement that introduces the first series in Gill's book "Audio Portraits" describes the increasing use of personal stereos in Britain since 1980 and the ways in which they help users to disengage from their surroundings. Each of the fourteen full-page photographs that follow is a straight, mid-length colour portrait of an unnamed subject wearing a personal stereo (see figures 4–7). Sometimes the portraits are paired with another on a double page spread, and sometimes the photographs are allowed to stand alone. The sense of detachment that links all of the subjects of these audio portraits takes on many different guises, variously marked by ecstasy, vulnerability, resignation, disinterest or apathy.

Reflecting this sense of detachment, Gill's level of personal engagement with the subjects remains minimal. Their names, occupations or even the part of Britain in which the photographs were taken are never revealed. The book's introduction, written by Jon Ronson, tells us that some of the people in these audio portraits are homeless, but we are left to speculate about who they might be. Brief captions at the bottom of each full-page reproduction provide clues about the tastes of these people, telling us the name of the band or album being played – Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*,



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

FIGURE 4 Stephen Gill, *Paranoid Android – Radiohead* from the series "Audio Portraits" (1999–2000), C-type print, 279 × 355 mm.

FIGURE 5 Stephen Gill, *Rough Riders – D. M. X.* from the series "Audio Portraits" (1999–2000), C-type print, 279 × 355 mm.

FIGURE 6 Stephen Gill, *Talk Radio* from the series "Audio Portraits" (1999–2000), C-type print, 279 × 355 mm.

FIGURE 7 Stephen Gill, *104.9FM* from the series "Audio Portraits" (1999–2000), C-type print, 279 × 355 mm.

Radiohead's *Paranoid Android* or Verdi's *Hebrew Slave Song*. However, the absence of any other personal details suggests that the lives of these individuals are much less relevant than the photographs' collective statement about the paradoxes of isolation and social engagement in contemporary British public space.

Gill's sequencing and juxtapositions establish a series of arbitrary links between the portraits that add additional layers of connotation. The young woman's vacant expression in *Paranoid Android* – Radiohead (see figure 4) takes on an angelic tone when paired with the teenage boy in *Rough Riders* – D. M. X. (see figure 5), who listens to his personal stereo with his eyes downcast and arms outstretched as in a manner reminiscent of religious ecstasy. *104.9FM* (see figure 6) and *Talk Radio* (see figure 7) seem to be paired simply because the surface details of the photographs appear alike. Both portraits are taken in a leafy public park, and focus on men wearing a similar shade of blue casual clothes while listening to their personal stereos with blank, detached expressions on their faces. Points of difference also cut through these commonalities. One man is white and the other is black. One appears to be out jogging, while the other lies on the park lawn in a blue sleeping bag and uses a black plastic bag for a pillow. However, the implied social, economic and cultural differences between these men ultimately slip to the background in these "Audio Portraits". Like the personal stereos that tie the series together, Gill's photographs isolate his subjects from their larger context and allow them to occupy an alternative conceptual space. By wresting his subjects from their specific social contexts, Gill allows his photographs to acquire new meanings and values in the context of this book.

A comparable strategy is used by the French photographer Mathieu Pernot in his series "Les Hurlleurs", published in his book *Hautes Surveillances* (2004) (see figure 8). "Les Hurlleurs" (see figure 9) is a series of colour portraits taken outside prisons in Barcelona and Avignon, and focuses on people who communicate with jailed friends or loved ones by shouting over the prison walls. As is typical of much Conceptual



Figure 8



Figure 9

FIGURE 8 Mathieu Pernot, *Hautes Surveillances* (cover). Arles: Actes Sud, 2004.

FIGURE 9 Mathieu Pernot, *Monica, Barcelone* (2003), C-type print, 80 × 100 cm.

Documentary photography, Pernot's style is cool, detached and distant. His subjects may be more emotive and more explicitly political than Gill's, but Pernot aims to maintain a comparable distance between himself and the people he photographs (quoted in Parr, *Arles Recontres de la Photographie* 86). As their bodies and faces strain under their desperate desire to be heard from the other side of the prison walls, these people's individual narratives are effaced and their voices are silenced by Pernot's archival logic. Pernot's larger interest in prisons and transcending the conceptual limits of these institutional spaces is evident in his series "Promenades", "Panoptique" and "Portes", which are also published in *Hautes Surveillances*. In contrast to the colour and intense emotion of "Les Hurlleurs", these black and white photographs of prison corridors, yards and cell doors are stark, cold and empty. Jeremy Bentham's model of panoptic surveillance is reversed in these photographs – the prisoners are invisible and the institutional structures and their custodians are the ones being watched.

The Foucauldian thread that runs through Pernot's work extends from his interest in prisons and surveillance to his understanding of the political, social and ideological implications of archives. Pernot's long-standing preoccupation with archives is evident in his earlier "Photomaton" series (1995–97) and his book project *Un camp pour les bohémiens* (1998–99). In this book (see figures 10–11), Pernot draws on an archive of photographs from the Saliers internment camp which was opened as a camp for Gypsies in early October 1942 in the Camargue region of France. Pernot juxtaposes contemporary photographs of the survivors with the mugshots taken over fifty years earlier. "Photomaton" uses a similar style of mugshot that encourages us to consider how the social, economic and historical marginalization of these Gypsy children is produced through power and visual imagery.

Pernot's "Photomaton" and *Un camp pour les bohémiens* recall the nineteenth-century archives of Alphonse Bertillon, Francis Galton, Thomas John Barnardo and Havelock Ellis which were famously analysed through a Foucauldian framework by Allan Sekula and John Tagg, amongst others, during the 1980s and early 1990s. Pernot

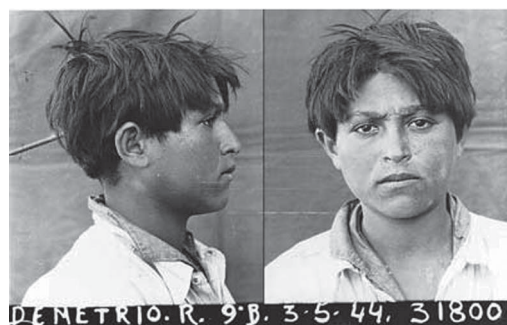


Figure 10

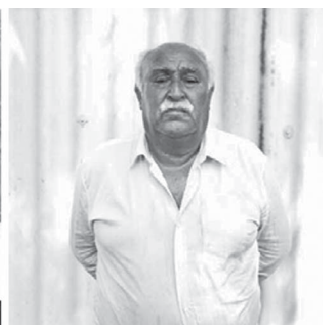


Figure 11

FIGURE 10 Mathieu Pernot, *Roger Demetrio*, 1944 Photographie extraite d'un carnet anthropométrique.

FIGURE 11 Mathieu Pernot, *Roger Demetrio*, Lille 1999 (1999), Tirage baryté, 50 × 50 cm.

is acutely conscious of the weight of this philosophical history and its relationship with photography, but approaches his subjects from a different angle:

My work is influenced by human sciences but there is not the method or the finality. I do not look to identify or document people to confine them once again in a framework . . . I like Foucault's idea of archaeology: a map or an archive which constitutes a way of thinking . . . What do a picture by Bertillon and a portrait by Thomas Ruff have in common? Nothing, and yet they are both photographs. There is a schizophrenia in the medium and it is this madness that I wish to invest in.

(Quoted in Parr, *Arles Recontres de la Photographie* 87)

Pernot views these positivist medical, criminal and psychiatric photographic archives critically as structures that have served historically to confine or contain their subjects. He exploits the camera's power to isolate its subject and tear it from its social context to generate a much more open conceptual economy for contemporary documentary photography.

Since the 1970s, photographers and writers including Alan Sekula, Martha Rosler, Susan Sontag and Abigail Solomon-Godeau have been intensely critical about this power of documentary photography to wrest subjects from their political and social milieus. In an article on war photography from 2004, Solomon-Godeau describes the camera's shutter evocatively as a "miniature guillotine" that slices an image from the flux of lived experience and decontextualizes the event to which it refers (61). Such criticisms are part of a much larger critique of documentary photography. Over the last thirty years, documentary photographers' claims for objectivity and neutrality have been challenged as the product of power, discourse and ideology, and the emotive qualities of humanist documentary photography have been reread in terms of a double violence in which the victims of traumatic events also become the victims of the photographers' and spectators' voyeuristic gaze. The institutionalization of photography in museums, universities and book publishing, and the aestheticization of documentary photography as an expressive practice have also contributed to what Stephen Dawber refers to as a "profound crisis in documentary photography's conditions of possibility" (251).

Conceptual Documentary photography is a response, in part, to this apparent "crisis" in documentary photography. Parr argues that Conceptual Documentary marks a conscious effort to shift documentary photography away from the very emotive humanism that dominated much of the twentieth century. To Parr, the humanist documentary photography epitomized by the "Family of Man" exhibition is far too "preachy" for a cynical contemporary audience (interview). The general preference for the lush, seductive and commercial qualities of colour photography in Conceptual Documentary also marks a rejection of the black and white photography that in the mid-twentieth century became code for heroic modernist documentary. Earlier manifestations of this shift away from heroic documentary photography are evident in the local, diaristic approach to documentary that developed in the United States in the 1970s. As photographers became increasingly wary of the political implications of "concerned" documentary photography, many came to focus less on far away places and social "others", and instead turned towards their home towns, city streets, domestic spaces and daily lives. Peter Galassi's exhibition at MOMA in New York in 1991, "Pleasures and

Terrors of Domestic Comfort” and Val Williams’ “Who’s Looking at the Family” at London’s Barbican Art Gallery in 1994 are indicative of this turn towards the everyday that occurred in late twentieth-century documentary photography.

The contemporary cynicism towards humanist and heroic documentary photography finds very different form in Boris Mikhailov’s controversial account of an underclass of homeless people in his native Kharkov. Mikhailov’s “Case Study” (1998) series documents some of the social casualties associated with the Ukraine’s transformation from a socialist to a capitalist state. Rather than romanticizing the suffering of his subjects as noble or heroic, Mikhailov draws our attention to the voyeurism of much documentary photography by paying his subjects to reveal their broken bodies or to perform various intimate acts for the camera. Mikhailov denies that he is exploiting his subjects and insists that: “We spectators are the ones who are humiliated and degraded by the confrontation, exposed to a truth we cannot walk away from and cannot bear to share” (Mikhailov 9). Gillian Wearing’s notorious three-screen black and white DVD projection *Drunk* (1997–99), in which some of London’s street alcoholics are shown rolling around the artists’ studio, marks another attempt to highlight how social documentary can transform other people’s lives into a kind of theatre for the entertainment of others.

Coupled with this pervasive critique of the exploitative relations implied in much social documentary photography is widespread cynicism towards the power of photography to generate real social change. “Photography is essentially an act of non-intervention”, writes Susan Sontag in *On Photography*. Part of the horror of memorable examples of photojournalism “comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has a choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph” (11–12). The use of photography in the mass media has also been blamed for fostering a climate of inaction amongst consumers of documentary photography and photojournalism. One popularly held notion is that our constant bombardment with images of war, famine and terror has had the dual effect of fostering our “addiction to atrocity” and inoculating us against doing anything about it (Taylor 233). John Taylor steps away from these simplistic cause-and-effect models and suggests that the news industry is a symptom rather than a cause of compassion fatigue: “People’s indifference to the suffering of others is not an effect of photographs, but a precondition, in fact, of viewing them in modern industrialized societies” (233). Drawing on Norman Geras’s book *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy after the Holocaust* (1998), Taylor argues that in industrialized societies we are parties to a contract of mutually agreed indifference. In order to function in mass societies, we cannot feasibly intervene in the lives of everyone we meet and consequently acquiesce to a silent, mutual arrangement of non-intervention. “Indifference to photographs simply reinforces an existing self-serving and rational disposition to avoid the gaze of others, and so avoid obligation” (Taylor 231).

The focus on the everyday and the cool, distanced aesthetic that characterizes Conceptual Documentary are symptoms of this shift away from humanist documentary traditions in an era of compassion fatigue. The absence of captions or explanatory narratives in Conceptual Documentary photobooks, such as Gill’s *A Book of Field Studies*, distinguishes it from the hard-hitting, deadpan photographs of victims of violence in Sierra Leone by Candace Scharsu and Taryn Simon’s photographs of strange, hidden

aspects of American life which similarly rely heavily on explanatory text to contextualize Simon's photographs. In contrast to these documentary practices, the notion of being true to an "original" context is much less significant in Conceptual Documentary photobooks which instead revel in the instability of a photograph's contextual framing. In Conceptual Documentary we witness a contemporary critique of humanist documentary traditions that is enacted through an archival impulse and through a self-reflexive approach towards the paradoxes and limits of photography.

This multi-layered critique can be explicated further with reference to Jacques Derrida's account of archives in his essay "Archive Fever". In a passing remark in "Archive Fever" Derrida raises questions about the relationships between technologies of archivization and the archive. Derrida grounds his analysis in Freud's personal archive as well as the notion of psychoanalysis itself as an archive, and he asks whimsically how the structure and meaning of these archives might be different if Freud and his colleagues had had computers, email and phone cards (17):

Is the psychic apparatus *better represented* or is it *affected differently* by all the technical mechanisms for archivization and for reproduction, for prostheses of so-called live memory, for simulacrum of living things which already are, and will increasingly be, more refined, complicated, powerful than the "mystic pad" (microcomputing, electronization, computerization, etc.)?

(16)

Although Derrida does not mention photography, the language with which he describes these reproductive technologies as "prostheses of so-called live memory" and "simulacrum of living things" has striking resonances with photography as a medium of memory, traces, documentation and reproduction. Given that photography emerged at the same time as psychoanalysis and informed Freud's own writing about the relations between the conscious and unconscious (295), an exploration of the ways in which photography might address Derrida's unanswered questions about the relations between archive fever and technologies becomes all the more compelling.² The archival impulse that is evident in Conceptual Documentary photobooks, along with their self-reflexive approach to photography, offer a particularly useful means of addressing how technologies of archivization shape the archive.

One of the conditions of Conceptual Documentary photography is that it steals time. Conceptual Documentary is not a history lesson. It exploits photography to seize a lived moment, sever its links to its historical context and take it somewhere else. This strategy is revealed in Sleeth's book, *Red China*, which brings together a series of eight photographs, taken in Beijing during a thirty-six-hour period in 2003. All of the photographs are tied together conceptually and aesthetically by the colour red (see figures 12 and 13). The colour red is a well-known signifier of communist China, and in China also symbolizes happiness and good fortune. In each photograph in this book, a red object with links to consumer capitalism (a bank sign, coca-cola, a shopping bag or a taxi) comes to dominate in otherwise neutral and largely monochromatic surroundings. Collectively, Sleeth's photographs speak to China's transition from a communist to a capitalist state through the use of red as a potent conceptual and compositional element. All of the photographs in *Red China* are untitled, and the absence of text in the



Figure 12

FIGURE 12 Matthew Sleeth, *Red China # 6* (Beijing) (2003), C-type print, 152 × 127 cm.



Figure 13

FIGURE 13 Matthew Sleeth, *Red China # 8* (Beijing) (2003), C-type print, 152 × 127 cm.

book tells us that the details of where and when the individual photographs were taken are less significant than the relationships between the photographs within the pages of this book. The absence or marginalization of people within the frame also helps to extract the subjects from their lived social contexts, and allows them to acquire new meanings and values in the book as symbols of China's changing culture.

To Derrida, a comparable act of recontextualization is the condition of all archives. Derrida draws attention to the etymology of the word archive, and the Greek word *arkeion*, to illustrate how the archive is traditionally set apart from public space. Gatekeepers police its boundaries and decide what enters the archive, and the interpretive role of those in command, the *archons*, determines how the archived documents relate to each other and constitute a coherent and articulated corpus (Derrida 9–10). In Derrida's terms, the archive is therefore “at once *institutive* and *conservative*” (12). That is, the archive can work to produce the archived event: “. . . the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (17). The construction of archives also involves a loss – of time and presence. There are no present moments in the archive, only documents, prosthetics, and substitutes. Derrida argues that the archive consequently produces a dual state of memory and forgetting. What is forgotten is the event itself. Just as a photograph can never offer up the event that it claims to capture, the archive cannot store the originary event and ultimately institutes the death of lived memory.

This process of forgetting is central to Conceptual Documentary, and it arises from an engagement with the unique characteristics of photography. By taking objects out of their “original” context, interpreting them and ascribing them new meanings within a new context, Conceptual Documentary exploits both photography's and the archive's dual state of remembrance and forgetting. The result is that Conceptual Documentary

photobooks should not be understood as a repository of documents about an event but something that institutes the loss of the “original” event. Indeed, Conceptual Documentary has come at a time when the very notion of an “original” photographic event has not only been lost but wilfully abandoned in contemporary photographic theory. Conceptual Documentary’s emphasis upon seriality and its framing of documentary photographs according to a pre-determined scheme attest to a rejection of the decisive moment that is spontaneously “captured” by the documentary photographer, and a comparable distrust in the notion of singular, authentic or original photographic meanings.

This appreciation for the contingency of photographic meaning owes a great debt to 1960s conceptual photography, and in particular to the use of seriality as a means of undermining the fetishization of the singular or discrete photograph. The relocation of art photography to the realm of mass-published books, catalogues and magazines – exemplified by Ed Ruscha’s photobooks and Dan Graham’s “Homes for America” – should also be acknowledged as important precursors to Conceptual Documentary photobooks. However, there is an important difference between 1960s conceptual photography and contemporary Conceptual Documentary. Like postmodernism, conceptual photography has been accused of treating the camera as a discursively neutral aperture through which the subject enters language. The conceptual artists Ed Ruscha and Robert Rooney both describe the camera as simply a tool for recording their serial photographs. Rooney famously described the camera as a “dumb recording device” (quoted in Lindsay n. pag.). In 1981, Ruscha similarly said of *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* that: “The photography by itself doesn’t mean anything to me; it’s the gas stations, that’s the important thing” (quoted in Bush 263). Comparable instrumental views of photography pervade much postmodern photography theory. Geoffrey Batchen argues that postmodern theory may analyse photographs as a language and photography may be critiqued as a tool for the exercise of power and discourse, but photography itself is treated as though it has no power of its own (176–202). Conceptual Documentary is importantly distinguished from these traditions because it is centred on a new self-awareness about the limits and possibilities of photographic technologies and their impact upon Conceptual Documentary projects.

Conceptual and subsequent postmodern critiques of photography have long been institutionalized, and Conceptual Documentary photographers such as Gill, Pernot and Sleeth seem to take for granted their lessons about the instability and malleability of photographic meaning. In Sleeth’s book, *Ten Series/106 Photographs* (2007), this self-reflexive approach to photography is explored in a number of ways. Sleeth says that he tries to grapple with “what photography does well” in his books, and this book is concerned primarily with the illusion of control that is offered by photography (Sleeth interview). As the title suggests, *Ten Series/106 Photographs* brings together ten of Sleeth’s photographic series. The subjects of each series variously address the themes of collection, categorization and control. “Pictured” (2004–06) speaks to the use of vernacular photographs to organize and restructure memories; “Tagged” (2004) was shot in an hour at the Botanical Gardens in Copenhagen where almost every plant and blade of grass is tagged according to its species; and “10 Fire Extinguishers and 13 Houseplants” (2004–07) focuses on two ways in which we attempt to restrain nature – one by controlling unanticipated outbreaks of fire and the other by confining nature to a pot and bringing it indoors. Since 2004, Sleeth has obsessively photographed every

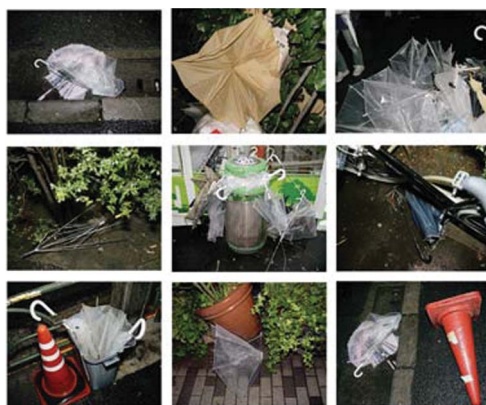


FIGURE 14 Matthew Sleeth, *Abandoned Umbrellas* (2004), 9 C-type prints, each 61 × 50 cm, mounted on DiBond aluminium.

houseplant and every fire extinguisher he has come across. The photographs that are reproduced in this book represent only a fraction of the full archive which, to Sleeth, is the work of art (interview).

In contrast to the cool, formulaic serial photographs of industrial structures made by Bernd and Hilla Becher (two other significant precursors to Conceptual Documentary), Sleeth's work also includes a personal dimension and an allowance for what he refers to as "beauty and chance" (Sleeth interview). Although Sleeth seeks out certain photographic subjects to develop his preconceived idea, his *Abandoned Umbrellas* (see figure 14) highlights how the location and specific content of the photographs are largely subject to chance. The cheap umbrellas that are the focus of this series are sold in Japanese cities on rainy days and discarded when the weather clears. When collected in a series, the individual photographs of umbrellas become emblems of waste and consumption in contemporary Japan. The emphasis on colour and the play of light on the wet, translucent plastic illustrate how a chance find can be reframed according to a particular aesthetic and conceptual logic.

The "Abandoned Umbrellas" section of *Ten Series/106 Photographs* also underscores the critical function of layout and repetition in the book. Sleeth comments that the abandoned umbrellas do not stand up as well as single prints ("Ten Series"), and therefore prefers to exhibit them in grid form. According to Sleeth, the grid is not a series of works, but one work in itself. Although the design constraints of the book meant that the grid had to be broken up, Sleeth's desire to emphasize the relations between the *Abandoned Umbrellas* led him to present them in the book in pairs across a double page when other series, such as "Pictured" and "Tagged", are represented with one photograph per double page. The paired images throw into relief the aesthetic differences that cut through the common content of the photographs. Double pages that feature only one photograph allow the photographs to stand alone, and rely on repetition rather than juxtaposition to emphasize the differences and similarities between the photographs. Unlike exhibitions and grids which can have an equalizing effect on photographs with common content, difference emerges within the book through the

repetitive act of turning the pages, and the continual appearance and disappearance of the individual or paired images. Sleeth's book thereby presents repetition as something that both photography and photobooks do particularly well.

The scale of *Ten Series/106 Photographs* (20 × 25 cm) and its printing on standard paper stock enables readers to flip forwards and backwards through its pages as quickly or as slowly as they choose. In contrast, the bulk of Sleeth's *Red China*, which more closely resembles a large album of photographs than a book of reproductions, fosters a much slower and more studied mode of spectatorship. The eight hand-printed C type photographs that feature in this limited edition artist's book are mounted on a thick, unbleached card, are hard bound with red tape and presented in a slip case (see figure 15). Although the unbleached card on which the photographs are mounted undercuts notions of preciousness, the format of this book, the relatively small number of pages and the knowledge that there are only fifteen books in the edition encourage readers to carefully study each of the photographs in turn. Sleeth is not particularly interested in the increasingly fetishized status of photobooks as collectable objects, and is much more concerned with the ways in which books can open up the possibilities for displaying photographs (interview). At 35 × 48.5 × 3.2 cm, *Red China* is a book most comfortably viewed sitting at a table where its large, rigid leaves can be turned carefully, one page at a time. This mode of reception is therefore a far more personal experience than viewing photographs in a gallery that demands a direct, individual and "hands-on" relationship with the work.

The importance of an active Conceptual Documentary reader to establish connections between the images, or to find the punch line for the visual joke that may tie the photographs together, highlights some of the problems that arise when photobooks become objects of display in a museum. This emphasis on the viewer or receiving subject in Conceptual Documentary also counters conceptual art's tendency towards emphasizing the power of institutions and systems of global capitalism in shaping meaning, and points to another important distinction between 1960s conceptual photography and contemporary Conceptual Documentary photography. It has been quite some time since Roland Barthes declared the death of the author and announced the birth of the reader, and the modernist investment in the photographer as an expressive source of meaning was critiqued. Whether photographs are presented in galleries or books,



FIGURE 15 Matthew Sleeth, *Red China*. Sydney: Joseph Lebovic Gallery, 2005.

we assume the presence of an active viewer who may traverse the gallery space according to their own whims, skip sections of books or read backwards as well as forwards through its pages. However, when books are kept away from the viewer's hands and presented in glass display cases, the locus of meaning shifts and constricts. As rarefied objects attributed to the photo-artist, museum photobook displays privilege the status of the author while the reader's potential for an active engagement with the book is delimited. Moreover, the presentation of photobooks in museum display cases ceases the movement of repetition, appearance and disappearance that is so central to their design.

An interesting point of departure from this emphasis on repetition, appearance and disappearance can be found in Gill's book *A Series of Disappointments* (2008) (see figure 16), which has been designed specifically for exhibition. The book is a series of formal studies of variously twisted, torn and crumpled betting slips that were discarded in and around some of the seventy-one betting shops that saturate the north-east London borough of Hackney. Individually, the photographs document a moment of trauma and frustration. In one photograph, a betting slip appears to have almost dissolved under the pressure of a clenched fist and sweaty palm. The book is presented in a concertina format that allows it to be read either as a conventional book or opened up and hung from a wall where all of the pages can be seen in one long frieze. Owners of *A Series of Disappointments* are encouraged to have their own exhibition of the book, which is sold with instructions for removing the book block from the cover and hanging the expanded pages on small hooks or nails using the holes punched into the top of the book. The special edition of the book comes complete with a title stencil to be used in the exhibition. Although the photographs' plain grey background and uniform lighting conditions highlight that repetition is important to this book, when opened up and hung on a wall it is the sheer quantity of betting slips that stands out. Hackney is a struggling area that is overburdened with betting shops – over three times the average number found in other London boroughs. This long, continuous line (measuring 835 cm) of thirty-six photographs of crumpled betting slips emphasizes the magnitude of the loss, anxiety and frustrated ambitions that they represent to this community.

Temporal and psychological transformations also take place in the relations between the individual photograph and the series in Conceptual Documentary photobooks. The repetition of photographs of a single, often banal subject has the effect of



FIGURE 16 Stephen Gill, *A Series of Disappointments*. London: Nobody, 2008.

protracting and merging the photographed moments. Consequently, when viewing Conceptual Documentary photobooks we experience in a very direct way the “two illogical conjunctions” that Thierry de Duve argues are at work to some extent “in every photograph” (118). In his classic analysis of our apprehension of photographs as time exposures and snapshots, de Duve argues that whereas the snapshot tears an event out of the flow of time, time exposures figure a pause in time and manifest a desire for a more protracted temporality. De Duve’s theoretical framework is, in part, psychoanalytic and bound to notions of trauma and speech. The snapshot is linked to the experience of trauma, while the time exposure fosters a sense of distance and better exemplifies the status of the photograph as a melancholic “work of mourning” (123).

These relations between time exposure and snapshot are particularly evident in Pernot’s “Les Hurlleurs”. Individually, any one of the photographs documents a moment of trauma and physical exertion. *Monica, Barcelone* (2004) (see figure 9) shows a mother holding a screaming baby under her arm as she shouts out towards the prison wall, perhaps to the baby’s father. Mother and baby look away from each other, their faces contorted, frozen and silenced in a moment of distress as they both cry out in the hope of being heard. However, when viewed within the context of the book, this frozen moment becomes just one element in an ongoing, melancholic narrative of human struggle and alienation. “The time exposure doesn’t refer to life as process, evolution, diachrony, as does the snapshot. It deals with an imaginary life that is autonomous, discontinuous, and reversible, because this life has no location other than the surface of the photograph” (de Duve 116). This temporal and psychological shift from time exposure to snapshot is not simply the product of the relation between individual images of emotional trauma and a larger theme or narrative. It may be also witnessed in the more banal photographs in Sleeth’s *Red China*. In the context of this book, these snapshots also become, through repetition, time exposures that are part of a much larger picture of China’s transition from a communist to a capitalist state.

Rather than being tied to the content of photographs, trauma is implicit in the archival logic of repetition that is so central to Conceptual Documentary photobooks. Derrida reminds us that the logic of repetition that pervades the archive is inseparable from the death drive:

And let us note in passing a decisive paradox to which we will not have the time to return, but which undoubtedly conditions the whole of these remarks: if there is no archive without consignment in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And this from destruction.

(14)

Freud’s notion that subjects attempt to bind trauma and return to a state of quiescence through the compulsion to repeat resonates with Parr’s explanation of Conceptual Documentary as a desire for order in a chaotic world. Sleeth similarly recognizes the long historical relationship between photography and the desire to order the world visually, and argues that the root psychology of photography is underpinned by a desire to

control and collect (Sleeth interview). Although the compulsion to grasp at reality through repetition marks an attempt to bind trauma, Derrida reminds us that repetition ultimately works “against itself” (14). In other words, the archive that is produced through repetition generates an open economy in which meanings multiply and the archived event is lost. By using repetition to explore and categorize a particular subject, Conceptual Documentary photobooks similarly underscore the inability of the archive to capture and contain an event. The more an idea is reiterated and re-photographed, the more multi-faceted and elusive the “original” event becomes.

Conceptual Documentary photobooks, such as those by Sleeth, Pernot and Gill, not only make evident Derrida’s argument that “Archival meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives” (18) they go one step further. Conceptual Documentary’s self-conscious exploitation of photographic fragmentation and repetition reveals how technologies of archivization form both the structure of the archive *and* the archivable content. As Conceptual Documentary demonstrates the persistence of the desire to document and catalogue, it also acknowledges the difficulties associated with using photography to fulfil that desire. Referential yet contextual, factual yet constructed, incoherent yet systematic,³ Conceptual Documentary mirrors documentary photography’s increasingly fraught but tenacious relations to the “real” world to produce equally paradoxical archives.

Notes

- 1 “The Open Book” was seen at the International Centre of Photography in New York in 2005 and the Museum of Photography, the Royal Library, Copenhagen in 2006.
- 2 Derrida comments (17) that he could have devoted his whole lecture to this issue of recording technologies and their role within archives, but sadly does not explore them further. David Bell also picks up on this relationship between recording technologies and archives at the end of the nineteenth century in his own analysis of Derrida’s “Archive Fever”, and explores the significance of the phonograph and cinematograph in this context (148–61). See also Cadava (97–99) for more on the relationship between photography and the unconscious.
- 3 Foster identifies a comparable series of paradoxes in contemporary archival art. He argues that our networked world is both connected and disconnected, and that archival art can mimic that paradoxical appearance in an order that seems both incoherent and systematic (22).

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