

Reply to Archer and Wilson

I would like to thank Michael Archer and Andrew Wilson for taking the trouble to comment on my article about the work of Judith Cowan, Andrea Fisher and Gillian Wearing, 'Power to the People' (not my headline, I should say, perhaps 'Not Drowning but Yawning' would have been better). Unfortunately, as is often the case in such exchanges, both take issue with arguments which I did not actually make. It is too easy to set up an Aunt Sally of a critic, in this case universally anti-theory and complexity, pro-realism and montage, and then knock it down. In fact I made no unrestricted claims about the uses photography should be put to in fine art. Archer tries to make it seem as if I did by lifting phrases out of context: just one example - I am quoted as arguing that for any adequate conception of photography in art 'it is vital that we believe in the truth of photography's descriptive powers'. This is part of a sentence which makes it perfectly clear that this statement refers only to an understanding of Wearing's photography. I was not seeking to lay down rules about what techniques or media artists should use, rather I was making an argument about the specific works on show, and their different uses of photography in relation to their subject matter and ideas. Despite the caricature of my argument which both Archer and Wilson perpetrate, nothing I wrote would rule out an interest in Melanie Counsell's work, or anybody else's.

This same misunderstanding applies to many of the other things that Archer has to say. To praise Wearing's use of montage is not to place the practice in some ideal hierarchy above other forms of manipulation, but to comment about what I consider to be an appropriate use of the technique in this instance. Archer pretends to know Cowan and Fisher's work intimately because he has chatted to the artists (a *very* unreconstructed point of view) and claims that the polarities I list are more mine than theirs. This is odd because in his essay for Cowan's *A Line of Blue and a Pool of Red* (installed at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 1992), he describes this purely sculptural work in just such terms, setting up oppositions between 'structure and formlessness' and 'male and female'. In any case, he misses the point of the argument which, in describing these oppositions (most of which were not indeed mine but taken from writings about Cowan and Fisher), asked what criteria could be used to restrict such readings. Given the laboured polar oppositions in Cowan's work, how do we prevent ourselves evoking every other opposition we can think of?

In claiming that there is an inconsistency in the idea that Fisher sets up an opposition between minimalism and descriptive photography in order to deny the power of the latter, Archer misses the point (again) which is the claim that this opposition is made in order to be deconstructed. In fact, Archer's interesting comments about the conflation of representation and the wall could contribute to such a reading; we would expect minimalism to adopt a little of the meaning of which photography is drained. For Archer, the use of montage techniques against the advertising industry is 'a blank political opposition that leads nowhere beyond empty name-calling' (and this *is* a universal statement). Archer claims that Fisher does in fact engage in issues of identity and photographic representation in mass culture, but he does not say how, and does not address my central claim that such deconstructive work offers the viewer mere stasis, a suspension of action and critical thought.

Towards the end of his piece, however, Archer asks the pertinent question, who is the 'we' in Wearing's pictures, the 'we' that is given a voice? Obviously for Archer, this is supposed to be an unanswerable question, but given Wearing's frame of reference, I don't think that it is. I argued that Wearing's photographs were effective, at least in part, because they make the viewer aware of the artifices of representation in commercial visual culture. These are remarkably uniform and everyone in contemporary Western society is surrounded by them. It is more than an ironic coincidence that post-modern theories of diversity, competing narratives and fragmented identity have emerged at the very time when corporate control of the means of expression underwent a widespread and thoroughgoing expansion, which is of course still continuing. Of course such images are open to alternative and oppositional readings, but their blanket effect is not: their presence does not cease when critical faculties are blunted through fatigue, preoccupation or sheer familiarity. So to answer Archer's question, what 'we' have in common is precisely what binds us into and implicates us in this commercial culture. If the question *is* unanswerable, then we should be clear about the consequences: depending on where the boundaries are drawn, the best that even Cowan and Fisher can do is wallow in restricted, self-aware self-reference, different groups will pursue their own localised language games with no hope of communication, and even an exchange between critics may prove impossible.

To move briefly onto Wilson's letter, which aside from the unwarranted generalisation of my argument and a little invective, makes only a couple of substantive points. The first is that a belief in the accuracy of photography's

descriptive powers is somehow mystical; well, no, it's *causal*, if you put a camera in front of something, the resulting photo bears a causal relation to the subject, one which can be predicted and manipulated (this shouldn't really need saying). It is tempting to say that Wilson's preoccupations with 'half glimpsed lateralities' and the intuitive creative process might be more properly characterised as mystical. Wilson argues that Wearing's inherently artificial (not to say theatrical) methods contradict the documentary aspect of the works, but this is not so because the way people present themselves and the things they write have a documentary value in themselves, and there are also elements in such photographs which escape the intention of both artist and subject. Wilson finally claims that in judging contemporary art we should go beyond appearances; fine, but the question is how. Squinting at it sideways on is hardly a satisfactory answer, especially if all you glimpse is an orgasmic sublime.