TRUE FICTIONS: AN INVESTIGATION OF IDENTITY, NARRATIVE, AND PHOTOGRAPHY

by

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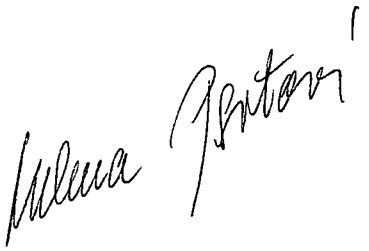
Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania
July, 2002

To my twins, Anna and Jakob Danyushevsky, for their untimely arrival which became an inspiration.

These Thesis contains no material that has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it incorporates no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgment is made in the text.



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ABSTRACT

This research project explores the narrative potential of the photographic medium, and the ways in which photography translates reality and fiction. As an aesthetic object, a photograph is an iconographic form not unlike an open-ended story, which in its dualism incites the viewer's imagination and curiosity. I have intended to test the complex translations of reality and truth within the photographic image. Taking into consideration the continuum of photography's history, the work of the artists who have explored the terrain of constructed photography, and in a visual and/or conceptual way inspired my project, and my personal desire to explore the duplicate truth of photography, I have tried to find new ways to visually reconfigure the aspect of truth within fiction. Additionally, I have sought a new approach to the issues of identity using the self-portrait technique and the theatrical practice of transformation and role-playing.

Combining documentary and staged self-portrait techniques, my aim was to produce an imagery, which presents the viewers with an open-ended narrative where fantasies and deceptions blend. I have employed photography's mechanical and semi-objective nature to produce a realistic representation of the construct. Relying on photography's ability to generate believable fictions, I have chosen to participate in my images as a pretended character. I have set my performance against the real life street milieu, and blended the pretence directly with the element of chance, hoping to emulate the immediate reality with the utmost veracity. As a result, the images contain both the naturalness of a documentary photograph and the theatricality of the construct. They suggest the 'real', but their effect is, essentially, always tentative and ambiguous.

The intent of the imagery is to extend the interpretation and symbolic potential of a photographic narrative, and to encourage the viewer to search beyond the obvious. Through the fluid mix of reality and fiction my imagery invokes the proximity of truth and deceptiveness, encouraging the viewers to enter into a dialogue on the identity subsumed in the instantaneous reality of the street. Represented in the straightforward manner of street photography, the images are stimuli and evocations, reflecting on the discourse between the real and imaginary, the personal 'truth' and intended deceptiveness.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor David Stephenson for his guidance and encouragement, Anne MacDonald, and Jonathan Holmes for the continual support, as well as the members of academic and library staff of the Tasmanian School of Art at Hobart who have helped me over the entire period of time I have spent at this University.

I would also like to thank Patricia Scott for editing my exegesis, Patricia Brassington for her astute observations and, particularly, Jeff Malpas for challenging and helping me to articulate my thoughts.

Most of all, I thank my husband Leonid Danyushevsky who has made me believe that the apparently impossible was achievable.

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SUMMARY

This paper describes the concepts and related art practices that stimulated my research work and its methodology. I have approached photography in its most straightforward and basic way; as the 'eye's technological extension'[1] and, in the process of developing images, I realised that I had been compelled to ponder the essence of my involvement in art making.

In Chapter 1, I investigate the notion of photographic veracity, and the ways in which this veracity has been manipulated. Using 'Tableau Vivant' as an example of its intentional exploitation, I also draw attention to the long-standing practice of construction and manipulation within the history of the medium. The various ways in which photography refers to reality, have been a subject for debate in considering its ontology. I focus my discussion on some views of Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Martin Jay, Andy Grundberg and others who have touched upon issues pertinent to my work. I also discuss Postmodernism and its impact on photography, focussing on the postmodern influence in defining photography as a medium for constructed and simulated imagery.

In Chapter 2, I concentrate on the context of my work. I discuss in brief the cinematic approach to reality and the importance of documentary photography in the way I work. The major part of Chapter 2 describes the work of artists who have worked in the discipline of constructed narrative photography, and used the perceived veracity of the documentary idiom to blur the distinction between truth and fiction. In detail, I discuss the photographs of Jeff Wall and Philip-Lorca di Corcia. The following section of Chapter 2 is limited to artists who in different ways apply the autobiographical concept to their work. In this light I review the works of Tracy Moffat, Sophie Calle and Nan Goldin, and I briefly summarise artists like Urs Luthi, Eileen Cowin, Laurie Long, and Vanessa Beecroft who have also used constructed tableaus to reflect on their identity, following a review of Yasumasa Morimura's work. I conclude Chapter 2 with a detailed discussion of the work of Cindy Sherman.

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[1] Martin Jay 'The Camera as Memento Mori: Barthes, Metz, and the Cahiers du Cinema', in *Downcast Eyes*, (University of California Press. Berkley. 1994), p.435

Chapter 3 is dedicated to my own work. I begin with my thoughts on the role of a masked appearance in my personal journey. I then describe my research and the development of my imagery as it evolved during the last six years, and the ideas and strategies employed for creating the imagery. I also discuss the problems I have encountered in the course of my research, their solutions, and the impact of travel on my work. I describe the strategy that I employed to combine photographic factuality with the deliberately constructed and staged scenario. I explain my working methods in detail and conclude with a discussion on the presentation of the final body of work.

Chapter 4 concludes my exegesis; I summarise the project and its contribution to the field of fine art photography.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The stimulus for my PhD project has been the desire to investigate the diverse ways in which contemporary photography extends the viewer's perceptions of reality. I find art intriguing for it repeatedly mingles the real and imaginary worlds. German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer discusses art as a 'play' in which the senses connect with the intuition and, 'set the imagination free'.[2]

> Art is rather to be characterized as intuition, indeed, as a world-view, *Welt-Anschauunung* – literally, an intuition of the world. This does not simply mean that art justifies its own claim to truth over and against scientific knowledge, insofar as the free play of imagination tends toward 'knowledge in general'.[3]

Our general perception of reality is often shaped by the desire to establish a more satisfying world for ourselves; time after time, we are trying to discover just what we want to see. It is perhaps a wish to identify ourselves with the increasingly complex world we live in that, on the one hand, reinforces our pursuit of 'the real' but, on the other hand, entangles some strong sentiments and musings, taking us into the world of imagination and fantasies. Borders between the real world and the complex and concealed inner world of the subconscious can be very blurred, and our equilibrium between the two vague and inconstant. Often, reality is referred to as existent, genuine, and therefore verifiable, and imagination is perceived as contrived, invented and false, however, both truth and illusion rarely have an absolute measure.

> ...it is true that we both elicit the image from things and imaginatively project the image into things in one and the same process. Thus aesthetic reflection is oriented above all toward the power of imagination as the human capacity of image building.[4]

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[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Intuition and vividness' in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, (Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1986), pp.163-166

[3] Ibid., p.166

[4] Ibid., p.18

Photography constitutes a visual language that is certainly straightforward and inherently believable, yet the ways in which photography interprets existing reality are often illusory. Therefore, the objectivity in a photograph is almost always superficial and thus unreliable. It seems almost ironic that the very essence of photographic trueness and authenticity puts forth some of the most deceptive, puzzling and evocative qualities. Once the instant of reality is frozen by the click of the shutter, it is separated from its context. Framed and isolated, it takes on another meaning, and one that is open for discussion. The rendition of what one believes to be the truthful depiction becomes multilayered and, in fact, fictitious. The language of photography is intricate and indeed, in its effect, often paradoxical.

1.1. PHOTOGRAPHIC VERACITY

Photography upholds its reputation for veracity mainly as a result of its technical basis. The camera, evolved from the principle of the camera obscura[5], is essentially a mechanically operated device designed to control the amount of light necessary to form an image on the light-sensitive material. The light falls on and reflects from the subject in various intensities. The optics of the camera lens gather and focus these reflected rays of light onto the photosensitive emulsion of the film, forming a 'latent image'.[6] When the 'latent image' is developed, the silver halide crystals that were struck by light are converted into black metallic silver and then fixed, making the image stable. This perfectly accurate analogue of reality is made not by the hand of the artist, but by the chemical reaction of the light sensitive material. While this is a broad interpretation, there must always be radiant energy, light in some form, to produce an affect on the photographic material. The photographed object modifies this energy in either time or space,

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[5] Camera obscura, literally a dark room, with a hole in one of its walls, through which the rays of light enter and project on the opposite white painted wall an inverted image of the outside view.

[6] This is possible only because light causes subtle changes in certain salts of silver. When film is exposed to the light, individual grains, that are struck by light, react, but invisibly. The mechanism of this reaction is rather complicated, and is triggered by free independent silver ions and small specks of impurities such as silver sulphide. Some of the silver ions collect together at sites that have been exposed to light, forming a latent image, which needs the action of a developer to increase it, in the order of about ten million times, and make it visible.

and reacts to the results in its own characteristic way. Even if the artist can modify the outcome of this process by scrutinising his idea beforehand, and submitting it in a way, which corresponds with the capacity of the apparatus and photographic process, the fact remains, that in photography, one can control only partially the actual process of image making. Vilém Flusser analyses the relationship between the camera and the photographer, comparing the camera to a machine, an 'apparatus', a 'technical organ', which a human being cannot fully control and, even then, only through its exterior, since the interior of the camera, a 'black box' as Flusser argues, is 'impenetrable'[7]. Unlike the processes of drawing and painting, it is not therefore the craftsmanship of a maker, but the accuracy and presumed neutral objectivity of the process that validates authenticity and encourages a certain belief in the truthfulness of the photograph. Vilém Flusser makes an interesting analogy between black and white photography and the concept of 'true' and 'false'. He explains that: '...if we could see the world in black and white, it would be accessible to logical analysis.' Since a mixture of the two is grey, Flusser sees photographs as 'theoretical images', arguing that: 'Long before the invention of the photograph, one attempted to imagine the world in black and white'[8].

The belief in the truthfulness of photography is influenced by the way each individual viewer perceives and understands such a representation. According to Roland Barthes, the objective realism of photography produces an effect or the

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[7] for a further discussion refer to Vilém Flusser, 'The Apparatus' in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (Reaction Books, 2000), pp.21-31

[8] Flussser uses an analogy with the philosophical concept of truth: 'Abstractions were made from the world of judgements distinguishing those that were "true" and those that were "false", and from those abstractions Aristotelian logic was constructed with its identity, difference and excluded middle. Modern science based on this logic functions despite the fact that no judgement is ever either completely true or false and even though every true judgement is reduced to nothing when subjected to logical analysis'. For Flusser photographs 'translate a theory of optics into an image and thereby put a magic spell on this theory and re-encode theoretical concepts like "black" and "white" into states of things'. Considering also colour photography, television and film, Flusser believes that: 'Black-and-white photographs embody the magic of theoretical thought since they transform the linear discourse of theory into surfaces. Herein lies their peculiar beauty, which is the beauty of the conceptual universe.' (Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, pp.41-43)

evidence that 'the thing has been there'[9], which brings the idea that the photographed object has truly existed. Also, because we essentially tend to believe in what we see[10] the understandable and realistic mode of the photographic depiction endorses our belief in the truthfulness of the image. Because the sight reassures our cognition and comprehension of the subject, we are inclined to trust in its depiction which, certainly in case of a straightforward photographic representation, corresponds with recognisable facets of reality. In this way, photographic truth is dependent on the sensorial and logical assessment. But the association of photographs with truth is not perceptible and cognitive in general, it is always subjective. Building upon his personal experience of viewing certain photographs, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes analyses the truth and reality of the photographic image, and while associating the photograph with cessation of time, its connection with the present, the past and death, he speaks of a certain 'indifference' with which photography suggests its 'likeness to reality'. He explores its convincing power of generating what he calls 'air' and 'lineaments of truth'[11]. Aware of the fact that any analysis of the photographic image is determined by the assorted ways in which reality and certainty are perceived and understood[12], Barthes establishes that the complete veracity of a photographic image can be justifiable only by a promise of absolute truth itself.

For that reason it can be argued that photographic veracity exists only as a suggestion or mental picture shaped by an individual belief in the photographic fact. As a result, the measures of photography's veracity are subjected to continuous scrutiny and theoretical debate. Eventually, it is mostly our willingness to submit to the effect of a photograph, which perhaps best justifies the possibility of its verite.

> Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits (to leaf through a magazine at the hairdresser's, the dentist's); mad

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[9] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (transl. by Richard Howard. Hill and Wang. New York. 1981), pp. 76-77

[10] For further discussion on the objectivity of the gaze refer to Martin Jay, 'From Empire of Gaze to Society of Spectacle', in *Downcast Eyes*, (University of California Press. Berkley. 1994), pp.392-394

[11] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 77-100

[12] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp.435-445

> if its realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call, in conclusion, the photographic *ecstasy*.
>
> Such are the two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilised code of perfect illusion, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality.[13]

1.2. TABLEAU VIVANT

Since the invention of photography in the 1830s, two distinctly different streams of thought emerged about the nature of the medium. The first depended on the camera's ability to produce realistic images of the perceived world: Fox Talbot's "pencil of nature". The second, more critical of photography's alleged fidelity to nature, saw the medium's potential to reflect subjective experience.

While the predominant use of early photography was to document reality, the tendency for altering its portrayal is most obvious in works described as 'tableau vivant'. The earliest especially posed 'tableau vivant' were studio reconstructions of scenes, in which the sitters posed by the photographer assumed roles of particular characters. Some tableaux were allegories, theatrically composed; others were humorous scenes from life and viewed through a stereoscope, became popular home entertainment. One of the best known examples of 'tableau vivant' is the extraordinary photomontage made from 30 negatives, by Oscar G. Rejlander *The Two Ways of Life*. Rejlander constructed his images from numerous separate negatives to achieve desired effects; his photomontages are examples of painstaking labour, skill and genius. Rejlander relentlessly rehearsed his models, to execute perfect pose and facial expression, and like many of his

Oscar Gustav Rejlander, *The Two Ways of Life*, 1857, (largest version 31 x 16 in)

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[13] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.119

contemporaries, he also used friends and repeatedly, himself in his allegories. His tableaux and genre compositions, allegorical prints and studies demonstrate Rejlander's fondness for storytelling. He was one of the first to introduce into simple genre scenes an element of narrative, and to explore the technical and symbolic potential of photography.

Henry Peach Robinson, *Fading Away*, 1858

Like many photographers who built their tableaux on simulated versions of reality, Henry Peach Robinson used models and montage to depict a 'naturalistic' rural idyll, but it was his *Fading Away* that passed through the very core of ethical consciousness. As Gernsheim comments, this contrived and melodramatic picture of a dying young girl surrounded by her grieving mother, sister and fiance, constructed from five negatives, was 'calculated to excite painful emotions'[14], and outraged the nineteenth century's sensibility of what it conceived, as permissible and appropriate subject matter. The impression of reality was so immaculately constructed in this picture, that many believed that they viewed a real scene from life. Both Oscar G. Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson constructed the stories of their tableaux using darkroom techniques, drawing and the studio and outdoor set-up. Their craftsmanship is remarkable, considering the level of the early photographic technology.

Julia Margaret Cameron, *Queen Esther before King Ahasuerus*,, 1865, (32.4 x 29.5cm)

In contrast, Julia Margaret Cameron, chose, arranged and photographed the costumed life models to pose for symbolic parables directly in front of her camera. Known also as a portrait photographer, her theatrical tableaux were allegories based on religious themes and Old Master paintings, e.g. *St.Cecilia*, *Charity*, *Madonna and Child*. Others, some based on poetry, were her own idealised representations: *The Rosebud Garden of Girls*, *Oenone*, *The Dedication*, *The May Queen*. In his 1950s commentary on

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[14] Helmut Gernsheim, *The Rise of Photography 1850-1880 - The Age of Collodion*, "Art photography", (The History of Photography Volume II. Thames and Hudson. London. 1988), p.40

Cameron's photographic compositions, Gernsheim criticises the romanticism and dramatic illusionism, comparing them to amateur theatricals[15]. The more recent views on Cameron's work, however, place the artist and her creative ideas in historical and social context, recognizing that her theatrical allegories expressed wide range of real emotions and experiences rarely openly expressed during the Victorian era. These views place Julia Margaret Cameron amongst the greatest portrait photographers, acknowledging her unique and individual contribution to the early developments of art photography[16]

The element of 'tableau vivant' is revealed through different styles of early photography. John Thomson (*Street Life in London,* 1877-78) posed characters in postures appropriate to their profession or role in society in little scenes not unlike a *tableau vivant*, Count Giuseppe Primoli applied photography's inherent deceptive quality to fabricate street scenarios (*The admirer of la Rejane,* 1889), in which he used his friends to act as the characters in these faked street situations. Englishman, Dr. Barnado, realising that the camera could be used effectively to capture the anguish in the faces of wretched children, exploited photographic factuality. Applying shrewdly 'artistic fictions' he staged them in 'before and after' shots, which he then used to raise money for missionary purposes.

Many of the early photographers subjected themselves to the camera's seductive realism, and played with appearances transforming their identity, leaving us with a legacy of invented self-portraits, which stand out for their theatricality. Nadar used costumes to embellish portraits of his famous clients as well as of himself, satisfying the fantasy of dressing up and bourgeois taste for adventure and the experience of otherness. Under the influence of Romanticism the experience of otherness often corresponded with the attraction to the primitive

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[15] '...Mrs. Cameron's photographs often appear mawkish, even ludicrous. Indeed, some of her twenty-four illustrations to *The Idylls of the King, and Other Poems,* taken at Tennyson's own request in 1874, are reminiscent of the worst kind of a amateur theatricals. In spite of the singular industry with which Mrs. Cameron arranged her figures to bring the characters into the region of pure ideality, her compositions produce a realistic instead of poetic effect.' (Gernsheim, H., *The Rise of Photography,* "Art photography", p.50-56)

[16] see Wolf, S., *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women,* Yale University Press, 1998 and Lukitsh, J., *Julia Margaret Cameron,* Phaidon Press, 2001.

and exotic, which fitted well with the nineteen-century's desire for illusion and excess. Nadar's *Self-portrait in Indian Costume* exemplifies the taste for the exotic that many of his contemporaries shared.[17]

Gaspar-Felix Nadar, *Self-Portrait in Indian Costume*, 1863, (Albumen print, 22.0 x 13.0cm)

The frequency with which the early photographers explored the narrative potential of their medium demonstrates not only their creative and innovative endeavour, but also attests to photography's inherent ability to play with fantasy. The theatrical poses of the first constructed tableaux still resonate in the works of many contemporary artists who repeatedly exploit the photographic illusion of reality. While masters of early constructed photography rivalled painting's dominance in the nineteenth century art scene, the photographers of today not only use photography's artistic potential, but frequently venture into deliberate deception of the viewers.

Oscar Rejlander regularly used the camera's realism not only when constructing his tableaux but also for many of the self-portraits he produced throughout his life. His self-portrait *Rejlander the Artist introduces Rejlander the Volunteer* echoes photography's relationship to painting; the artist presents

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[17] "People are not always of the country in which they were born and, when you are prey to such a condition, you search everywhere for your true country. Those who are made this way feel exiled in their own town, strangers in their homes; they are tormented by bouts of inverted homesickness. It is a strange malady: its victims feel like caged birds of passage. When the time comes to leave, you are troubled by great desire, and the sight of the clouds moving off towards the sun is strangely disquieting. If you so wished, it would be easy to assign to every one of the famous figures of the day not only the country, but also the century in which their true existence should have been set: Lamartine and de Vigny are modern Englishmen, Hugo is a Spanish Fleming of the age of Charles V, Alfred de Musset a Neapolitan of the time of Spanish domination... For example, you are a German and I a Turk, though an Egyptian Turk, not one from Constantinople. I feel as if I have lived in the East and, when at Carnival time I dress up in an authentic caftan and tarbush, I feel I have rediscovered my true form of dress. It has always surprised me that I don't understand Arabic fluently; I can only imagine that I have forgotten it.' Excerpts from the letter by Theophile Gautier to Nerval, quoted by the Goncourt brothers in their *Journal* (Nov. 1863), convey discontent with the present and longing for a refuge in romanticised far-away places, and distant times. (Reprinted in 'The Image of the Other', essay by Jean-Francois Chevrier, in *Staging the Self*, ed. J. Lingwood, Butler&Tanner Ltd. London. 1986, p.13).

Oscar Gustav Rejlander, *Rejlander the Artist introduces Rejlander the Volunteer*, 1860, (Albumen, 10 x 11.2cm)

Jeff Wall, *Double Self Portrait*, 1979, (colour transparency, 65 x 86inch)

himself simultaneously as a painter in front of the canvas and as a soldier. The painter gesticulates as if in front of an audience, looking into the camera, the soldier, resting his gun, casts a hostile look on the artist. This theatrical set-up shows the figures not only posing against each other, but brings an almost surreal quality into the game Rejlander plays with his personality. In comparison, a century later, Jeff Wall uses a simple composition of two strikingly realistic images of himself and creates ambiguity, illusion and restrained spectacle for the viewer, addressing the twofold aspects of authorship and spectatorship. In similar ways, both artists exploit photography's realism to reflect on dualities and facets of identity and photographic truth.

The early tableaux and theatrical allegories, and above all, the persistence of their creators, affirm that photography's use to create fictional form has a long-standing history. Since photography's invention, the image has been manipulated and altered with the aim of producing something more than just a 'mirror of reality'.

1.3. Reflections on Photography

The ways in which photography defines reality has been the subject of theoretical musing since the discovery of the medium. The ability of a photograph to evoke additional levels of visual reality has brought about conflicting views on the 'ontology' of photography. Because the theoretical positions are today plentiful - and often contrasting - it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to compare all the people, terms and views that attempt to define photography; instead I have limited my discussion to several ideas, which in some way reflect issues related to my research project.

Eugene Atget, *Café "Au Tambour", Quai de La Tournelle*, 1908, (Silver Gelatin print)

In photographic images the distinction between real and illusory is complicated. The images are simultaneously true and false, genuine and yet mysterious. As a result, their puzzling effect has often been regarded as mystifying and 'surreal'.[18] Susan Sontag in her influential book *On Photography* examined in detail the connection between Surrealism and photography. Making an analogy between Surrealism as an 'accumulation of oddities, a joke, a death trip'[19] and photographs, she argued that like Surrealism, photographs present a reduced interpretation of the world. She saw photographs as the simultaneous 'pseudo-presence and a token of absence', through which we can make only 'attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality'.[20] Sontag criticises photography's 'patronising quality' through which it transforms reality into an object.[21] For her, photography is a "reductive way of dealing with the world"[22], it 'flatters the

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[18] The illusory quality of photography was fully established by Surrealism in the 1920s. Surrealism, defined by André Breton in his Manifesto in 1924 as 'Pure psychic automatism' intended to express the real process of thought, believed in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought. Favouring accidents over artistic creation, Surrealists fully appreciated the fact that a photograph does not need to be manipulated to a great extent to appear fantastic and that a photograph of a seemingly ordinary subject can have an uncanny, mysterious quality. This was an important realization, given that one of the central aims of the movement was to trigger the subconscious and latent memory; something that proved to be well suited to the photographic image. The discovery of the surreal potential of photography has been a significant point in art history and in the development of the photographic medium, something that outlasted the impact the movement has had, for example, on painting. More than any other style, Surrealism opened a way for photographers to explore the creative potential of their medium; and its implication for photography was perhaps more significant than acknowledged in its time. Surrealism recognised some of the very essential attributes of photography as a creative medium and elevated its potential above the predominantly descriptive function, and thus introduced a new way for the interpretation of the photographic image.

[19] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York. 1978), p.75

[20] Ibid., pp.14-16

[21] Ibid.,p.80

[22] Ibid.,p.80

viewer, creating a false sense of ubiquity, a deceptive mastery of experience'[23]. Talking about 'photographs of Agony', and the Surrealist idea of 'convulsive' beauty, Sontag uses the examples of Eugene Smith's images of Minamata and Lewis Hine's photographs of exploited children to criticise the 'beautifying' quality of photography. What she called the 'aestheticizing tendency of photography', for her, did, in fact, neutralise the effect of distress that such pictures produced[24].

> Cameras miniaturise experience, transform history into spectacle. As much as they create sympathy, photographs cut sympathy, distance the emotions. Photography's realism creates a confusion about the real which is (in the long run) analgesic morally as well as (both in the long and in the short run) sensorially stimulating.[25]

In addition, Sontag disapproves of photography's ability to convert the world into an assemblage of fragmented and 'dissociated' moments, its acquisitive relationship to the world, and she looks critically at photography's association with humanity and truth.[26] Although Sontag's analysis of photography can be regarded as a criticism of the medium[27], her comprehensive scrutiny of photography and its paradoxical relationship with reality and truth actually articulates well, in my view, photography's creative and conceptual capacity.

In comparison with Sontag, Roland Barthes' reflections on photography are often personal. In many ways, as a photographer and also as a subject of photographic representation, I find Barthes' analyses stimulating. Reading

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[23] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, pp.81-82

[24] Ibid., p.109

[25] Ibid.,p.110

[26] Ibid., pp.110-112

[27] Terry Barrett in his book *Criticizing Photographs* points out that Sontag's *On Photography* is 'an observer's view that is extremely critical of photography' (p.123). And that 'it particularly upset several photographers' (p.138). (Terry Barret, *Criticizing Photographs: an introduction to understanding images*, Mayfield Pub. Co. Mountain View. California. 1990) Similarly, Andy Grundberg in the *Crisis of the Real*, also acknowledges Sontag's repeated and enduring complaint about photography's ability to devalue first-degree reality and stresses that this criticism came ironically 'just as art photographers were recognising how to exploit the difference between photographic reality and reality itself.' (Grundberg, A., *Crisis of the Real*, "Photography Beside Itself" (p.269)

Camera Lucida in particular, one cannot help but be absorbed, and convinced, by the acuity and honesty with which Barthes probes his feelings and thoughts about photography. For instance, when drawing upon his direct experience in looking at certain photographs in *Camera Lucida*, he lets himself be subjected to, what he refers to as, photography's 'magical' powers, and 'madness'.

Throughout his life Barthes repeatedly reflected on the twofold nature of the medium and analysed photography's analogical potential. In *Image-Music-Text*, when speaking of the 'duality of messages' (*denoted* and *connoted* messages) in all imitative arts, Barthes asserted the 'denotative' status of the photograph which, to him, does not transform reality, but is its 'perfect *analogon'*. Comparing photography to other 'analogical reproductions of reality', e.g. painting, drawing, cinema and theatre, he argued that while photographic 'objectivity' offers 'perfection and plenitude of its analogy', it is, at the same time, a 'message without a code'. This, for Barthes, presented what he called a 'photographic paradox', through which the photograph can be both 'objective' and 'invested'.[28] Stressing photography's evocative qualities, Barthes elaborated upon a notion that in a photograph 'something is revealed'; this he called 'the third meaning'[29].

Furthermore, Barthes recognised that photography evokes not only intimate experiences of the viewer, like emotions or memory, but also echoes the culturally coded perception of life. In *Image-Music-Text*, Barthes analysed further the mental and emotional processes that, for him, were fundamental to the

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[28] Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', in *Image-Music-Text*, (transl. by Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang. 1978), pp.196-199

[29] Martin Jay, in analysing the ocular experience, elaborates on the Barthesian notion of 'the third meaning' (Barthes, 'The Third meaning: research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills', in *Image-Music-Text.*), as follows: 'Borrowing a term from Julia Kristeva, he called it a level of *significance* which was not equivalent to that of signification or communication. Whereas the latter two produced what Barthes called the "obvious" sign, a meaning which seeks out the viewer, *significance* provided only "obtuse meaning" instead. Defining obtuseness variously as blunted, rounded in form, and greater than the "right angle" of meaningful narrative, Barthes also linked it explicitly to Bataille's notion of expenditure and Michail Bahktin's idea of the carnivalesque. Resisting metalinguistic translations, and outside the circuit of semantic exchange, not a copy of anything in the real world, obtuse meaning was visual counternarrative: 'disseminated, reversible, set to its own temporality...counterlogical and yet "true".' (Jay, M., *Downcast Eyes*, p.444)

interpretation of photographic images. Examining what he called the 'connotation procedures', Barthes believed that translations of the photographic image are, above all, historical, hence cultural and depend on the understood values of society. According to Barthes, society and culture shape the individual viewer and the way he reads photographic images. Making the comparison with a real language, which one can understand only if one has learned its signs, Barthes used an example of press photographs. He argued that both perceptive and cognitive subtexts, as well as ethical ones, are drawn from culturally shaped knowledge. To him, only 'truly traumatic photographs' were capable of 'pure denotation'. Concluding, he inferred that: 'the "mythological" effect of a photograph is inversely proportional to its traumatic effect'[30].

Like Barthes and Sontag, many contemporary theoreticians such as Walter Benjamin, Victor Burgin, Jean Baudrillard, Rosalind Krauss, Allan Sekula and Andy Grundberg, to name just a few, analysed photography's intricate conceptual potential and its relationship to reality and truth. This has also been the subject of discourse for some modern thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault; and has been the source of inspiration for a new generation of artists, who have been exploring the medium since the 1970s.

1.4. PHOTOGRAPHY AS A POSTMODERN MEDIUM

In the nineteen eighties, Postmodernism introduced the argument that all images are artistically equal and renounced the Modernist notion of the originality and authenticity of an image. This gave rise to a new perspective on the function and meaning of art. Postmodernism changed assumptions about the function of fine art in our culture, and about the role of the artists in relation to their art. Examining the impact of Postmodernism on photography, Andy Grundberg explains Jacques Derrida's term 'Deconstruction', which has been widely used within the Postmodernist vocabulary. In its principle, Grundberg explains, the term 'deconstruction' relates to the theory of language and knowledge called Structuralism. Structuralism promotes the idea that everything has a deeper

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[30] Roland Barthes, 'Photographic Message', in *Image-Music-Text,* (transl. by Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang. New York. 1978) pp 199-210

structure, which must be deciphered. In search for this deeper structure it divides everything (thoughts, text and images) into two; the 'signifier' and the 'signified'; and, through the relationship of the signifiers, Structuralism examines the structure of things, when the 'signified', or the meaning, is inferior[31]. As Grundberg suggests, Structuralism is a: 'symptom of a certain historical desire to make the realm of human activity a bit more neat, a bit more calculable.'[32]

While acknowledging Jacques Derrida and the contribution of Poststructuralism, Grundberg also reasons that the basic foundation of Postmodern Art is the impossibility of 'pure, unblemished meaning or experience'.[33] Others, like Christopher Norris, have been openly sceptical about Postmodernism's impact on culture. For example, Norris, in his analysis of Postmodernism and advanced philosophical thought, claims that 'Postmodernism amounts to a vote of no confidence' in the tradition of 'enlightened philosophical, ethical and social thought'[34].

Be that as it may, the main impact of Postmodernism on art has been that it generally tends to place more value on the intellectual analysis rather than the visual one, and that, in an assortment of ways, Postmodernism has appropriated the vocabulary of mass culture, encouraging a scrutiny of public sphere values.

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31 Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real,* (Aperture Foundation, Inc. Text. New York. 1999), pp.4-5

32 Andy Grundberg further elaborates that Structuralism also fits into another historical process, that of 'gradual replacement of our faith in the obvious with an equally compelling faith in what is not obvious - in what can be uncovered or discovered through analysis.' With wit, he uses an example of Copernicus; 'who had the audacity to claim that the earth revolves around the sun, even though it is obvious to all of us that the sun revolves around the earth, and does so once a day.' He quotes Eagleton: 'Copernicus was followed by Marx, who claimed that the true significance of social processes went on "behind the backs" of individual agents, and after Marx, Freud argued that the real meaning of our words and actions were quite imperceptible to the conscious mind. Structuralism is the modern inheritor of this belief that reality, and our experience of it, are discontinuous with each other.' (Ibid., pp.5-6)

33 Grundberg examines the poststructuralist notion as follows: 'our perceptions only tell us about what our perceptions are, not about the true condition of the world.' As such 'meanings are undercut, or *deconstructed*'. He further continues that it is impossible to get the 'ultimate' meaning of anything. 'Meaning is always withheld, and to believe the opposite is tantamount to mythology' (Ibid., pp.5-6)

34 Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism,* (Blackwell Publishers. Oxford UK&Cambridge USA. 1993), p.304

Postmodernism also promotes simulated imagery, introducing the concept of simulacra and hyperreality and, in view of that, it reduces to nothingness the importance of personal experience, and challenges the idea of authorship. It sees the world void of authenticity and originality of experience; the world, as Grundberg describes it, is in the end 'an endless hall of mirrors' in which we are 'the prisoners of what we see'.[35]

Grunberg further debates the postmodernist style in photography, using examples of mixed and, so-called, alternative media and approaches, e.g. photography about photography, theatrical photographs, and pictures mixed with text or audio. He argues that as such Postmodernism 'lifts photography from its traditional second-class status, and privileges it as the medium of the moment.'[36]. It recognises photography's manifold nature, and sees photographs not as natural truths but fictions whose mechanisms can be exposed. For Grundberg, photography's reproducibility, its lack of authorship and its links to popular culture no longer carry the previous 'stigma of illegitimacy' but, instead, they give photography a special status amongst other art media.

Without doubt, photography's idiosyncratic quality and its descriptive mode of representation fit particularly well within the context of postmodern ideas.

Jean Baudrillard wrote:

> Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real...[37]

Taking the 'camera-bound culture' as a rich source of inspiration, many contemporary photographers, like Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons and Cindy Sherman, have rendered life as lived through the mediation of either advertising, mass magazines or movies. In the process, they scrutinise the veracity and

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[35] Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real*, p.18

[36] Ibid., p.7

[37] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, transl. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (Foreign Agents Series/Semiotext(e). New York. 1983), p.25.

integrity of the photographic image, and while testing the flexibility of photographic truth, they continually look for new ways in which the altered description of reality can evoke idiosyncratic 'interpretations' by the audience. For example, Jeff Wall sets up misleading clues in seemingly realistic depictions only to destabilise the viewers' belief in the 'frozen moment' and confront their ideas of the world.

During the last three decades art has shifted towards the analytical re-presentation of reality as replicated and fictional. Much of contemporary photography questions the natural world by mingling the pictorial effect of an image with the concept, which is of a perplexing and often incongruous kind. While relying on the power of the constructed scenario, it fabricates the recognised facets of reality in an attempt to achieve a suggestive imitation of both, i.e. the real and the fictional, resonating with often sarcastic and impersonal perceptions of the world. Thus contemporary photography not only represents and exposes the stereotypes of our world, but it challenges many long established, categorised and accepted meanings, as well as our cultural beliefs. Often, it not only tests our notions of what we see and know, but also probes into the idea of whether all of what we see and know still 'moves us' in any way. In other words, a photograph is no longer only the *mirror* of reality, but it is also the *mirror* of conscience and morality.

CHAPTER 2. PROJECT CONTEXT

I have tried to analyse the things that instigated the development, changes, and also, the final outcome of my research. In looking at and acknowledging the continuum of one hundred and fifty years of photography's history, I have established that my fascination with early photographs, documentary and street photography, as well as with cinema, has influenced considerably the way in which I created my own images. While some of my images contain an element of 'Tableau Vivant', the others impart more of the documentary and cinematic influence. Both film and photography underlie the photographic 'promise' of truthful reproduction of reality and both repeatedly exploit this 'promise' relying on the imagination and knowledge of its viewers. It is essentially their simulation of reality, implicative of both the truth and fantasy, which shapes the way I construct the *mise en scéne* of my imagery.

2.1. CINEMA AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

In the following section I will look at the ways in which cinema, and documentary photography, convey their narratives as linked to the real. Cinema offers an absorbing feeling of simulated reality, unfolding through the long and complex dispositions of actions and characters, images and sounds, and thus creates a seductive illusion of reality[38]. Its implied truthfulness is nonetheless misleading. Most of the feature movies are made by placing in front of a camera people, who are costumed, made-up, and trained to act. Cinema, perhaps with the exception of Cinema Verite[39], is built upon the carefully considered selection of

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[38] Cinema provides the sensation of the living presence (Sontag, S., 1978) by allowing the viewer to relate with the flow of moving pictures. It offers intimate illusions of reality in a continuity of time and insinuates that this illusion will go on. Depending on a particular style of filmmaking, the ways in which film presents its illusion of reality to the viewer, vary. While in some films the 'reality effect' is so convincing that the film presents the viewer with a completely closed world of its own, in others, film may suggest the breadth of the unseen world outside its frame, and as such calls for the imaginative ability of its viewer. For instance, the avant-garde cinema of the sixties developed various methods that would deliberately disrupt a film's flowing illusion in order to stimulate the viewers' imagination.

[39] The term 'Cinema Verite' essentially means a direct cinema, when 'real' people are filmed in spontaneously 'uncontrolled' situations. The director does not function in the pure sense of the

symbolic signs, i.e. scenarios, plots and sets, which are made up by a team of workers especially trained to create the most believable illusion of a specific reality and time. Nevertheless, this does not seem to disrupt its 'magical', illusory powers. On the whole, we knowingly entrust ourselves to a film's 'simulacrum', allowing for the 'cinematic hypnosis' to stir up a 'dreamlike state of film-watching'[40], lending ourselves to a seductive world of fantasies and improbable genre scenes.

Documentary photography touches, perhaps more so than any other photographic genre, upon our deepest belief in the photographic fact; albeit, viewing a document, one can also register far more and different sensations to those that were originally recorded by the instant 'click' of the camera shutter. Whilst effectively promoting the 'credibility' of the instantaneous depiction, the

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word; instead he/she acts as an observer, insisting on having no control over the shooting. The role of director is to witness the process, without effecting the spontaneity of filming, and the non-interference is used as the main filming force. As such it aims to eliminate the barriers between audience and subject. Complex technical devices, special lighting, equipment and large crews on the studio set, are usually reduced to the use of handheld cameras and live sound. Scripting and traditional forms of melodrama, suspense, etc. as well as acting and directing are replaced by spontaneous, uncontrolled action. The Cinema Verite director asks nothing of the people featuring in his film, except their permission to be filmed. The 'real' people are preferably non-actors, often 'playing' themselves. Professional actors are rarely used and if so they too appear as themselves, as actors. The standard editing process is left to the filmmaker alone, who in an attempt to be his own editor then tries to re-create events as he witnessed them, rather than manipulating them through the arrangement of shots, juxtaposition or sequences. While such an approach is strictly divorced from fictional elements, the Cinema Verite technique has been applicable in many scenes of feature cinema. Filmmakers like Godard or Forman have often applied this way of working, in order to bring an element of truth to their films. The main goal of Cinema Verite is, nevertheless, a truthful and direct depiction of life as it presents itself. The result is an untarnished documentation, a kind of 'Kino-Eye', where a camera would be as mobile as the human eye. (Mamber, S. *Cinema Verite in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary*, MIT Press. Cambridge. Massachussetts. 1974)

[40] Martin Jay refers to Christian Metz's discussion of a state of disavowal, which reinforces voyeurism by denying any relationship between the viewer and what is viewed. As Metz says :'...the film masks its working, a masking which suggests that *trucage*, a term normally used for trick photography alone, is close to the essence of film itself' (*Trucage and the Film* by Christian Metz). Martin Jay continues that: 'Although paradoxically granted a higher "reality quota" than the still photography because of its apparent ability to "reproduce life", film was in fact based more on deceit.' (Jay, M. *Downcast Eyes*, p.482)

documentary photograph also advocates and validates a notion of Barthesian 'photographic paradox' (see Chapter 1.3). It encourages empathy and emotional association with documented subject matter and promotes our musings and recollections and, every so often, astonishment and disbelief, reinforcing the impact of the everyday themes. The narrative potential of documentary, street or travel photography, is always affected by an individual photographer's style and his sense of an aesthetic arrangement of the pictorial frame: and by the photographer's former experiences and cultural background.

The aesthetic choices I make when I visualise and edit my images are inspired by documentary photography. I like the element of chance, the spontaneity and authenticity that emphasise the feeling of a frozen moment in time, such as the little details like figures or street signs, half-cut out of the frame, which underscore the so called poetic accident, and the inferred relationship between the figure and the background that brings about the everyday feel, hence veracity, of a documentary photograph. And, above all, I relate to the element of surprise and of disclosure through which documentary photography stirs up the imagination, and sometimes disbelief. The compositional equilibrium, lyricism and a certain

Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Herwijnen, Gelderland, The Netherlands*, 1956, (Silver gelatin print)

André Kertész, *Budapest,* 1914, (Silver gelatin print)

Josef Koudelka, *Spain*, 1974, (Silver gelatin print)

fatalistic melancholy so typical of European photographers like Brassai, André Kertész, Robert Doisneau, Henry Cartier-Bresson or Josef Koudelka, to name just a few, inform my visual vocabulary. I relate easily to the nostalgia and somewhat bittersweet mood of the place and moment, noticeable not only in these images, but in much European photography. On the other hand, I find moving the marked sharpness and somewhat anxious restlessness, which is apparent in works of American documentary photographers like WeeGee, William Klein, Garry Winogrand, and Helen Levitt. In comparison with the European works these images seem to appear chaotic, demanding and 'tough', just like the environment they describe. In different ways, both the European and the American documents

Garry Winogrand, *American Legion Convention, Dallas, Texas*, 1964, (Silver gelatin print)

William Klein, *Close Up,* (Contact sheets from 1982, 1954 and 1983).

are intense and confrontational. They also depict human diversity, the public and the private, the medley, contradictions and pulse of life; the suggestion of sounds,

passing voices, whispers and the silence of a frozen moment; but above all, they are filled with insatiable curiosity about life taken as a whole. The virtue of documentary photographs lies in their ability to present the viewer with a frank record of the immediate reality. Unique in its spur-of-the-moment candour, the truthfulness of documentary photography allows us to identify with its depictions on our own level of understanding and consciousness. As such, documentary photography promotes a substantial degree of veracity, representing through the immediacy of its style what we know as direct, plain, unvarnished reality.

2.2. CONSTRUCTED NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Many contemporary photographers seek ways to test and exploit the juxtaposition of veracity and artifice. In order to examine the common cultural codes through a modelled and staged fiction made of objects, they imitate scenarios from real life. Most of these artists construct their work and prepare their strategy well in advance; they choose what is most significant and demonstrative, such as gesture, pose, expression; the props are all carefully selected and fully controlled to enhance the symbolism of a picture. This symbolism is, in its effect upon the viewer, essentially psychological, and touches upon the postmodern notion that photographs are not actual truths but fictions whose mechanisms can be exposed.

Artists like Jeff Wall, Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Cindy Sherman, exploit photography's inherent aura of authentic reality, while relying on the viewers' response to the familiar, yet oddly constructed or dramatised, real life situations. In Wall's imagery, for example, there is always a palpable, contradictory and somewhat disenchanted perception of life. It reflects conflicts in collective values and, as Wall calls it: the 'grand myths of metamorphosis' in Western culture. He touches upon the momentous possibilities of imaginary and external worlds and fills the space he creates, between the viewer and the image, with ambiguity and postmodern irony.

2.2.1. Jeff Wall

Jeff Wall, both an artist and an art theoretician, has produced highly controlled and premeditated work since 1978, analysing a complex connection between the history of fine art and the problematic conditions of contemporary culture. He combines the pictorial effects of traditional oil painting and cinema with the symbolism of mass media culture, and produces eye-catching 'photographic reality' while relying on an effect that is analogous to traditional oil painting. By invoking the composition, scale and subject matter of such masters as Caravaggio, Velásquez, Cézanne or Manet, Wall manufactures a setting of everyday social circumstances. The situation is recognisable and often familiar in the way it represents the media-saturated façade of the contemporary world. The picture-perfect look of Wall's images is vividly lifelike, even though the outcome of his work has been almost methodically calculated. He devises his shots in a similar manner to the film director planning his set; carefully constructing the story, casting its performers, formulating their acting techniques and the particulars of their roles, as well as the lighting and set design and the organisation of the picture. All of these are shaped in a strictly methodical way in order to attain the exact end product. Wall's images are large Cibachrome transparencies, lit from behind by fluorescent light. They are reminiscent of advertising billboard displays, rather than photographs. This is an effective means for an immediate visual impact upon the viewer; the luminous light captures and 'absorbs' one into the image, whilst their larger-than-human scale overwhelms us and produces an unsettling effect of constructed 'reality'. Wall calls his pictures 'cinematographic' and, indeed, they are, given that each of them is constructed into a symbolic and complete illusion of reality. As such, his imagery has an allegoric, 'totalising' quality which, like 'ordinary cinema' suggests that the depiction is complete in itself. In comparison, a photographic image, whose aesthetics originate from photojournalism, is always, according to Wall, indicative of an 'outside' reality, reducing it to 'a fragment of a greater whole'[41].

Wall's working strategy relies on photographic instantaneousness. The transparencies illuminate the momentous facets of both the imaginary and the real

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[41] Jeff Wall, interview with Pelenc, A., in *Jeff Wall* (Phaidon Press Limited. London. 1996), pp.9-10

world, leaving us with a narrative allegory of constructed 'reality'. Wall's initial studio work presented figures in iconic and still poses. Carefully constructed images like *The Destroyed Room*, *Dead Troops Talk* and *The Vampires' Picnic* appear more theatrical and grotesque, partly because of their hard studio lighting and dissonant colour. In these works Wall applies theatrical irony and relies on the improbability of the staged incident or frozen action, which is often the focal point of some of the invented street scenarios from the mid-eighties. Works like *Mimic*, *The Agreement*, or *Milk* as well as *Stumbling Block* or *A Fight on the Sidewalk,* on the other hand, draw upon observations of real life situations. In *Milk* a young man sitting on the pavement strikes a gesture resembling, at first look, an angered drunk. His motion is frozen at a moment when, from the brown paper bag he clutches, a spill gushes into the air. The spill is white; the title informs us that it is milk. Realising the irony in what the picture promises to represent, we begin to question what we see; what we think we see; and what we know: - and that is exactly what Jeff Wall aims for. Relying on the effect of a 'picture-perfect' ordinary moment in life, he stirs up and suspends both, our certainty and our doubt. Like most of his work, *Milk* denotes a postmodern irony.

Jeff Wall, *Milk*, 1984, (transparency in lightbox, 187 x 229cm)

Stumbling Block again depicts a recognisable urban situation, interrupted by the fall of a passing girl over a comfortably outspread man. In his pose the man emulates the look of a street 'bum', but is equipped with padded gear and the badge of a city employee. He is the friendly and passive stumbling block over which, those who are ambivalent, trip; have a kind of healing interruption or a meditative stop in their senseless corporate rush. Black humour tints this essentially 'green comedy', as Wall calls it[42]. In *Mimic* the

Jeff Wall, *Stumbling Block*, 1991, (transparency in lightbox, 229 x 337cm)

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[42] Jeff Wall, *Jeff Wall*, pp.21-22

gesture suggests guarded mistrust, but on a closer inspection, reveals the open space of the street as a distinctively aggressive modern landscape, in which the private and the public mingle in an unpredictable mix. In *The Thinker* the contemplative pose of a man in the foreground imitates the structure of *Peasant's Column* by Albrecht Durer. Here, the pose against the landscape becomes a backdrop for the social scenario.

Jeff Wall, *Mimic*, 1982, (transparency in lightbox, 198 x 229cm)

Jeff Wall, *The Thinker*, 1986, (transparency in lightbox, 229 x 216cm)

The crucial importance of the human subject determines the details and composition in each frame. They are all used as scaffolding for Wall's intended idea, but at all times the original concept precedes the creative process. Wall himself believes that erudition and knowledge, in the history and theory of art, is essential in the development of his work. From his standpoint, of a political culture of change, Wall refers to the tradition of pictorial symbolism as a reflection of the social and moral values of society. Their antagonistic nature, according to Wall, is closely linked to the class-divided structure of modern societies and this affects the representation of every aspect of contemporary life in modern art. The contradictory and often disenchanted perception of life manifests itself in the representation of the figure in art imagery; and the figure, its appearance, and gesture, has been a fundamental element of Wall's work. He uses the expressive power of the gesture in his images not only as means to express an action but, rather, to show the involuntary, compulsive body movements that are truthful responses suggesting an unease. Wall's latest work, *Landscapes,* draws upon the visible distances, and moves his physical viewpoint further away from the immediate presence of the figure, which becomes a

miniature detail in these vast social spaces. For Wall, the purpose of art is to confront the problematic aspect of contemporary life, which is dependent on the 'economic psychology' of consumption and stereotype. Its truths are often impenetrable through the glossy surface. By giving an account through a relationship 'to this surface' art, for Wall, should reflect upon its truth and, thus, provide a glimpse of something 'other'. This 'other' is 'always something better because experiencing art is, as Stendhal said, the experience of a "promesse de bonheur", a promise of happiness'.[43]

2.2.2. Philip-Lorca diCorcia

In comparison, Philip-Lorca diCorcia employs photographic veracity to display the theatricality of the everyday. Like Wall, he builds his narratives to mimic various layers of reality. The narratives, although fairly disparate in their details, all oscillate between the artificiality of constructed fiction and the authenticity of the documentary idiom. In the late 1970s, he began work on a series of photographs in which he constructed seemingly banal domestic situations. Cleverly lit and sophisticatedly composed, the shot is usually limited to a single protagonist somewhat lost in his own world. The stage is meticulously elaborate and the fantastic quality of light is suggestive of fiction; yet, instead of rejecting the picture as false, we feel drawn further into its drama. The almost dispassionate treatment of the characters delivers voluptuous sensations from the mere act of seeing and proves to be very effective in satisfying the viewer's voyeurism. DiCorcia relies on the power of documentary fact, which he, like a

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Mario, 1978,*
(Chromogenic colour print, 38 x 58cm approx.)

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Alice, 1988,*
(Chromogenic colour print, 38 x 58cm approx.)

[43] Jeff Wall, *Transparencies,* with an interview by Els Barents (Schirmer/Mosel. Munich. 1986), p.104

skilful cinematographer, seductively mixes with fiction. He uses his family and friends to pose in roles in constructed everyday scenarios, which he then titles by the real name of the protagonist and the year in which the picture was taken. DiCorcia's way of working is very similar to the one which a master film-maker like Alfred Hitchcock would use. He takes a great deal of time, painstakingly devising all the details and nuances of the setting. Wanting a perfect illumination of the scene with all the necessary reflections and shadows, diCorcia combines natural and artificial light, achieving dramatic effects, which are an essential part of his images. The colours are lavish and vibrant, provoking the viewer's imagination. Deliberately, diCorcia avoids any specific clues; instead he offers the voyeuristic spectacle of a suspended moment in the life of the character, who is self absorbed and unaware of the viewer, 'poised for a course of action that only he or she can know'[44]. The interpretation of the story is left to the viewers' own fantasy and dreams.

While diCorcia's work relies heavily on a profound statement of photographic fact, he, at the same time, abandons the realism of a documentary style through elaborate artifice and surreal use of colour. This proves to be very effective. On one hand, there is the fantastic and glossy perfection, which comes partly from his experience as a commercial magazine photographer and, on the other, a promise of realism, learnt from the great masters of the documentary tradition, such as Garry Winogrand and WeeGee. By combining both the magnetism of 'commercial gloss' with 'the force of the real', diCorcia achieves mind-provoking fiction, seductive in its duplicity.[45]

In 1990, diCorcia began a series of photographs depicting the 'down-and-out' types of Hollywood. He photographed prostitutes, hustlers and drug addicts at Santa Monica Boulevard, using his unique style to portray the failed dreams and the longing for success, the heartless reality of the American Dream. He posed these characters in motel rooms, parking lots and 'fast-food joints', allowing the material at hand to heighten the scene. Again, diCorcia titled the pictures matter-of-factly, in this series, by the name and the age of the protagonist, the place and the payment he gave to the person, supposingly, for the posing. The

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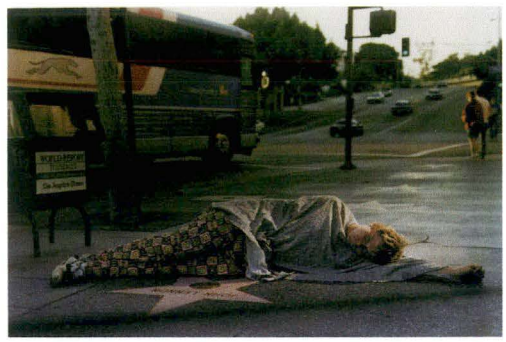
[44] Peter Galassi, *Philip-Lorca diCorcia* (The Museum of Modern Art. New York. 1995), p.6

[45] Ibid., p.12

Philip-Lorca di Corcia, *Marilyn; 28 years old; Las Vegas, Nevada; $30,* c.1990, (Chromogenic colour print, 38 x 58cm approx.)



Philip-Lorca di Corcia, *Major Tom; Kansas City, Kansas; $20,* c. 1990, (Chromogenic colour print, 38 x 58cm approx.)

pictures expressed the grim sadness of their protagonists who sell themselves as 'dreams' to others, having lost their hopeless fantasies. The images are highly staged. Most of them are taken in low light conditions, and diCorcia uses flash to illuminate the characters, giving them a theatrical presence. In comparison with his earlier work, the *Hollywood 1990-1992* series seems somewhat less manufactured, though the project is set up as a series of premeditated fictions. The central character's keenness to pose for the picture, the setting of the back streets, cars and neon lighting bring out a rather dismal realism in these brightly coloured works.

Philip-Lorca di Corcia, *Michael Jenson; 19 years old; Dallas, Texas; $20, and Jerry Imel; 18 years old; Wichita, Kansas; $20*, c.1990 (Chromogenic colour print, 38 x 58cm approx.)

In the next series, diCorcia explores even further the element of chance, setting up his medium format camera on the streets of big cities, photographing people randomly passing by. He deliberately selects busy streets, in places like New York, Naples, Tokyo and Los Angeles, that are full of activity and life. In order to achieve the utmost detail of the rich variety of characters and scenes, he uses infinite depth of field and, again, he titles his pictures with conceptual factualism; *LA 1998*, *Rome 1996*, *Tokyo 1998*, *New York 1993*, *Hong Kong 1996*. As in the *Hollywood 1990-1992* series, he 'singles out' the subjects using his own supplemental flash light. In the sharp, contrasting light the characters, frozen in motion, remind us more of actors than people accidentally passing by. But these are non-orchestrated scenes. The figures appear unreal because of the flashlight, which separates the figure

Philip-Lorca di Corcia, *New York. 1993,* 1993, (Chromogenic colour print, 38 x 58cm approx.)

Philip-Lorca di Corcia, *New York. 1993,* 1993, (Chromogenic colour print, 38 x 58cm approx.)

from the crowd and the rest of the scene, accentuating their expression and individual characteristics. Caught in action, they are mostly oblivious to the camera, becoming a colourful spectacle for the viewer's eye. The frozen motion, vivid colour and sharp detail emphasise again the cinematic feel of this work. Once more, light, the key element of diCorcia's stories, literally highlights the everyday event of street life, underlining the 'here and now' that has been characteristic for all his work.

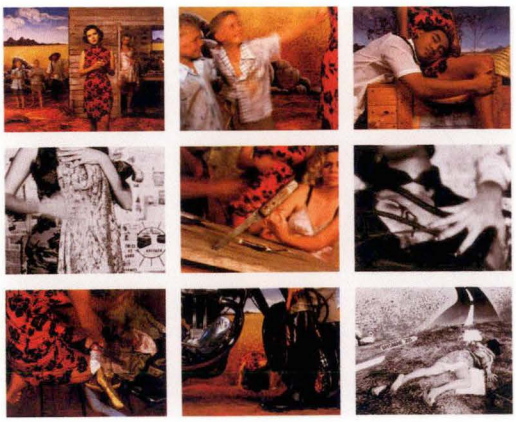
2.2.3. Artists exploring their identity through the photographic veracity

Like diCorcia, a number of artists use the documentary idiom to instil a convincing veracity in the narrative of their imagery. Tracy Moffatt and Sophie Calle both test, albeit in different ways, the boundaries of the photographic narrative and question the role of photographic art in relation to reality and identity.

Tracy Moffatt, in most of her work, refers to racial issues of dispossessed subjects and discourses on otherness, gender and class. She uses the veracity of the documentary style, TV, film and the pre-arranged scenarios. In her series *Up in the Sky* (1997), Moffatt refers to film by staging artificial scenarios based on themes of racial 'hybridity' and 'lawless' existence

Tracy Moffatt, *Up in the Sky,* 1997, (C-type print)

in the outback of Australia.[46] In *Something More* (1989), she arranges a panel of nine images in sequential order and conjures up a narrative that flows like interconnected movie stills. She employs a fusion of black and white and colour photography (six images are in colour and three in black and white) exploiting their contrasting expressive power. The staged element is exceedingly contrived and the colours are vivid, whilst the black and white close-ups have a blurred, off-hand quality, recalling a documentary photograph. The gestures and extremely symbolic details, the alternating sharp and blurred focus, all clash and complement each other in a seductive mix. The work is not only highly charged politically, but also examines the power of tale telling tested through evocative sequential narratives.



Tracy Moffatt, *Something More,* 1989, (C-type print, black and white print)

Sophie Calle tests the nature of tale-telling by challenging audience's voyeurism. She exploits a belief in the veracity of the document and the written word, and scrutinises the flexible relationship between the concept of a truthful account and one of an invented fiction. She establishes an intimate relationship with her viewers through the use of serial imagery, text, displays of various objects, recordings of her own voice, video and film but, mainly, through a promise of voyeuristic pleasure. The work of Sophie Calle always relies on the implied narrative and the viewer's willingness to decipher the story. With an immaculate attention to every detail, she obsessively analyses every possible thread of a plot that is often introspective and intimate. She maintains a self-disciplined detachment from her real self, yet, conversely, she repeatedly insinuates the probable secret of the personal conflict. She searches through her inner feelings and seemingly reveals herself to the viewer, only to create yet another mask in the next story. She often invents a shadowy personality and, with

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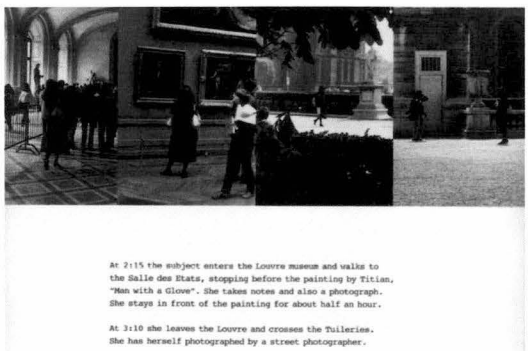
[46] see Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: the female nude in art,* (Routledge. London. 2001) pp.205-207

typically chronological precision, she intrudes into other people's lives. Most of her evocative work was done during the eighties.

In *L'Hotel* (1981) employed as a housemaid, she looked into the personal belongings and poked into the privacy of the hotel's guests. In *L'Homme au Carnet* (1983), she collaborated with a Parisian newspaper, publicly describing



Sophie Calle, *La Filature*, 1981, (black and white print, text)

Sophie Calle, *Suite venitienne*, 1980, (black and white print, text)

the life of a man, based on his diary which she claimed to have found. In *La Filature* (1981) she hired a private eye to follow her, documenting herself as the object of the scrutiny. The photographs of her and the notes of when and where she - the 'subject' went, are both part of this work, designed to trigger the viewer's voyeurism. And, in the *Suite venitienne* (1980), she followed a man on his trip to Venice, the city of carnival and obscurity[47]. Shadowing his footsteps Calle searched to find 'the truth' about who he was. What makes this search tantalising is the fact that Calle is on one hand the voyeur, searching for the most intimate traces of a personal life, and on the other she keeps a sober rationalising view, like a scientist. She is obsessive yet rational, intimate but detached. She analyses and questions herself as 'the other', and as she tries to unfold the secret about 'others', she seeks to find herself.

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[47] 'To follow the other is to take charge of his itinerary; it is to watch over his life without him knowing it; it is to relieve him of that existential burden, the responsibility for his own life. Simultaneously, she who follows is herself relieved of responsibility for her own life as she follows blindly in the footsteps of the other. A wonderful reciprocity exists in the cancellation of each existence, in the cancellation of each subject's tenuous position as a subject. Following the other, one replaces him, exchanges lives, passions, wills, transforms oneself in the other's stead.' - Jean Baudrillard (back cover of *Sophie Calle. Suite venitienne. Jean Baudrillard. Please, Follow me*, transl. by Dany Barash and Danny Hatfield, Bay Press. Seatle.1988)

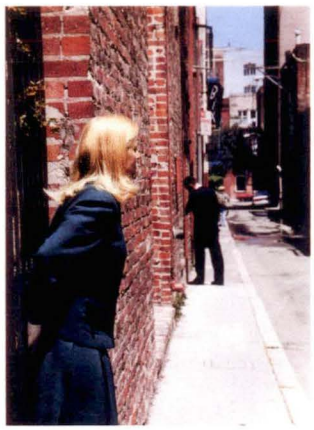
In comparison with Calle, Nan Goldin's view through the camera eye is candid and direct. Although she does not stage her subjects per se, her photographs flow like interconnected movie stills from life, intense in their realism. Regularly, she subjects herself to the realistically descriptive capacity of the camera eye, and whether photographed by herself or by others, she unfolds her existence for the viewer. Like many of the characters in her pictures, she is more

Nan Goldin, *Self-portrait in my blue bathroom, Berlin, 1991*, 1991 (C-type print)

Nan Goldin, *Self-portrait on the train, Germany, 1992*, 1992 (C-type print)

than a subject; she is a life character, frozen in moment and place, halted in a pose which reveals a fragment of her tumultuous life. The camera eye is inseparable from Nan Goldin's life, it offers Nan as a young girl to the viewer; Nan with bleached hair partying; Nan travelling; Nan battered; and Nan with her lover. As if always looking through the camera, Goldin documents the outcast's way of life; the urban subculture of the 1970s, and her own life interconnected with drug dependency and sexual love. Even though her work is provocative in disclosing the most intimate details, voyeuristic shock is not Goldin's aim. She is both the insider and the sympathetic observer, who entrusts to the viewer's gaze the most precious thing: the stories from her life.

Since the 1970s, a number of artists have created narratives through set tableaux, changed appearance and the invention of a fictional identity. Urs Luthi created narratives through a series of self-portraits, in each disguising his real appearance by deliberately altering each of these renderings of himself. He used make-up, wigs, and exaggerated poses to question identity and gender. Eileen Cowin made tableaux images called *Family Docudramas*, which echoed soap-opera vignettes and film-stills, in which she used herself as the foil of the piece, imitating a scenario from real life. Laurie Long began to investigate the boundaries of memory, identity and circumstantial narrative by taking on the



Laurie Long, *Alley Spy,* from *Becoming Nancy Drew,* 1996, (Chromogenic print)

personality of the fictional character, Nancy Drew, from children's books. Long physically transformed herself and acted out a scenario in a variety of cinematic tableaux. The tableaux are constructed as triptychs, combining the theatricality of performance, pinhole image and text. Vanessa Beecroft selected protagonists based on how closely they resemble herself; she dressed them as uniform female archetypes, and then choreographed them as 'living sculptures' in constructed scenes. Although she herself never appeared in the performances, which are photographed and documented on video, polaroids and slides, the search for her real identity is subtly suggested in the work.

Vanessa Beecroft, Still from a performance *Deitch Projects*, NY, 1996

Identity is also central to the work of the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura. Building upon changed appearance and performance, Morimura replaced with his own image well-known figures and images from Western and Japanese art, mingling historical and contemporary life. He took on the appearance of familiar icons, mainly female, through which he addressed ethnic and gender identity and, using computer-scanning techniques, he questioned the value of originality in Art. The computer allowed him to merge multiple images. In *Portrait (Six Brides)* there are six images of him as various women and one of him as a 'black midget'. The figures are condensed within the frame, resembling a multi-coloured mosaic. In his best-known series, Morimura characterised the well-known stars of classical movies. Imitating the make-up, hairstyle, dress, pose, expression and setting associated with each star and thus easily recognisable by the viewer, he suspended

Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Six Brides),* 1991 (Colour print, 55 x 47 1/4 in.)

viewers' disbelief by himself acting as each of the female characters. The works bring to mind, inevitably, Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills*, but Morimura's characters are meticulously perfected in body language and expression; his transformation is complete. His actresses are exact imitations of the real screen personality, his disguise can be deciphered only by the most observant of viewers. In all his work, Morimura relies on the expressive power of colours which heighten the artificiality of his elaborate and often garish constructs. His work derives its content from images of many cultures, yet offers the most pointed and poignant comments on his own culture, where images are traded as profitable investment.[48].

Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-Portrait (Actress)/After Ingrid Bergman 1*, 1996 (Colour print)

Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-Portrait (Actress)/White Marilyn*, 1996 (Colour print)

Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-Portrait (Actress)/After Marlene Dietrich 1*, 1996 (Colour print)

Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-Portrait (Actress)/After Catherine Deneuve 3*, 1996 (Colour print)

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[48] For further discussion see Robert Stearns, "Space, Time and Memory" in *Photography and Beyond in Japan* (Hara Museum of Contemporary Art. Tokyo. 1995) pp.92-95

2.2.4. Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman's work has played an important role in the development of contemporary photographic art over the last decades. Seducing the viewer in a complex and contradictory web of fantasy and reality, Sherman's photographs offer a shifting, fragmented portrayal of the self. In 1977, Sherman began to photograph herself as various actresses playing parts in an assortment of scenarios resembling the classic movie stills where, through a myriad of masks and disguises, she explored the construction of female identity. Like many of her contemporaries, she was flirting with popular culture, finding sources for her imagery in advertising, film, and TV. As Sherman herself said, she mainly wanted to make art that was immediately accessible, 'not one that you felt you had to read a book about to understand.' Since the late 1970s her photographs have dealt primarily with depictions of women. She elaborated on such topics as fashion photography, old masters' paintings, and horrific fairy tales and, absenting herself, used fake body parts to construct brutal images of sexual disgust. She has worked in large format and in vibrant colours that often endorse the disquietude of her images. In *Sex Pictures* (1992) and more recent investigations inspired by surrealist photography, eg. *Mix and Match* (1994), Sherman has moved toward a pronounced articulation of the grotesque, which both attracts and repulses us by its full-colour vibrancy.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #54*, 1980, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

Sherman's first series, *Untitled Film Stills*, consists of a group of 69 untitled black-and-white works made during 1977-80. Each 'frame', sized to the format of an 8 x 10-inch film still, makes reference to such 'stills' from popular films of the late 1940s, up to the early 1960s. Taken with a self-timer, Sherman posed in front of her camera, made-up to resemble types of female characters and typical stereotypes as

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #7*, 1977, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #35*, 1979, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

presented in lowbrow popular film and fan magazines. Sherman refers to them as like a Shelley Winters or Barbara Stanwyck type and a Sophia Loren or Jeanne Moreau kind of character, capitalising on the particular stereotypes of women these actresses represented.

With theatrical sensibility, Sherman dressed and composed the characters to fit into a particular setting at a particular moment. As a result, the characters always seem a little awkward and, while we can recognise the specific film reference, we have a sense that we are looking at a person imitating a film image. In both movies and publicity stills, women are characteristically seen screaming in terror, laughing, or conveying some other clearly graspable reaction to a situation. Some of Sherman's characters addressed the ideal of glamour and femininity projected onto women and, with a sly humour, criticised the artificial culture of femininity.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #34*, 1979, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

The characters evoke the disquieting vulnerability, anxiety or terror, often inherited from movie characterisations of suspense films and psychological thrillers. By using odd and uncomfortable angles, Sherman created the mood of threat or fear, as in Film Noir (see *Untitled Film Still* #34).

In some images, taken indoors with the character lies on the bed, and shot from the vantage point of looking down on the subject, she echoed a

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #52*, 1979, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #10*, 1978, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

pictorial tradition of female representations, in which the female is subjected to the male gaze. It is therefore not surprising that Sherman's photographs coincided with the publication of pioneering feminist studies on the role of women.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #23*, 1978, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #20*, 1979, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

In the images, which were made while taking trips with her family, Sherman used location to enhance the narrative. Constructed in the open air, these images, for me, subtly resonate spontaneity of documentary photography. In the case of *Untitled Film Still #23*, the woman's gesture and expression suggest an unexpected event; alarmed, she is looking outside the frame, stirring our curiosity. In the *Film Stills* Sherman tested spatial and compositional effects, using extreme close-ups and cropping, as well as setting the figure deeply into space. The resulting variable point of view from which the single character is seen tends to emphasise the camera work and heightens the surveillance-like quality. The

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #83*, 1980, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #25*, 1978, (Black and white photograph, 18 x 22.50cm)

strength of the *Untitled Film Stills* lies in their appearance of fairly grainy 'snapshot' in which the beautifully posed still distorts the boundaries between real life and fantasy. Translation of the images is multilayered, often provocative, and

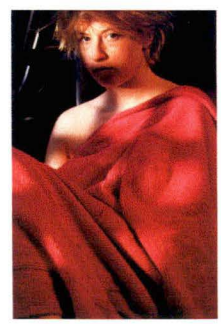
often unsettling. Partly because they are shot in black and white, Sherman's demonstration of drama seems tinted by pathos; in this way the whimsical grotesque, so typical of her later work, is delicate and almost understated. The seductive subtlety of *Untitled Film Stills* proves to be highly effective and, for me, is unsurpassed in her later work. The *Untitled Film Stills* trigger imagination and invite the viewer into the realm where fantasy, dreams, truth and deception overlap in a seductive mix.

In her next two series, *Rear Screen Projections* (1980-81) and *Centrefolds* (1981), Sherman further explored how the media shape our notions of reality. In

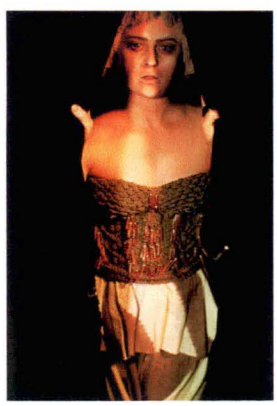
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #71*, 1980, (C-type print, 112.50 x 168.75cm)

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #90*, 1981, (C-type print, 112.50 x 168.75cm)

these larger-format colour photographs, the artist again used herself as the model, incorporating theatrical devices and alluding to the format of the print centrefold. The use of dramatic light, the projected background reminiscent of a stage set (see #71), as well as the horizontal composition of the *Rear Screen Projections* are reminiscent of Cinemascope movie screens. In the *Pink Robes* series (1982) of Sherman wearing pink bathrobes, these ambiguous images of solitary females evoke, yet insidiously invert, conventions of representation of women in the mass media.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #98*, 1982, (C-type print, 112.50 x 168.75cm)



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #117*, 1983, (C-type print, 112.50 x 168.75cm)

Sherman's *Fashion Series* of 1983-84 (see #117) incorporates a wry humour that has been explored further in her later work. Here the artist created bizarre, freakish characters, with unglamorous and eccentric results that undermine the conventions of fashion photography.

Sherman's subsequent work has dealt more explicitly with terror, the grotesque, death and decay. In the two series *Fairy Tales* (1985) and *Disasters* (1986-89), Sherman exploits the mythical and horrific aspects of the 'fairy tale'

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #157*, 1986, (C-type print, 112.50 x 168.75cm)

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #142*, 1986, (C-type print, 112.50 x 168.75cm)

through scenes of death, decay and animal/human transformation. By playing with cliches of the morbid and the monstrous, she presents images that are simultaneously seductive and repellent, hilarious and disgusting, in their use of artifice.

In her 1989-90 series *History Portraits*, Sherman draws upon art history and historical portraiture. Through humorous exaggeration, this body of work references old master paintings, with the artist mimicking such familiar art historical subjects as Bacchus, the Madonna, the Biblical Judith with the head of Holofernes and the odalisques of Ingres. Sherman imitates the composition, colours and details of the paintings and reproduces a particular pose, gesture and expression to achieve an identifiable look. Using artificial body parts to highlight effects ranging from the ungainly to the grotesque, she probes and exaggerates the conventions of both male and female stereotypes within the history of Western art. Visually, these works are lavish and spectacular; they are bizarre and witty.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #233*, 1990, (C-type print, 112.50 x 168.75cm)

In 1992 Sherman turned to more explicitly sexual subject matter, referencing the conventions of pornography. Instead of using herself as the

subject, she manipulated fragmented parts of mannequins and prostheses of genitals into contorted sexual acts that are manifestly artificial, and even ridiculous. She utilised surrealist photography as a point of departure. Ranging from quasi-abstract to out-of-focus images, and continuing the portrayal of disconnected body parts, these works suggest a number of disquieting references. Using masks both as images and as subject matter, the pictures of 1996 build upon Sherman's longstanding preoccupation with the conventions and props of film-making, the grotesque, and the realm of horror.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #250*, 1992, (C-type print, 112.50 x 168.75cm)

Sherman challenges the suspension of disbelief in her viewers by playing almost exclusively all of the characters. Although her appearances are largely dictated by the roles she assumes, the disguise is double-sided. Each time, Sherman's poker-faced gaze suggests the real personality behind the mask. This somewhat withdrawn gaze reappears throughout her work. Despite the fact that her images are set up and played out in front of the camera lens, viewers are always aware of the artist's reserved inwardness. She is somewhat distant from the world which she imitates and confronts. Nevertheless, Sherman's work is far from being autobiographical, it investigates the potential of the narrative form and the way we read situations when influenced by certain motifs, and when confronted by character types.

CHAPTER 3. MY WORK

3.1. STAGING MYSELF

Over the period of six years I have staged myself, grimacing and frowning, in front of my camera. Self-renouncing and self-revealing; I have been testing the trenchant yet fickle nature of the photographic portrayal. Photographing oneself, being located in front and behind the picture-making device, one feels the split of consciousness, like a *doppelganger.*[49]

I face up to the 'camera eye' in disguise, pretending to be a certain character. Like the masked figures at a carnival, my characters play with their identity and, while I feel myself drifting into the realm of the *doppelganger*, I traverse the threshold of 'otherness'. At this interim state I am able to contemplate the self, reality, and truth[50].

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[49] The *doppelganger* is an imagined 'thing', originally of literary fantasies. The *Doppelganger* theme also appeared in early movies. Holger Liebs suggests a fitting example in his article 'Who Are You, Specter? The Mythical Potential of Technological Media', recalling the movie *Der Student von Prag* made in 1914. '...the film's protagonist is seen practising his fencing in front of a mirror when his reflection suddenly steps out of the mirror's frame to become - in the film - his adversary in flesh and blood. The "spectre" of the *doppelganger* image always consists of the eerie presence of my own self in a picture generated by machines.' Liebs continues: 'This experience is menacing because it questions my identity.' (Holger Liebs, 'Who Are You, Specter? The Mythical Potential of Technological Media', in *Veronica's Revenge, Contemporary Perspectives on Photography*, ed. by Elizabeth Janus (Scalo. LAC Switzerland. 1998), p.214

[50] Jeff Malpas (Head of School of Philosophy, University of Tasmania in Hobart) gives the following explanation of Heidegger's idea of truth as uncoveredness or disclosedness: 'Disclosedness, and so also truth, is always, for Heidegger, a matter of the coming to be of a world within which particular things, and even ourselves, can come to presence.' As Malpas argues: 'We can not determine the character of the world (and truth), but we can persist in questioning. We always look only at one side of the *thing*, the other side is hidden. For if there were a way to look at everything, we would see nothing... Through the questioning we can hope to reawaken and maintain a capacity for thoughtfulness.' Christopher Norris in *The Truth about Postmodernism* offers DuBois' paraphrases of Heidegger: 'In Plato's representation of the attaining of truth, "everything depends on the shining of the phenomenon and the possibility of its visibleness". Notions of outward appearance, *eidos*, *idea* come to the fore... Unhiddenness, a term regularly used by Heidegger, is thus attached to perception, to *seeing*. The *idea* becomes 'the master of *aletheia*', and '*aletheia* comes under the yoke of the *idea*'. In this shift in the notion of truth, the essence of truth is no longer the unfolding of

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The revelation of the truth for me lies in its parallel with the *mask* and the *carnival*. While the *mask* conceals, it also uncovers; meant for hiding, it also reveals itself as the cover-up and pretence of the real. The *mask* does not lie, it presents itself as false and, per se, is honest about its purpose and meaning. Therein lies the *mask's* truthfulness. Similarly, *carnival* is not only about a play with the masked identity; at a *carnival* the 'real' does not only get masked but played with, and it is through this play of concealment and disclosure that reality and truth are questioned and, in many ways, also symbolised.

The disguise allows me to relate and identify myself with the foreign place, for the masked appearance imparts the real person in the stranger, and thus leaves everything to the imagination and belief of the others. Given that there is not an absolute measure for either the true or the false, I create a 'space of discourse' between the two. The masking, my performance, and each of my pictures, are an investigation and endless questioning. Time after time, I have played this kind of game with my own personality, in a meandering, and perhaps futile, search for the possibility of the truth and the 'lightness of being'.

3.1.1. Personal journey

I arrived at Hobart's airport on one of those strikingly clear days when blue sky tints everything into a vivid and piercing daydream. Stunned and, except for the well-pronounced 'yes' and 'no', also mute, in October 1988, I made my first trip to Hobart.

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unhiddenness, but rather resides in the essence of the idea. Truth is the correctness of the gaze, not a feature of beings themselves. And this kind of truth, truth as correctness, becomes the dominant paradigm for Western philosophy.' Discussing further the idea of truth, Norris also refers to Page duBois's book *Torture and Truth*, Foucalt's *Discipline and Punish*, Heidegger's essay *Plato's Doctrine of Truth* and Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, in which Plato used examples of binary oppositions: truth/falsehood, reality/appearance, knowledge/ignorance, reason/rhetoric, adequate ideas/sensuous perceptions etc. He related these to the metaphor of Light/Darkness; 'which depicts us as self-condemned prisoners of the cave, our gaze averted from the Sun - the natural light of reason - and instead fixed upon the flickering play of artificial images and illusions that pass for reality among those who trust to the fallible evidence of the senses'. (Christopher Norris, 'Getting at Truth: Genealogy, Critique and Postmodern Scepticism' in *The Truth about Postmodernism*, pp.257-277)

A couple of weeks later at the local Migrant Centre... there I was; silent, buffed and reluctantly charmed by the evidently friendly English teacher who was convincing me that my English was just fine, and that I was ready to embark on a successful journey to my splendid future. My response at the time gave no suggestion of my excitement; but today, I remember my English teacher with unspoken gratitude, though no one has ever managed to ignite the appropriate settler's spirit in me...

Separated from one's known surroundings and culture, one realises very quickly that to remain an individual it is necessary to find other ways of substantiating the self. The immigrant experience is often rich with ironies. I don't know how one grows used to the idea of being a migrant, a 'certified species', but I imagine that regardless of where we are, we all see ourselves as individuals with experiences fine-tuned throughout our journeys...

In 1988 a fairly adventurous escape from my past took me to Austria. There, in the overcrowded cells of the infamous refugee camp 'Treiss-Kirchen', not far from the splendid city of Vienna, I became aware of the triviality of my own being. I had no proper sense of the present, no idea of what was to come and, frankly, being a fatalist, I wasn't too curious about it. I understood, however, that what I treasured of my past was completely irrelevant for my present or future, and that the strange dream-like state was going to stay with me for a while. Ironically, for the first time in my life I felt truly free. With little money and my identity limited to the regular small plastic identification card with Polaroid photo, I hitchhiked across the Austrian land. Aligned with the roads and highways, I was ardently waving my hand to see the cities and flat bright green farmlands, the shimmering riverside of the Danube and the snowy peaks of the Alps; and to journey through fleeting acquaintances that were never destined to last. I was enthusiastically engaging in animated articulations of my thoughts, soaking up this world of foreign culture. The culture that was filled with people who, assorted by types and cut to an identical pattern, were admirable and impervious, and taught me a pliant way of existence. Soon I found that the part of me, which was understood by the others, had little to do with my real self. My sense of adventure heightened. I became an unclassed drifter: an observant and

uncommitted soul of the world. Wondering in poetic fervour, freethinking and daring, I reached out to every new precious moment like a child to a new game.

And there was always a new role to assume, and always a challenge to perpetually re-invent myself. There were stories to tell and 'lives' to live, and roles yet to be discovered. Their transience only exaggerated the thrill, my true identity was to be never discovered; I could be anyone, and I could be all...

These nine months played an important role in forming my understanding of self-identity. Instead of clinging to the old identity, which belonged back in Czechoslovakia, I found a satisfaction in not having one. The feeling of not belonging, of being an outsider, can happen even in a familiar place. This feeling has not happened because of my experience as a refugee; it has always been there. More than anything, becoming a migrant has, perhaps, merely justified this alienation. Looking back, I realise now that this period of interim existence shaped me into the person I am now and, overall, lastingly affected my approach to life and to my work.

3.2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

I have always thought that to interfere radically with the way in which the camera lens reproduces what it sees, with a distortion of the optics of the lens or darkroom manipulation, entails a certain dismissiveness of its best feature - the perfect simulation of reality. However, manipulating to some extent what occurs in front of the camera is quite another matter. In this way the image, though constructed, retains thought-provoking photographic veracity as well as a suspension of disbelief.

> Looking spontaneous, looking staged and looking synthetic are the mutually exclusive, but co-dependent poles of the contemporary photographic idiom.[51]

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[51] J.J.Charlesworth, 'Reality Check' in *Art Monthly*, (Britannia Art Publications Ltd. London. Issue No 247. June 2001), p.2

3.2.1. Honours Project

This research began in 1995 with my Honours project. I had the opportunity to work while travelling, which provided me not only with a source of inspiration but also brought to light issues of identity, alienation and pretence, which were always underlining my work.

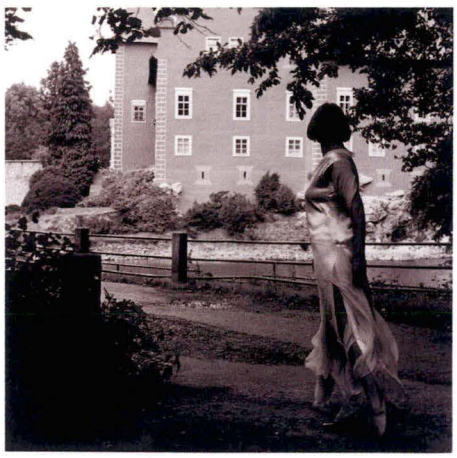
This body of work essentially developed from reminiscences of past experiences, places and circumstances, when I relied on my memory to inspire a sense of narrative. It contained subtle references and referred to places and situations I had known during my life. I constructed life-like scenarios in front of the camera in such a way that the feeling or mood of a particular situation would draw the viewers into the image. They included visual symbols and single isolated characters whom I impersonated. I relied on the fact that the still photograph would evoke a narrative response in the viewer. I emulated gestures and expressions that were generally recognisable and suggestive. I had practised carefully in front of a mirror placed alongside the camera, in order to check my performance and the overall 'look'. All of this was carefully designed to suit the constructed scene and to suggest a real life situation. Posed for the viewer's 'voyeuristic pleasure', the single characters were isolated and frozen in their motionless pose, their appearance and look was distant and markedly nostalgic.

TelAviv, 1995, (Selenium toned Silver Gelatin Print, 45 x 45cm)

Šumava, 1995, (Selenium toned Silver Gelatin Print, 45 x 45cm)

They were somewhat detached from the present and their gestures and facial expressions, symbolic of solitude, displayed the sentiment of a particular moment. Set against the details and lighting of the background, the implied story denoted a

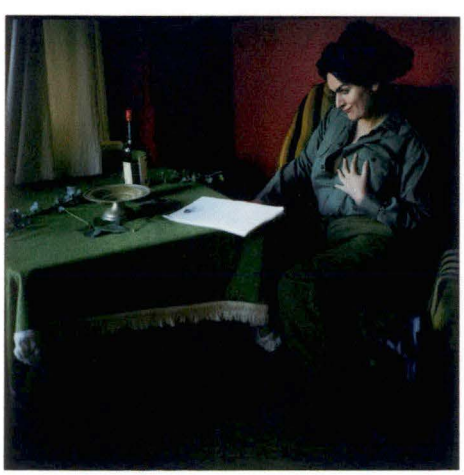
circumstance, while substituting reality for an enticing illusion. Some of the images were particularly illusional; in fact, they were so remote from the reality of the time and place in which they were photographed, that they appeared obviously fictitious. Others were less contrived, combining the element of fiction with controlled chance, and as such, became significant for the way I continued my research. I realised the narrative potential of a photograph, which combines the elements of truth and fiction in one. I felt such a blend could leave space for the viewer's imagination while, at the same time, suggesting the veracity of an objective record. The final series comprised forty black and white images, toned in selenium, which emphasised the contrast between the black and the white, while underlining the softness of grey tones. It also complemented the overall look of this work, which was introspective and highly evocative of the past.



Červená Lhota, 1995, (Selenium toned Silver Gelatin Print, 45 x 45cm)

3.2.2 Introduction of Colour and the *Powder Magazine* Series

The following year was marked by persistent trials in colour photography, which lasted for almost three years and produced three separate bodies of work. My earliest trials in colour were composed indoors, in a controlled light situation, where I could somehow colour coordinate my setting and the character. I have



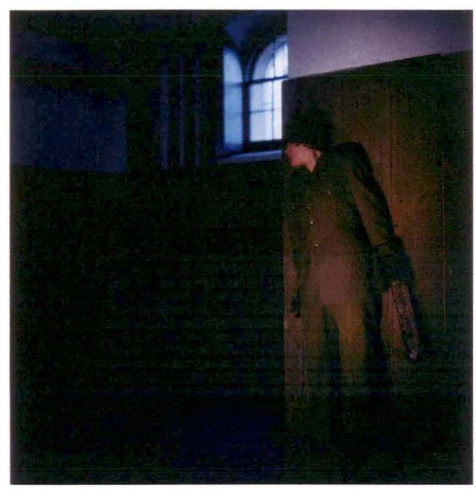
Green, 1996, (C-Type Print, 62 x 62cm)

Blue, 1996, (C-Type Print, 62 x 62cm)

used mostly fine grain films and I chose rich colour hues and a high detail. The intense colours, together with the large format I had chosen for these early prints, heightened the artificiality of the whole set up and exaggerated the theatrical aspect of my work, influencing the way my subsequent imagery was constructed and read.

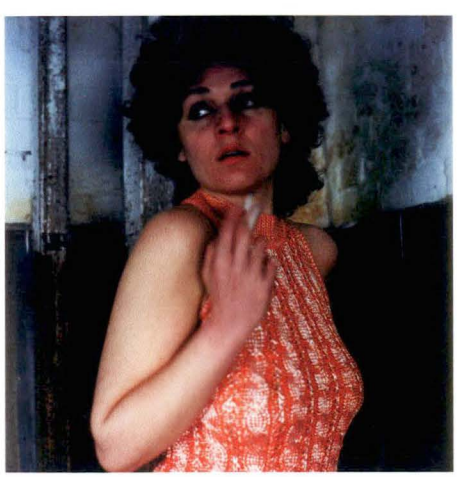
During the same year I started working at the historical site of the Powder Magazine on Hobart's Domain. The sandstone complex, once used for the storage of explosives, echoed Hobart's colonial past and provided me with privacy in its

Powder Magazine #8, 1996, (C-Type Print, 73 x 73cm)



Powder Magazine #3, 1996, (C-Type Print, 73 x 73cm)

eerie, remote setting. Over a period of four months, I developed a variety of solitary female characters, who were set off by the ambience surrounding the place. The characters, which dominated the picture frame, appeared from different corners of the space that remained bare and unchanged by the props. The space was lit partly by the studio illumination installed for each take, and partly by the scarce daylight available to me. The use of artificial lighting heightened the colours of the costumes and accentuated the theatrical look of the characters. I used a film designed for tungsten lighting[52], and



Powder Magazine #1, 1996, (C-Type Print, 73 x 73cm)

[52] Tungsten lighting consists of studio lamps emitting a colour temperature of 3,200°Kelvin

intentionally combined the required studio lighting with an added controlled daylight. Daylight has more blue, less red, content, therefore pictures taken on this film in a daylight situation have a blue cast, while warm colours such as yellows and reds become suppressed and subdued and whites show a blue tinge,

Powder Magazine #4, 1996, (C-Type Print, 73 x 73cm)

Powder Magazine #6, 1996, (C-Type Print, 73 x 73cm)

and all the cold colours generally are emphasised. Through modifying colours in this way, I obtained a slightly macabre, unreal appearance that underscored the eeriness of this particular imagery. Retrospectively, this project resulted in a series of 20 large images that stand out with their surreal and somewhat anxious disquietude, masquerade and pretence; this effect was heightened by the melodramatic frozen gesture and gaze. While I developed good control over the process of posing, and investigated the strength, and limitations of the gesture, I felt that overall the resulting theatricality of the work undermined the aspect of veracity, which I believed was vital to the interpretation of the narrative.

Powder Magazine #13, 1996, (C-Type Print, 73 x 73cm)

Powder Magazine #17, 1996, (C-Type Print, 73 x 73cm)

3.2.3. Street Photography and *Once Upon a Time* Series

I wanted to move away from the obviously staged and contrived look of my imagery and also, at this stage, I felt that the emphasis on the figure and its transformations had become too repetitive. But while the subject matter seemed restricted by the methodology, the actual process of image-making was still

Draught, 1996, (C-Type Print, 70 x 70cm)

Tata, 1996, (C-Type Print, 70 x 70cm)

exciting for me. I decided to concentrate more on what occurred at the time of photographing a particular scene, rather than on the careful staging of its final outcome. The element of chance has always been present in my work, since I could never completely control my "performance" by being both behind and in front of the camera when I work. During the exposure, a brief moment of self-awareness (see *Souvlaki Friend*) had repeatedly disclosed the masquerade, and I realised that all my attempts to control it were, in effect, counterproductive. I wanted my work to be suggestive, but not overstated. The more I controlled the images, the less evocative they seemed to be.

Souvlaki Friend, 1996, (C-Type Print, 60 x 60cm)

I needed to find some way to put forward this essentially contradictory blend of fiction and reality. I refrained from precisely setting up my scenarios and performances.

Instead, I set out to photograph with less preparation, relying on the spur-of-the-moment action. (see *Casino*). I began to look into documentary photography and street photography, particularly the latter. Trying to emulate the look of a street photograph, I developed loosely structured scenarios, which I then performed in a real life situation. My first trials were mostly unsuccessful and in the first images the overall feeling of theatricality was still dominant. To some extent I felt restricted by the location of Hobart's familiar setting and, seeking anonymity, I ended up working mainly at night. This way of working needed an

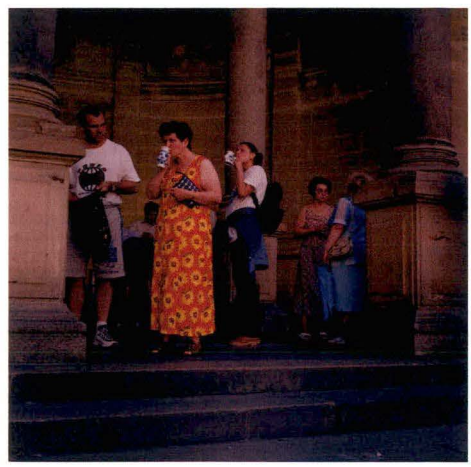
Casino, 1996, (C – Type print, 6o x 60cm)

Flash, 1996, (C – Type print, 6o x 60cm)

adjustment to the technical aspects of the process, and I started experimenting with a flash in order to freeze the motion of the figure. As a result, the image gained a 'frozen', rather unnatural, look and severe colour hues, which underlined the theatrical aspect of the work. Additionally, the flash, despite its convenience, caused awkwardness in the passing-by people, and thus contradicted simplicity and truthfulness I have tried for.

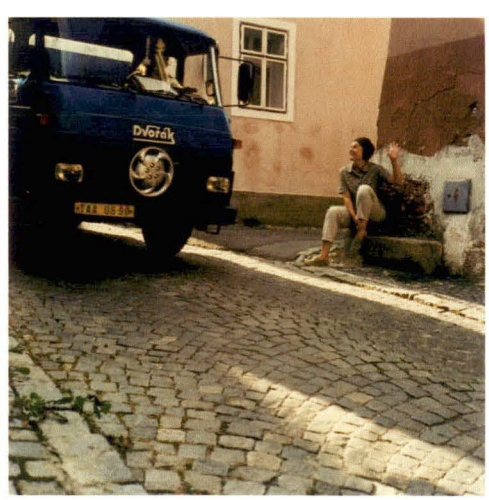
What seemed a problem was soon largely resolved by my next trip overseas, where I felt more at ease performing amongst a crowd of strangers. In larger cities, the crowd is a self-absorbed entity, flowing and ever changing, and it offers anonymity not only to the performer, but also to the observer. Uninterrupted, and mostly ignored, I could work my way into or outside the crowd. I could experiment in a real life milieu, and blend the staged element of my work directly with the occurring events. Many images failed simply because I had no control while taking the picture, nevertheless a few which were successful contained the unaffectedness I aimed for. They were photographed in soft, diffused afternoon

light, resulting in low-key, natural colour hues that were apt for to the everyday feel I wished to depict. The images resulting from these trials formed a series called *Once upon a Time*, and contained the naturalness of a documentary photograph and, at the same time, their fictional aspect remained noticeable without overshadowing the whole scene. Because these images were recorded with a kind of detached factuality, the self-absorbing pretence they still contained was barely visible and, I thought, more effective. Most of the images from this series contain a sense of nostalgia, noticeable in the earlier, black and white work. Unlike the previous colour work, partly because of the soft colour hues, and partly because of its setting, the *Once upon a Time* images are unpretentious and their 'truthfulness' hence more probable. Most of the images were composed in places I visited in my childhood and while they echo memories of those times, they also typify, what I would call; a distinctively 'Czech' look.



Once upon a Time, 1997, (C-Type Print, 63 x 63cm)

Once upon a Time, 1997, (C-Type Print, 63 x 63cm)



Once upon a Time, 1997, (C-Type Print, 63 x 63cm)

The characters are reminiscent of ordinary people, their make-up and gesture echo the everyday feel. In *Pilsner #1,* the character mingles in the crowd.

She becomes the inconspicuous pedestrian, one of the women. In *Pilsner #2*, the close-up reveals the somewhat unnatural appearance and double expression. And, for a split second, the travesty of the construct, exposed by a man passing by in the background, becomes obvious. The man, aware of the camera, recognises the pretence of my act; and the camera, freezing his questioning look, mingles my act with the real event. The mix of reality and fiction, heightened by the relationship between the truthful response and the apparent play-acting, becomes oddly amusing.

Pilsner #1, *Once upon a Time*, 1997, (C-Type Print, 63 x 63cm)

Pilsner #2, *Once upon a Time*, 1997, (C-Type Print, 63 x 63cm)

3.2.4 Recent Work

The *Once Upon a Time* series and the two *Pilsner* images, in particular, played a role in the way my recent work has been developed. I began to exploit a *documentary* approach to heighten the reality of the constructed scene. The term *documentary* suggests that the primary and only function of this type of photography is documentation: it is blunt, direct and undistorted story telling. Documentary photography 'keeps its distance' from its subject matter. This applies even more to street photography, which observes and records reality, using the urban area as its milieu. Its inhabitants are the players in this scene, and subsequently, the frequent subject matter. Dressed in disguise, I too became a player in the urban milieu, my gestures or expressions were part of an act, the personal yet nameless act of a city dweller. In an attempt to isolate and document

a fragment of the event, in front of the camera, and because I was concerned with the immediate and accurate recording of it, I felt I needed to rely essentially on a chance situation. The aim of reducing my creative intervention in the image was to produce a more convincing effect on the viewer. In this way, the seeming veracity became a fundamental idea, upon which I decided to build my subsequent imagery.

Also, at this point it became apparent to me that travelling was significantly affecting the way I worked. Travel has been not only a source of inspiration, it has reflected my personal journey. All places contain a strong narrative and, retrospectively, a very personal meaning. Intriguing, they are a palette for contemplation and self-reflection and, above all, they offer a possibility of fulfilled dreams. Being a stranger in foreign places enhances the experience of being in a dream-like state of suspended reality in which perceptions blend in with the realm of the subconscious and imagination. Because my work has always been based on inner experiences and observations, I decided to rely on my instincts and feelings for the atmosphere of the place and to suggest a moment in time. The ensuing ideas and stimulation were fed partly by curiosity and partly, by what the French call, the 'déracinnement',[53] both of which were influencing the way I felt in each different place. Consequently, I began to transform myself into a temporary citizen, a kind of local interloper, everywhere I went. In all places I wore the mask of belonging, still feeling an outsider, and with the anonymity of a wanderer I suspended my inner self and submitted to the weightlessness of being. And so like a *flanéur*, who is unobtrusive and slips unrecognised from one place to another, drifting through the urban area, I have strolled the streets of foreign cities, wandered through places, observing, consuming and seizing any opportunity to stop and freeze the passing experience.

Big cities are a colourful melting pot that encourages anonymity and alienation. There everyone is, to a point, an introverted outsider, trying to locate himself or herself in a milieu, which is both familiar and alien. The urban area is diverse, equally public and private; it is a medley of contradictions, and its fast pulse, which never stops, feeds our insatiable curiosity about life taken as a whole.

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[53] Déracinnement is a feeling of displacement, often experienced by someone who is apart from their familiar environment or habitat.

Protected by the mask of a strange-looking, awkwardly-unfitting character, I have tried to present my brief urban experiences as they happened, rather than staging them beforehand. In other words, although still having a certain outcome in mind, I have accommodated myself to the street situation, trying to fit with the actual flow of people passing by. The characters in my images, believable and explicable in an everyday psychological sense, are only 'figures', which in their teasing closeness to self-parody continually confront each other, contesting for their identity in each place. Their individual endeavours are shared in the fleeting interactions on the streets of the large cities. They keep a rationalising distance; recreating yet another 'mask', yet another story, in the next place. They re-appear in the timeless space of the streets, continuing their futile search for the uncanny truth of being. The photograph, the *memento mori* of their search and of the concealment of their mask, is deliberately de-constructed through the veracity of the photographic record. But the camera gives only a picture of appearance, and while everything depends on the possibility of their 'visibleness', a promise of truth is attached only to perception, to *seeing*.

The element of chance has played an important role in the way the images were created. It brought not only an aspect of truth into set-up scenarios but, also, it altered and subsequently shaped the way they were read. While each of the characters played out its role in front of the camera, an impromptu movement or gesture usually happened in the scene, producing the desired idiosyncratic mixture. As a result, the interpretation of each image alternates between the given narrative and the one which can be assumed from the fortuitous live scene. As such, the images contain the very essence of photographic duality; projecting, on one hand, the recognisable fact in a veritable way but, on the other hand, playing with reality, offering only its imaginary imitation. The images offer an open-ended narrative, and their reading lies ultimately with the viewer. In the images *Zurich* and *Basel I* and *Basel II*, I impersonated an onlooker who strolls through streets with a cigarette in his

Zurich, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

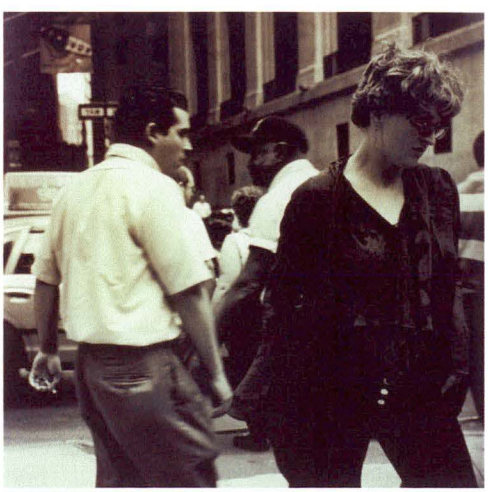
mouth, trying to hide the obvious curiosity with which 'he' observes the crowd. Dressed in my uncle's coat, I have spent days walking through the streets, stopping and adjusting my pace to the bypassing crowd, leaving the camera set up beside the pavement to record the changing scene. While in one instance (see

Basel I., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Basel II., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Basel I.) the character seems to impartially overlook an adorable group of little children, in the other, (see *Basel II.*) he catches a glimpse of a beautiful woman and begins to follow her. For a moment she becomes an object of his fantasy and voyeuristic pleasure. On another day, at another place, the character ends up being observed himself, becoming an awkward spectacle for others (see *Zurich*). In the fashion of a *flanéur*, the character walks the streets, leisurely satisfying his pursuit, until he too comes under the scrutiny of the camera's eye.

In the images *New York I* and *New York II,* the character tries to fit into the crowd yet, caught in a sudden thought, she stands apart, frozen, evermore



New York II., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

New York I., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

incapable of catching up with the fast flowing rush-hour crowd. The moment of thought separates her from the rest, and though anxious to fit back in, she is overcome by self-doubt. The rushing figures, blurred (see *New York I*) or intertwined (see *New York II*), form a swift, dynamic and self-assured backdrop, which contrasts with the reserved expression of the central character. In another

Jona, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

St.Kilda, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

image, I used a different appproach, when the character stands out from the fast passing crowd (see *Jona*). The well-known Swiss indifference was, in this particular case, perfectly suited for emphasising the contrast between a solitary stranger and the others. On another occasion, I followed a girl in a wig. I was puzzled by the piece of writing she clutched in her hand while meandering Melbourne's St. Kilda area in the blushing afternoon light. Intrigued, I stalked this mysterious character (who reminded me of one of my own 'persona'). I documented her steps with the camera, perhaps in the vain expectation she would stop and reveal, to me, the anonymity of her mask. And, then, while I was loading another film into my camera, my obsession nearly exposed, she paused and I came so close to discovering her identity... Suddenly, she waved her hand at approaching taxi, and I lost her. I shall never find out who she was; her fate is to remain the impersonation of my curiosity, the other 'I'.[54]

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[54] In this particular case I deliberately followed and photographed the girl, having in mind that she represents exactly the quality of an outsider, wandering with a sense of unexplainable purpose, like my characters. Besides my curiosity there was, therefore, a good reason for me to follow and to photograph her. In the process of proofing my work, I have noticed that sometimes an accidental passer-by, rather than the character, becomes the focal point in the composition. As such, his or her

San Francisco, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm

The corner of the legendary Beatniks' 'Vesuvius', in San Francisco, a place where Jack Kerouack found a temporary refuge from his thoughts, turned out to be a perfect milieu for an imaginary return to the 1960s. The image, however, represents today's San Francisco in which, as in any other big city, this blithe feeling is tarnished by the nervously running pulse of stressful lives.

In the picture the two strangers, the man and the character, are both looking in one direction. They caught a glimpse of something, a funny scene, or perhaps an accident? The man is smoking, his tough face reveals somewhat scarred sagacity; the woman, a relic of the 'love and peace' era, looks, and instinctively reaches, for a cigarette. Both of them have seen such a scenario too often. Out of the frame, the possible scenario is concealed; its impact relies on the imagination of the viewers.

Bangkok I., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

In a comparable way, the *Bangkok I* image also relies on the viewer's imagination. Containing a thread of uneasiness, it draws attention to an unpredictable ending of a chance meeting of the two characters. A woman, hesitantly standing in front of a shop, is the subject of a man's scrutinising gaze. Should she continue her stroll or step inside? In the alleys of such a vast melting pot like Bangkok, life is often ruled in ways exotic to the Western mind. To understand this absorbing, hot, colourful and sticky place, one would have to

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figure (or a gesture) connotes the image narrative far better than the invented character. In such cases, I preferred this picture to the one I had planned. Also, I was aware that such an image would add an additional twist to the ultimately predictable notion of me performing all of the characters myself.

do more than just break the language barrier. Characterising the experience of a 'Western-tourist-lost-in-Bangkok's-back-streets', the woman is halting for a moment, and the underlying mood, of anxiety, on her shaded face states a truthful response to insecurity.

Prague, 1998, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

The *Prague* image uses the darkness of the night to underscore the mood of the suggested narrative. Lacking recognisable facets of today's reality, this image transports the viewers into the time tinted with nostalgia. In a white blazer showing through the darkness, the fuzzy silhouette may be rushing to or from a party. And there on the distant corner shadowy figures, appearing almost weightless in the light of a street lamp, suggest a sequence of possible events. Oscillating between drama and farce, the darkened shapes leave a space for the viewer's imagination. The setting draws its tension from the narrowly curved street, so typical of Prague's Old Town, and brings to mind Kafka's dark humour.

In cities, even empty and hidden corners evoke human presence, the hustle and bustle filled with everyday activities, thoughts, experiences and memories. Their emptiness is charged with emotions, expectations and dreams. While travelling, I like to browse through places at night. There, in the stillness and

Trmice, 1998, (C-type print, 49 x 49cm)

Manhattan, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

privacy of the night, protected by darkness, I make photographs where the light, reflected from empty street corners and quiet buildings, renders their shape and appearance, recalling the remnants of the day. It is as if the ghosts of footsteps and whispering voices speak from empty walls and footpaths, echoing past lives.

Děčín, 1999, (C-Type print, 49 x 49cm)

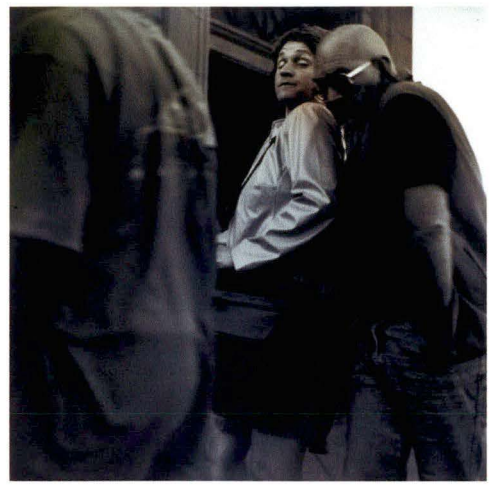
Usti nad Labem, 1999, (C-Type print, 49 x 49cm)

Images like *Decin* and *Usti nad Labem* express this kind of revealing stillness. To me, they also allude to a yearning for the lost past, as only in their temporary silence can I step back into time. At night, reality becomes almost eternal; bringing together past and present and, in effect, projecting future dreams. In many ways, these images are perhaps the most revealing of my real self; my *mask* is the silence of the night, which softly resonates the drifter's hopeless desire to belong. These images, in many ways, match and intensify those where everything can be analysed into identifiable symbols; such as where my masquerade becomes a sign of the moment; or those where both the character and the unaware passer-by turn into involuntary players of a spectacle, in which the street simulates the theatrical stage.

The characters in this series are almost always engrossed in their own thoughts. Sometimes they absent-mindedly mingle in the crowd or take part in a particular scene, but most of the time they stand separate from the crowd observing and contemplating its peculiarities. They are inconspicuously slipping through the crowd. They encounter, pause, satisfying their curiosity, and then continue in a vain hope of locating themselves. Walking as if in a search that leaves them hungry with expectations, they belong to every place, and to no place;

the odd wanderers whose transformations are just as brief as their encounters are; and as futile as their search is.

Santa Monica, 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)



Sydney I., 2002, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

In the process of making images, I have eventually become a live performer and the staged act has turned into the factual reality of the moment. Gradually, the progression of this research has turned into an intriguing examination of the potential and limits of both the photographic medium and myself. The act of fabrication has come very close to the real experience. The truth and objectivity turned out to be diffused into a multiple discourse on reality *and* on my temporary identity. Inevitably a question arose: have I ceased to be a photographer, step by step becoming the object in front of my camera lens?

3.3. METHOD OF WORKING

To achieve the desired effect in my images, I have developed a particular method, which allows me to work alone in a variety of situations. Usually starting with a simple story line, where a planned performance by an invented character takes place, I decide on visual clues: the make-up, props, street signs, gestures. At first, these are symbolic, and they often expand and take their final shape during the actual process of photographing.

I tend to place my characters in a real life situation, often in the middle of a spontaneous circumstance, among an existing crowd. Some of them are entirely fictional, whereas others are based on observations. And while I tend to

impersonate a particular character in the same manner as an actor performs on stage, the 'stage', in this case the street, basically shapes the performance. My actual dress-up consists of wigs, make-up, clothes and a few props (e.g., glasses, handbag, book, etc.) that are packed in a bag and help me to complete the transformation into the character on the spot. Sometimes, a found thing, or an occasionally offered cigarette, complements the set-up. Depending on situation and place, I change or complete my disguise in the privacy of a hidden corner, a rest-room, or the back seat of a car. This way I can make more than one image during my 'wander through the place'. Most of the actual performance develops there and, frequently, is a reaction to a particular milieu. The location thus functions simultaneously as the backdrop and the scaffolding for the invented tale.

The outdoor shoot is clearly more dependent on, and restricted by, the environment and, while there is no time for privacy and lengthy preparations or rehearsals of the actual shot, it forces a convincing realism into the image. Above all, as my characters take part in the reality of the moment, I am unable to control the exact outcome of the shoot, leaving the camera to record all that happens intentionally and accidentally in front of it. I prefer my images to be more a product of the combined photographic and subconscious process than to suggest a complete manipulation, which has a fixed goal as its outcome. Even though I construct the narrative, setting and character beforehand, I have no direct control over what is being captured on the negative during the take. Also, I am unable to manipulate what happens on the location as such, although I pick and choose the place and organise the specific and identifiable details carefully within a pictorial frame. The street maintains its own flow and look.

Boston, 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Whilst setting up the shot, I pay attention to the angle of view and composition, choose a location for my character and try to estimate when, and if, the other figures will appear in the frame.

Over the years I have chosen a way of working[55] which allows me not only to simulate the character but, also, to depict the 'snapshot-like' accidental quality of an event in front of the camera lens. The camera for me is merely a tool that allows me to document the immediate reality.

Contact sheet of the *New York* session, 1/9/2001

The way I use the camera is impersonal; neither my eye, nor the finger that triggers the shutter is 'featuring' in the moment the image is being made. Supplied with a medium format 1950s Rolleiflex twin-lens camera with basic manual controls, standard fixed 80mm lens and self-timer, a sturdy tripod and a

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[55] Usually I watch which way the crowd is moving, and try to predict the speed at which they are approaching the camera frame; sometimes I try to count the time by which they should reach the camera's reasonably sharp focus. At other times I simply 'practise' and walk with or against the moving group of people, whilst acting out my role.

hand-held light-meter, I begin by measuring the exposure. I determine the aperture and shutter speed, usually setting the shutter speed on 1/125 of a second or faster for 'freezing' the objects in motion, and below 1/60 of a second for the 'blurred-in-motion' effect. The aperture setting also affects the depth of field and, since I cannot adjust focus when the take is made, I use depth of field to determine what will appear reasonably sharp in the frame. After this, I place the camera on the tripod, set its self-timer, which then triggers the shutter while I am in front of the camera. The accidental and often unintended result is exciting in its possibility and it brings authenticity into what is a highly manufactured image. Working this way, I have only partial control over the outcome of the final image and, for this reason, I make a succession of shots for a particular scene, then proof the material and, when possible, repeat the same scene to ensure that, in the end, I attain a desired image.

The effect of my imagery is dependent on an accurate, objective representation of reality. To achieve this, I always try to maintain the best possible detail, unmarred by grain even when a big enlargement of a print is required. Therefore, I use a film that has a fine grain but which, at the same time, permits some degree of motion of the subjects photographed in a range of daylight conditions. Because I shoot in existing daylight, the exposure sometimes does not allow for the smaller aperture, necessary for greater depth of field, while also maintaining a shutter speed necessary for stopping fast action.[56] When the

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[56] Depth of field is the distance between the nearest point and the farthest point in the subject, which is perceived as acceptably sharp along a common image plane. For most subjects it extends one third of the distance in front of, and two thirds behind, the point focused on. Stopping the lens down to a smaller aperture, e.g., f 22, increases depth of field. The aperture (also referred to as the diaphragm) is a circular hole in the camera lens. Its size variable and indicated by 'f' numbers, sometimes referred to as 'f' stops. By varying its diameter we control the ***intensity*** or amount of light allowed to pass to the film. The shutter speed controls the ***time*** during which the light acts on a photosensitive emulsion of the film. The range of speeds, usually in a doubling sequence, matches the doubling and halving sequence of apertures. The faster the shutter speed, e.g., 1/125 second and above, the better the camera's ability to freeze the motion of speeding objects. The exposure is the product of the ***intensity*** of light that reaches the film, and the ***time*** during which this light falls upon the film. The combination of aperture and shutter speed settings needs to be proportionate to the amount of available light and the sensitivity (ISO) of the film, so that the effect of light on light-sensitive film forms a negative image when processed.

available light is less intense, I am forced to underexpose, in other words to 'push' the film.[57] 'Pushing' of the film, and subsequent increase in its development, results in a higher contrast in the negative and further increase in its density. I have found that the dense negative is ideal for the printing technique I use, and produces effects that complement my imagery.

3.3.1. Printing Technique for the submission work

While colour photography has a greater descriptive potential, I felt that the way I used it in fact interfered with my imagery.[58] I wanted to imply a subtle suspension of disbelief while maintaining a descriptive objectivity. In other words, I wanted to achieve the kind of fantastic realism, which is both recognisable and puzzling. I started photographing in black and white again, with the intention to hand colour parts of my images, and/or selectively tone them. Eventually, I realised that the only way I could achieve the aesthetic quality I wanted, would be through manipulating in some way the colour printing process. This way I could maintain the aesthetic quality of a monotone print, and allow for its additional colour manipulation. My colour printing from black and white negatives involves a particular printing technique, which by changing the filter combinations of Cyan, Magenta and Yellow, normally used for colour printing, allows for a range of colour casts of various monotones. While changing the filter combinations for selected parts of the image, I applied the 'dodging' and 'burning

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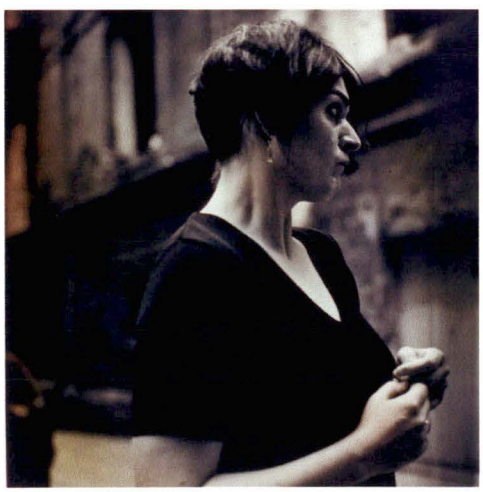
[57] 'Pushing' of the film means uprating its film speed, i.e. rating the film as more sensitive to light than it actually is, thus effectively underexposing. The film is then given an increased development.

[58] With the exception of the 'Powder Magazine' series, when I used controlled tungsten lighting and achieved somewhat fantastic, surreal colour tones, most of my colour shots were shot in daylight, and without any other manipulation looked, to me, rather picturesque (referring to the *Once upon a Time* series). In the case of my earlier colour images, colours also revealed the flaws of my characters' make-up, showing not only the skin colour, but also non-natural colour of hair, and imperfect and often appalling make-up. Moreover, colour placed emphasis on choosing the right outfits, which were often mismatched in colours and styles, and looked excessive and nonsensical. I felt that while colour described the invented fantasy in a lifelike way, it also revealed its fabricated nature. This brought a highly theatrical quality to the images and produced a rather exaggerated farcical mood. I wanted my images to maintain the aspect of convincing realism, but the colours seem to somewhat undermine this intention.

in' techniques during the printing process[59]. These enabled me to add and overlap assorted colour hues, and to achieve a unique multicoloured print. Because colour printing is executed in absolute darkness, this technique proved to be difficult to control precisely. Thus every print is, on closer inspection, different, one-off, and as such, unique. Although often unpredictable, through long experimentation I found a way to blend and overlap the selected colour tones within various parts of one print, and obtained an aesthetic quality which was unusual and dreamlike. This was imperative to the overall effect of the images that mingle truth and fiction in an improbable way. The colour hues I chose are deliberately different to those usually connected with a black and white toning process *and* to those reminiscent of deteriorating old negatives. Instead, I opted for colour hues that are intense, like purple and green, and then matched them in atypical combinations with ochres, yellows and browns or various tones of blue, trying to maintain the illusory and inimitable quality I wished to generate in my work. Hoping the colour arrangement will accentuate the narrative, I have chosen for each image a combination of particular colour hues, which I felt, would be the most expressive.



Naples II., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Naples I., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

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[59] During the printing process, chosen parts of the image can be 'dodged', or masked, to hold back the exposure time for those parts, while the rest of the print is given full exposure. In reverse, some parts of the print can be 'burnt-in', and given an extra exposure, while the rest of the print is masked.

3.3.2. Presentation and Installation of the Work

I proof print about two thirds of the material I have photographed. From these proofs I edit all the potentially successful images, which I then print in a larger size. I consider effective, those pictures which appear less contrived yet, effectively, render the story scenario. While every image contains a separate narrative, I have always anticipated my images as a series. In view of that, most of the images in my series are edited and printed in such a way that, in the end, they complement each other and can be matched and exchanged in different ways for display.

Given that my imagery depicts real life scenarios, where the subject's expression and gesture are often crucial factors, the size of the images needs to be large enough to sufficiently show their detail. At the same time, however, the viewer should feel comfortable looking at them from a close perspective, hence their size must be 'private'. To reconcile these issues, I have made the size of my submission works 49x49 cm square. The square format is dictated mainly by the aesthetic choice of a comparatively static compositional frame and, in this way, I use the full size of my 6x6 cm negative, since I rarely crop my images. The final series comprises 28 images, framed in a conventional way for works on paper. The primary function of the framing is to effectively isolate each photograph as an individual image but, at the same time, unify all of the images together into the series. The date in the title refers to the time when an image was made.

In view of the fact that the images are multicoloured and have rich densities I have opted for a neutral white mount and simple frame which, in colour, matches the mounting board and allows for the image itself to be prominent. Presented in such a simple unobtrusive way, the images, like fragments from a continuous flow of multiple frames, recall cinematic flow while, at the same time, each of the individual images stands out independently, selected and 'frozen' in the way of a photograph, every one of them a momentous and significant fragment of the whole.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSIONS

This research reflects my longstanding interest in the relationship between truth and fiction. With fascination for the *verite* of the photographic record and story telling, I have created imagery that enabled me to weigh one against another. This body of work is contingent on the illusory aspect of photographic veracity, and the combination of reality and fiction widened its narrative. Furthermore, I felt that as truth and fiction intermingled, their fluid relationship became an important objective, providing a rich ground for discussion on self and existence.

This research project sought to produce visual ways of encountering the past and representing ideas of identity in relation to 'lightness of being'[60]. In the process of my research I have developed a specific methodology through which I have combined documentary photography with staged self-portrait techniques, utilising an element of 'Tableau Vivant'. I have brought together traditional and contemporary photographic approaches portraying invented stories as a truthful way of life. I borrowed assorted characters from life and, by suspending my own identity in a variety of guises and performances, I explored an autobiographical aspect in my work. When staging myself, I relied on melodrama and farce to cross over the boundaries of cultural differences, and to investigate the 'otherness', alienation and pretence that often isolate people. This way, the impersonation of a character served as a means of understanding the impact of place on my own identity.

I used a documentary element to record the constructed scenes. In the process, I re-examined the personal aspect of documentary photography, which not only stresses the self-conscious presence of the photographer at the scene, but also places the photographer at the centre of the documentation. By photographing simulated characters together with accidental occurrences in the photographed scene, I placed my emphasis on the element of chance to facilitate an aspect of truth within the work. This approach allowed me to blend the

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[60] Refer to the leit-motif of Vladimir Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being*

accidental event together with the prearranged tableau, and find narratives that were motivated or induced by the actual process of photographing. In this way I have not only injected substantial authenticity into essentially fictional imagery but also exemplified the opposing attributes of veracity and illusion of the photographic medium. Their paradoxical relationship allowed me to explore both the symbolic potential of photography and the theoretical concept of truth. Just as the world of fantasy and trickery blends with the real world, so truth can blend with deception. In my imagery, the element of truth became equal to the invented construct.

Through my work I explored a notion of binary oppositions such as truth/falsehood and reality/appearance, hoping to extend viewers' perceptions of themselves as individuals within their environment. Reflecting upon interactions of people, in their common urban environment, the images merge live performance and photographic record, picturing existence as both changing and repetitive. The images are simultaneously true and invented, specific and abstract; they render both the photographic stillness and the rhythm of cinematic flow; each of the images is unique and, at the same time, they all replicate each other. Frozen in a particular moment in time, they are indefinable, belonging simultaneously to the past and present; a specific place and a non-place.

I have depicted brief life experiences in the form of an open-ended narrative, rendering the interrelations of the 'public' and the 'private' as a sign of contemporary identity in a world where borders move, regimes change and where cultures are affected by globalisation and faiths become marginalised. Furthermore, employing the aesthetics of double meaning and paradox, I have pointed to the state of confusion the identity undergoes in reality where boundaries of truth and fiction are increasingly blurred and where individuals try to 'locate' and define themselves.

My work invites interrogation and, essentially, reflects on the dialectics of the whole. The images, in the final submission, probe my perception of existence as an ongoing search for meaning. This search, no doubt, will stimulate and influence the development of my future work, and has indeed enthused the

nascent work, in which I intend to emulate the viewpoint of a child through the use of a pinhole camera, and to explore further the fluid relationship between reality and fiction in art.

My work is a reflection of my thoughts, their contradictions and, sometimes, of the absurdity of my reasoning as I weigh them against the intuition and emotions[61]. 'The work of art is born of the intelligence's refusal to reason the concrete.'[62]

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[61] 'All try their hands at miming, at repeating, and at re-creating the reality that is theirs. We always end up by having the appearance of our truths. All existence for a man turned away from the eternal is but a vast mime under the mask of the absurd. Creation is the great mime.'(Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Penguin Books, 1975, p.87.)

[62] Ibid., p.89.

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APPENDIX 1. Curriculum Vitae

TERTIARY EDUCATION

1991 – 1994 BACHELOR OF FINE ART DEGREE. SCHOOL OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, HOBART, TASMANIA.

1995 BACHELOR OF FINE ART WITH HONOURS (Photography) SCHOOL OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, HOBART, TASMANIA.

2002 PhD IN FINE ARTS Photography. SCHOOL OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, HOBART, TASMANIA.

WORK EXPERIENCE

1996 - 2000 PART-TIME LECTURER (Photography), TASMANIAN SCHOOL OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, HOBART, TASMANIA.

1998 – 2000 PART-TIME TEACHER (Photography), FRIENDS' SCHOOL, HOBART, TASMANIA

2001 PART-TIME LECTURER (Photography), TASMANIAN SCHOOL OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, HOBART, TASMANIA.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1980 INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF ILLUSTRATION AND GRAPHIC ART (BRNO, CZECHOSLOVAKIA)

1992 EXHIBITION OF PRINTMAKING STUDENTS (FINE ART GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, HOBART, TASMANIA)

1993 "*HOME SHOW*", Graduate exhibition of printmaking ('ENTREPOT' GALLERY, SCHOOL OF ART, HOBART, TASMANIA)

1993 "*I'SLAND (ī'l-)n.*" ('LONG GALLERY' SALAMANCA PLACE, HOBART, TASMANIA)

1995 "*HONOURS SHOW*" (PLIMSOLL GALLERY, SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS, HOBART, TASMANIA) Exhibition of photographs

1997 "*HOME SHOW*"(ENTREPOT GALLERY, HOBART, TASMANIA)

1998 Exhibition of works by the postgraduate and staff members of School of Art in Hobart (PLIMSOLL GALLERY, SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS, HOBART, TASMANIA)

1999 *"SOME PHOTOGRAPHS"* Collaborative exhibition of contemporary Czech photography (SUTEREN GALLERY, LITOMERICE, CZECH REPUBLIC)

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1987 *"DRAWINGS AND PRINTS"* ('RIS' GALLERY', USTI NAD LABEM, CZECHOSLOVAKIA)

1985 *"GRAFIKY"* (GALLERY 'NA TERASE', USTI NAD LABEM, CZECHOSLOVAKIA)

1986 HELENA PSOTOVA *"STAGE SETS"* (THEATRE 'Cinohra', USTI NAD LABEM, CZECH REPUBLIC)

1997 HELENA PSOTOVA, *"PERCEPTIONS, DECEPTIONS AND DREAMS"* (UNIVERSITY GALLERY, LAUNCESTON, TASMANIA)

1997 HELENA PSOTOVA *"BEYOND DECEPTIONS"* (THEATRE 'Cinohra', USTI NAD LABEM, CZECH REPUBLIC)

1998 HELENA PSOTOVA *"POWDER MAGAZINE"* (THEATRE 'Cinohra', USTI NAD LABEM, CZECH REPUBLIC)

SPECIAL AWARDS

2001 THE 2001 JOSEPHINE ULRICK NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY PRIZE, Highly Commended award

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sandy Edwards, 'Surfacing', in *Photofile*, #58 December 1999, (p.13, p.16), Australian Centre for Photography

'Portraits on Show', *Tweed Times*, 6/7/01

Stewart, A., 'The 2001 Josephine Ulrick National Photography Prize', in *Photofile*, #64 December 2001, (p.73), Australian Centre for Photography

COLLECTIONS

My work is represented in private collections in Austria, Australia, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Island, Russia, Switzerland, South Africa, and U.S.A

APPENDIX 2. Submission work

New York III., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Jablonec, 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

London I., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

London III., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Bangkok I., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Bangkok V., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Bangkok II., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Bangkok IV., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Bangkok III., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Melbourne, 2002, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Sydney II., 2002, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

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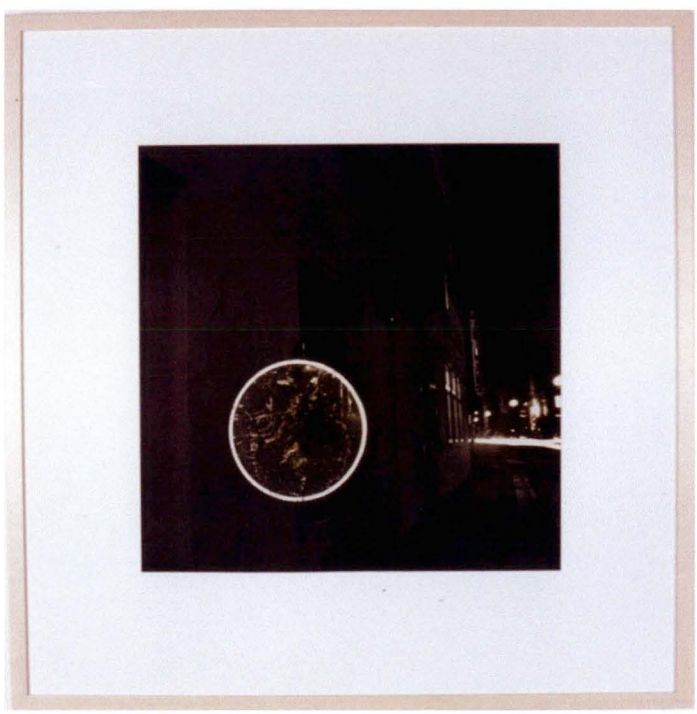

Usti nad Labem, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Naples I., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Naples III., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Naples II., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Basel II., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Basel I., 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

New York I., 2001, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

San Francisco, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Vodnany, 1998, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Zurich, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Trmice, 1998, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

Manila, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)

St.Kilda, 1999, (C-Type Print, 49 x 49cm)