

The Scene of a Crime

What happens when photography is presented as art without being stripped of its power to record the contingent? Various recent exhibitions have illustrated this encounter, and even shown works which takes it as their subject. Thomas Struth, who recently showed at the I.C.A., is also included in *Who's Looking at the Family?* at the Barbican Art Gallery and *The Epic and the Everyday* at the Hayward. At the latter he shows a picture of gallery-goers in front of *The Raft of the Medusa* in which the painting's tragic, choreographed figures are juxtaposed with a tentative grouping of viewers before them, who cling to the frames of painting and photograph alike. Strangely, the contrast between these modest, random figures,



some of whom are plainly distracted, and the plight of Géricault's naked subjects is qualified by the way in which the viewers in their loose cluster seem to echo the movement of the painting's composition.

When straight photographs are used in fine art, they must be distinguished from reportage and the snapshot: James Lingwood, one of the curators of the Hayward exhibition, argues that only fine art photographs make reference to various kinds of historical time. Relations are established between the present and the ever-receding moment of the photograph's creation, 'thickening' time and suggesting meaning.¹ This is a common concern and examples can be found in both exhibitions: Annelies Strba and Larry Sultan juxtapose old and new family photographs, suggesting that these pictures contain on their blank surfaces signs and symptoms of traumas long repressed.

Photographs certainly do contain such signs, although as they appear in the gallery, psyches recede in favour of physiognomies, traumas in favour of the physical traces of history, and they may work against, not with, the intent behind the pictures. Certain hierarchies are made light of by photographs where shadows gain substance, and objects are invested with the presence normally accorded to persons. Bernd and Hilla Becher's pictures of mine-heads are strongly reminiscent of August Sander's project of creating a social taxonomy of Weimar Germany. Grouped in blocks of nine, they are arranged by their construction material, type and location, mapping the variants and constants of industrial architecture and its dereliction. Some of these buildings have a forlorn artistry, sporting false columns or pediments, once expressions of industrial might, now of vulnerability. All the pictures are taken in even light, absolutely square to the subject and with perspective correction. Oddly, this extreme objectivity of presentation gives the subjects an air of unreality when seen together, as though they represented a single structure in the phases of some aimless metamorphosis.

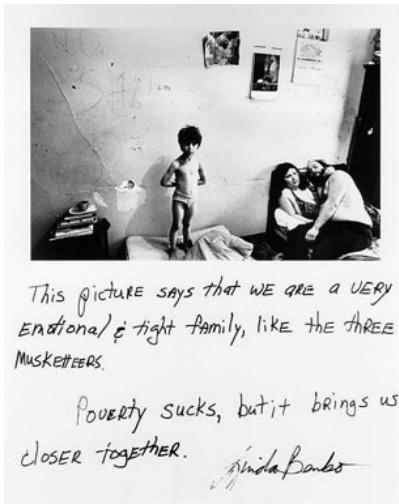
Similar panels are displayed at the Barbican, showing people rather than objects, and it is striking how badly people fare in this comparison. Alexander Honory's *The Found Image* shows studio portraits of families with their new-born babies, formally arranged in stiff looking groups with the infant always swaddled in white at the centre. Linda Duvall's *Babies that Look Alike* is a panel composed of illustrated notices of birth taken from a Canadian newspaper. As with the Bechers, it is natural to look from one image to the others, each illuminating its neighbours.



Where objects seem to gain character by this process, humans start to fade, appearing as interchangeable combinations in the endless shuffling of genes. Likewise, in Patrick Faigenbaum's pictures an Italian elite dispose themselves gracefully among their treasures, yet retire into the dull lustre of his dark prints as though they had a little less life than the stuff surrounding them. Compared with the Bechers' pictures and Struth's street scenes, they cast a baleful if incidental light

on a world where objects have more presence, and more expression through advertising, than mere mortals can aspire to, except when remade as commodities.

Photography's strength and weakness lies in its contingency: for Barthes there was something stupid about its indiscriminate recording. There are certainly limits to what photography can say. In the Barbican catalogue Val Williams states, 'We neither argue for the family nor against it, but merely acknowledge that it is there',² and this is only partly an evasion. Similarly, Lingwood argues that everyday experience 'insures against the dissolution of the photograph into a world of pure artifice, fantasy or kitsch; it creates a closeness to the nuances of reality, resists homogeneity, idealisation, abstraction'.³ Without them, though, sunk in a morass of particularities, it is possible to say very little. In art photography this problem is especially acute. Snapshots have specific meanings because taking them and looking at them is a social activity which presupposes an intimate knowledge of their subjects. In the gallery ignorance aids aesthetic appropriation, but bestows on the works a dull blankness, which some photographers have exploited as an end in itself. 'Found' photographs are shown at the Barbican, presented here as art, their new, adopted status due only to their once having been mislaid. All photographs act on the gap between past and present; only in the empty work of art, bereft of social activity, does this have to become an emphatic feature.



The Barbican exhibition takes the family as its subject, selecting from a good deal of recent photographic work which has explored the theme. This concern is of course the obvious arena in which to spin Freudian fables, but is also engaged in identity politics. The photographer, previously a disembodied eye, a man (usually) with no name and no attachments (think of Cartier-Bresson's anonymity) once collected exotic snapshots. Now photographers, more often women, are properly grounded in the social, we are led to believe, flaunting their familial ties in emulsion. Some of these pictures find as much intensity in the home as the early photojournalists did in the world: Sally Mann's extraordinary photographs of her children, Nick Waplington's convincing renditions of life in the living room, Susan Lipper's

affecting pictures of American rural life in Grapevine, and particularly Jim Goldberg's remarkable juxtapositions of images and words which tackle themes of wealth and poverty, aspiration and self-image. Yet much of the work shown at

the Barbican, and we may think of Sultan and Tina Barney here, consists of large colour prints of alienated looking individuals standing about in rich, sometimes vulgar settings. The isolation of the *flâneur* has been replaced by the isolation of the nuclear family, a reflection of middle-class reality perhaps, but one which neglects other forms of social solidarity. Ordinary life, overstuffed with objects, is blandly depicted on an epic scale conveying the magnitude of boredom. There is of course a good deal of acute social comment in this depiction of *anomie*, yet its elevation to the level of fine art is disturbing since there is a risk that it finishes valorising the banal. Advertising is the demon behind this, forever spinning epics out of mundane acts (climbing into a car or consuming a burger) and that the link with art is close should not surprise, for both are in the business of making objects alluring.

The Hayward exhibition attempts to create a feeling of the epic with a spacious hang and a predominance of large prints. Yet the epic and the merely large must be distinguished: there is no epic here in the sense of a heroic and continuous narrative. When narrative is suggested by complexity or by very large or long pictures (which ask to be read left to right) its coherence is usually denied. This is a hoary old trick, its possibilities played out long ago by Manet. Size is of course important: without it, Andreas Gursky's view over the rooftops of Cairo would be something anyone could have taken from their hotel window and it is unlikely that it would be used as the basis for musings about historical time. The epic applies finally, not to the subjects, but to the artists' endeavours. The heroic scale of this work may be due to a wish to make the photograph visible as an object, rather than a mere representation, and it may be due to the difficulty of persuading collectors to pay large amounts of money for an enprint. There is a danger that in the collision between fine art and photography, each plays to the other's inadequacies, the latter being inflated and emptied of content. In a sense, straight photography can only play at being fine art by cloaking the everyday with the epic and in the process draining it of human content. History is just what is often forced out of these photographs by sheer inflation. If Corinne Noordenbos's close-up pictures of the faces and glazed eyes of Alzheimer's victims are terrifying, it is because this is the most symptomatic disease of our culture, because they are our own.



Yet the germ of the contingent rescues even the most overblown works. Benjamin, in 'A Small History of Photography', wrote of what he called the optical unconscious: 'No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search the picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.'⁴ While the art world concentrates on the artist alone, photography is made as much by reality and its viewers.

The Barbican show includes some childhood snapshots of Jane and Hilda Thompson who, when they grew up, shot their abusing father dead; it also has a series of police photographs of the scene of the crime, including one of a shrunken man lying on a bed with a dull red stain on his chest, and three kittens staring down from a kitsch painting over the fireplace. The childhood pictures, as we would expect, look perfectly ordinary, as much as such photos ever do. They bring to mind Pierre Mac Orlan's comment that Atget's pictures looked like the scenes of a crime. Of this Benjamin remarked: 'But is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime? Every passer-by a culprit?'⁵ Indeed, and photography unwittingly reveals it. The relation between crime and the medium may become intimate: Hilla Becher has said that her industrial cataloguing is complete only when its object is destroyed.⁶ There is a curious sense in which fine art delivers the final blow to these structures, their destruction sealing their appropriation.

Sander's ghost is behind much of both exhibitions: the Bechers, Struth and Thomas Ruff are all his descendants. His project is in part so affecting because we search the faces, postures and gestures of his subjects for clues to the global crime that they were about to be caught up in, whether as perpetrators or victims. Struth's distracted viewers in front of tragedy who, despite themselves, create a reflection of it, call to mind the attitude of people in the West before the daily collapse that unfolds on screens before them. Photography, freed of art's vain ambitions and loosed from the vacant space of the gallery, might just serve as a prod to remind us of the condition of the raft we subsist on, its contingency a knot in the handkerchief of the culture industry.

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The Epic and the Everyday is at the Hayward Gallery until the 29th August. *Who's Looking at the Family?* is at the Barbican Gallery until the 4th September.

¹ James Lingwood, 'Different Times', catalogue essay in South Bank Centre, *The Epic and the Everyday. Contemporary Photographic Art*, London, 1994.

² Val Williams, *Who's Looking at the Family?*, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1994, p. 15.

³ *The Epic and the Everyday*, p. 14.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography' (1931), *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London, 1979, p. 243.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁶ Paris, Centre National des Arts Plastiques/ Prato, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, *Un'altra obbiettività/ Another Objectivity*, curated by Jean François Chevrier and James Lingwood, Milan, Idea Books, 1989, p. 57.