

The Realism project and the problem of identity

“The moment of identification, unlike that of illumination, does not distinguish photography from other visual images, or even from encounters in the world at large. At work in any personal exchange, identification plays an integral role in the formation of groups. Moreover, it is not just identification *of* a subject that is at stake but, often, identification *with* it. The personal and social position through which the beholder is looking can bring what she or he sees into focus, or distort it beyond recognition.”¹

Realism in art is the attempt to make a representation of a contemporary subject that is an interpretation, but by no means a facsimile. The Realism movement had its origins in 1850s Europe, where artists rejected the emotive and dramatic tendencies of the Romantic movement in favour of a more realistic and ethical portrayal of society. The plight of the working poor and the socio-economic impacts that industrialisation was having upon society at large, was the subject of particular interest for the Realists. A humanist movement, the primary concern of Realism was a search for truth. While being an opportunity to demonstrate imaginative virtuosity, Realism reveals the inherent subjective limits of the artist, thereby distinguishing it from Naturalism, (literal representation), and Photorealism, which engage on the separate criteria of pure objectivity and/or the formalist abstract mode of plotting an image as a field of visual content. “Photorealism involved transcription of a more photographic perspective, and [was] based on the conscious projection of special volumes onto a flat surface as though seen from a monocular lens.”² An example of this genre can be found in Chuck Close’s Grid Portraits, namely *Bob* 1970, located at the NGA. “It is a form of painting that is inherently representational and yet deals with a reductive abstraction through its scrupulous mimetic copying.”³ Realism, on the other hand seeks to alert us to the actuality of our present circumstance, a proposition of encountering a lived reality. The subject, in Realism, is discovered, directed and framed by the artist, who seeks to engage with the spectator/viewer in a way that is identifiable and non-theatrical. In contemporary visual art Realism can be painting, drawing, photography and cinema or any visual medium that allows the duality of representation and critical commentary. As articulated by Hariman and Lucaites, “realism is fabricated, signified, suggested rather than being a direct reproduction of reality. What is equally important, however is that images are no less useful or the virtual world less important for relying on rhetorical artistry.”⁴

¹ Olin, Margaret. “Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’s ‘Mistaken’ Identity.” in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida*, edited by Geoffrey Batchen, (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2009) 75.

² Ansted, Darryn. *The artwork of Gerhard Richter: painting, critical theory and cultural transformation*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2017) 86.

³ Ansted, Richter, 86.

⁴ Hariman, Robert, Lucaites, John Louis. *The Public image: photography and civil spectatorship*, (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016) 21.

Representation of a subject is mediated by the physical, situational and material constraints of the representation process, but also by the veritable nature of subjectivity itself. It is impossible for an artist to demonstrate pure objectivity, the subjective position always gets in the way, and although subject and object appear binary, both terms are mediated. “Subjectivity is not just a ‘subtractible addendum to objectivity’, as if objectivity were ‘the pure state that would obtain by eliminating all subjects’.”⁵ The project of Realism, as an art movement, must operate within the terms of aesthetic production. While tackling issues of subjective representation, it continues to attempt delivery of an informative or political agenda which proposes a truth which is considered, ethical and democratic. These components have been constantly exchanged and modified according to the historical time and circumstances of an artwork’s creation and expectations of the society it is received by. The nature of realism suggests a performative relationship between the maker and receiver. Jacques Ranciere argues for a site where spectators “will learn things instead of being captured by images and become active participants in a collective performance instead of being passive viewers.”⁶

Critical Realism, a 2014 paper by Alexandra Oliver, explores a conceptual theory which seeks to recover Realism from its “taboo” status since postmodern semiotic critique,⁷ a study that essentially sought to map out and decode the image, essentially denying any *indiscernability* or fluid possibilities, reducing it to a finite system of signs. *Critical Realism* is a proposition that differentiates from the historical description of Realism, asserting itself as a mode of investigation that goes beyond simply a coverage of reality and its representation, to reveal the “problems of ethics, intersubjectivity, and human rights, [with an] articulation of difference, otherness and non-identity.”⁸ Identity has the problem of holding onto the concept of difference, not as a question of potential creative possibility, but as a tool of colonisation that seeks to establish the ‘self’ as a dominating position of the ‘other’.⁹ “Identity, thus understood, supposes that a clear dividing line can be made between I and not-I, he and she; between depth and surface, or vertical and horizontal; between us here and them over there.”¹⁰

Realism is an evolving project to document the human condition. Within this essay, I test the premise of my own documentary investigation against the historical development of Realism to the present day. The research for this paper occurred concurrently with the timeline of my experiments into capturing a view of people in a state of neutrality – *as they are*. The site of public transport was the location of the source material, a common area, which conveniently I found myself situated each day. From the initial utilisation of a phone camera to record the event of public transportation, the image making process evolved into the unusual medium of what I would describe as constructed drawings as monochromatic prints, assembled from multiple video frames. My understanding of the imagery I was producing was informed by my research into concepts surrounding representation, theatricality, autonomy, and identity, just as

⁵ Oliver, Alexandra. *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art*, (Ph.D. University of Pittsburgh, 2014) 13.

⁶ Ranciere, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*, (New York: Art Forum International, March 2007) 272.

⁷ Oliver, *Critical Realism*, 1.

⁸ Oliver, *Critical Realism*, iv.

⁹ Barad, Karen. *Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart*, (Parallex, 20:3, 2014) 168-187.

¹⁰ Minh-ha, Trinh T. ‘Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Question of Identity and Difference’, (Inscriptions, special issues ‘Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse’, 3-4.1988) 1.

the research itself was directly influenced by my actions in the field and studio; a genuine feedback loop. The fluid experience of creating and researching simultaneously threw up signposts of understanding along the way, each indicating a historical and/or personal development in the timeline of the dual projects. It is these signposts discovered along the way that chart the course for this paper.

A train arrives at a platform of a central railway station. It is a weekday afternoon; the time is somewhere between 5 and 7pm. Commuters prepare to disembark onto the platform – workers, shoppers and students prepare to exit the city. By engaging with public transportation, the commuter enters a scheduled timetable/timeline outside their own determination. It is a between-time where a decision of physical situation and time spent can't be altered. It is neutral territory, a democratic territory that all the passengers share. "The city is a place to look, from streets to signage to buildings. It is also a place to look at people...[and] everyone has agreed to be seen by others."¹¹ Public transport is a location where neutrality has primacy over theatricality. It is a zone that I seek to access a view of the way people are, in a space where artifice has little currency.

Michael Fried identifies *theatricality* as an inhibiting factor in capturing people in a natural state, otherwise commonly known as the social phenomenon of *camera face*. It is an instinctual reaction that humans exhibit, one learnt through witnessing the camera's potential to freeze us in a moment contrary to our expectations. Roland Barthes articulates his reaction to his being photographed... "[n]ow, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantly make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice."¹²

Using photography as a tool I attempt to capture the non-theatrical, (unaffected reality), obtainable from this in-between-space of public transit. I position myself on the train platform every day, activating the camera at the same moment of the train's entry to the station. Filming in slow-motion (240 frames per second) always in the same direction, with the same focal length, I capture the stream of passengers on rolling footage. I can't see them, they can't see me. At least I think they cannot see me; they didn't know I was going to be there, at least until the final moment. It is likely that my presence as an object in the field will affect the documentary process; the impact of my situatedness should not be discounted. Barthes articulates that "the essential gesture of the Operator [photographer] is to surprise something or someone (through the little hole in the camera), and that this gesture is therefore perfect

¹¹ Hariman, Robert, Lucaites, John Louis. *The Public image: photography and civil spectatorship*, (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016) 18.

¹² Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, (London: Vintage, 1993) 10.

*when it is performed unbeknownst to the subject being photographed...revealing what was so well hidden that the actor [subject] himself was unaware or unconscious of it*¹³

A lived perspective

Adolf Menzel, a painter, born in Breslau in 1815, achieved much fame in France in the 1860s, the height of the Realist movement, but has remained under the radar of most contemporary commentators outside Germany. In discussing Menzel's treatment of space in the works *The Schafgraben Flooded*, 1842-43 and the *Garden of Prince Albert's Palace*, 1846/1876, Michael Fried alerts us to the artist continually asserting "the primacy of *situatedness* as such."¹⁴ The *Schafgraben*, a sketch book pencil drawing, divides the vertically orientated landscape view into three or four spatial zones to emphasise the *lived perspective* of the image. As the eye wanders from the top of the drawing to the bottom, the viewer encounters distinct shifts in focus and intensity of concentration, alerting us to the shifting gaze of the artist. For example, the presence of an old wooden tree stump in the foreground is almost under foot, and cannot be simultaneously absorbed with other aspects of the work. A similar experience is gained from the *Garden*. As from a high balcony, we view a large stately garden dominating the full verticality of the picture plane. At the top of the canvas, a sun-lit palatial building is positioned on the near horizon, with its window awnings swelling in the breeze. From there the eye descends through tall poplars, past pathways and lawn, to underneath the balcony itself. We are made aware that the view is decidedly experiential. "It is as if Menzel's concern with embodiment called for thematizing the fact that the lived body is always some place, in some particular special, actional, and orientational relation to the world, which therefore is never present to artist or viewer as pure 'spectacle,' the way the world appears to have been present to Claude Monet, whom Cézanne once famously described as 'nothing but an eye'."¹⁵

There is a distinction between *looking* in this *lived*, binocular manner, to that of the mechanical view of camera, which is monocular. For the camera to take in Menzel's perspective, the lens would have to be wide angled or fish-eyed, which would force distortion onto vertical and horizontal references, negating a natural or *real* representation, certainly not a *lived* one. The camera can intrude into the experience of an image, the artifice of its optics imposing a foreign/alien dynamic.

I survey the frames within the stream of video, studying the flow of imagery in an acute superliminal mode, drawing out details otherwise lost. Inside the moving body of the train people are caught in slow motion vignettes. Unconscious of the blindly trained lens; faces, bodies, groups, interior space, spaces beyond, and spaces reflected are all meshed into the timeline. The question is how to extract these moments, or most often, extended moments? How to draw a sense of real presence from this fleeting trace of humanity? This is not a search

¹³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 32.

¹⁴ Fried, Michael. *Menzel's realism: art and embodiment in nineteenth-century Berlin*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press: 2002) 22.

¹⁵ Fried. *Menzel's realism*, 22.

for identities, but a critique of the very notion of identification and an attempt to locate a site of non-identity. If Realism is understood as an operation of identity, then as Alexandra Oliver proposes, “reality is epistemologically suspect: not because representation is never objective, but because objectivity is never objective either.”¹⁶ The problem of Realism is not just one of representation but a problem of intersubjectivity. A reading of Realism is required which is sensitive to boundaries, opacity and vulnerabilities, which enables art to give us “an experience of what it is like to encounter one’s own subjective limits, or be forced to recognise one’s own dependence on an object.”¹⁷

Candid moments

Walker Evans, utilised a stealth mode of operation to capture the elusive naturalness of expression among the general public. Evans established his photography career shooting almost exclusively outdoors using a large plate camera, most notably in the 1930s Farm Security Administration series for the US Federal Government where he documented the plight of depression era farming communities. At the completion of this project (essentially social-realism in the nineteenth century tradition) Evans trail-blazed new territory when he undertook the *New York Subway* series between 1938 and 1941. Using a compact 35mm camera with a ‘fast’, low light lens hidden under his overcoat, this series turned on its head the accepted convention of the perfectly composed and lit photograph. Unconscious of the hidden camera, “the vulnerability of the subjects endows them with a candidness that precludes them from assuming a sham pose, as they would in front of a visible camera.”¹⁸ Michael Fried posited that, “Evan’s...projects may be understood as attempts to realise an ideal of naturalness that goes back to Leonardo’s notebooks.” Fried goes on to quote Susan Sontag... “There’s something on people’s faces when they don’t know they are being observed that never appears when they do.” (*On Photography* 1977, p37)¹⁹

As with Evans’s Subway series, my intention is one of a non-present impartiality on the part of the operator, (myself). Like Evans, I also have no control over lighting and limited potential for compositional variation. The conditions of the commuter documentation are restricted and finite. The information I record is extensive, variable and democratic. The obvious constants, that I am situated at the station, that the train always has people in it travelling in the same direction and to the same destination. I search for a way to retrieve or extract the traces of people collected from the streams of footage, and frame them in way that is meaningful in a sociological sense. The images are ghostly faint, almost fragile, essentially fugitive in their manifestation as a single stilled frame. What’s more it doesn’t feel like a lived view, it is shallow in perspective, monocular; it doesn’t read as if human eyes have made the observation.

¹⁶ Oliver, *Critical Realism*, 14.

¹⁷ Oliver, *Critical Realism*, 17.

¹⁸ Hill, John T, Heinz Liesbrock, eds. *Walker Evans: Depth of Field*. (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2015) 27.

¹⁹ Fried, Michael. “Barthes’s Punctum.” In *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida*, edited by Geoffrey Batchen, 141-170. (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2009) 147.

Which I haven't, which is the intent. The process of my drawing practice previous to this series was one based on observation, (a binocular view), of constructing the image from what I saw. In this series, the image is to be constructed after the fact, after the moment(s) have passed. The first attempts to harness the image moments involve printing multiple layers of the same video still as a transparency, layered one on top of the other and reshooting them on a light table. This action builds up the tonality of the form, but doesn't model the form, the image is still flat. It is becoming apparent that it isn't the single moment that is going to deliver the sense of realism I seek, it is the extended moment, or moments. In moving away from the traditional modes of the materiality of drawing and photographic image making I am bolstered by Geoffrey Batchen's summation "that photography is not something that is generated by a particular technological apparatus but instead functions as a particular set of photographic meanings and expectations – a 'mode of apprehension' – that are brought by viewers to certain images coded as photographs, irrespective of the exact technology of their making."²⁰ This is great news, as I am about to start rupturing the time line.

Beyond the *Informal*

In the year 1952, Walter Ulbricht, First Secretary of the ruling Socialist Unity Party of the East German state, directed the art Academy to pass the directive down to its students that "the working class were to be celebrated exclusively in the adapted Soviet Socialist Realism style."²¹ This followed the 1951 visual art mandate that "formalism is defeated in every area of art...the fight against decadence is resolutely continued [and] realist art is developed by picking up the traditions left by the great masters of classical art."²² Working under this edict of politicised social realism, and after finishing his training at the academy, Gerhard Richter cut his teeth painting propaganda murals for the East German State.

Richter's move to the west in 1961 marked a major departure from the narrative in his work. Upon encountering the Neo-modernist movement of the *Informal*, the German equivalent of America's Abstract Expressionism and Pop art, Richter was liberated from the confines of socialist realism which ultimately inhibited the autonomy of the artist. But his former academic training, as described by Buchloh, "equipped him with an arsenal of anti-modernist tools that would be continuously and cyclically reintroduced in the artist's works after his arrival in West Germany."²³

Richter has typically been understood to be a changeable post-war artist, primarily concerned with the materiality of painting. His "process of surface investigation often negates qualities of

²⁰ Batchen, Geoffrey. "Another Little History of Photography." In *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, edited by Geoffrey Batchen, 259-274. (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2009) 269.

²¹ Ansted, *Richter*, 10.

²² Ansted, *Richter*, 10. Quoting Benjamin Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter: Painting after the subject of History*, (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1994), 9.

²³ Ansted, *Richter*, 216.

an underlying, often representational image.”²⁴ The *Informal* inspired the ‘destructive moment’ of disturbing the painting’s wet surface, creating a field of interruption, which results in a destabilization of the image’s identity and meaning. This surface interference, playing with our expectation of the artist’s intent, is both a formalist tool of expression and a vehicle for obscuring what lies beneath the surface, our humanness. By making an image fugitive, the spectator is left to draw conclusions as to the completeness of the subject, both as to its representational accuracy and its associative connection. Richter “uses interruption to theatricalise the space of painting, opening up the structure upon which signification operates.”²⁵ Whilst being a frequent painter of the human image, his source material is nearly always derived from the photograph, which is in turn a slice of moment from the larger world. In the main body of his oeuvre, Richter’s subjects are “consciously severed from self-evident narratives that could be unfolding.”²⁶

In Richter’s painting *Reader*, 1994, the signature blur technique often used in his figurative works has been replaced by a more painterly treatment. In this work, the ‘interrupting’ layer of *Informal* treatment is not evident, as the artist moves away from a singular monocular view to a more selected ‘lived’ binocular vision. Richter employs a far more complex construction technique, of focussed colour and atmospheric perspective, than in earlier works such as *Betty*, 1988, which utilises the indiscriminate ‘snapshot’ as the source cast under the *Informal* blur. *Reader* recognises the limitations of the camera’s vision. The way the eye sees typically involves “vast chromatic variation and dynamic phenomena... [t]he minute variations in colour that the eye can see are considerably abbreviated by the photograph.”²⁷

In a monochromatic way the multiple video-still images of commuters also seek to tackle this binocular “lived” experience of vision. By compositing multiple frames of time around the singular image of the passenger(s) the object is brought into focus outside the corporeal constraints of time and location. The moving object becomes stilled and modelled by multiple views, as if viewing the subject from life, rendering the form of the individual(s) to a fullness not apparent from a single frame (or naked vision). The static figures on the platform are blurred into the timeline. Even the extremities of the carriage interior lose their focus, while the main ‘trace’ of the human under investigation becomes fuller, more ‘real.’

Import over Function

The *October Cycle* is a series Richter painted just before the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. While still exploiting the *Informal* arsenal of pictorial freedom, these works are serialised with a narrative effect more apparent than in previous works, where political content mixes symbolically across the collective whole, evoking a direct association of the subject’s poignancy with the spectator. More typically his paintings had been characterised by “an

²⁴Ansted, *Richter*, 89.

²⁵Ansted, *Richter*, 123.

²⁶Ansted, *Richter*, 36.

²⁷Ansted, *Richter*, 86.

ambivalent process of fine-grained dialectical negation;”²⁸ in effect a kind of ‘philosophical materialism’ delivered sparingly and without dogmatism.

Richter shared Adorno’s position of (modern) art’s social character, that is, to be “the social antithesis of society”²⁹ and “to use the strength of the [epistemic] subject to break through the deception...of constitutive subjectivity.”³⁰ Adorno considered authentic works of (modern) art as that of social monads, [absolutes]. Within this model are the categories of *import* (*Gehalt*) and *function* (*Funktion*). “Adorno’s account of these categories distinguishes his sociology of art from both hermeneutical and empirical approaches.”³¹ *Import* is given priority, with its interpretation understood to be that which is “societally mediated and socially significant.”³² *Import* is what the artist invests in the work, *function* is the way an artwork is received by the spectator. For Adorno, *function* should not be the concern of the artist, and may ultimately commodify or negate the aesthetic qualities of the work by its over politicisation.

With the *October Cycle*, Richter’s mediation of the *Informal* with the ethical divided critics and commentators of the time, leading Dietmar Elgar to write, “arguably no other work of twentieth century art has been discussed so vehemently or provoked such ongoing controversy in Germany.”³³ The *October Cycle* was based on events that happened on 18th October 1977, ten years before Richter painted the series. Referred to as the *German Autumn*, the events depicted in Richter’s works centre around members of the *Second Generation* of the Red Army Faction (RAF) members who were found dead in their prison cells shortly after the kidnapping and murder of industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer, and the hijacking of the Lufthansa airplane Landshut.³⁴ A series of fifteen monochromatic paintings, the works fugitively portray the living and dead portraits of the *Autumn* protagonists alongside an array of associative objects and references which, collectively, the spectator assembles to create a circumstance of correspondence with the historical moment. Richter “succeeded in returning to narrative, drama and pathos to trace symbolic order,”³⁵ representing a full engagement with an ethical response in the territory of the socio-political, while still maintaining the artistic autonomy of the *Informal*.

²⁸ Ansted, *Richter*, 164.

²⁹ Zuidervaart, Lambert. “Theodor W. Adorno”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) 4.

³⁰ Zuidervaart, *Theodor W. Adorno*, 8. (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx)

³¹ Zuidervaart, *Theodor W. Adorno*, 7.

³² Zuidervaart, *Theodor W. Adorno* 7.

³³ Ansted, *Richter*, 171.

³⁴ Founded by Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, a journalist and intellectual, the RAF group’s origins traced back to the 1960s student protest movement in West Germany, where issues such as racism, women’s liberation and anti-imperialism were key issues in left wing politics. The legacy of Nazism and a suspicion of authoritarian structures had divided the young generation from their parents and institutions of the state. Richter’s works rubbed a raw nerve in the German psyche of 1988 given the political sensitivities of the times, with the Berlin Wall falling the following year.

³⁵ Ansted, *Richter*, 171.

Documenting the human story of civic transportation, and my personal location within this 'event', is a performative action. It has at its intent a view to representing a situational and behavioural condition within our society; the way we live in modernity.³⁶ The 'site' of the train provides endless possibilities of encounter with a rich diversity of actors, and yet as more individuals are assembled in the footage, the more universal their identities, or non-identities become. The shortlist of 16 extended moments (images) that I arrive at focuses on groups, couples, individuals, schoolkids, empty seats and reflections within and outside the train. Selected visual elements within these images are enhanced through the action of temporally displacing them from the background environment, which is relegated to a blurry staccato-like state. Two, three, four frames of moments are layered together to produce a concentration of intensity that is as much a process of reinforcing the selected form through the action of modelling as it is a process of reduction by negating detail and identity. The subjective focus, of the object or individual, can literally be shifted by the manipulation of the image parts.

In his book *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno further developed a 'social' interpretation around the autonomy of art.³⁷ Moving beyond the Modernist understanding of autonomy, 'art for art's sake', he posited that autonomy maintained two inter-related propositions or 'senses' - social and aesthetic, and autonomy and commodification –which “stand in a relation of mutual dependence.”³⁸ For Adorno the social and the aesthetic are *interpenetrating*; there are not two independent 'senses' of autonomy. In discussing Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, Andy Hamilton further explains that “[t]he opposition between autonomy and commodification is too stark to count as mutual dependence. One might say that there is a dialectical relation between "social" and "aesthetic" autonomy, just as there is between (social) autonomy and commodification. However, these strands must inevitably be separated to some extent...[and quoting Bernstein]...“for all aesthetic phenomena there will be a purely aesthetic or internal way of regarding them and an external, social characterisation.”³⁹

It is now hotly debated whether aesthetic autonomy is an outdated concept in contemporary discourse, “an idea whose time has passed.”⁴⁰ However, the importance of art's autonomous position is still highly relevant when it comes to the “threatened independence of the arts in education and in many other practices, like museums, bookshops, newspaper criticism, new

³⁶ “Modernity is still on. In our field, the concept of modernity is being used in a particular way. And this leads to many misunderstandings when European critical thinkers read about it. We use modernity to name the Western project of civilization. It's a name that the West gave itself. We want to unveil modernity as an important concept for locating the Western project of civilization and to make visible its power over life, over the life of people and the earth.” Vázquez, Rolando. *The End of the Contemporary?* (Institute Für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2017) 4.

³⁷ Identified during the period of 18th century Romanticism, “[s]ocial autonomy is the result of the historical differentiation in which the production of artworks becomes independent from the context of the church and the aristocracy, accompanied by an emerging art market and professionalization of the artist...Romanticism is constitutive for art practices since two centuries, its influence is everywhere. Romantic ideas about individuality, creativity, the imagination, the role of the artist, authenticity, and autonomy are still the basic values in contemporary art.” Doorman, Maarten. *Persistent Autonomy and Romanticism* (Aesthetic Investigations, 2015) 76-77.

³⁸ Hamilton, Andy. *Adorno and the Autonomy of Art*, 2011, 1.

³⁹ Hamilton, *Adorno*, 1.

⁴⁰ Doorman, Maarten. *Persistent Autonomy and Romanticism* (Aesthetic Investigations, 2015) 73.

media, due to a growing commercial culture and a more consumerist attitude towards the arts.” But the ever-pressing issues of globalisation have extended art’s responsibilities beyond mere aesthetic and commercial independence, the “academic world has become interested in ‘less closed disciplines’ like ‘sociology, cultural history, philosophy of culture, ethics’.”⁴¹

Zones of indiscernibility

A sociological perspective was developed further by Ranciere in *The Emancipated Spectator*, that art is emancipated and emancipating when the authority of the ‘imposed’ message is renounced. This emancipation has application on the audience targeted and in the explication of the world at large, that art “stops *wanting* to emancipate us.”⁴² By not forcing the viewpoint on the spectator, “it is up to the spectator to interpret it and react to it affectively.”⁴³ This liberation from hierarchical or binary structures can be linked to the idea of visibility and invisibility, and the destabilization or alterity that can happen in between. These zones of indiscernibility, as developed by Deleuze and Guattari, provide a fluid and democratic platform to discover an infinite range of variable interpretations of position. It breaks down hierarchical structures enabling what Ranciere identifies as dissensus, (as opposed to resistance), which is “a modification of the co-ordinates of the sensible.”⁴⁴ Dissensus examines the boundaries between ‘normal’ and ‘subversive’, between the political and passive, or apolitical.

Ranciere, investigating the relationship between politics and art, found that the boundaries between them were constantly being redrawn. He posited that “[t]his frees artistic and political creativity from the yoke of the great historical schemata that announce the great revolutions to come.”⁴⁵ This position taken up by contemporary artists counters the ethically bankrupt nature of neoliberal globalisation in favour of *altermondialism*, a position which respects human rights, the environment, national sovereignty and cultural diversity, and in effect picks up some of the great socialist propositions of 19th century Marxist Realism.

Of the extended moments I capture, one of these images has two distinct manifestations. By directly overlaying the capture frames, (with video frame edges in symmetrical alignment), the body of an older woman is found within the blurred silhouette of a younger women on the moving train. (See Figure 1) By re-sequencing the frames, (layering the frames according to the speed of the moving train) the older woman becomes a blurred apparition within the focussed form of the younger woman in the carriage window. Both women occupy the same space in the image moments, and yet are out of time with each other. In this way, they both inhabit a zone between visibility and invisibility, there is no distinct hierarchy, they were both there. In a

⁴¹ Doorman, *Persistent Autonomy*, 74.

⁴² Ranciere, Jacques, Fulvia Carnevale, John Kelly. *Art of the Possible*, (New York: Art Forum International, March 2007) 258.

⁴³ Ranciere, *Art of the Possible*, 263.

⁴⁴ Ranciere, *Art of the Possible* 259.

⁴⁵ Ranciere, *Art of the Possible* 257.

society where the commodification of youth dominates our visual culture, raising issues of “generationalism, ageism and specificity,”⁴⁶ this work questions the focus of our gaze. By offering dual visions of this image a suggestion of equality is proposed. These people could be any number of peoples, the city any number of cities. These individuals are present within the assembled images of faces, bodies, train parts and infrastructure; not defined by identity, they come together in their otherness. The operator (me), actor (the subject) and spectator (all citizens) co-join; they/we are the images – it is an acknowledgment of a shared condition.



Fig. 1. Ben Sibley, *Dual Proposition*, from *Commuter 3*, 2017. Assembled video still print.

Chris Marker’s 2006 works *Staring Back*, reinforces the necessity of a new kind of image, which is not a representation based on nationality, ethnic or racial attributes but instead on “a shared constitutive power that will lead to transnational forms of citizenship.”⁴⁷ The possibility within these images reveal the capacity to consider political and active modes of citizenship “beyond the ‘myths of identity’ and the ‘illusions about the necessary course of history’.”⁴⁸ In these works Marker extracts single frames from video footage he shot while observing the Paris

⁴⁶ Brookes, Karen. “Nothing Sells like Teen Spirit: The Commodification of Youth Culture”, in *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images, and Identities*, ed. Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce, (Westport, Connecticut, London: Praeger, 2003) 1.

⁴⁷ Maimon, Vered. *Towards a New Image of Politics: Chris Marker’s Staring Back*, (Oxford Art Journal 33.1, 2010) 83.

⁴⁸ Maimon, *New Image of Politics*, 91.

May Day protests of 2006.⁴⁹ “Marker searches for the ‘one frame lost in the stream of almost identical frames...the real photogram, something nobody has perceived – not even the guy who shot it (me, in most cases)’.”⁵⁰ Blurring and distorting the single frames in Photoshop, Marker harnesses the flexibility and fluidity of this new media to flatten the backdrop of these scenes to highlight individual faces and expressions. The face is treated as divorced from identity, thereby democratising the encounter as that of one between equals. Zuidervaart highlights that one of Adorno’s main claims is “that the goal of thought itself, even when thought forgets its goal under societally induced pressures to impose identity on objects, is to honour them in their nonidentity, in their difference from what a restricted rationality declares them to be.”⁵¹ Marker’s photograms in the *Staring Back* series, are a strategy for blurring identities, the aim is not to highlight individuals, but to blur roles, “to extricate characters from their documentary identities in order to give them a fictional or legendary cast.”⁵²

In Marker’s work, the face becomes the image before it becomes a ‘mark of identity’, it’s what Deleuze refers to as the ‘affection image’. In this context, “there is no close up of the face, the face is in itself face and both are affect, affection image.”⁵³ Deleuze posited that when a face, part of the body or even an object records external motions or fluctuations on its surface while remaining constant, it becomes a site upon which this external affect registers as a movement of expression, thereby becoming ‘facialised’. This accounts for that feeling of being observed by an object, or an object returning a gaze, even when it has no face. Hence Deleuze’s argument that “every object of the affection image is a face regardless of what it depicts.”⁵⁴ In the close-up face images of Marker, “individuation ceases to hold way,”⁵⁵ the face becomes phantasmagoric, indistinguishable from as many such presences. “[B]y individuating the flow of images in *Staring Back*...Marker creates an ‘affection image’ or cinematic close up in which an image of a face does not identify a person as a separate self-sufficient subject, but by presenting him/her as both present and absent opens the transformative possibility of ‘becoming other’ and the problem of ‘belonging’ to a group.”⁵⁶ In Deleuzian terms the face is political, because “it is always part of a specific organisation of power that inevitably triggers its own forms of resistance or deterritorialisation’.”⁵⁷ In *Staring Back*, the individual is not presented as a sovereign identity, but one of unfixedness, neither present nor absent, visible or invisible. This liberation from the representational, in an *altermondialist society*, imagines a possibilities of more active transnational citizenship, one of true inclusivity.

⁴⁹ Protests, where students and labour unions successfully campaigned against the policies of the conservative government of Dominique de Villepin, that sought to undermine the conditions, (terms of employment), of young workers.

⁵⁰ Horrigan, Bill. *The Revenge of the Eye, A Portfolio by Chris Marker*, (New York: Art Forum International, Summer 2006) 313.

⁵¹ Zuidervaart, *Theodor W. Adorno*, 9.

⁵² Ranciere, *Art of the Possible*, 266.

⁵³ Maimon, *New Image of Politics*, 96.

⁵⁴ Maimon, *New Image of Politics*, 96.

⁵⁵ Maimon, *New Image of Politics*, 99.

⁵⁶ Maimon, *New Image of Politics*, 100.

⁵⁷ Maimon, *New Image of Politics*, 99.

Ranciere proposes that “what art can do is always a matter of the reversal of perspectives,”⁵⁸ and this is a liberating position for art to occupy when it comes responding and contributing to the society we live in. Realism in art has always been an investigation into a ‘truth’. For Adorno, truth in art’s content, “is the way in which an artwork simultaneously challenges the way things are and suggests how things could be better, but leaves things practically unchanged: ‘Art has truth as the semblance of the illusionless’.”⁵⁹ Definitions of what adequately ‘represents’ a truthfulness of depiction and its conjoined ethical implications are constantly revisited and challenged by theorists and philosophers. Grey areas manifest between different concepts and the components of concepts, leading Deleuze and Guattari to posit that an individual component “partially overlaps, has a zone of neighbourhood [zone de voisinage], or a threshold of indiscernibility, with another one.”⁶⁰ This leaves a path open to accepting both the distinction of individual opinion and the undecidedness of shared territory.

Through the dissensus lense, the premise of a truth becomes less distinct and expands to become an agreement to disagree on what is politically palatable or societally actionable – of where identification resides and how it is perceived. This dissensus flows through to the materiality of how art is conveyed, through a plethora of methods and methodology. This stance questions the presumption of artistic autonomy; whether it remains exclusive to the artist or whether the *surface* of representation is in fact a public or common space. Ranciere argues that “[c]ontrary to the modernist thesis, the surface has not been a boundary, isolating the purity of art, but rather, a place of slippage between various places”⁶¹ Rather than referring only to the very materiality of arts manifestation, art’s location in the public realm is being questioned. “[T]he surface, like the image, is not the amorphous destiny of things – it’s a process of art that changes the coordinates of the given.”⁶²

Central to the idea of a realism that is critical, is that it doesn’t attempt to pre-empt the gaze, but allows for the emancipation of possibilities – that society is a transnational location and that the political and aesthetic cannot be separated. Images are “no longer addressed as exclusively documentary or fictional, analogical or digital,”⁶³ or dependent on any specific technology, ideology or site, rather, the presentation of images can offer a truly democratic platform for the exchange of perspectives and understanding.

⁵⁸ Ranciere, *Art of the Possible*, 266.

⁵⁹ Zuidervaart, *Theodor W. Adorno*, 7, (AT 132).

⁶⁰ Kassianidou, Marina. *In the Gap between Visibility and Invisibility: The “Fugitive” Image*, (The International Journal of the Image, Volume 2, Issue 3: 2012) 76.

⁶¹ Ranciere, *Art of the Possible*, 266.

⁶² Ranciere, *Art of the Possible*, 267.

⁶³ Maimon, *New Image of Politics*, 100.

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