

## **Notes for presentation and discussion: non-topographical mappings of resonant spaces using digital photography – a case study.**

By Michael Bowdidge, practice-based MPhil/PhD student, Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom.

Before I begin I would just like to say that this paper has been written very much in the spirit of its context of presentation, and as such does not claim to be an exhaustive account of my practice. In fact, due to the very nature of this subject this would be an impossible task. So, rather than attempt such a feat I would like to present to you instead the beginnings of some ideas, with the hope that they can be examined, explored and developed through discussion.

[http://www.artnet.de/artwork/423802436/\\_Lucas\\_Samaras\\_Photofictions\\_Orchid\\_44.html](http://www.artnet.de/artwork/423802436/_Lucas_Samaras_Photofictions_Orchid_44.html)

It has been posited by the art historian and curator Alison Green, whilst reviewing the recent work of Lucas Samaras (Art Monthly, May 2004, p 32-33) that much contemporary photography “uses digital manipulation to construct fictive scenes”. She also suggests that much of this work “flows from a tradition of reportage and documentary” but then reminds us that “Proust thought that photography’s strength was that it could intentionally distort reality”. Green provisionally positions Samaras’ recent work within a Proustian “alternative tradition” in which he explores a notion of photography where “there is no photographic truth... only stories which slip rapidly into impossible dream-worlds”.

As an artist who currently uses digital photography and image manipulation (amongst other media) there is much that I find seductive about this “alternative tradition”, in that it seems to articulate something quite fundamental about the ways in which I use these technologies. However, a closer examination of my own practice in this light has yielded many surprising insights, and allowed me to site it much more accurately in relation to these two seemingly opposing traditions. I would like to expand on these matters a little, with the hope of gaining a still deeper understanding of them through their presentation.

If one considers Brassai’s (1997) seminal text on Proust and photography, further light can be shed on this notion of an “alternative tradition”. Brassai suggests that perhaps what Proust valued in photography, and what is most clearly evinced by his writing, is that he saw the camera as a way of drawing out hidden aspects of reality, all of which were “equally valid and legitimate” (p 128). This Proustian verbal relativism, this continuous shifting of viewpoint, which Brassai clearly shows has its roots in the advances in photographic technique which took place during Proust’s youth, has been connected by many critics (such as Curtius, Blanche and Vettard, see Brassai, p 125) with Einstein’s contemporaneous discovery of relativity.

<http://www.artnet.com/artwork/424031837/alfred-stieglitz-equivalent.html>

However, there is more to this idea of an alternative tradition than meets the eye. Alison Green suggests (in a recent email exchange) that it has its roots in the dialogue between pictorialism and documentary ways of

working which occurred at the time of Hine and Stieglitz, as described by Trachtenberg (1989). Stieglitz argued that “pictures made by photography were intrinsically no different from any other” (p172) and that the work of the pictorialists deserved to be treated as art, as their practice attempted to transcend the mechanistic nature of the camera.

Trachtenberg goes on to argue that “a polarized language entered photography criticism” (p 174) at this point, in which art was pitted against document and factual reporting against personal expression, largely as a result of Stieglitz’s personal influence. In Trachtenberg’s opinion, which I am inclined to agree with, the dualities set up by Stieglitz were a “reductive simplification” (p 176) of the complex issues which had arisen in and around photography at that point and have more to do with “a way of looking at photographs than [with] qualities intrinsic to them” (p 176).

[http://www.artnet.de/ag/fineartdetail.asp?cid=83036&wid=424381128&page=1&group=&max\\_tn\\_page=](http://www.artnet.de/ag/fineartdetail.asp?cid=83036&wid=424381128&page=1&group=&max_tn_page=)

This may be the case, but once such ideations or genres are loosed into the world they have a tendency, in my opinion, to become self-reinforcing, as they have some functionality as cultural shorthand and are often used by practitioners to either reinforce or oppositionally define their own identities. James A Cotter (1999) describes Duane Michals (in a *Photo Insider* feature) as doing exactly this when he rejects “the conventions of such giants as Ansel Adams and Robert Frank” early in his career in order to pursue his own narrative vision.

Nevertheless, perhaps because of its inherent multiplicity, practice often fails to fit neatly inside such boxes, and implicitly resists attempts at simplistic classification. I suspect that this dialogue between the documentary and pictorial modes may simply be an attenuated ‘playing out’ of what Trachtenberg terms “the dialectic of strange and familiar, of astonishment mingling with recognition” (p 4) which, in his opinion, characterized much of photography’s initial reception as a medium.

If this is the case, then it is possible that this dialogue, which can also be characterized as being between the known and the unknown, is still being enacted in photography’s various genres, and is fractally present both within them and as a meta-discourse between them, as well as in the work of individual practitioners.

[http://www.albrightknox.org/acquisitions/acq\\_2002/di\\_Corcia.html](http://www.albrightknox.org/acquisitions/acq_2002/di_Corcia.html)

In the previously mentioned email, Alison Green noted that much of current photographic practice (she mentions Crewdland, di Corcia and Kurland amongst others) seems to be heavily biased towards what she terms “the ‘directorial mode’ or the ‘documentary aesthetic’ in photography” and asks “what is the proscription against the manipulation of the photograph?”

This is a complex question and one worthy of much deeper consideration than I have time for here, but all of these practitioners have achieved a level of critical recognition which exceeds that of photographers such as Duane Michals. The work of the latter explores the fantastic through the use of montage and manipulation, so

perhaps there is some truth in this position, but I suspect that that this proscription is at its strongest in artistic, critical and academic circles.

<http://digitalart.org/>

That such an injunction exists seems likely, but there are a great many people who do not heed it. The internet is awash with manipulated photographs, often created in the vernacular of the fantastic by thousands of subscribers of websites such as digitalart.org. These images often mix photographic sources with digital effects to produce images which are often stunning in their technical proficiency, if at times their subject matter seems a little hackneyed. The influence of surrealism is clearly seen in many of these images and whilst most of these artists may not earn a living from their work, there can be no doubt as to the commitment and enthusiasm of these communities.

To talk about the complex relationship between 'high' and 'low' photographic art falls outside the scope of this paper, as the ultimately irreducible multiplicity of artistic practice always problematises such dualities, especially when artists destabilize and re-invent the genre to which they have been assigned. The work of Crewdson (for example) subverts the expectations of 'the documentary aesthetic' to good effect and as such is a far from straight-forward reconfiguration of a certain type of artistic practice.

<http://www.guggenheim.org/artscurriculum/downloads/jpg/crewdson.jpg>

Crewdson himself cites Hopper, Frank, Eggleston and Spielberg as influences and his work has been described by journalist Richard McClure (2003) as 'Faux Realism'. In an interview with Antonio Lopez (2001) the artist describes himself as "wanting to create a complete world" and being "drawn to [the accessibility of] photography" because he is "interested in drawing the viewer in with that accessibility", in order to then "complicate that relationship". Clearly this is a complex and interesting practice which questions many of our assumptions about genre.

In 'The Return of The Real', Hal Foster examines a similar revisiting of certain methods of avant-garde artistic practice by artists in the 1950's and 60's and suggests that "even as the avant-garde recedes into the past, it returns from the future, repositioned by innovative art in the present" (Introduction, p x). Such a process may also be at work here.

What does seem certain is that photography is becoming increasingly fluid and difficult to define, and seems at all levels to be questioning its role, purpose and scope both consciously and unconsciously. Perhaps this is because the medium is finally coming of age. We are habituated to it, we are mediated by it but I suspect that we are no longer fascinated by it in the way that we once were, as we have new toys now.

In the art world, debates hinge on the significance of the ethnographic turn and newer media have supplanted photography's previous role as the arriviste medium that struggles to be accepted as 'art', while in western

culture as a whole we are seduced on a daily basis by the phantasms of technological innovation (of which digital imaging is a part, it must be admitted) and the mass media. If this is the case, then perhaps photography is now free to rediscover itself outside of the constricting dualities which have been imposed on it since its inception.

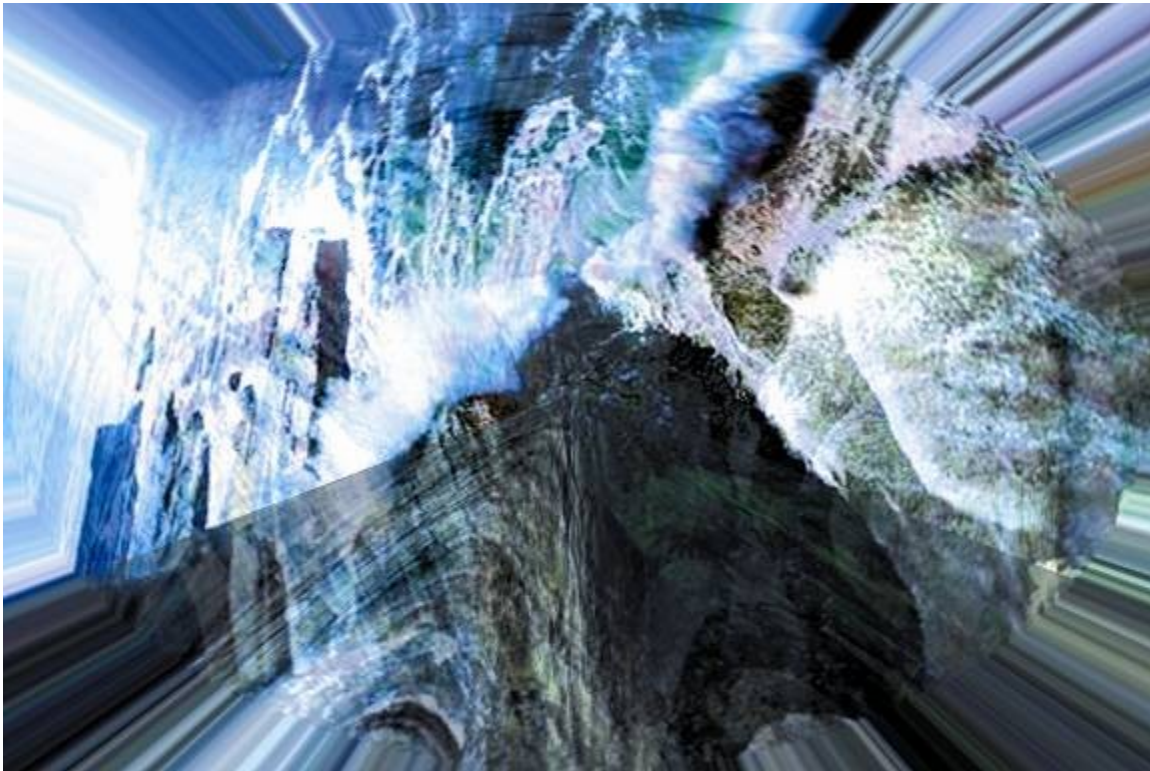


Bowdidge, Michael (1988) *Fragments*. Installation with 2 x 35mm slide projectors and stereo soundtrack.

I would now like to say a little about my own photographic practice and how I feel that it relates to the context which I outlined previously.

I studied photography for a year or so at school, but did not return to it as an artistic medium until the second year of my undergraduate degree. At that time my practice was relatively undefined and I was still in the process of identifying my concerns and interests as an artist, so I was 'following my nose' and trying out different media to see 'what would happen'.

At one point I flirted briefly with shooting colour slide film and superimposing the resulting images over each other using 2 slide projectors, and then re-shooting the transpositions. Although the results were interesting I found the process time-consuming and overly dependent on equipment which I would not have access to when I left college, and so I moved on.



Bowdidge, Michael (2001) *060901*. 4 colour inkjet print on paper.

Little did I know that I would eventually return to making images in a similar way later in my career, indeed I had been using digital technology for several years before I recollected my earlier 'analogue' experiments at college. As an artist I often seem to take 'the scenic route', a seemingly Wittgensteinian journey in which "the same or almost the same points [are] always being approached afresh from different directions" (*Philosophical Investigations*, Preface, page un-numbered).

I started working with computers about 8 years ago, as a change of job lead to my initiation into the world of the Mac. I soon became fascinated by the artistic possibilities of Photoshop, although the first couple of years were spent gaining some mastery over the program, so that I could get it to do what I wanted it to, rather than the other way around.





Bowdidge, Michael (2002) *Underwood* (2002). 6 colour inkjet print on paper.

At first I worked with 'found' files, though their provenance was not important to me as I was filtering and distorting anything that I could get my hands on at that point. Eventually I brought a cheap digital camera and began to apply the techniques which I had learnt to my own photographs. One of the first things that I noticed was the way in which new spaces often appeared in the finished images and I suspected that this was a result of the strategies that I had developed for using certain Photoshop filters.

My work still begins with an intuitive 'visual sampling' of the various resonant locations in which I find myself (both literally and in a metaphorical sense). This is often performed as quickly as possible, as it seems to me that the process of moving through the space and recording it should be as spontaneous and intuitive as the later processing of the images. I also suspect that this process may contain a fractal echo of the Wittgensteinian 'journey' mentioned earlier.



Bowdidge, Michael (2004). *Musicity I*. 6 colour inkjet print on paper.

Each print originates from an intertwining of three digital photographs (in order to perform a visual 'triangulation' of the given space), which are combinatorially selected from a much larger group, and then merged, rotated and sometimes cropped. Finally, they are optimised and printed on a large format 6 colour inkjet printer.

During the digital manipulation the original identity of the space becomes obscured and an improvised compositional structure begins to emerge. The process of triangulation (as used mathematically or geographically) is normally associated with an attempt to ascertain the position of a given object or point more accurately. However in this particular usage the superimposition of the images creates a surfeit of information, causing a mutual pictorial collapsing.

Differences in the distance and angle from which each photograph was taken also create mutually reinforcing ambiguities of scale when they are brought together. This further amplifies the sense of dislocation created by the translucent digital compositing of the images. As a result of this process multiple, contradictory view-points become apparent, creating a non-topographical mapping of the original space which is both coherent and fragmented, inviting and yet simultaneously denying comprehension.



Bowdidge, Michael (2005) *Matilda 10*.  
4 colour inkjet print on paper.



Bowdidge, Michael (2005) *Matildas* [installation shot]  
*Urban Invasion, Matilda, Sheffield*.

In addition, much of this recent work is intended to be exhibited in the space from which it was originally created (although this does not always prove to be possible). When it does happen, this allows the image to make reflexive references to its physical and cultural context, creating explicit synergies between the object and its setting. In short, the emergence of new perceptions and spaces can occur both within and around an artwork if consideration is given to the way in which it relates to its context, thus creating an environment which exists somewhere between the traditional gallery setting and installation.

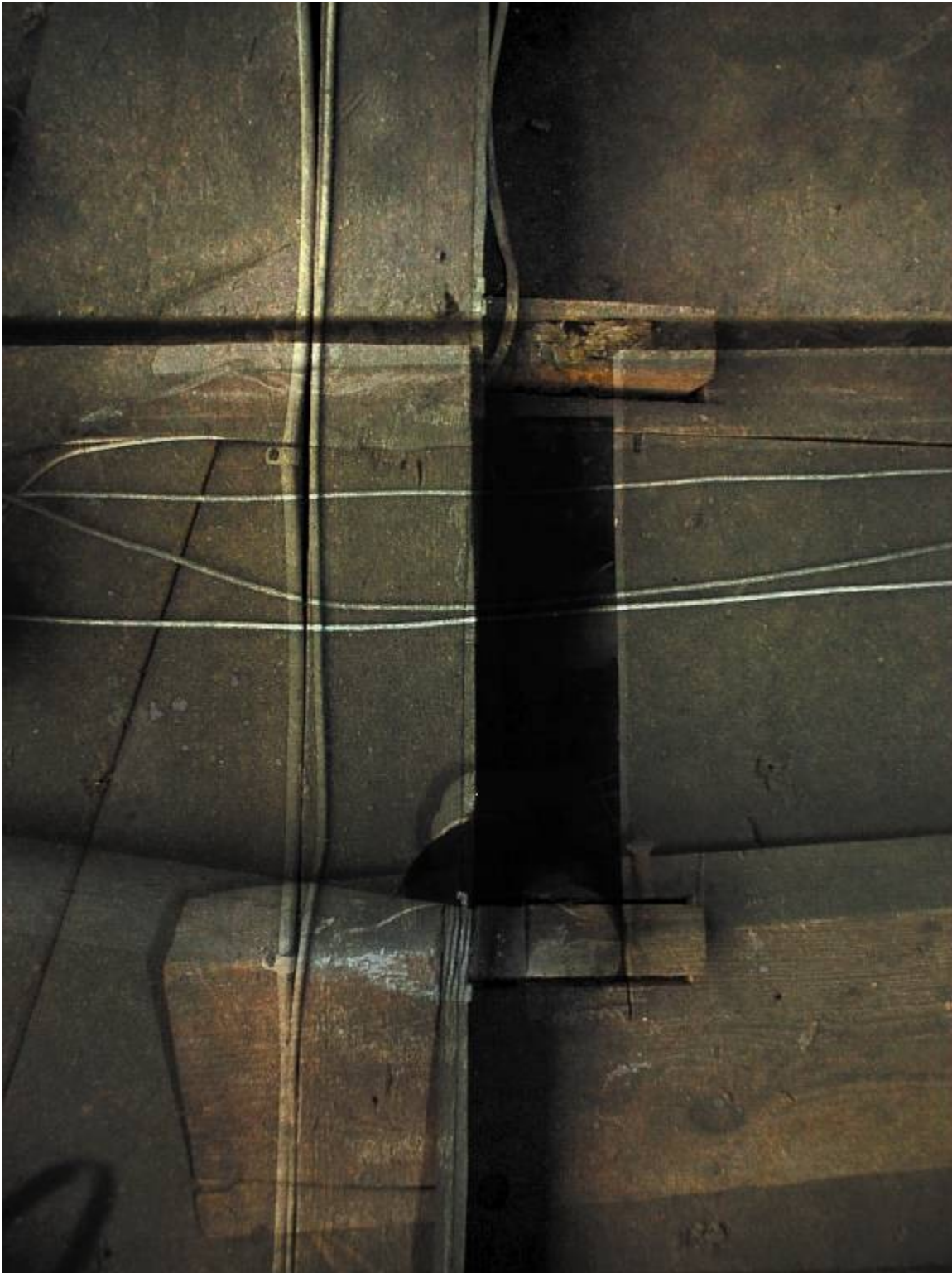
The strategies embodied in this form of practice have evolved through an intuitive process of creative experimentation whose roots lie very much within the sphere of tacit artistic knowledge. However, one of the things that commencing my PhD has taught me is that practice can be enriched through theoretical contextualisation.

I have always been interested in the mundane, the decaying, the disused and the forgotten, and I am now inclined to believe that there is something almost Augustinian in the fetishisation of this subject matter as I suspect that my intention is, to quote Danto (1981), to show that 'the least... perhaps especially the least... is



luminous in holy grace' (Preface, vi). Indeed, it strikes me now that a literal quality of luminosity is perhaps one of the most important attributes that I seek to embody in these digital images.

On reflection, there seems to be something paradoxical at the heart of this work, in that it seeks to clarify, to re-evaluate its subject matter through a process of fragmentation and deconstruction, moving away from the world, in order to somehow get closer to it. Perhaps in some way my practice can be seen as a search for the essence of space which is analogous to Wittgenstein's (1953) attempt to understand the 'essence of language' (p 43), in that, like him, I feel as if I am dealing with "something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement" (p 43).



Bowdidge, Michael (2004) *Closer (Large)*. 6 colour inkjet print on paper.

This brings us back to the 'alternative' tradition. It seems to me that these images are Proustian in a sense, as they seek out hidden aspects of reality and draw them to the attention of the viewer. There is also something fantastic about the triangulations, as the synergies between the superimposed files conspire to

create a sense of drama and movement that seems to suggest a sense of possibility, a sense that the world is amenable to re-imagining and reconfiguration.

I have suspected for some time that the results of this process of 'triangulation' are in some way analogous to mathematical projections of geometric shapes from theoretical higher dimensionalities, which can cast a three dimensional 'shadow', much as a three dimensional object creates a two dimensional shadow in reality, and it was the consideration of this idea that suggested the title of this paper. There is also a suggestion that these mappings are selective and subjective (as perhaps all maps are in some way), and as such may sit in relation to the 'documentary' mode in much the same way as the later work of Wittgenstein sits in relation to his earlier writings.

There is a great deal more that I could say about this subject and there always will be, but I am constantly reminded by the images behind me that the relationship between text and image remains problematic at best. Ultimately there is only so much that can be said, and the rest, to let Wittgenstein (1922) have the last word, "we must pass over in silence" (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7, p 151).

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## **Supplementary Material**

<http://www.michaelbowdidge.com/>

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