Photography and the Design Imperative

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THE REALITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography’s relationship to notions of reality has a long history. As far back as the 11th century astronomers used the camera obscura to view solar eclipses (Trachtenberg 1990, p4). By the late 1500s, and with the addition of a focusable lens, they were widely used by artists to accurately render perspective in their drawings and paintings (Lemagny & Rouille 1987, p12). The birth of photography as we know it came in the mid 1800s, during the scientific age, with the ability to fix images on a base. Photography’s capacity to render apparently accurate depictions of what is in front of the lens via a mechanical apparatus, the camera, led to the common view at the time that “through the camera, nature paints herself” (Trachtenberg 1990, p14).

Being mechanically recorded as opposed to hand generated, photographs were regarded as an unproblematic record of an observed reality and appeared to usurp the role of painting in depicting it. The relationship between the photograph and the reality it depicted was underscored by the naturalistic tendencies of post-Renaissance and pre-20th Century European art (Banks 1998, p15). Thus the prevailing framework of photography draws heavily on models of representation predicated by realism (Berger & Mohr 1982, p119).

The discipline of anthropology also emerged in the mid 1800s and was influenced by biology, then a science of classification. It seized on the potential of photography to catalogue the people, artefacts and rituals of distant cultures to confirm developing theories of social evolution (Ball & Smith 1992, p7; Harper 1998, p25). The photo-documentation of observed phenomena and realities has been closely associated with ethnography since (see Ball & Smith 1992, pp3-12; Pinney 1992, p74). This history coupled with the camera’s accurate recording of subject matter has forever cast it in the popular imagination as an unproblematic window onto the world; what we see is what we get, a picture of ‘reality’.

The interchangeability of photography and reality that this legacy has engendered isn’t something we should take for granted. There is a substantial body of literature that challenges the common assumption that photography is simply a window to the world and photographs document an unproblematic, external and objective reality (see for example Ball & Smith 1992, pp16-20; Emmison & Smith 2000, pp3-4; Pink 2006, pp3-20; Winston 1998, pp60-62). Indeed Baudrillard argues that such is the extent of this interchange that in the popular imagination the image has become the reality supplanting the reality documented by it. This is what he refers to as simulacra (Baudrillard 1988, pp 172 & 185).

In academic fields that use photographic based research methods, including design, it is commonly agreed that photographs are framed by the subjective intent, bias and ideological agendas of the photographer / researcher (Harper 1998, p29;
Prosser & Schwartz 1998; p116). Notwithstanding these fields are still dependent on a largely realist frame; the accurate depiction of subject matter before the lens is regarded as being an essential pre-requisite to collecting rigorously sound research data in photographic form (see Cruickshank & Mason 2003, pp6-7, 21; Ireland 2003, pp26-27; Pink 2006, pp50, 68; Keller et al 2006, p19).

The advent of digital photography and its potential for endless manipulation has, perhaps at this point, thrown assumptions about photography and reality into sharp relief for more than the cognoscenti of photographic theory and artistic practice. Ironically, however, the rate at which photographs depicting everyday aspects of human experience has multiplied exponentially, the digital technologies that enable endless manipulation of the photographic image also enable the endless reproduction of photographic images that depict everyday ‘reality’. It would seem that our faith in the medium to depict ‘reality’, though having been challenged through this technology, has not been shaken.

Over the past two decades, my work as photographic artist/designer has been typified by an interest in and exploration of both analogue and digital montage and collage techniques and a strong aversion to conventional documentary photographic practice. In this regard my work has been concerned with designing and constructing fictitious scenarios or worlds rather than documenting the ‘world-as-seen’. I would classify this as a practice of synthesis that is antithetical to the realist conventions of most photography. With the growing interest and use of photography in design research, drawn from ethnography, I have been concerned with the implications of the dominant realist frame and analytical tendencies that prevail. This privileges the photographic depiction of the ‘reality’ we perceive of the ‘here-and-now’, which though important, seems at odds with designs’ more synthetic role in visualising “what-might-be” (Dilnot 1999, p77). Through my practice I have re-engaged with photography of the world-as-seen, a largely descriptive approach, to then explore against that a more abstract and interpretive approach. This shift is more in keeping with the synthetic nature of design and the resultant photographic techniques better suited to picturing the ‘reality’ we wish to perceive of what-might-be.

THE BANALITY OF REALITY

From its inception photography documented the everyday with the novelty of the medium in its formative years ensuring such images were anything but banal, even if the experiences and scenes documented were. As it pushed into unfamiliar territory on the coat tails of European colonial expansion, and often at the behest of anthropology, its stock in trade became the everyday lives and settings of other cultures, rendered exotic by their distance and inaccessibility. Arguably the novelty of photography, the expensive and specialised nature of its practice, and the extent to which the world had yet to be ‘discovered’, both literally and photographically, ensured it as a medium that could continue to surprise.

The photographic exploration of ‘remote’ and ‘exotic’ features of the ‘world-as-found’ continues to be standard fare. In contrast to this though, there also developed a type of photography that sought to explore the often overlooked world of the local and / or familiar, corresponding with a similar shift in the study of culture in the form of sociology. Through the first third of the 20th century August Sander documented a typology of German workers; familiar enough to German citizens but unique in its scale, ambition and subject matter. In roughly the same period, in America, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lang and Walker Evans photographed little known or seen aspects of their national life in the form of the poor, underprivileged or the exploited. Though their subject matter was local its unfamiliarity to many of their compatriots ensured their photographs exotic status. Through the 1930s to 1950s Minor White, Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, all sought to explore what they believed was the beauty in the commonplace and ordinary. The choice of such self consciously common subject matter was rendered anything but banal, in photographic
form, through a combination of technical virtuosity and the rigorous application of an almost classical visual aesthetic.

George Eastman's combined invention of inexpensive roll film, cheap processing and the box brownie at the turn of the 19th century ensured the medium itself was on its way to becoming an everyday part of life. Not surprisingly common place domestic scenes and family snaps began to fill the photo albums of many a middle class home; photographs that on one level all look the same, their distinguishing feature being the emotional connection each family had to them as records of their lives. Though still interested in the everyday, photographers such as Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander sought to break free of the constraints of technical virtuosity and classical aesthetics through their work from the 1940s to 60s. They developed a more spontaneous and less measured approach that had more in common with the look and feel of these family happy snaps. More recently an acute awareness of not only this visual aesthetic but of a preoccupation with truly banal subject matter is exemplified in the work of Ed Ruscha, William Eggleston (both from the 1960s on) and Andreas Gursky (from the 1990s on).

The penetration of photography into all nooks and crannies of life has been completed in recent years with the advent of inexpensive consumer digital cameras and, perhaps more significantly, their integration into mobile phones. The distribution and exhibition of such images online and via the internet has ensured that we are now inundated by them on a daily basis. If the stock in trade of most domestic photographers is the documentation of everyday aspects of their lives and the sheer volume of this documentation renders such images banal, then the ubiquity of the medium and its digital distribution renders the practice of photography itself banal.

Photography is now sagging under the weight of this particular history, its relationship to reality and the contemporary ubiquity of photographic images and practice. In talking about photography and its role as a representational art, compared to non photographic forms of art as "direct experience", Carl Andre commented that "photography is just a rumour, a kind of pornography of art" (qtd Kotz 2005, p7). By virtue of its ubiquity, its inescapable presence in our lives I'd argue it is more than a rumour, it is a kind of fact. Its capacity to render appearances accurately and the extent to which it has penetrated and depicted everyday life, like pornography, leaves little to the imagination. It is no coincidence that pornography is so dependant on photographic depiction. Perhaps photography is not so much a pornography of art but of life itself.

In response to this trajectory I first revisited banal subject matter and adopted a more classical modernist visual aesthetic, in my photographs of the world-as-found, as a way of familiarising myself first hand with this territory. I then began to shift to a far less measured approach to the composition and photographic depiction of the everyday. This was achieved through a number of devices such as: rendering the images out of focus through the lens; the use of extremely slow shutter speeds coupled with hand held photography; moving the camera rapidly whilst making exposures; and not looking through the viewfinder to compose shots. My aim has been to develop images that are increasingly abstract and evocative, as opposed to descriptive, of places, spaces and moods; as a result my work has become increasingly non-figurative.

THE REALITY OF REALITY

A brief discussion, at this point, on notions of reality is warranted given the relationship photography has had with it. At one end of the spectrum is the materialist view of the world, characterised by positivism. This view regards the material objects that make up the world as something that exist separate and external to our experience of them; reality therefore exists separate to human experience. From this we draw on ideas of objectivity; that we can find, analyse, measure and quantify this reality; we can discover universal truths that exist separate to our experience. This view prevailed through the scientific age and
had profound consequences for all manner of intellectual endeavours (Gergen 1999, pp6-8). As I’ve argued elsewhere its separates objects from subjects by placing the focus on the object (Roxburgh & Bremner, 1999). At the other end of the spectrum is the idealist view of the world, typified by solipsism. This view challenges the very material existence of objects, the world, and reality, in that it is argued that reality is based in the mind. From this we draw on ideas of subjectivity; the tools we use to find, analyse, measure and quantify our belief in reality and notions of universal truth are located in the mind and it is individual human consciousness alone that is the only thing we can be sure of, not an external, material reality.

If we take these points as being at either end of a philosophical continuum we would find along it various forms of constructivism that actively seek to theorise the relationship between the material and ideal. Constructivism emerged in the 20th century and caused many an academic field to question its practices, begin to reintegrate a knowing, human subject into them, and more significantly into conceptions of reality itself. Though there are other variations on the constructivist theme these 3 points are the ones that I am most particularly drawn to:

→ constructivism, in which individuals construct knowledge of the world from their experiences, and by implication construct reality, through a systematic relationship to the external world (Gergen 1999, p60).

→ social constructivism which is similar to constructivism but emphasizes the influence of social relations over the individual in the construction of reality (Gergen 1999, p60).

→ and radical constructivism which posits that all we can know is our own experience and that we cannot know whether there is or is not an external reality (Gergen 1999, p60).

I am drawn to constructivism because of its attempts to reconcile the relationship between objects and humans, the material and experience, and its emphasis on the experiential nature of our understanding of the world. I do find its premise that the development of knowledge, what we know as learning, as contingent upon the rectification of failure (that is, we learn through our mistakes and progress through correcting them) somewhat mechanistic and as Glanville (2004) has argued lacking in generosity of spirit towards the condition of being human. For this reason then I am drawn to radical constructivism. I appreciate its foregrounding of human experience and the ethical consequences that derive from it and am intrigued by the deliberately provocative stance it takes on the question of an external reality. In its account of reality the object, the material, is always metaphorically out of ones grasp, its very existence is uncertain. This in itself is not a bad thing philosophically. It provides an ongoing critical platform for a questioning engagement with the material and our experience of it, and this is crucial for design as design is nothing if not in the business of experience in this era, as I will touch upon shortly. However, being a photographer and designer who has an interest in the materials I use and the embodied experience I have of them I find this view philosophically disabling in the process of making.

From constructivism to radical constructivism, I then find myself drawn to social constructivism as it places some faith in the material and takes the position that though things materially exist we know them through our experience of them and that this knowledge of what we call reality is shared and constructed socially. However, I find social constructivism underplays the role of individual agency, privileging social experience, where radical constructivism emphasizes individual experience. In this regard then I cast myself as a radical social constructivist with the view that individuals, social institutions and processes and objects are co-determinate and exist in an ongoing, ever changing network of relations, a position that has much in common with actor network theory (see Law 1992; Mackay & Gillespie 1992). However I do not accept that these relations are equal, as many actor network theorists argue, hence my inclination towards radical constructivism, as I see human agency as being greater than the effects of inanimate things.

A knee-jerk reaction to the rhetoric of the immaterial would be to give up on
making for it would appear that what is made is not ‘real’ anyway; why invest anything in something that does not exist? I responded to the intellectual impasse posed to me by this logic through a number of strategies. The most obvious was to embrace the embodied experience of the photographic process; the response to both the sense of place and space of the scenarios being photographed and the mechanics of the apparatus itself. Similarly I explored the materiality of printing through experimentation with paper stocks and printing techniques.

The other, more subtle response, was to explore the immaterial aspects of my photographs. This was done firstly by working through techniques of abstraction so that the material properties of the scenarios photographed became progressively less clear. Though seemingly contradictory, my aim was to obscure the apparent materiality of these scenarios in an attempt to evoke the experience of them. Secondly, my photographs were digitally distributed to volunteers who selected their preferred images for exhibition in Light Relief (Part 1). These were sequenced into sets of screen savers for exhibiting, as well as redistribution via the internet for use off site. In this way, though the images could be experienced, they were in a sense immaterial as they existed as binary code, not as prints that could be held or touched. Though initially these images of the immaterial were an evocation of my embodied experience of the material, through this process they became instead the participants’ response to their experience of them. In a way the nature of this process echoed the co-determinate relations outlined earlier.

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE OF REALITY

If material reality is something that is fundamentally experiential, then can a photograph depict it and if so how? Furthermore what are the implications for research practices, such as design, that use photographic observation in a way that is premised on an external, knowable, and photographable material reality, albeit in the context of subjective interpretation? I will answer the first question now and deal with the second later.

Photographs can only ever depict the visible traces of phenomena, events or things that are in front of the camera when an exposure is made. How they depict these traces can be manipulated through a combination of the technical features of the camera and editorial choice prior to, during and after taking the photo. This combination is what makes up a photographer’s vision, their ‘unique’ way of ‘seeing the world’. Though vision is a central feature of how we apprehend the world, experience is embodied and dependant on all available senses, not just vision; it is aesthetic in the truest sense. Experience occurs in time and space and not just in the fraction of a second it takes to make an exposure. As such a photograph can never depict experience, though it may try to visually interpret it, it can only document and depict the visible traces of things that we have experiences of. The photograph of such things becomes an object itself and we can have experiences of it; we can experience the photograph as a thing but cannot experience the thing it depicts. We may have had experiences, embodied and occurring in time and space, that resemble or are analogous to experiences associated with the visible traces depicted in the photograph. It is through resemblance, analogy and metaphor that we imagine experiences in the photograph and through this we see photos as analogous to reality. This has implications for visualising the future (what-might-be) as I’ll touch upon shortly.

Common experience with photographs suggests that the documentation of our ‘reality’ is pretty much the end point; documentation is enough. Though through this documentation there is an element of transformation, editorial choice and technical ability, such an approach to photography tells us to a large extent what we already know, or more to the point, what we want others to know about what we know. This state of affairs persists, in part, because of our fixation with photographic ‘reality’ and the denial of the transformative potential offered by photographs when we view them, not as ‘reality’, but the raw material for conceiving of or depicting new ‘realities’, or more precisely new experiences;
this is design. By this I mean that we regard photographs of the here-and-now as interchangeable with things that exist. So long as we do this we can only view them as visual descriptions, objects of analysis. Though analysis of the here-and-now is an important starting point for design, design is fundamentally a process of synthesis concerned with the projection of future scenarios of what-might-be. Documentary photography cannot project what-might-be, though designers looking at it might. In this regard I believe that for photography to become a transformative medium of synthesis capable of projecting such future scenarios then sole reliance on the realist frame is an unnecessary constraint.

The phenomenal amount of essentially banal photographic depictions of everyday ‘reality’, is symptomatic of what Manzini (1992) would call an overcrowded or polluted semisphere. It is indicative that issues of quantity are at the centre of our experience in the post industrial world (e.g. quantity of choice, messages, experiences, goods, lifestyles, media exposure, etc). This pre-occupation with quantity, in which design is implicated, is perplexing given that experience is a fundamentally qualitative not quantitative phenomena. The mantra of unlimited choice is a kind of tyranny in which the exercise of judgement is suspended as we become overwhelmed by that choice and the messages associated with the things we choose. Our naturalistic reading of photographs and an unwillingness to consciously intervene in what we believe to be real is typical of this suspension of judgement; for how can we change reality? I would argue by imaging the reality we want.

Part of the problem for design relying on realist photography, as a basis for projecting possible future scenarios, is that both the quantity and banality of such imagery makes it difficult to exercise any judgement; choice fatigue as it were. This is exacerbated by what I have called elsewhere “the loss anticipation” (Roxburgh 2008, p23). That is, as a consequence of our ability to shoot and view an endless stream of images on our digital cameras almost instantly, we rely less on our capacity to anticipate how an image might turn out, and more on the technology’s ability to shoot, display and store this stream in the hope we get the right shot. The price we pay in doing this is wading through a flood of images that are nuanced variations of the here-and-now. This digital phenomena, overwhelmingly reliant as it is on a realist framework, is incapable of projecting images of the ‘reality’ we want because it is tied to depicting the ‘reality’ we have. We are endlessly reproducing a virtual version of the world we already inhabit. Methods of photographic research and representation that are more in keeping with design’s synthetic nature, that utilise interpretive rather than descriptive frames, may be better aligned with design’s capacity to project possible future scenarios. It is here that the work I have been producing has been focused.

THE REALITY OF INQUIRY

The history of design research is typified by the importation of methods and frameworks from other disciplines (see Downton, 2003 pp35-53; Glanville 1999, pp80-81). With the shift to user focused design in the past decade or so, ethnography has been a source of much emulation as design researchers seek to understand users and the worlds they create, inhabit and experience. Photo ethnography has been a feature of this shift and it is commonly fixed on the analysis of the ‘realistic’ content of the image. Matters relating to photographic stylistic consideration are ignored at best or rejected outright, in photo-ethnography, with the prevailing view that the images be as ‘natural’ as possible (Cruickshank & Mason 2003, pp6-7; Pink 2006, p68).

When the relationship between photographs, their content, and the user experience of them is explored in order to gain insight into the user’s here-and-now, the realist frame seems appropriate. In an attempt to overcome this ethnographic tendency towards the here-and-now, more design oriented techniques of ‘observation’ called cultural probes have been developed. These include but are not limited to: photo surveys requiring respondents to answer questions photographically and in written form; subject self documentation and
journal writing; and photo elicited interviews using direct or self documented photographs. Such techniques are also common in ethnography but cultural probes are framed differently. They don’t necessarily require direct answers to specific questions around set topics. They are framed more like design briefs in order to elicit creative, often visual, responses to questions (see Bremner 2004). This is done to get subjects to “talk about their dreams and wishes for the future, not their observations and irritations from the present and the past” (Keller et al, 2006, p19). This focus on future scenarios, as opposed to the here-and-now is very much about design potential for it parallels designs’ concern with what-might-be. This marks a move away from both the designer as creative genius model and the problem solution paradigm that design has operated under for so long. It echoes social constructivism and repositions the designer as participant, with users, in a more collaborative approach to design conception.

The move towards user centered design appears to challenge the authority and expertise of designers by involving non designers in aspects of the design process. Such a reading would be simplistic for it repositions rather than undermines design expertise, though it may challenge designers’ egos. In spite of these developments designers still have a critical role to play in interpreting and visualising the scenarios imagined in such collaboration and it is this ability to imagine and visualise that is crucial. It is also this ability that is at risk of being lost given the parallels user-based design has with social constructivism, that is a potential loss of agency. Keller et al (2006, pp27-28) make the point that embodied experience of the here-and-now is privileged by designers, as a source of creative inspiration, over most other forms of research or inspiration. This usually takes the form of a kind of amateur ethnographic observation. Whatever the limitations this may have as a key research input for design projections, the fact that such a view holds cannot be overlooked in any conception of design research, including user centered design. It suggests that imagining and visualising are premised on experience, seeing and visual memory.

Keller et al (2006, pp19 & 26) demonstrate that though photographs of the here-and-now are considered important in design conception, the photographs themselves are less important than the tactile experience, the seeing, handling, and memory of their form and content; this subjective experience feeds designers’ conceptual and material creativity. That design is an integrative process of synthesis yet the dominant frame of realist photo-observation is analytical, suggests a disjuncture between the process and this method. This becomes more apparent when one compares the use of sketching as a research and ideation tool, in design, to the use of photography. The demarcation between the interpretive and synthetic aspects of sketching and the analytical inference of realist photography is marked. The use of realist photographic depictions of the here-and-now and the design synthesis of future scenarios appears to preclude the interpretive dimension of a designer’s creative subjectivity.

It is crucial that the creative skills designers have, their insight, their ability to imagine and actualise future scenarios, their very subjectivity, do not get lost in the move to a more ‘democratic’ configuration of design that ethnographically framed user-based design represents. The evidence is that the everyday use of photography and the dominance of the realist frame results in the reproduction of the here-and-now as yet more banality (Hjorth 2006, pp.6-7). It would be a pity if designers simply replicated this state of affairs by limiting themselves to this frame in their use of photography for design.

THE AESTHETICS OF RESEARCH

Embodied experience of the material world is fundamentally individual in nature and our ability to communicate it, to develop some sense of common experience can only occur through the use of analogy and metaphor. As I stated earlier documentary photography depicts things, not experience, and we only glimpse the sense of experience associated with those depictions through resemblance, and visual metaphor and analogy. When we depict the here-and-now the realist
frame will generally suffice but when we try to depict what-might-be, the banality of the realist frame is a limitation. As design is about what-might-be I would argue that an aesthetic approach to research has its place in design. Photography so conceived must then shake lose the powerful grip of realist depiction and also embrace an abstract and interpretive frame where the creative expression of visual analogy and metaphor might thrive; for how else can we depict that which we can imagine but does not yet exist? Given designers' growing interest in ethnographic methods and their tendency to privilege embodied experience as an important aspect of the creative process, these methods need to be translated in such a way as to accommodate that tendency. It is my contention that an interpretive aesthetic frame, as opposed to a realist one, is one way forward in this act of translation.

Originally conceived photo-documentation was a kind of visual positivism; through it we thought we could know all that there was to see. Though positivism is out of favour its legacy still underpins much of our reading of photographs, why else would realistic photographic depiction persist. Pask argued that “we do not make a prediction of the real world… which is unknowable in detail. Rather we make predictions about some simplified abstraction from the real world – some incomplete image” (1961, p19). Setting aside any contenttion about the notion of ‘the real world’ the idea of the prediction of it, is, in its purest sense, an act of design for design is nothing if not a prediction of how things might be. If we cannot know the ‘reality’ of the world, as radical constructivists insist, then realistic photographic depictions of it are an abstraction anyway, we just mistake them for the ‘real’ thing. Furthermore, and given this, if we can only know the ‘real’ world through our experience of it, if our predictions of it are a simplified abstraction, and if the communication of experience and prediction occurs through analogy and metaphor, then the creative use of more abstract and interpretive methods for design research would simply open up the toolkit for representation of future scenarios beyond the reproduction of the here-and-now.

Glanville (2005, pp6-8) argues that theory imported into a field without a test of its appropriateness is polemic and that the field becomes confined to what is already understood, making growth beyond these confines unlikely. “In fields such as design, where emphasis on creativity and the novel is central, such constraints are especially limiting and undesirable” (Glanville 2005, p8). The ethnographic turn in design and its dependency on the realist frame, when using photo-observation methods, suggests an emerging polemic and it is here that I call for design's attention to turn to what I call the aesthetics of research. That is: an engagement with the embodied sensory aspects, and creative and interpretive potential of the framing, deployment and reading of design research methods, that go beyond the realist frame. My interest in moving away from realism in my photographic work, towards abstraction, is part of my exploration of this more interpretive mode.

**THE DESIGN IMPERATIVE**

Second order cybernetics highlights the role of observation in action and experience but does not locate the observer outside the system being observed, as positivism does; rather the observer is part of the system. In observed systems, the system is seen as mechanical and externally imposed limits as moral. In design terms, the problem solution paradigm that has dominated since the design methods movement is an embodiment of this view. In observing systems, where the observer is within the system, options, rather than limits, are internally generated and correlate to ethics. (Glanville 2004, pp2-3).

Glanville outlines von Foerster's two key imperatives for second order

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1. In photographic terms I see analogy as being where we can infer an understanding of what is depicted, but we are unfamiliar with, through our understanding of other things that we have seen or experienced, that share similar features. This also entails the identification of dissimilar or distinguishing features of the things being compared. In this vein I see metaphor as being the juxtaposition or substitution of seemingly incongruous or unrelated visual features that imparts a meaning that is different from the juxtaposed parts. Visual context is crucial in establishing metaphor.

2. This should not be confused with research on aesthetics.
cybernetics, these being ethical and aesthetical. As cybernetics is interested in the desired goals of a system, hence its interest to design theorists, the ethical imperative is "to act so as to increase the number of choices" as opposed to setting limits (von Foerster’s qtd Glanville 2004, p12). Setting limits is moral, providing choice is ethical. How we act in response to these choices and the effect they have on us, what we conventionally see as causality, is key to the aesthetical imperative which is "if you desire to see, learn how to act" (von Foerster’s qtd Glanville 2004, p12). The underlying inference here being that by taking responsibility for our actions (or reactions) we develop understanding and where the ethical imperative is to an extent quantitative the aesthetical imperative is qualitative.

The role of observation in design research, and a photographic practice based upon it, that persistently adheres to a realist frame, which in turn implies a form of positivism, needs to be questioned from an ethical standpoint. Ironically, though the photographic reproduction of the banal seems to provide us with a seemingly endless set of depictions of the here-and-now to choose from, for our design cues, adherence to such a singular framework is a limit and antithetical to the ethical imperative. In a way the volume of choice of endlessly familiar images is no choice at all.

Seeing, literally and metaphorically, and action are fundamental to design as they predicate desired change; imagining what-might-be. Responsibility for our actions as designers, though not an historically new idea, has really only gathered momentum in the past decade and a half as we have become aware of the consequences of our actions upon both the bio and semi-spheres. We have seen design, the realm of the artificial, in mechanical terms resulting in us identifying problems that need externally imposed solutions (limits). We have been blind to seeing the artificial in ecological terms, the idea that we are part of and not separate to the systems we think we act upon. The move towards an aesthetics of research in this context then suggests what I’d call the design imperative; that is if you desire to act (design) then learn how to see (aesthetically). It is my argument that our dependency on photo-realism limits our capacity to learn how to see which in turn impedes our ability to act. The experimentation with interpretive and non realist frameworks in photo-based design research methods, that is a feature of my work, is an attempt to learn how to see in this way.
REFERENCES


