

Judith Cowan, Andrea Fisher and Gillian Wearing

Two very different exhibitions, at Camden Arts Centre and City Racing, exemplify the current status of photography in fine art. At Camden Judith Cowan and Andrea Fisher's mixed media work is shown together, bringing out their similarities: both play photography off against other materials, and both share a general approach and an underlying theory. Cowan surrounds photographs of water with cast iron frames which take on the role of containers. Fisher juxtaposes large, regular panes of glass or areas of paint, reminiscent of minimalist art, with fuzzy newspaper photographs. Cowan, whose concern with liquid-filled containers is not new, now juxtaposes these with long iron tubes, like cannon, which lie on the floor, creating a rather over-literal opposition. Fisher's sparse work is seen against a background of overwhelming whiteness: in *I told him that during my childhood my mother's misfortune took up the space of dreams - M. Duras*, the largest element consists of a glossy white rectangle painted on the matt white wall of the gallery. Against these expanses of white, the photographs seem darkened and lost. More specifically, while her earlier work borrowed from Ellsworth Kelly, now Fisher uses some of Robert Ryman's strategies, evident in the overall whiteness of her exhibition, and in the variety of ways in which the photographs themselves are attached to the wall: either stuck flush to the surface, or with the edges allowed to peel away, propped up against the wall or screwed down behind glass. Cowan's use of heavy iron frames, trays or boxes appear to confine the represented water as though it were really liquid. Both artists raise familiar Derridean questions about borders, about the relations of identity between work of art and frame. In throwing together objects and photographs, and in their concentration on diverse methods of framing, Cowan and Fisher plainly intend to invoke current post-modern photographic theory. There is a deliberate blankness and reticence to both sets of work, which given its considered vacuity, must be seen as one with the theory which has produced it, and the art criticism which seeks to justify it.

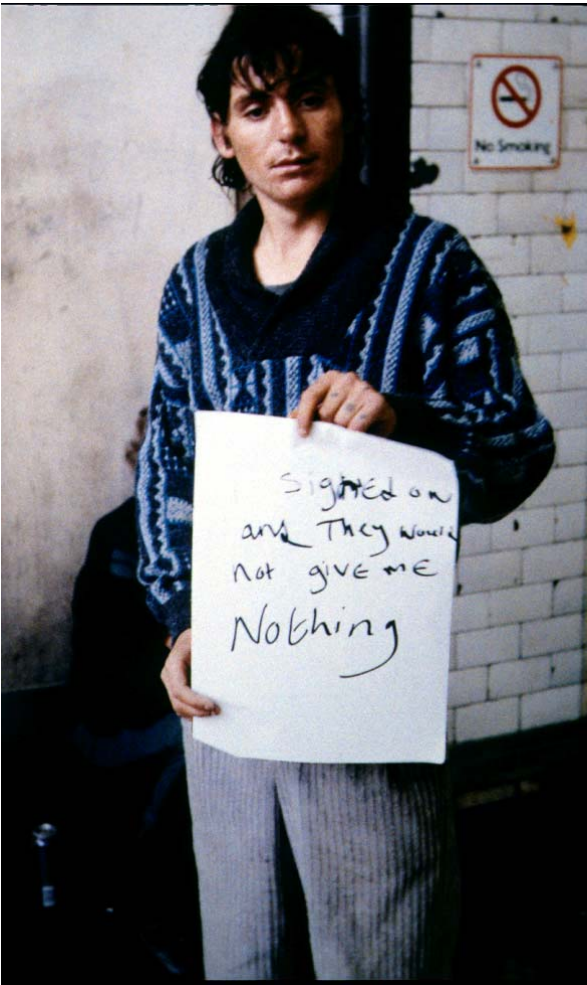
Cowan and Fisher establish simple polar oppositions: the fluid immateriality of water is opposed to the weight and solidity of iron, and the realism of photography with the blank lack of reference in minimalism. In the promiscuous imagination of post-modern critics these oppositions act as metaphors for all others - sculpture and photography, absence and presence, meaning and meaninglessness, masculine and feminine, self and other, East and West, and so

on forever. Some of the associations are less arbitrary: water in Cowan becomes a reference to the immateriality of photography itself, and her containers evoke developing trays and tanks. Cowan and Fisher also play with psychoanalytic themes, to which photography, if thought of as a rhetorical and partial practice, is highly suited since it acts as materialised memory. In Cowan's case, it is obvious that the viewer is supposed to stand disoriented before a liquid feminine sublime, an expanse of vastness and depth without stable reference points, before which logical and linguistic categories fall away: some of the titles, *I couldn't keep it in the picture*, *Filling in the holes in words*, push the point home. Phallic iron logic traps the fluid and threatens to trip up the viewer. Most of Fisher's works on display are entitled *Displacements*, and aside from literally dislodging images - as in *Displacement I* which removes the image from the wall and places it behind panes of glass on the floor, as if it awaited installation or packing - this summons up the psychoanalytic category, with its mapping of one identity onto another, a process threatening the straightforward identification of a subject in photography.

It is no surprise that these diametrical oppositions, once established, are deconstructed. Fisher uses photographs which depict highly charged subject matter: in the past it has been female victims of violence and the firing of oil-wells in Kuwait, here the subjects are less clear, but at least one is a casualty of the Hiroshima bomb (hence the reference to Duras). Fisher's juxtaposition of photographs and blank painted panels also suggests an equivalence: some of the panels are made of glass, a material which stands in for photographic lenses and plates, which have been rendered literally opaque. This indicates Fisher's agreement with the current critique of the powerlessness of reference in documentary photography, and her critics are not slow to seize on this: Desa Philippi has written of Fisher's earlier oil fire pictures, 'While these images continue to fascinate and repel, they also communicate a sense of radical disjunction and the ensuing inability to distinguish and figure. Underlying the dramatic explosions fixed in the photographic frame is an implosion of the representational apparatus itself that would render the photographs believable and interpretable.' In presenting this theory, both Cowan and Fisher tilt the argument in their favour: Cowan photographs water in such a way that it fills the frame allowing no reference point except a flattened perspective effect. The larger prints are quite grainy, and all are glossy, reflecting the light like water, and serving to remind the viewer of the medium. Fisher's newspaper photographs are greatly enlarged to emphasise the elements

which make them up, and they are tightly cropped and printed hard to form quasi-abstract patterns of black and white.

The political implications of such works and theories should not be ignored. John Tagg and others have argued that photography only refers to objects as a matter of convention, and this is central to these works which seek to undermine the opposition between fine art and photographic representation. It is a view which is based on the supposed impotence of documentary photography to influence change by its descriptions of human tragedy. It can be asked whether this failure is to do with the medium itself or rather with political reaction, to the wanton blindness of leaders such as Reagan and Thatcher to real, let alone depicted, suffering. If we accept that photography is at fault, then before these works artist, critic and viewer are supposed to share a post-modern Nietzschean awareness of contradiction, to quiver in a tense and suspended state before the brief revelation of vistas opened up beyond whatever opposition they choose at that moment to consider. Andrew Wilson, writing in the catalogue devoted to Cowan's work, and echoing a statement made by the artist in *Creative Camera*, states that 'What Cowan presents are those extreme vertiginous still-points of life that cannot be delineated but only felt, when one stops breathing for instance; laughing, at orgasm, between life and death (drowning).' And this is precisely the point, that in the face of catastrophe, whether it be references to a fluid post-Fordist future, or to the real victims of the atom bomb, these works and their attendant writings inspire an aware, informed inaction. They evoke 'theory' in a highly literal fashion, with their facile deconstruction of banal oppositions. If we do find ourselves breathless in front of these works, it is in an activity that Wilson somehow fails to mention - yawning.



Gillian Wearing's use of photography could hardly be more different. While Fisher and Cowan's work is allusive and difficult, Wearing shows unmanipulated colour prints which are refreshingly direct. She does not simply ignore the debates about photographic representation, but equally does not conclude that the medium is hopelessly compromised. If many photographs of people fail to allow their subjects' voices to be heard, why not simply give them back that power? This is just what Wearing does in a series called *Signs that say what you want them to say and not signs that say what other people want them to say*. These are straightforward colour portraits of people in the street who have been given paper and pen to write a message and who present themselves before the camera, holding up their signs. These are works which play to the strengths of photography, finding an interest in contingent

detail, in stance, clothing, expression, even in the handwriting of the signs. In this series the individual pictures work together performing a mapping of attitudes and types - young and old, rich and poor, cynical and idealistic, Krishna devotee and heavy metal fan. The pictures portray and evoke a wide range of emotions: a middle-aged woman holds up her idealistic drawing of a young girl. A desperate looking homeless man writes 'I signed on and they would give me Nothing'. An old man holds up a sign saying 'What a lovely girl'—presumably referring to the photographer. There is of course irony here, and a danger that the pretensions of some of the people, along with the idiocy and the grammatical errors in some of the signs, might lead the viewer to think that Wearing was satirising her subjects. Sometimes the determined cheerfulness of the messages is called into question by the appearance of their authors and the backgrounds against which they stand. But the irony is often that of the subjects themselves who are fully aware of the artificiality of the situation, but who decide to play along anyway. A complacent looking man in a suit holds up a sign reading 'I'm desperate', and a much rougher looking man has a sign which reads, 'Please don't feed me or give me anything to drink'.

In another series of three pictures, *Take your top off*, Wearing is pictured naked in bed with three different transsexuals, in three different bedrooms with their attendant clutter. She is the common element to each picture, and we can clearly see the cable release with which these double portraits were made. It is a refreshing corrective to see people that don't look like models, whose blemishes have not been blotted out, and whose skin tones have not been warmed to a healthy glow. Another pair of large pictures, again in raw, unmanipulated colour, show a man and a woman masturbating, each holding in their free hand a smaller version of the whole photograph, which is of course infinitely recursive. These untitled images are shocking, but clearly comment on the use of colour photography in pornography, showing the never-represented purpose of this industrial output of images. Narcissism is implied by the way these subjects hold themselves in both hands, as it were, while the endless recursion of images is analogous to the unending flow of pornography. Both sets of pictures relate to commonly seen portrayals of women: their directness and ugliness is disturbing because they use the medium of advertising and publicity to portray scenes which oppose sanitised flesh and Ideal Home interiors. The strength of this work is that it is not founded on the never-never land of post-modern theory, but deals with issues of identity and photographic representation in mass culture.

While Cowan and Fisher contrive with a refined elegance to produce claustrophobic spaces and enforce a breathless silence on their viewers, Wearing's pictures are direct, garrulous and open, bringing in many voices other than the artist's. Her pictures are competently made, but none are beautiful in a conventional sense; Wearing uses photographs to make a point, and it is vital that we believe in the truth of photography's descriptive powers if we are to understand them.

Julian Stallabrass

Judith Cowan, *Water Rises* and Andrea Fisher, *Recent Works* are at the Camden Arts Centre until 21st March.
Gillian Wearing, *I'm Desperate* is at City Racing until 4th April.