

Alexandra Moschovi talks to Julian Stallabrass about *The Anatomy of Photography*

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AM: In your recent project *The Anatomy of Photography*, you combine a suite of quite disparate, both in terms of content and aesthetics, photographs with an idiosyncratic memoir that brings together dreams, incidents, memories relating to the act of photographing rather than the making of specific pictures. Although this project was perceived, as you mentioned, in book format, in which pictures and narrative may closely interact or be looked at independently, your merging of factuality with fiction, of projected images with voice-over, seems to be in purpose non-linear, to intentionally hint at the space and time that was left out of a given photograph's frame and, at the same time, to subvert its interpretation, and thus question the interaction of these two modes of narrative. How do you delineate the rapport between the two and in what ways does your work relate to or depart from earlier practices that combined the photograph as index and the written word?

JS: The relation between words and photographs is as old as photography, and that dumbly contingent medium has rarely been able to do without them. There are some practices that have been very important to me, and not only those that literally combine words and photographs. Benjamin's imagistic texts (for instance his 'Berlin Childhood'), which creates snapshot memories, and dwells on their past and future significance; he took, as I try to, from Proust, for whom photography was so significant, and whose quasi-narrative account of a life I took as a model (to which I can never hope to live up to, naturally). In W.G. Sebald, more recently, I found a strangely familiar recognition, particularly in *Austerlitz*, of the latent image that can lie behind a life, particularly of one whose identity is in question. There is a tension in the interchange between photographs and text: the images are a guarantee of presence in a particular time and space; the text does not guarantee anything, and leads the viewer to ask: who was there, and why photograph?

AM: Among specifically politically informed and more diaristic in conception photographs, there are pictures that explicitly mimic a signature style or comment upon different moments in photographic modernism (one may easily identify traces of Strand's emphasis on geometry and abstraction, Evan's fascination with mass culture and signs, Magnum's humanist aesthetics, etc), categorised in different sections. Could the title be perceived indeed as tautological? Given that the photographs were taken (or made?) over a fairly long period of time, was this analytical interest in the formation of photography's art history something that defined your practice right from the start?

JS: There is a double development here: of the track of a young photographer through various enthusiasms, for Evans, Strand, Atget, Cartier-Bresson and others, and into a realisation that such work was history; and of a developing consciousness of the history of photography as a whole, and of possible places that someone could try to occupy within it. Both the sequence of photographs and the text touch on that development. Put more simply, a young man starts out by trying to remake Walker Evans in colour; a

less idealistic one may continue to do so, among other things, but knows that they have to be used in more elaborate ways, and with a politics that the later Evans, at any rate, would have rejected.

AM: You chose to avoid photography's, nowadays typified, museological mise-en-scène, that is, to present the photographs as art objects, matted, glazed, and framed. Instead, you dematerialised your photographs by projecting them. Is this simply a decision dictated by the specifics of the project or a statement against the fetishisation of photographs, and art's commodification by extension? Can it be conceptually associated with other screen-based practices of display favoured by new media practitioners?

JS: It's dictated by lack of funds! But then, once it was done, it felt like being given the most extraordinary gift, to make this sequence of a hundred or so photographs, which can be displayed quite large, yet can be carried on a CD, or even emailed. I like not making objects, not having to worry about their sale, preservation, storage, insurance... And that anyone can have this piece if they want it. I would like to make it available on the web. In that sense, it is connected with much freely available digital art, and the ethos that supports it, and it supports.

The disadvantage of this display, though, is that unlike books, to which I remain committed, I impose my time on the viewer in the sequence and the reading of the text. I think this can be played with, though, and I would like to develop the work by having a tighter integration of word and image, and altering the rhythm of the picture sequence. Perhaps some very fast sections can emulate and comment upon the torrent of imagery to which so many people are exposed.

AM: Before it entered the sacred temple of the modern art museum and consecrated as art, photography was considered a potentially oppositional medium, the 'Picture' that could not be integrated into the 'Regime', as conceptualists and politically engaged artists and photographers in the 1970s maintained. Where do you think photography may stand today? Has it been entirely assimilated by the institution 'art'—in Peter Bürger's definition of the term—and lost its political impulse?

JS: The medium is too big to talk about quickly, like this. Obviously there are signal examples of rather conservative, high art photographers, who try to emulate aspects of painting, and make grand works that sell for high prices. It doesn't necessarily mean that they cannot say anything critical, even in pictures like that. Then again, it is easy to think of photographers who have one foot in the museum and concerns elsewhere who are able to make very interesting and critical work (think of the renewed fame of Allan Sekula, which is nothing to do with the museum vogue for photography, and everything to do with a revival of radical politics in art). The medium continues to work across many places and sites, in the mass media, in the art world, on the Web: to demand of it a particular, singular fate is to shrink it excessively.