Private Viewing

Ryan Barone

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
PRIVATE VIEWING

By

RYAN BARONE

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

May, 2009

Angela Kelly, Committee Chair
Date

Therese Mulligan, Ph.D., Committee Advisor
Date

Clarence B. Sheffield, Jr., Ph.D., Committee Advisor
Date
TABLE OF CONTENTS

iii. Acknowledgements
iv. Abstract
v. List of Figures
vi. List of Exhibited Works
01. A Nail in the Coffin: My Fleeting Life as a Photographer
02. Introduction
04. After Photoconceptualism, Re-reading the Snapshot
13. No Ideas But in Things: Returning Home
20. Distance
24. Closing Remarks
25. Selected Bibliography
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am eternally grateful to have worked with and learned from so many truly wonderful individuals. To my family and friends, committee members – Angela Kelly, Therese Mulligan, and Chip Sheffield, and colleagues: there aren’t enough words to say how thankful I am to each and every one of you.
PRIVATE VIEWING

By

RYAN BARONE

M.F.A., Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2009

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores my birthplace and hometown of Gloversville, New York, using loss as a primary theme. Issues related to memory and the photographic medium such as the trace and latent image are investigated through a range of interdisciplinary projects. The thesis also addresses the language of early Conceptualism, often utilizing systematic methodologies and employing common materials as a means of addressing amateur uses of the photographic image. Photographic production and circulation are interrogated on a consumer level, emphasizing vernacular optimism for the medium while illustrating their ultimate shortcomings.
LIST OF FIGURES

ILLUSTRATIONS

3.1  Dorothy (Eyes Closed), 2008 from Stump City, 2007 – 2009
3.2  The Problem of Describing Color (Variation #1), 2008
4.1  Don’t Forget Me, 2007 from Stump City, 2007 – 2009
4.2  Ed Ruscha, Twentysix Gasoline Stations, 1962

TABLES

5.1  Our Heights (1991 – 2003), 2009
LIST OF EXHIBITED WORKS

01. *Commissioned Family Portraits (Working From Memory)*, 2008
   Graphite on Paper – 3 Parts, 9 Pieces; Each 8.5 X 11 in.
   Drawings by Ken McKay

   Wall Drawing, Blue and Red Carpenter’s Chalk, Dimensions Variable

   Inkjet Prints; Each 4 x 6 in.
   
   *Crying Child*, 2007
   *Don’t Forget Me*, 2007
   *A Letter From My Brother*, 2008
   *Above Her*, 2008
   *Billboard*, 2008
   *Closed Due to Illnis*, 2008
   *Dorothy, Eyes Closed*, 2008
   *Gasoline Spill*, 2008
   *Painted Portrait*, 2008
   *Prayer Card*, 2008
   *Prescription Drug List*, 2008
   *Private Viewing*, 2008
   *Target*, 2008
   *Group Portrait*, 2009

   Television, DVD Player, 13 x 14 x 12 in.

05. *The History of Gloversville*, 1995
   Newspaper, 16 x 26 in.

   Inkjet Prints – Eight Parts; Each 4 x 6 in.

   Vintage Picture Postcards – Eight Parts, Dimensions Variable
I. A NAIL IN THE COFFIN: MY FLEETING LIFE AS A PHOTOGRAPHER

It was May 21 when I heard the news. After packing my camera, I found myself driving east from Rochester towards my hometown of Gloversville, New York. My grandmother had passed away; her funeral was in two days.

At home I bought an ordinary black suit, the kind for “marrying and burying”. My attire was undistinguishable from the crowd; I could leave the room and no one would know that I had ever been there. A private viewing was held on the evening prior to the funeral. It was an open casket memorial.

On the next morning I was allowed to photograph alone for an hour inside the funeral home, which was across the street from my former school. I loaded film standing in the foyer as music played from another room. On my left was my grandmother’s casket. Facing it, I found myself focusing on formal issues of color and composition as a means of emotionally guarding myself. The camera was a mediating force, a physical shield.

I began photographing Gloversville with a desire to investigate a familiar landscape and explore the growing rift between my roots and myself. After the funeral, the camera, I concluded, only served to heighten the distance.

Today, I find myself unwilling or simply unable to pick up a camera. For too long I had used it as a protective tool, a way of separating myself from my surroundings. I reduced people and places to pictorial elements. These days, I don’t care much for hiding.
II. INTRODUCTION

This thesis concerns itself with physical and emotional distance perceived between my home of Gloversville, New York, and myself. Works investigate issues of loss, remembrance, memory, and nostalgia within a contemporary context in order to examine their influence in the formation of cultural and personal identity, and their role with regard to the photographic medium. The culmination of these efforts is titled Private Viewing. Relating in a general sense to an intimate affair, and more pointedly to Christian funeral practices, this title is intended to situate the thesis within a somber context, a tone elsewhere evidenced in the work itself.

It is entirely possible, if not inevitable, that Private Viewing would have appeared in a drastically different form if not for the following inspiration: William Carlos Williams’s Paterson (1963) and George Perec’s Life: A User’s Manual (1978). Both have provided immeasurable influence on the thesis’ structure and tone. Furthermore, critical and art historical texts by Roland Barthes, Nancy Spector, and Jeff Wall have proved indispensable. Their presence throughout this process helped to establish a philosophical stance with regards to my individual art practice, to reiterate my passions, and to acknowledge that to which I am opposed. Artistically, I am above all indebted to Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Bas Jan Ader for their deeply human approach to issues of longing and the quotidian.

Employing a working method rooted theoretically and art historically in Conceptual and post-studio practices, each work exhibited exploits modest and commercially available materials such as drugstore photographs, commercial picture postcards, and carpenter’s chalk as a means of deskillling the art object. Furthermore, this material employment critically mirrors the socio-economic landscape of the subject matter itself. Materials are adopted not for their formal elegance or aesthetic qualities, but for their ability to convey a particular tone. Within each piece, viewers are allowed an interpretive entryway through the ubiquity of the objects in-and-of themselves.

Despite visual disparity, the work exhibited under the title Private Viewing share a distinct quality in the personal adoption of systematic methodologies. This approach is used to not only examine the process of production itself, but also as a method for exploring subjectivity through a critical lens. By introducing personal
or autobiographical elements into the cold structure of system-based art, I draw parallels between the mechanical properties of the photographic medium and its hindrance of unmediated experience.

Lastly, the issue of nostalgia continues to retain a negative connotation within contemporary art discourse. Often deemed kitsch, the nostalgic impulse has been largely suppressed within the plastic arts – evidence of the continual influence of modernism. Similarly, the emergence of postmodernism marginalized the subject of nostalgia in favor of critical theory and an uprooting or displacement of subject matter and its origins. Thematically, nostalgia often points towards a Romantic impulse; the works in Private Viewing do not deny this impulse. Rather, the location of work within contemporary visual language helps to calm the idealized aesthetic associated with Romanticism.

Regardless of its focus on contemporary life, Private Viewing nevertheless references Pliny the Elder’s tale of the Corinthian maiden. Often regarded as the mythic birth of painting and later photography, Pliny tells the story of Dibutade, who on the eve of war traced her lover’s silhouette onto a wall. By tracing his shadow, Dibutade was able to retain a fragment of her lover in the event of his death. Her tracing however only captured a shell, a fragile line functioning as a hollow reminder of what was.
III. AFTER PHOTOCONCEPTUALISM, RE-READING THE SNAPSHOT

In 1995 Jeff Wall published the essay *Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art*. Focused largely on the adoption of amateurism as conceptual strategy, Wall specifically examined instances of banality evidenced in photoconceptualist imagery such as that of California artist Ed Ruscha. The embracing of an amateur aesthetic coupled with what appeared to be a detached, cool, vantage point visible in significant works such as Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* signified, Wall argued, a decisive break from the fine art trajectory of photography:

Amateurism is a radical reductivist methodology insofar as it is the form of an impersonation. In photoconceptualism, photography posits its escape from the criteria of art-photography through the artist’s performance as a non-artist who, despite being a non-artist, is nevertheless compelled to make photographs. These photographs lose their status as representations before the eyes of their audience: they are “dull,” “boring,” and “insignificant.”

“*Marks of Indifference*” retroactively highlights the radical shift in photography that took place in the 1960s, articulating the transition from Late Modernist practices of the second quarter of the 20th century typified by practitioners such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, to the dematerialized Conceptualist works of Ruscha and Doulgas Huebler. Unlike their predecessors, this new breed of artists focused on the quotidian with deadpan humor and wit. Nearly fifty years later, Western culture appears to have become all the more enamored with the everyday – the “dull,” “boring,” and “insignificant”. Photographically, the adoption of what is now known as the “snapshot aesthetic” has not only been canonized in classic works of the late 20th century but has also served to blur the lines between definitions of high and low art and culture, and of professional and amateur practices.

The present climate, one characterized by increased accessibility to the internet and the rise of economically affordable digital imaging has further blurred these distinctions through a democratizing of the image both in its production and dissemination. Take Wall’s reading of Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, an artist book that coolly fulfills its title. Who, Wall rhetorically ponders, would be bothered to take such

---

insignificant snapshots? *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, as Ann Reynolds notes, caused great confusion amongst critics; this project as well as additional artist books from the same period, she argued, “failed to signify either as works of art or as documents of social or personal narratives. There didn’t seem to be enough to them.”

Finding critical emergence in the art movements of Minimalism and Conceptualism of the 1960s and 1970s, such systematic work operates in direct opposition to the modernist codes articulated by Greenbergian criticism. By denying the singular, the autonomous, and the authentic, systematic art provided a means for subverting the dominant modernist thought through their embeddings in predetermined formulae. As Boris Groys notes in his essay *The Mimesis of Thinking*, “this change allowed the artist to analyse and criticise the dominant regime of image production and distribution by his or her own artistic means for the first time.”

Systematic artwork acknowledges history and denies romantic notions of the individualized genius by incorporating a preexisting framework as a critical aspect. Through its open admission of dependence (to construct, to context), works created by systematic means declare themselves as decidedly collaborative in nature. Works by Sol LeWitt and others are not created in a vacuum, but adopt established frameworks as a means of guiding aesthetic and conceptual modes of reception. Aesthetic decisions do not primarily inform the work but exist in service of its presiding concept and its derivative system. Subsequently, conceptual concerns often guide the aesthetic towards a particular model, allowing visual intentions to be justified in service of the concept. This translates into a reductivist tendency; a paring of the essentials a la Sol Lewitt, and the sublimation of personal expression.

Throughout the late 1960s and 70s, discussions of these works often included words such as “detached” and “cool”. Conceptualism of the period had emerged from Minimalism and reductive tendencies evidenced in late modernist abstraction. As such, an injection of the personal into work of the time was lauded as laughable. Notable exceptions to this rule are Bas Jan Ader, Piero Manzoni, and Yves Klein who employed Conceptualist strategies with a distinct flair for the theatrical. His works are dominated either by slapstick humor or sheer earnestness – elements almost entirely absent from work of this period.

My personal reason for adopting the pastiche of the systematic within my art practice combines both theoretical and personal underpinnings. It is plausible that the general concern for calculated data and organizing could be attributed to the occupations my parents held throughout my childhood. My father worked

---

construction, and my mother as an administrative assistant at a phone company. I have utilized a formulated methodology as a means of investigating personal subject matter often too personalized and specific for a public audience to interpret on their own. These systems provide the opportunity to make some sense (however insignificant) out of the chaos of daily life. In short, the user is provided a given amount of distance, allowing one to breach intangible subject matter through fragmented and, potentially, more approachable means.

The distance afforded by the use of a systematic approach is further evident in the photographic medium itself. Unlike more direct forms of mark making such as drawing or painting, the camera provides not a direct, but an indirect process as an optical machine. Similar to the silkscreen, the camera can serve as a distancing mechanism between operator and subject. Lens-based photography’s only claim to directness, to direct recording, lies in the ability to capture a duration of exposure that has been largely eradicated by developments in photographic manipulation, and more particularly with the rise (and ubiquity) of digital image manipulation software.

Similarly, the four by six inch photographic print is relegated a certain ubiquity within contemporary culture. Its small scale connotes the “snapshot” – that, as historian Jonathan Greene writes, has been “bandied about as both praise and condemnation.” As vestiges of vernacular photography, these objects exist as collisions of both high and low culture. My use is meant to set the tone theoretically through these material readings. The four by six image may be read as cast off images or prized materials in the hands of a given viewer. As Roland Barthes notes with regard to the Winter Garden Photograph in his 1981 book Camera Lucida, by situating images within this context, content adopts a more democratic tenor. Photographic prints become objects at once fragile and disposable through the economic modesty of their production. Their inherit value, too, is ambiguous; it is unsure if these images belong in albums, frames, or tucked away in boxes.

Economically produced, the snapshot holds little material value. They are not made from marble or cast in bronze. Simply and without apology, they are pieces of paper. When stored haphazardly or handled with little care, they are rarely assigned any material aura. Conversely, the snapshot may exist as a precious object both with regards to its intimate size and the subject matter embodied within its surface in the minds of specific viewers, collectors, and historians. In Camera Lucida, Barthes details the emotional potency of one photograph

---

in particular. The Winter Garden Photograph is by the writer’s own admission publicly insignificant and personally revelatory. He recalls:

(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the “ordinary”; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your studium: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound.)

Barthes reveals images as ever-shifting entities, rather than fixed objects. This belief is not only relevant with regards to interpretation, but image production and dissemination as well.

In Gloversville, photographic labs embedded within the corporate structures of drug and department stores (e.g. Wal-Mart, Walgreens, and Rite Aid) are the only remaining venues for images to be printed. The lack of any such dedicated photographic lab, particularly prior to the widespread employment of the internet, not only greatly limited their quality, but also their potential scale. These images – both economically and physically modest (never larger than eight by ten inches) – have shaped my life considerably. Such printers are rarely maintained or kept to an ideal standard; as such, inconsistencies with regards to color balance and tonal range often occur, disrupting the supposed objectivity of the image.

---

Dorothy (Eyes Closed), 2008
Technical issues of color balance and auto-correcting have also become widely accessible among digital printing kiosks for personal use. Though intended as positive enhancements, their implementation corrupts the image, moving it further again from any notion of truth. If the photograph’s position as document is to be interrogated, its container (as printed matter, as digital representation) should accept at least a portion of the blame. Just as the camera’s operator composes a frame (both including and excluding), the printed photograph further dictates the reception of a given image through its substrate, print quality, and color balance.

During the winter of 2007, I had photographed a barren wall of my childhood bedroom, a deep maroon paint left over from my younger brother’s tenure. During the following fall, the same digital file was delivered to multiple photographic labs, with each image printed at four by six inches. The resulting suite of photographs fluctuates through tones of red, ranging from a tangerine orange to a deep burgundy. By utilizing the same digital file in each experiment I was able to provide a constant against which I could compare the variables (in this case each lab). The series of photographs, The Problem of Describing Color (2008), borrows its title from a Robert Hass poem of the same name. It explores the ways the printed image remains unfixed and permeable. In a similarly minded poem, The Problem of Describing Trees, Haas meditates on the difficulty, if not impossibility, of doing justice to a subject through description: “And the tree danced. No. / The tree capitalized. / No. There are limits to saying, / In language what the tree did.”6 With two lines, Hass exposes the fundamental flaws found in communication. The Problem with Describing Color works towards establishing a visual example of the permeability of images, and deals with another notoriously shaky issue – memory. By utilizing a deeply personal image, my intention was to challenge the notion of the photograph as document by illustrating the ways in which various printed incarnations of the same image are infinitely different.

---

The Problem of Describing Color, 2008
The vernacular photograph, as evidenced both by Barthes and *The Problem of Describing Color* is an ever-shifting, unfixed object that affects issues of memory and perception at a near universal level. The interrogation of these images – their production and dissemination – is often overlooked in art history, but many parallels can be found in the work of the *Pictures* generation⁷ and beyond by artists such as Sherrie Levine and Christopher Williams. In his essay *Too Drunk To Fuck: On The Anxiety of Photography*, Mark Wyse discusses the complex formation of photographic meaning, focusing specifically on the work of Williams. He notes:

In Williams’ work we shift from an understanding of photography as a testimonial witness to the world, to a realization that photographs are byproducts of undisclosed forces that alter and determine our relationship to them. In doing so, desire seems to be at the forefront, because desire determines that which is disclosed and that which is hidden. Williams is operating in a cultural time in which the author-witness has not only been dethroned, but the process itself no longer holds its implied objective veracity. For him, the only way to excavate truths is to look at how the process and ingredients of making an image impacts the world.⁸

Williams’ works, polished photographs of disparate, yet obliquely connected subject matter, characterize the anxiety and flexibility of the photographic image in contemporary artistic discourse. Such images, born after the 1970s *Pictures* generation, equipped with heightened awareness of the falsities of “objective” photography, exist in a moment of existential crisis. As such, artists such as Williams have created self-referential, or to borrow from theorist Michael Fried, “beholding” photographs. Practitioners such as Wall and Thomas Ruff accept the artificiality of the medium as a starting point, ever referencing the reliance on convention and context. Works of postmodernity and beyond recognize more than ever their reliance on pre-existing visual vocabularies and the plurality or non-originality of images.

This notion may be addressed in two ways: through what is physically seen or, as in the case of Christopher Williams’ work, meaning itself. Evidenced by titles such as *Kodak Three Point Reflection Guide, © 1968 Eastman Kodak Company, 1968. (Miko Laughing) Vancouver B.C., April 6, 2005*, Williams’ photographs dictate to viewers exactly what is missing, allowing them not to be misguided, leading them to think they understand the artist's intent. For Williams, intent is slippery and for an artist to expect an audience to “get” their work is naïve at best. One has, in light of Williams, only themselves – one’s subjective opinions, which

---

⁷ This nickname derives from the title of Douglas Crimp’s 1977 exhibition *Pictures* held at Metro Pictures in New York City.
have not been dictated but pointed to by the artist himself or herself. For photographers after \textit{Pictures}, this awareness of manipulation is implicit in the act of photographing itself.

Despite their referential qualities, photographs, as Barthes notes, are nevertheless influenced by what exists beyond their frame. External information locates visual content most often through the use of captioning, texts that often carry an authoritative demeanor. Filmmaker Errol Morris comments on the issues of truth, photography, and context as follows:

\begin{quote}
In discussing truth and photography, we are asking whether a caption or a belief - whether a statement about a photograph — is true or false about (the things depicted in) the photograph. A caption is like a statement. It trumpets the claim, “This is the Lusitania.” And when we wonder, “Is this a photograph of the Lusitania?” we are wondering whether the claim is true or false. The issue of the truth or falsity of a photograph is only meaningful with respect to statements about the photograph. Truth or falsity “adheres” not to the photograph itself but to the statements we make about a photograph. Depending on the statements, our answers change. All alone — shorn of context, without captions — a photograph is neither true nor false.\footnote{Morris, Errol. “Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire”, Zoom – Errol Morris Blog – NYTimes.com, July 10, 2007. http://morris.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/07/10/pictures-are-supposed-to-be-worth-a-thousand-words/}
\end{quote}

Notions of truth and photography, as Morris suggests, are decidedly complex. Today, images undoubtedly circulate in multiple contexts, often removed from their initial framework or even physical or digitally altered. As active producers and consumers of such images, we must understand the intricacies of their nature. It would be simple, but wholly inaccurate to consider objectivity and subjectivity as binary products without intersection. These words – objective and subjective, real and imaginary, true and false – are only “meaningful with respect to statements about the photograph”\footnote{Ibid.}, not the photograph itself. In this light, viewers must adopt a more proactive role; closely examining the dissemination and placement of imagery, for, as they shift, so too does their potential for meaning.
IV. NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS: RETURNING HOME

Subverting traditional notions of place and beliefs of the image as an utterly objective document, *Stump City*, an ongoing body of photographic work consisting of multiple four by six inch color prints, obliquely references my hometown and birthplace of Gloversville, New York. The collected images seek to blur boundaries of a singular place through the use of ambiguity and abstraction. There is no privileged photograph that contextualizes *Stump City*, and works are not titled in a way that would geographically situate them. Rather, individual photographs examine quotidian subject matter as a method of interrogating a familiar terrain. Ann Reynolds’s analysis of Robert Smithson’s filmic and photographic work proves significant in unfolding the underlying structure of the photographs that constitute *Stump City*: “All of Smithson’s photographs are technically stills – images of things arrested in time and space.” As Reynolds observes, Smithson’s photographic efforts, much like my own, “can be read only in terms of “stillness” and fragmentation […] it appears insufficient, out of place, and points elsewhere – to other images.”

The fragmenting or contextual shifting that unavoidably exists in each photograph forces the development of multiple relationships between singular images among the photographic body as a whole. Upon viewing, audiences are asked not only to consider images individually, but also to probe for meaning in subsequential information – titles, and of course, other images. This conscious interplay between photographs does not establish a master narrative but rather allows for a multi-faceted approach to the body as a whole, offering a rhizomatic series of interpretive strategies rather than a didactic, linear approach.

---

12 Ibid.
13 Philosopher Gilles Deleuze adopted this botanical term as a philosophical concept used to describe non-hierarchical theory which, in its very structure, denounced binary categorization.
Don’t Forget Me, 2007 from Stump City
This contextual game is quickly evidenced in work such as *Don’t Forget Me* from 2007. A hazy green fog dominates the composition, depicting a building obscured by night. Tethered to the right edge of the frame are two signs illuminated from the rear, each intimately juxtaposed. The sign on the left, black with white type, bears the words “don’t forget me.” The other is a photographic ad for Coca-Cola. Consider the functions of these signs. The words “don’t forget me” function, in their initial circumstance, as advertisement; a consumerist prompt to buy a particular soft drink. Let’s now position this image next to another, also from *Stump City*; a portrait of my grandmother from 2008 titled, *Dorothy, Eyes Closed*. Resulting from this juxtaposition, the consumer-based origins of the words “don’t forget me” shift meaning. This is not to say that its sign no longer fulfills its original function, only that with supplemental context comes an alteration of interpretive and linguistic structure. The sign’s position as advertisement dissipates (though never disappears) through this addition. As *Dorothy, Eyes Closed* portrays human fragility; its juxtaposition taints the materialist constructs found in *Don’t Forget Me*. This, of course, works both ways. Publicity images, as John Berger notes, “never speak of the present. Often they refer to the past and always they speak of the future.”

The decision to title the series *Stump City* rather than *Gloversville* is a deliberate strategy for displacing content from the present tense. Moreover, the employment of its present (actual) name restricts the exploration of critical issues – loss and longing – giving precedent to a more fact based documentary approach. There proved to be a distinct worry that social documentary practices would divert the focus from autobiography; relegating work under the title *Stump City* provided ample distance from such notions of fact. That is not to say, however, that *Stump City* as a title appeared from the ether. Upon its settlement at the end of the 19th century, the region now known as Gloversville had been coined “Stump City”, a name reflective of the deforestation resulting from its founding within the Leatherstocking region of New York during the emerging glove trade. With the appearance of a United States Post Office in 1828 came its more official name, Gloversville, marking the certified end of Stump City, as known today.

Interestingly, both Stump City and Gloversville share certain semiotic parallels. In their own ways, both names relate to notions of absence. Stump City both recalled and reminded its inhabitants of the omnipresent trace of their landscape’s prior incarnation. Likewise as a post-lumber industry, the glove reflects a physical trace – a literal casting of an absent body. These notions of absence factor prominently in the myth of

---


The photographic image for Barthes operates in a similar capacity.
Gloversville, the acknowledgement or repression greatly effecting cultural identity. Barbara McMartin, author of *The Glove Cities: How a People and Their Craft Built Two Cities* writes:

In May 1947 the *Saturday Evening Post* published an article by John Lear extolling the local glove industry. Titled “The Temperamental Wizards of Fulton County,” the piece seems to have forever frozen the way the county sees its past. It elevated a few myths to the stature of gospel, romanticized the industry, and hid its darkest secrets.¹⁵

Once the glove-making capital of the United States, Gloversville, today, is perhaps best characterized by the abandoned factories scattered across its landscape, bearing the trace of past industrialization like the rings of a tree. Old factories remain standing, their interiors preserved under layers of dust like an American Pompeii. The fixture of vacant architecture fuses disparate times, creating a hybrid city that at once recalls past achievements and present desolation.

*Stump City* as well as *The History of Gloversville* (1995), a childhood essay constructed entirely from word of mouth, enters into dialogue with Geoffrey Batchen’s declaration of history as “a matter of personal invention,”¹⁶ borrowing from both existing cultural knowledge and personal experience. Throughout my life I have returned to memories of Gloversville only to later realize that they are not mine, but part of a complex oral history that has skewed and redefined truth. While in Rochester, I began studying the town’s history and was exposed to its fascinating and deep culture. I learned of early factory workers and their demand for self-reliance, and of Samuel Goldwyn’s life as a glove salesman before moving to Hollywood. Some of this knowledge began to permeate the work itself – *The Best Years of Our Lives* (2009) for instance, employs the title frame from Goldwyn’s 1946 film as a meditation on nostalgia and loss through the use of the readymade object. Presented on a particularly dim television, *The Best Years of Our Lives* marks an intellectual and theoretical return to Gloversville, but neglects to negotiate with the physical place itself. The only way to come to terms with home was to go back again and again, to further blur personal distinctions between art and life.

The decision to return and, furthermore, to photograph each repeated visit was met after long and careful deliberation. I had high hopes of doing justice to this place, to render each recollection visible, though not necessarily as reality had presented it. I also recognized the sheer impossibility of “coming home again,” as

---


Thomas Wolfe so aptly wrote. It was imperative for me that each photograph be treated with care, and that visual description remained consistent with the tone of the region itself. As the poet William Carlos Williams noted with regards to *Paterson*, artistic content should reflect the emotional and physical tenor of its referent:

“So the objective became complex. It fascinated me, it instructed me besides. I had to think and write, I had to invent the means to get said, in the pattern of the terms I employed, what appeared as called for. And I had to think hard as to how I was going to end the poem. It wouldn't do to have a grand and soul satisfying conclusion because I didn't see any in my subject. Nor was I going to be confused or depressed or evangelical about it. It didn't belong to the subject. It would have been easy to make a great smash up with a 'beautiful' sunset at sea, or a flight of pigeons, love's end and the welter of man's fate.”

While Williams’s structuring of *Paterson* includes passages of lyrical mastery, more importantly it denies the poetic impulse to romanticize through a “beautiful sunset at sea, or a flight of pigeons.” On the contrary, *Paterson* adopts a tone aligned more with the banalities of New Jersey.

Within the field of visual art, figures such as Ruscha and Robert Smithson similarly explored quotidian content, each adopting the guise of a particular personal landscape. Ruscha’s *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* and other works of this period assume the cloak of the amateur as a means of production. For example, Ruscha, operating in a manner co-opted directly from real estate photographs of the 1960s was able to depict his subject matter truthfully – or at least fittingly – through the adoption of a familiar visual mode. Like Williams, Ruscha focuses on content directly and analytically. Extemporaneous information is disregarded and depictions are stripped of aesthetic flourishes, reduced to a visual style that mimics Williams’s poetics, a practice of plain speaking.

---

18 Ibid.
Ed Ruscha, from *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1962
Through an exploration of the commonplace exemplified by Williams’s description of the poet’s role – “Not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal”19 – Ruscha and likeminded Conceptualists interrogate not only a marginalized landscape but the complex process of artistic identity. Conceptualism shares this defining characteristic with Williams: mining or cloaking of various identities as a means of embedding content within a “localized” language. Adopting a localized pastiche questions not only issues of identity, but authenticity, truth, and originality.

Looking at the trajectory of art history, this questioning begins to make more sense. Relinquished of the burden of originality, artists after modernism faced a certain crisis of identity. The adoption of these varied identities reflects the struggle of the artist as both creators and viewers. Throughout Paterson, Williams intentionally disrupts poetic passages as a strategy of embedding a readerly response within the work itself. As Margaret Dickie observes, “Writing Paterson took time because Williams had to learn how to write and read a long poem.” She continues, “This relentless struggle is the source of Paterson, central to its composition.”20

If Stump City and Private Viewing’s related works reflects anything it is the relentless struggle of someone searching for his own voice well after Barthes and Michel Foucault declared the Death of the Author. Each snapshot reflects not only the physical and cultural landscape of home, but also an attempt to mend the fractured, if never fully developed relationship between it and myself. So, I relentlessly wander the streets of my childhood in hope of coming to an understanding as to why some have stayed and why I left. I hold my camera up to even the most insignificant of objects, looking for a sign.

V. DISTANCE

Throughout the thesis process, I became increasingly interested in not only my growing psychological
distance from Gloversville, but also my inability to fully dissociate myself from it. There are certain aspects of
our lives that we simply cannot change, as they are not choices, but realities that exist outside of ourselves; our
birthplace is one of those aspects. In October 2008 I began carrying a vintage picture postcard from Gloversville
in my pocket. Depicting an idealistic landscape, its caption read: Gloversville, N.Y. as seen from Herman Myers
Park. Pictured, the Adirondack Mountains crown the horizon line. Closer to the foreground are some factories.
As the postcard is transferred from pocket to pocket on a daily basis, it collects web-like fractures across the
yellowing card-stock. What had begun as an idealistic memento of my own hometown was physically
transformed, providing a visual representation of the temporality of space, and the effects of memory and time.
Each postcard (eight were completed at the time of Private Viewing) was carried for varying intervals of time –
days, weeks, or months. These time frames, memorials in and of themselves, represented the time away from
Gloversville, the wear and tear signaling the fracturing that occurs when one leaves home. This work is
reminiscent of On Kawara’s ongoing I am still alive, a series of telegrams and postcards that bear the titular
message. Where Kawara reminds the recipient (and thus, his viewer) of his continual heartbeat, the postcards
that comprise Untitled (Reminders) (2008) prompt myself to be cognizant of my ever-present roots.

This notion of the prompt has a strong lineage in the conceptually grounded strategies of artists such as
Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner. Much like the photograph, the prompt functions as a
starting point or a map to guide the viewer; it provides observations from which the viewer may reconstruct
their own narrative. Prompts serve to ignite the reader’s imagination, and to provide a launching board for
interpretation. Prompt, or systematic art as described earlier, place the viewer in a more active role by
highlighting notions of subjectivity.

I have on occasion utilized collaboration as a means of further highlighting and problematizing the
purported stability of such notions of subjectivity. In the case of Private Viewing, only one exhibited work
Commissioned Family Portraits (Working From Memory) (2008), displays a mutually knowledgeable
collaboration. A project in which I commissioned a series of portraits depicting each member of my own family
from memory, Commissioned Family Portraits (Working From Memory) (2008) provides an example of the
absent sitter, and the difficulties of recollection and translation. With steeped interest in descriptive systems and faltered memory, I chose to approach an all-too-common subject matter: my immediate family. A process most similar to that used by sketch artists in police offices creates the commissioned drawings, supplying the draftsman with photographic source material, an attempt was made to describe each member of my immediate family through verbal recollection. The drawings, resulting from my descriptions to Rochester artist Ken McKay, were, not at all accurate. Initially devastated by my poor descriptive skills, notably with regards to such familiar subject matter, I returned to this collaboration for two more sets of drawings. Each subsequent version built upon the framework of the past, revising upon past remembrance. In his novel *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth writes,

> And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of other people...? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. 21

I had naïve hopes of as Roth says, “getting them right”. It never happened. *Commissioned Family Portraits (Working From Memory)* recalls not only the persuasive claims of Martha Rosler’s *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1973–74) but again, Robert Hass’ *The Problem of Describing Color*. The portraits function as consciously unfixed representations of familiar subjects while simultaneously expressing the desire for stability in an increasingly unstable world.

Much like the tale of Dibutade, the Corinthian maiden who traced her lover’s silhouette on the eve of war, the photographic medium still serves for many as a means of fixing a shadow, however naïve. Increasingly influenced and fascinated by the ready-made and notions of the everyday, I sought out materials that were familiar to my home. *Our Heights (1991-2003)*, 2009, a wall drawing consisting of multiple horizontal lines in blue and red carpenter’s chalk, was inspired – in fact, transcribed from markings discovered in my childhood home. The use of carpenter's chalk functions as both homage to my father, a former carpenter, and an allusion to impermanence. With its ability to be washed off, the chalk operates both literally and metaphorically. *Our Heights (1991-2003)* serves not only as a meditation on the photographic trace, but serves as a vaguely Cubist

portrait of two figures – my younger brother and me. The work does not depict fixed portraits, but provides the viewer a glimpse into multiple time periods, a characteristic impossible to approach with the singular photograph.
32 2/8"    KRIS, NOVEMBER 24, 1991
33 7/8"    KRIS, MARCH 10, 1992
41 2/8"    KRIS, OCTOBER 10, 1994
41 4/8"    RYAN, JANUARY 30, 1991
42 0/8"    RYAN, APRIL 14, 1991
42 4/8"    RYAN, MAY 26, 1991
43 6/8"    RYAN, JUNE 14, 1991
44 0/8"    RYAN, AUGUST 14, 1991
44 1/8"    RYAN, MARCH 10, 1992
44 2/8"    RYAN, SEPTEMBER 29, 1992
46 0/8"    KRIS, APRIL, 1996
47 2/8"    RYAN, OCTOBER 4, 1992
47 7/8"    KRIS, DECEMBER, 1996
48 0/8"    RYAN, MARCH 15, 1993
49 4/8"    KRIS, APRIL 1997
51 4/8"    KRIS, OCTOBER, 1998
53 4/8"    KRIS, APRIL, 1999
55 0/8"    KRIS, DECEMBER, 1999
55 2/8"    RYAN, APRIL, 1996
57 4/8"    KRIS, NOVEMBER, 2000
57 4/8"    RYAN, DECEMBER, 1996
60 0/8"    RYAN, JULY, 1998
65 0/8"    RYAN, OCTOBER, 1999
67 6/8"    KRIS, MAY, 2003
68 4/8"    RYAN, NOVEMBER, 2000

*Our Heights (1991–2003), 2009*
Measurements, from floor, for a wall drawing in blue and red carpenter's chalk.
VI. CLOSING REMARKS

Living within an over-saturated, image-driven society, I am, as you are, more reliant on “reading” images than ever before. In a world where the written word has lost its bearings as a primary method for communication, it has become much more imperative that we look at the way that images are disseminated with a heightened level of scrutiny.

Through the investigation of personally and culturally pertinent material, I have taken the opportunity to explore theoretical and medium oriented issues regarding perception, memory, and the formation of identity itself. Private Viewing, despite the noblest of efforts, has thankfully only begun to scratch the surface. What I would like to emphasize prior to conclusion is that, despite its appearance as a capstone work, a critical step towards an academic close, it is truly one investigation of what I hope to be a lifelong pursuit.

With each day I become more aware that I cannot stop time, and that I don’t have the power to keep those whom I love from eventually leaving. Yet there exists an honest desire to hold tight, to grasp at what is passing before my eyes on a daily basis. I find myself once again recalling the tale of Dibutade. Centuries later, I see myself with the same desires: continually tracing and recording, hoping just once the shadow will stay.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


