THE RE-PREDICTION OF THE SELF: DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY, SERENDIPITY AND THE MIRROR TO THE FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will be discussing reality in relation to photographic practice. This has been a much debated and contested area and I am not interested in rehashing those debates to any great extent here. On one level I will be confining myself to a fairly simplistic and commonsense understanding of the term, not because I reject the essence of those debates but because, I would assert, the majority of people who take photographs do so unaware of them. For many people, though they are aware of the extent to which photographs can be manipulated, their normal domestic practice of photography revolves around documenting things, places and people that are real to them. In this sense photography and reality are conflated. It must be said however that as an academic and photographer I do not conflate the two and subscribe to Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra that would position photographs as a kind of *de-facto* reality. Where I use the terms realism or realist I am not referring to notions of reality, I am specifically referring to photographs in which the content is highly congruent with the subject matter photographed. In making my argument I will firstly concentrate on digital photography as a domestic practice, that does not involve any significant post shooting computer manipulation, and then discuss the implications of this practice on 'professional' photography.

PIXEL PERFECT

Anecdote 1

Walking along the beach in mid 2007 I saw a young couple watching their toddler kicking a ball along the hardened sand by water's edge, clearly something he had only recently learned to do. The scene had all the makings of a superannuation or health insurance ad: young attractive couple; first child blonde and cherubic; glorious sunny day; and picturesque beach. There was nothing unusual in this itself but my realisation that the parents weren't so much overjoyed by their son's new found ability, though this was evidently a source of pride, as they were intent on reproducing this moment photographically as perfectly as possible. Rather like watching a dog being trained to fetch, the mother would encourage the boy to kick the ball whilst the father found the right angle and shot off a few frames. Then the parents would huddle around the LCD screen on the back of the camera and briefly discuss the merits of each shot, whilst their son stood by, apparently unsure what was expected of him now. This scenario was re-enacted several times as I passed by with no sense that they'd yet managed to get 'the shot'. For all I know they're still at it, still striving for 'the shot'.

Anecdote 2

Until she got her own digital camera and computer, my daughter would often grab mine whenever her girlfriends came over. Weeks later, as I uploaded my recent photographs, I'd discover the latest batch of their group

shots and portraits as they variously pouted, laughed and posed; practicing subtle variations of looks in an endless stream of images, that to me, looked largely the same. That my daughter could choose from this tide of minute variation the best images indicated that there were indeed differences between the photographs and discernment as to which were better or more meaningful than the others.

A Mirror to the World

These observations, amongst others, have made me aware of a profound shift that has occurred as a consequence of the rapid consumer uptake of digital photography in its various hardware forms. Photography has often been conceived of as a mirror, or window, to the world because of its ability to accurately render the subject matter that lies before it. Szarkowski argues that these are, on an analytical level, metaphors that are distinctly different in their inference yet in practical terms poles of a continuum. Photography as a window to the world infers an objective photographic gaze "through which one might better know the world".[1] In essence such a photographic practice is concerned with the realistic visual description of the world. Photography as a mirror of the world infers the interpretive dimension of photographic practice and the photograph as "reflecting a portrait of the artist who made it".[2]

As photography involves mechanical and chemical processes the camera is seen by positivist researchers as a "mirror with a memory" and because of the binding link between the appearance of the world, and the photograph of it, this lends credence to the view that they depict something actual and "mirror reality".[3] Ball and Smith make the point that though "the mirror is a powerful metaphor for exploring realism" the "mirror like character of photographs will not guarantee their realism" for "mirrors, even metaphorical ones, can also distort".[4]

Much water has passed under the bridge since the idea of photography revealing, let alone capturing, reality or the truth prevailed.[5] The metaphor of photography as a window to the world appears at odds with the subjective and interpretive frame of analysis that has superseded the once dominant mantra of objectivity. In this subjective realm photography might be more appropriately conceived of as a filter through which we represent and interpret our understanding of the world and our attendant realities.[6] This would indicate that except for analytical purposes, such as exemplified by Szarkowski, the metaphor of the photograph being a window to the world, in academic circles at least, has run out of steam. Of course this commonsense view of photographs may still hold in other contexts.

There should be nothing surprising in these ruminations, nor in the observation that popular discourse and experience around photography has not kept pace with academic discourse, the former being still wedded to the idea that photography and reality are largely interchangeable. Using a Baudrillardian framework, Finkelstein argues that "the image as a mirror, representation of and counterpart to the real, also acts to contaminate reality; thus, the approximation of the image to reality can distort and even supersede

that reality".[7] Given this it is worth considering dusting off the photography as mirror metaphor in academic circles, for it is useful in understanding how most domestic consumers of photographic technology (the collective we in this paper) engage with it.

A MIRROR TO THE FUTURE

We hover around our LCD mirrors to the world, on the backs of our cameras or fronts of our phones, reliving the memory of the moment just before. Where once the gap between shooting the moment and viewing it seemed immeasurably huge it now appears infinitesimally small. There appears to be no space between the experience of a moment and our memory and record of it; we experience, we shoot, we view. If we are unhappy with the experience of the view we re-enact (if possible) the moment so that we can re-shoot the experience of it, to view, until it conforms to some idealised notion we have of what it should look like.

Baudrillard implicitly argued that the media depictions of 'reality' *de-facto* become the reality most of us believe.[8] This idea of the simulacra was conceived in the context of mass communication where the means of production and distribution were in the hands of few, thus our 'reality' was produced by a limited number of sources. In the age of individual access to the means of production and distribution, a shift has occurred in the location of the production of this 'reality' and consequently our experience of it. Our *de-facto* reality now encompasses our own digital depiction of it (in this instance photographic); through it <u>we</u> create and live our own simulacra.

Our memory of an experience outlasts the experience itself. With analogue photography we had to anticipate the best moment to take the photograph. We could only guess what the visual record of that moment would look like, until we got our prints back from the lab; this too entailed anticipation. More often than not we'd be disappointed that the images didn't do justice to our memory of the moment, though they'd act as an aid in re-activating that memory. Rhetorically, these photographs supersede the experience itself. With digital cameras and the loss of the space between moment, experience, record and view, our experience of photographing a moment has superseded both the photograph and the experience of the moment itself. We live and confirm the reality of a moment, and our experience of it, the moment we view it in pixel form on our camera. All of this entails a kind of loss of anticipation. Though we may have an ideal in mind when taking digital photographs, and this implies some sense of anticipation, the virtual elimination of time between shoot and view means it is a radically altered sense of anticipation. It is not so much the anticipation associated with the unexpected results often achieved through the time delay of analogue photography rather it is the anticipation of a pre-visualised and instantly viewable ideal. This suggests the anticipation of a kind of nostalgia before the event is photographed.

In this sense our reality is not what we experience nor what we photograph ourselves experiencing; rather it is our experience of viewing the photograph of the experience, the moment after the experience itself. It follows that the

meaning we make of an experience is the meaning we make of viewing it just after we've had it, not when it actually occurred. This suggests that our experience of the world is hypothetically meaningless unless we can see it a fraction of a second after we have had it. Hjorth talks about this as entailing a fast-forwarding present, where presence becomes co-presence; we become so consumed with the act of photographing that our experience of a moment is put on hold and is subsumed by the experience of photographing the moment.[9]

If analogue photography was a mirror of our reality then what are the implications for this metaphor with digital photography where we shoot and view until what is captured accords with our predetermined view of how we think our reality should look, or meets our standards of the reality we wish others to see? Here the camera is not a mirror of our perceived reality but of our preconceived reality. This has really been the case with photography all along it is just that the loss of anticipation has made it all the more commonplace.

In the 1990s Finklestein argued that we lived in the era of self production; that identity was a malleable thing that we'd fashion through the things we wore and owned, and as such we'd arrive at a place of being.[10] Koepnick in analysing the photographs of Alan Schechner, talks about "becoming over being", implying that the journey to identity outstrips its destination.[11] In the aforementioned practices our reality is forever in the making, it never arrives as such. It is reasonable to assume then, metaphorically speaking, that if you do not exist digitally then you do not exist at all - the popularity of sites such as MySpace and FaceBook would suggest this is so. We have passed through the era of self production, where we fashioned the self, and are now in the era of self prediction[12] where we rehearse the self (experience, shoot, view, experience, shoot, view....). Our digital cameras are no longer a mirror of a present reality but a mirror of the reality we re-present (design) as we photographically enact it, a mirror to our future.

Serendipity and the Decisive Moment (583)

The rapid rate at which many digital cameras can now shoot means that digital photography has to an extent simultaneously eliminated serendipity whilst exploiting it. By shooting endless variations of the same subject matter, many more than when we shot on film, we seek to leave nothing to chance and at the same time we seek to maximise the chance we have of capturing something approximating the decisive moment that we have preconceived. This reinforces the loss of anticipation.

Analogue photography required us to be more conscious of what we were after due to the limits of the size of a roll of film and the size of the gap between shooting and viewing; we had to anticipate we had 'the shot'. Much of the editing of analogue photography, for it is a practice of editing and anticipation, occurred during the process of shooting - what will I shoot?; what won't I shoot?; do I have enough film left?; what will it look like? - are all questions critical to analogue practice. Now we apparently shoot without limit,

though perhaps the limits of patience and digital memory apply. Thus we shoot copious variations of a scene and constantly review the images as we go, often deleting shots we think are no good. Though judgement is still exercised during this process, it is a judgement about coverage through volume. We no longer anticipate 'the shot', as we see what we shoot as we go.

The sheer volume of images that can now be generated is a daunting thing to deal with. As the days pass after we shoot, and we review the shots, we notice things we perhaps didn't see at the time and the judgement we thought we exercised can come back to bite us, for though it is judgement enacted it is also judgement deferred. This is perhaps why we now view our images not in a photo album, where 'the shot' took pride of place, but on the screen saver where our indecision can be accommodated with only a cursory cull of the worst images. We are indecisive in the photographic depiction of our preconceived decisive moment. With the loss of anticipation comes the lack of decision. In seeking to maximise the chance of getting 'the shot' by leaving little to chance we have come to the era of the indecisive moment.

This term is not new to photography. Its antecedent is obviously Cartier-Bresson's famous dictum 'the decisive moment'. Szarkowski writes of Elliot Erwitt's photography as being concerned with the indecisive moment for "they deal with the empty spaces between happenings – with the anti-climactic non-event."[13] Chapnick also challenges the hegemony of the decisive moment arguing that "there is more to the documentation of the human condition than the chronicling of dynamic events at decisive times, most of our lives are devoid of them… There is, however, a greater challenge for the photographer who uses the commonplace as his arena. This is where indecisive moments are found, in the daily experience of people who go through the repetitive routines that make up much of our experiences".[14] He goes on to argue that indecisive moments can be photographed decisively and herein lies the difference between Szarkowski and Chapnicks' use of the term and mine. I am talking about a photographer's indecision at the moment of taking photographs not the indecisive moments of the subjects being photographed, though these moments may intersect.

THE LOSS OF ANTICIPATION AND THE EXPLODING BANAL (866)

Affordable digital photography and computing (at least in developed nations) has seen a kind of commercial democratisation of both the medium and the means of its mass communication / distribution.[15] The deluge of photographic imagery, coupled with the loss of anticipation in this era of the indecisive moment is quite literally seeing a virtual world being created that is an idealised version of the world we inhabit. This explosion of the photographic depiction of the everyday, displayed in digital networked environments, is becoming increasingly banal[16] through sheer volume. Furthermore, because the photograph, in a Baudrilladian sense, has become our *de-facto* reality "the world has been reduced to the visible" and "when we accept the visible and treat is as if it were self-revealing, then we have entered the realm of the despotic banal".[17]

Photographs of the everyday can be traced back to late 19th century domestic photography.[18] During the height of classical modernist photography, Ansel Adams, Minor White, Edward Weston and the like, emphasised the qualities of dramatic content, lighting and composition, and a mastery of technique. In reaction to this photographers such as Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander developed a more spontaneous and less measured approach to photography during the 1950s and 60s, resembling the often hit and miss look of domestic photographers and focusing on the commonplace and everyday. In more recent times Ed Ruscha and Andreas Gursky have photographed the everyday but in quite different ways. Where to some extent Gursky has made the everyday monumental through his large scale photographs Ruscha has explored the beauty in its banality through thematic focus and visual repetition. The late 1990s saw an explosion of mimicry of this style of work, both in the artistic and commercial spheres, so much so that by the mid 2000s the novelty of the banal (oxymoronic though that may sound) had well and truly worn off and contrived banality was indistinguishable from the real thing.

Paralleling, influencing and influenced by this interest, have been the photographs of the everyday taken by non professional photographers. Photographs of home and family have always been an important device for depicting family as normal.[19] That their digital counterparts have now flooded the semio-sphere is attributable to the commercial democratisation of the relevant media. The difference between these images compared to their pre-digital equivalents is: firstly the extent to which less formal depictions, happy snaps, are publicly available; and secondly the extent to which they are, by virtue of being self-predictive, more consciously contrived and idealised projections of how we want our individual worlds to be seen and the extent to which they are still fundamentally banal. It seems our ideal world is pretty much an increasingly reductive version of the one we already inhabit.

That the self-predicted everyday worlds of 'non-professional' photographers are so banal doesn't simply indicate a lack of technical and conceptual photographic sophistication. It is indicative that we draw comfort from our everyday moments and objects, the things that commonly make up our day to day lives, so it is not surprising we should photograph them. Nor is it surprising we should photograph them realistically for despite the capacity to manipulate digital photographs, realism is still the dominant framework of these practices.[20] The banality of such photographs and the manner in which they are distributed is an important indicator of a desire to be socially networked, not just on a digital level, for the evidence is that the digital is used to enhance the actual.[21] The desire to be accepted into these networks results in us "performing normalcy".[22] This is underscored on a meta-social level by the manner in which such performances are also framed by media depictions of normalcy.[23] Like the mythical Orobus, the serpent that consumes itself tail first, we seem to be witnessing a cannibilisation of the everyday in that we are consuming an ever decreasing range of depictions of it at an ever increasing volume, thus reducing it to banality.

Hjorth argues that these trends do not necessarily result in homogeneity due to the importance of context as content.[24] By this she means that to see through the banality of this imagery, to get to its meaning, the context in which it is produced has to become part of the content accompanying it through the digital networks it is distributed within. This context takes the form of other textual and digital media. Though this may be the case, anecdotally at least, few of us have the patience to look beyond the image, to read the contextual, to understand the image as anything meaningful beyond the banal. On the basis of some prior experience, the level of differentiation occurs at a very specific content / context level and that generalisations of content typologies can be made.[25]

As the volume of these idealised images of the everyday increases, the semio-sphere becomes evermore crowded with them. As a consequence we have an ever increasing number of images circulating that depict an ever decreasing range of experiences of the everyday. Therefor our ability to find differentiated visual cues, beyond a reductive ideal, upon which to make further self predictions is rendered more impotent. If we lack the capacity to anticipate and resort instead to prediction through voluminous trial and error then we undermine our capacity to imagine things being other than they are, which is perhaps also why we are so locked into the banal. Like pornography, little is left to the imagination, everything is on show. In this regard we are suffering from a kind of pornography of the everyday; for how can we enact change if we no longer anticipate anything beyond the increasingly banal depictions of it?

THE DEATH OF PHOTOGRAPHY

For 'professional' photography the consequence of this is to potentially render it redundant. The extent to which the everyday is now photographed and displayed, almost indiscriminately, by so many people means that even the most incompetent photographer may produce something close to a 'professional' standard (whatever that may be) by sheer chance, or by trial and error. Photojournalism in particular looks a shaky profession as we see news outlets increasingly using camera phone images of various disasters. The challenges facing photography now parallel those that faced the design profession through the 1990s. With the availability of cheap design software and computer hardware the technical skills designers relied upon to demarcate their professional expertise became available to anyone for a modest outlay. Perhaps the challenge for photography is greater than this, such is the extent to which non-professionals have been engaged in its pre-digital practice, compared to other forms of creative practices, such as magazine design or painting, and the extent to which we see photographs as reality, a mistake not made with most other media.

Despite these digital shifts, it seems that commonsense photographic practice still conflates reality and photography and that many photographers are only interested in or capable of visualising fundamentally banal futures through it. Laudable and long overdue though it is, with the push towards the democratisation of creativity, as evidenced by user-based or co-design,

community based arts initiatives and wide access to media technologies, are we at risk of designing a future of ever increasing banality?

Though there will always be a place for well crafted 'realistic' depictions of things and events, given our commonsense conflation of photography and reality, we will increasingly become inured to them. This suggests that, creatively at least, realist photography is a moribund territory and that the increasing interest in abstract or alternative photographic practices is a direct consequence of this.[26] Though abstraction has a long history in photography, revisiting it might offer one way we can image or depict alternative futures of the world we wish to create. If we are to escape the endless reductivity and banality of the visualised everyday that we are currently awash with then perhaps we need to de-link 'reality' (whatever that might be) from photographic depictions of it and take our cues from the resultant imagery as to the kind of world we might project. This suggests a role still for the 'creative professional' in photography but one that requires a fundamental shift in the nature of their practice and their relation to their audience. It also suggests our sense of reality and the everyday is endlessly malleable and fundamentally artificial.

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[1] Szarkowski 1978, p.25.
[2] Szarkowski 1978, p.25.
[3] Ball and Smith 1992, p.16.
[4] Ball and Smith 1992, p.16.
[5] See also Kress & Van Leeuwin 1996, pp159-182; Sontag 1979.
[6] Harper 1998, p.35; Prosser 1998, p.105.
[7] Finkelstein 1991, p.191.
[8] See Baudrillard 1988, pp.172 & 185-186.
[9] Hjorth 2006, p.11.
[10] Finklestein 1991, pp.172-176.
[11] Koepnick 2004, pp.96.
[12] I must attribute credit the term self-prediction to Craig Bremner who used it on 26/8/07 in one of our many conversations about my research.
[13] Szarkowski 1972, p.5.
[14] Chapnick 1994, pp.236-237.
[15] Hjorth 2006, p.3.
[16] My use of the term everyday refers to the content of photographs; the depiction of everyday events or things whereas my use of the word banal refers to the extent to which such photographs are now hackneyed, trite or commonplace.
[17] Finkelstein 1991, pp.192-193.
[18] Gye 2007, pp.280-281.
[19] Hjorth 2006, p.7.
[20] Manovich 2003, p.248.
[21] Kyongwon Yoon 2003, pp.330-332; Hjorth & Kim 2005, p.54.
[22] Hjorth 2006, p.7.
[23] Lee 2005
[24] Hjorth 2006, pp. 7-8.
[25] For three years in the late 1990s, whilst at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), I ran a first year photography project that required students to photograph the things, places or people that were important to them. UWS had a highly diverse student population representing most of the waves of 20th century Australian immigration. The students were: mainly 18 – 20 years of age; often born overseas or first generation Australian; and roughly 60% female. Each year about 140 students completed this project. In class presentations of the work students talked about the meanings attached to these photographs. Though these varied a bit across the students the overwhelming impression was of the homogeneous nature of the things they photographed. Male students predominantly photographed their: cars; girlfriends and / or mates; electronic entertainment systems; sporting equipment / paraphernalia; and their bedrooms, many of which included posters of cars, bands and semi naked women. Female students predominantly photographed their: friends; framed photographs of boyfriends; family members; music collections; and their bedrooms, many of which included posters of bands and stuffed fluffy animals / toys. Though this is anecdotal only it indicated to myself and participating lecturers that general typologies were emerging so much so that a number of staff wanted to abandon the project because they were disappointed that nothing of the cultural diversity of the students lives were coming through and that all the photographs looked the same.
[26] See Jäger 2002; Jäger et. al., 2005.