COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
RESEARCH SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND THE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART
VISUAL ARTS GRADUATE PROGRAM

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

LEE GRANT

RESEARCH ESSAYS
PRESENTED IN PART FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

2010
Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two parts: the studio practice component, which includes an exegesis documenting the nature of the research undertaken (80%) and two research essays (20%) that explore contemporary themes in photography, specifically relating to portraiture and banality.

The essays in this volume are accompanied by a body of studio research to be presented in the form of an exhibition and book, for examination in June 2010 at the ANU School of Art Gallery.

The first essay is titled “Classifying Objectives: an investigation into the enduring power of typologies in portrait photography”. Here, I consider the endurance of typologies in portrait photography. Beginning in the 19th century, I discuss some of the typological conventions used throughout the 20th century and into the early part of this millennium. Citing the 20th century typological work of August Sander, Diane Arbus and contemporary artists Rineke Dijkstra and Thomas Ruff, I further examine contemporary approaches to the face and body with specific reference to the history and origins of typologies in photographic portraiture.

The second essay is titled, “The divine shock of the ordinary: contemporary photography and the aesthetics of the everyday”, in which I investigate how the photographic gaze in contemporary photography frames the banal and the prosaic in ordinary life. I briefly consider the origins of the snapshot aesthetic and focus primarily on the work of American photographer William Eggleston and English photographers, Martin Parr and Richard Billingham. I also discuss the work of Broomberg and Chanarin and explore how themes of inertia in photography can challenge and reframe the aesthetic encounter; that is, the way in which the image operates and the kind of affect it produces in the viewer.
2 Declaration of Originality

I .................................................. (June 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2010) hereby declare that the dissertation here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.
3 Acknowledgements

Many thanks must go to all those who helped guide me through this visual arts research degree.

I am especially grateful to my supervisors, Dr Martyn Jolly for his honest criticism and ongoing support of my work, as well as Helen Ennis for her insight and patience throughout the writing of my research essays. Nigel Lendon for suggesting the idea of keeping a blog which has allowed me to connect and share my work with so many talented and inspiring photographers, curators and enthusiasts all over the world.

I am very thankful for the support and guidance of my photomedia peers in the postgraduate program at the School of Art, as well as fellow photo-colleagues for their stimulating discussions over long lunches and dinners. To editors, curators and gallerists: Malcolm Smith, Mark McPherson, Mary Meyer, Bob Kersey, Cash Brown, Mark Henshaw and Gael Newton for believing in my work and their kind and continued encouragement.

Thanks also to the library staff of both the ANU School of Art and the National Gallery of Australia for putting up with my overdue returns and for purchasing many of the recommendations I made. Also Anna Raupach and TJ Phillipson at the ANU Inkjet facility for printing my work with great care and patience.

I am hugely indebted to all those people who generously made time to be photographed for my various projects, both in Belconnen and elsewhere (there are simply too many to list here). These encounters have all been uniquely wonderful and I am very grateful to have crossed paths with each and every person.

Finally my deepest gratitude goes to my family, especially my children Charlie and Pia, for accompanying me on my various suburban ‘safaris’ and photographic outings, for being honest and insightful critics and for patiently enduring a highly pre-occupied and photography-obsessed mother.
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4 Classifying Objectives: an investigation into the enduring power of typologies in portrait photography

A portrait!
What could be more simple and more complex,
more obvious and more profound?
(Baudelaire, 1859)
4.1 Introduction: The Photographic Portrait

"I feel certain that the largest part of all photographs ever taken or being taken or ever to be taken, is and will continue to be, portraits. This is not only true, it is also necessary. We are not solitary mammals, like the elephant, the whale and the ape. What is most profoundly felt between us, even if hidden, will reappear in our own portraits of one another." (Ben Maddow, 1977) ¹

Of all photographic practices in use since the invention of photography in the 19th century, none has been as preeminent as portraiture. Linked to the artistic practice of portrait painting, the popular fascination with portrait photography was based upon the desire for, or interest in verisimilitude. Indeed, the most popular photographic portraits from the 19th century were made to be accurate representations of the subject, as was evidenced by the rise of mass-produced cartes-de-visite.

During this early period, when photographic technologies emerged, debate raged as to whether this new medium could in fact be called Art or used for artistic intent. Photography, it was argued, is mechanically produced, free from the discriminations of human eye and hand. Like science, the photographic image was thought to be an objective, accurate record as opposed to a tool for expression. It functioned as evidence, not witness, as the latter is insecurely based in subjectivity. Harnessed to science, to commerce and to exploration, photography was thought “destined to be the faithful servant of reality”.² Indeed, photography progressed well into the 20th century with this idea intact. “It was there! declares the photograph. I was here! declares the photographer.”³ In her seminal work On Photography, published in 1977, the American critic Susan Sontag argued that photography's relationship to reality is inescapably linked to its indexical nature, much like a footprint, or a death mask. However, in his book Portraiture, Richard Brilliant⁴ maintains that no portrait can be anything more than a facsimile of the subject. The portrait as a simulacrum must not only be “differentiated from the original but, as Plato understood, can

never be anything more than a false copy or at the very least, nothing more than a version of the sitter".  

In this context, the ‘portrait’ in photography is considered to be one of the most problematic areas of photographic practice, largely due to its ambiguous nature. The site of contested meanings, the photographic portrait simultaneously represents the photographic image at its most obvious, yet ironically at its most complex. From this, stem questions about gaze, intent and meaning: that is, who is being photographed, how and for what purpose?

The portrait photograph is hence “the site of a complex series of interactions – aesthetic, cultural, ideological, sociological and psychological.... a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and inscription of social identity”6. To better understand the complex nature of the portrait in photographic practice, what Graham Clarke calls the “constant dialectic of significance in which the problem of individual status and self is held”7, this essay will raise the question of what has constituted a ‘photographic portrait’ throughout photography’s 170-year history. Further, it will consider how social uses of portrait photography (particularly in the documentary tradition) have been dependent upon an uneasy dynamic tension between its claims to be an exacting mimetic reproduction of reality and its power to represent a presence that transcends verisimilitude.

From the outset, portraits in photography were employed in various forms with the agreed objective being to:

Display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person. Like other types of portraiture, the focus of the photograph is the person’s face, although the entire body and the background may be included. A portrait is a composed image of a person in a still position and often shows a person looking directly at the camera.8

The invention of photography therefore marked a watershed as far as portraiture was concerned, and it is not difficult to understand why photography had such an instant appeal.

5  Ibid
7  Ibid
Photography immediately and democratically offered the picturing of ourselves both as individuals and collectively. Portraiture, originally only for the well to do, quickly became available to the masses through the relatively low cost of first, the daguerreotype and later the tintype and cartes-de-visite.

In these early days of photography many believed and hoped that the camera would prove more efficient than the human eye. Indeed, whilst photographic portraiture flourished, photography was also used to examine the human body. Closely linked to science, it was believed photography could enable new understandings of our exterior appearance. By capturing the unseen, the camera also became a primary tool in the sciences dedicated to the interior workings of both the body and mind.

By the mid-19th century, photography was beginning to be widely applied to the infant disciplines of physical and cultural anthropology as well as biology, economics and politics. In their exhibition catalogue *The Beautiful and the Damned*, Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves assert that this was given wider impetus as a result of Charles Darwin’s theories of natural selection and its consequent science of evolutionism. In addition to this, colonial interests in surveying and exploring unknown territories and unknown people gave rise to the use of photography as a means to “incorporate ‘natives’ of all sorts within the wider scheme of human classification.” This growing interest in the ‘new sciences’ relied heavily on extensive data. The notion of measurable inherited differences between races and ‘types’ dominated scientific thinking at the time. The mechanical nature of photography with its evidentiary ability to record such data and the belief that ‘the camera never lies’, sat comfortably within the taxonomic imperatives of Victorian science. Accordingly, through this process of imaging both ourselves and others and through the careful measuring and observation of the body and face, photography became the tool before which an individual could be submitted to scrutiny by various agencies (medical, judicial, moral etc...), each with their own agendas.

Works by Dr Hugh Welch Diamond (founder of the Photographic Society) and Francis Galton (considered the ‘father of eugenics’) in the late 19th century attest to the belief that

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9 Interestingly, Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* was one of the first scientific texts to systematically use photographs.

the face is capable of expressing the inner sanctum of an individual. Diamond’s “Types of Madness” portraits, mostly of female mental patients in various emotional states, were used as an instrument for physiognomic diagnosis as well as to illustrate the success of their therapeutic and psychological treatment, though there is little evidence to suggest that these treatments were successful. 

Galton produced composite photographs to pinpoint common characteristics of criminals and other types (with a disconcerting anti-Semitic focus). His process, much like Diamond’s, was founded on the physiognomic idea that a person’s character and potential could be established through appearance alone. This involved combining a number of individual portraits of a chosen group of people “through repeated limited exposure to produce a single blended image”. The resulting composite images had the effect of removing the subjects’ individual physiognomic qualities, instead accentuating common characteristics of the chosen group. Writing about these photographs, Galton suggested that they “portrayed no specific type of person, but rather an imaginary figure endowed with the average characteristics of a specific group of people. [...] This represents the portrait of a type and not of an individual.”

Both Diamond and Galton were considered pioneers in the early photographic movement from which point, photography viewed as “evidence, a form of proof, a bearer of visual information, a record” would not fail to inspire. Portraits were thus believed to embody

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13 Ibid
one's moral character and intellect, as these traits were believed to be reflected in one's face and expression.\textsuperscript{15}

![Plate 4-2 Francis Galton, "Composite-Fotografie"](image)

Other repressive agencies such as the judiciary (with its anthropometric tendencies to characterise a criminal type) and the museums' dedicated collection of racial typologies inevitably gave rise to the use of photography as a bearer of evidence. With its seemingly unbiased tendencies to imprint light, photography thus became in many instances, a scientific methodology; posing, recording and describing the world in a rigorously scientific and colonial fashion.

Photographers also contributed to the gathering of 'scientific' data and were considered an integral component of colonial exploration. It was not uncommon for photographers to be commissioned for expedition to foreign countries – particularly the colonies – where they traveled with others in search of business opportunities. Many engaged in the production of ethnographic or anthropological portraits. One such photographer was the German-born

\textsuperscript{15} An interesting contemporary reference is American photographer Nancy Burson, whose composite photographs challenge earlier attempts to classify human physiognomies by the likes of both Galton and Diamond. See http://www.nancyburson.com/pages/fineart_pages/earlycomps.html

J.W. Lindt, who traveled to Australia and made his reputation in the 1870s for his portraits of Aboriginal people made in his Grafton studio between 1873 and 1876.

Plate 4-3  J.W Lindt, Portrait of Aboriginal women and baby. From the portfolio 'Australian Aboriginals', c.1873, Grafton, NSW.

By the end of the 19th century, photography became the “defining representational medium of its age”. By the beginning of the 20th century, the ubiquity of portrait photography in particular meant that most societies had become subject to the camera’s gaze.

As a method of recording information, observing and classifying individuals from all walks of life, photography’s place in the pantheon of modern invention and science was ensured.

4.2 August Sander

The impact of the First World War saw a trend towards a different style of portrait photography. These photographs depicted people within their own environments and the clarity of their presence was accepted as revelatory of their condition and personage. These first stirrings of modernism became known as the “New Photography” movement, and are best characterized by the work of German photographer, August Sander.

In 1929, sixty of Sander’s portraits were published in the book Antlitz der Zeit (Face of Our Time), as a precursor to his crowning publication Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts (Citizens of the Twentieth Century). Sander was a modern man and believed that physiognomy could reveal class and occupation. Accordingly, his monumental work was conceived as a genealogy of a people – a ‘chart of humanity’ – where he sought to capture everyday people with the purpose of recording the cultural value of German citizens.

The series is divided into seven sections: The Farmer, The Skilled Tradesman, The Woman, Classes and Professions, The Artists, The City, and The Last People (homeless persons, veterans, etc...). By 1945, Sander's archive included over 40,000 images. The portraits are highly detailed and show people in their working or everyday attire, sometimes accompanied by the tools or symbols of their trade. To indicate the universal scope of his project, Sander never listed the name of a subject and his portraits are labeled simply after the person’s occupation (or lack thereof): a boxer, an accountant, an arist, a cook, a bricklayer and so on. These titles serve as a means of organisation, much in the same way that anthropologists of the time catalogued ethnographic data. Indeed as the German novelist Alfred Doblin wrote in the original publication’s introduction:

> Seen from a certain distance, the differences [between the subjects] vanish, the individual ceases to exist, and the universality is all that remains.

Sander’s subjects then are above all, social beings who assume their place in “a dense hierarchy of meaning established through social difference and distinction.”

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18 Anne H. Hoy, *The Book of Photography: the history, the technique, the art, the future* (The National Geographic Society & Random House: 2005), 85
photographed his subjects in a studio, believing that the environment in which the individual lived or worked symbolized an extension of their identity. The Pastry Cook, taken in 1928, is one of Sander’s best-known images. Here the stove, the floor, the flour and the boxes all reveal the public role of the man. John Szarkowski in 1963 described Sander’s baker as “soft and white and as fat as his dough, arrogant, impregnably insular, pettily expert, standing solidly outside of time, as ancient and indestructible as gluttony.”

A closer inspection of this portrait reveals the cook’s white, straight collared uniform, which dominates the photograph, creating a glowing, central mass and drawing the attention of the eye. It envelops a round man with buttons slightly tighter around the belly of the uniform and sleeves rolled up in neat, crisp cuffs. The man’s round face, which matches his corpulent body, is expressionless; his round eyes stare forward and his chin turns proudly upward. The cook poses for Sander and it’s his dignified involvement in this process that dominates the photograph.

Golo Mann in The History of Germany suggests that Sander’s subjects were noble people, not necessarily meaning that they were highborn, but that they presented themselves with

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22 Golo Mann, The History of Germany Since 1789, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 368
dignified reserve whether their place in society was high or low; that they commanded respect from the photographer and received it. "He shows them as they would wish to be known," Mann wrote. Sander's presentation of his fellow citizens is typical of the generic and commercial portraiture traditions from which he grew, however Mann finds a rare collusion between the sitter and the artist who does not fear that letting the subject appear "in a beautiful state" will render the art shallow. Sander allowed his subjects to present themselves as they wished. And he was never ironic. None of his sitters seem insincere in their presentation; many smile, some generously, and they are each and every one of them, honourable. Most are presented in their Sunday best, even when they are out of the studio (see Young Farmers, 1914 and Farm Girls, 1918). Indeed, a Sander subject is more often than not meticulous in his suit or her dress for Sander's camera, their postures revealing a strong Prussian sensibility. The 'Junglehrer' (Student-Teacher) taken in 1927, captures this perfectly. His fine figure, dutiful dog (a German shepherd no less) and his conservative outfit say it all. As Leo Rubenfien points out, in many of Sander's best photographs "the face is a mask, but the clothes are a face".

Plate 4-5 'Junglehrer' (Student-Teacher), c 1927 – 28

Golo Mann, "Zu Diesem Heft," #225, November 1959, 12
Ibid
Sander’s consistent choice of camera angle is an important nod to 19th century ethnographic practice whereby a traditional full-frontal pose might suggest more clues as to the subject’s culture, identity and place. Throughout his career he remained loyal to his large format camera with glass plate negatives, a slow and cumbersome apparatus. By photographing people using the same straight manner of the previous century’s portrait conventions, the photograph’s narrative extends beyond the subject to include the environment, facial expressions and body language, as well as physical adornments such as uniforms and other clothing props. This approach is suggestive of the way in which the whole space of a body’s presence is given value.

Furthermore, Sander ensured that every detail would contribute to a sense of the subject and their place in German society. These details are moreover tied to history: they are referential, clues to the era they were taken in, and of the society the subject inhabited. He let his camera say everything about their fur collars, hounds, walking sticks, military medals and anxious wrinkles. They seem to want to be seen; indeed they have placed themselves before the camera, to be scrutinized by Sander whose credo was simple:

> I am not concerned with providing commonplace photographs like those made in the finer large-scale studios of the city, but simple, natural portraits that show the subjects in an environment corresponding to their own individuality.26

The essence of his photographs might thus be revealed in the examination of their precise details. Collectively, Sander’s portraits were viewed as significant cultural and social representations of the Weimar Republic, a view that contradicted the Nazi’s Aryan propaganda. Antlitz der Zeit, which in English translates as The Face of Our Time was published and well received in 1929, however it was among the many books that without explanation was banned by the Nazis after they came into power. In 1936 the publisher’s inventory of copies was confiscated and all Sander’s printing plates, destroyed. With that,

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the chances of realizing the massive Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts (his massive seven-volume work that consisted largely of portraits) under the Third Reich vanished.27

Looking at Sander’s work today, the power of his photographs lies in the fact that he insisted on photographing the ordinary in extraordinary times. With the benefit of hindsight we become privy to a series of portraits that capture both a subtle artfulness yet reveal the complex, psychological depth of how Sander felt it meant to be German.

The work of August Sander is now regarded as one of the key projects in photographic portrait history and the influence of his archetypal formalism continues to have a major impact on portrait photography. This influence was most recently acknowledged with an exhibition in New York called Sander’s Children: Figurative Photography in the Tradition of August Sander. Exploring the lasting legacy of Sander’s typological approach, photographers such as Rineke Dijkstra, Diane Arbus, Albrecht Tubke and William Eggleston, amongst many others, were featured.

27 Nevertheless, Sander continued to refine it in private. He photographed (though in reduced volume) throughout the late ’30s and ’40s and into the ’50s, over time increasing the number of pictures in Menschen, adding such groups as “The Persecuted” (Jews) as well as “Foreign Workers.”
Plate 4-8 2008 Exhibition catalogue for "Sander's Children: Figurative photography in the tradition of August Sander", which explored the lasting legacy of Sander's typological approach.

The images presented in the exhibition, including artist statements in the catalogue, reveal Sander's formative influence on these photographers' styles. Taken over a period of six decades following Sander's active life as a photographer, the exhibited images are a testament to the enduring legacy of Sander's seminal work and demonstrate the extraordinary endurance and interest in typological portraits within the medium.

Plate 4-9 Rineke Dijkstra, Ponteland High School, Newcastle UK, 2000

Plate 4-10 Albrecht Tubke from the series, "Twins", 2001
Not long after Sander’s death in 1964, the American photographer Diane Arbus was introduced to his work by John Szarkowski, then director of photography for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Sander’s work was to have a lasting influence on her approach and style, specifically the way in which she classified her subjects and posed them.
In many ways, Sander was a photographer whose ambition and perception most resembled Arbus’s own. Both photographers were seeking clarity through their images. To look at their oeuvres, viewers can appreciate their efforts in conveying their respective societies during times of cultural, social and psychological upheaval. Sander and Arbus typically invested time with their subjects and both photographed them within their own environments rather than in a studio. What fascinated Arbus about Sander was his psychological reach, which she adopted and applied to her own work to great effect.

Arbus also photographed many of the same subjects as Sander (carnival performers, midgets, women in slinky dresses, blind people, twins etc...), and comparing their work is insightful. For example, Sander’s portrait of fraternal twins, from 1925, shows an eager-to-please girl and a dour, conservative little boy; one might imagine the roles they are preparing to play later in life. In contrast, Arbus’s 1967 portrait of identical twin girls is a kind of psychological x-ray. The girl on the right smiles willingly and trustingly. The one on the left however, is slightly off-kilter: her eyes are misaligned, her mouth is pursed, her stockings are bunched at the knees, even the bobby pins on her white headband have slipped below her eyes. Wearing identical frocks, the girls are standing so close that they
seem to be joined at the hip, "two facets of the same soul".\textsuperscript{28} A quote written by Arbus in 1959 provides a meaningful caption to this image, "what's left after what one isn't, taken away is what one is".\textsuperscript{29}

Exploring New York's marginalised subcultures, Arbus achieved some notoriety from her images of people who seemed emotionally or physically aggrieved. Her subjects included awkward adolescents, the tattooed, sideshow and circus performers, nudists and other so-called 'freaks', the matter-of-fact term she coined for her subjects. Arbus is herself quoted in words that could best be described as bohemian (and at worst, adolescent):

Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot... There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats.\textsuperscript{30}

Arbus's fascination with the human flaw is obsessively portrayed throughout her oeuvre. Working in the 60s and 70s her portraits of New York society's fringe are at times unsettling in their directness, but there is always a sense of complicity between those pictured and the photographer. Some have argued that the Rolleiflex camera which Arbus favoured,\textsuperscript{31} a camera not held to the eye but used at waist-level, placed her in direct rapport with the people she was photographing. This stance changed her relationship with her subjects; Arbus became less an observer and more a collaborator. Instead of looking at her subjects, she made them look at her.

As Arbus told a class of photography students in 1971:

The camera is a kind of license [in getting people to open up]... There are always two things that happen. One is recognition and the other is that it's totally peculiar. But there's some sense in which I always identify with them... [Yet] it's impossible

\textsuperscript{31} http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/photo/essays/vanRiper/030925.htm Accessed 23/4/09
to get out of your skin into somebody else’s... somebody else’s tragedy is not the same as your own.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Plate 4-17} Diane Arbus, \textit{A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, NY, 1970}

From the mid-'60s onward and using a medium-format camera, Arbus's pictures look more and more posed, not by the photographer alone, but also by the person before her lens. In many photographs, her sitters become fully active partners in their own depiction, performers of their own self-image.

The interplay between the subject and photographer is important to consider, particularly when notions of power underpin such relationships. Indeed, Arbus's sitters might be viewed as actors within their own surroundings and as she cleverly reveals, the primary force of the picture stems also, from the gestures of the subjects themselves.

Her ability to read people and convince them to pose resulted in enough trust for people to emerge momentarily from themselves for her camera. In the streets of New York, they would stand and let themselves be, unchanged, just as they were: a state the Japanese call ‘sonomama’\textsuperscript{33}, characterized by a pose of total naturalness and total attention. In relation to this, Roland Barthes further suggests that, “once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing’, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image”.\textsuperscript{34}

Transformation for the photograph is what Arbus seems to want to convey. She once said, “I truly believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them.”\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, her pictures are psychologically naked and often unsettling, particularly because so often people divulge unflattering truths in their attempts to either hide or reveal certain aspects of themselves – real or imagined.

\textsuperscript{33} Japanese for “without change” (uk; a-no), “as it is” (i.e. now).
During her lifetime, Arbus was greatly admired, but she was also castigated for being exploitative, "the nasty work of a rich girl slumming it". With her documentary realism and eccentric selection of subjects, she exposed cowardice, ignorance and venality, her harshest commentary being saved for those at the center of the ruling class (a reaction to her over-privileged upbringing perhaps). Her debutantes and society dames seem to have been drained of their life-blood long ago. Arbus's pro-war demonstrators are caricatures of twisted patriotism. And her 1968 portrait of a family in their backyard is a study not only of suburban alienation but a metaphor for the turbulent times of the Vietnam era in which it was taken.

Plate 4-19 Diane Arbus. A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, NY, 1968.

However, Arbus's choice of subject matter was not particularly unique. Odd-looking and socially transgressive people have always attracted the attention of artists. But unlike other artists who "only went backstage for the performance, Arbus went home with her subjects,

literally and emotionally”. 37 Arthur Lubow, writing for the *NY Times Magazine*, suggests that this emotional investment is why “her portraits of a young man in hair curlers or a half-dressed dwarf in bed retain the power to shock. It isn’t necessarily the subjects that unnerve us: her photographs of an upper-class woman in pearls or a pair of twins with headbands can be just as startling. What shocks is the intimacy.”38 Indeed, Arbus herself pointed out that “I don’t like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself”.39

When Arbus took a picture, she instinctively found the right place to stand. Her vantage point denies the viewer any protective distance. Judith Goldman, writing in 1974, further proposes that the mesmerizing power of Arbus’s photographs is also their problem. That power, she claims, derives from Arbus’s choice of subject matter but more importantly, from her handling of the subject:

Each picture acts like a visual boomerang; freaks and lonely people scare us into looking first at them and then back at ourselves. Arbus’s camera reflected the visual confrontations we choose not to have, the appearance of horrors that stop us but are hard to see. That is never easy. Yet should it be as difficult as her pictures seem to make it? We come away from an Arbus photograph never having seen the whole picture. The visual statement is strangely unresolved and incomplete, not because we get stuck in our own frame, but because her handling of subject prevents it. Something about her honesty is dishonest.40

The difficulty with Arbus’s photographs may also stem from the time in which they were created. The 1960s was a decade of colliding forces and her images were sensational in upending conventional definitions of normality. Leo Rubinfien writes that, “her fascination with eccentricity and masquerade brought her into an unforeseeable convergence with her era, making her one of its essential voices.”41

38 Ibid
For Arbus though, there was nothing pathetic or repulsive about 'freaks'. One of her most famous pictures is *A Young Brooklyn Family Going for a Sunday Outing, NYC, 1966*.

With her fashionable Priscilla hairdo and heavily penciled eyebrows, the woman also channels Elizabeth Taylor, an aspiration that inevitably, she doesn't quite achieve. She seems overburdened with her tote, camera, leopard-skin coat and a rather big baby and although she is looking straight ahead, she seems distracted by private concerns. The baby's arms and face reach forward and her husband's quiet gaze acknowledges the camera. The only off-kilter figure in the portrait is their son, a disabled child, his eyes, head and body all askew, his small hand held firmly by his father. Unlike the mother, the father is grasping onto nothing else but his son, whose crooked body fills the gap between his parents. The book *Revelations* establishes that Arbus spent considerable time in this family's home after which she later wrote, "They were undeniably close in a painful sort of way."\(^{42}\)

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Arbus’s photographic technique played a complementary role to her approach. Whilst she always made her own prints, the technical aspects of photography never really appealed to her. Nevertheless, she always knew precisely what look she was after, and would improvise technically to achieve it. She was proficient at using a combination of both artificial and natural light and regularly employed an on-camera flash to highlight her subjects’ features (and foibles), often isolating them within their own environments. Arbus was also very specific in her use of chemistry to process her films and in 1965 began printing her negatives with the black border exposed, as if to emphasize both that the image was un-cropped and thus unaltered, and also to prove that in the end it was only a photograph, thus sabotaging its pretensions to truth. "For me the subject of the picture is always more important than the picture," she once said. "And more complicated."43

Arbus’s deceptively simple images belie their implicit complexity. They reflect her concern with identity and belonging but also suggest themes of difference and how the act of looking and judgment are innately human traits. Walter Benjamin recognized the camera’s telling eye for psychological truths, where the subject is betrayed by chance gestures or fleeting expressions and was interested in how these might incriminate the subject. Arbus’s genius lay in her ability to be intimate enough with her subjects to intuitively draw out and illustrate her subjects’ characters through exactly these gestures and expressions that Benjamin discusses.

Her untimely suicide in 1971 only enhanced people’s fascination with her work. It also affirmed the Faustian44 legend that artists must pay for plumbing the depths of experience for their audience, despite the fact that Arbus herself viewed her bouts of depression as ‘goddamn chemical’45. Arthur Lubow describes Arbus as being “like a dowser of despair. [She] had picked up the signal of misery.”46 Her daughter Doon suggests that Arbus

44 “Faust” (and the adjective “Faustian”) has taken on a connotation distinct from its original use, and is often used today to describe an unsavory, ultimately self-destructive arrangement; the proverbial “deal with the devil”. It can also refer to an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faust (accessed 4/1/10)
preferred receiving confidences to giving them, one reason why photography was a natural medium for her. "She wanted to contend with something else, not express herself."  

Perhaps Arbus’s subjects sensed her vulnerability and were compelled to relinquish their inhibitions. Szarkowski observes that people were just as interested in her as she was in them. The results of these exchanges are revealed in her pictures which show how unguarded people appeared, projecting frankly to her camera and allowing it – and therefore us – to observe uncomfortable, raw and intimate moments in their lives. By gazing directly at Arbus’s camera, they seem to be gazing directly at us.

4.4 Thomas Ruff

The decade following Arbus’s death saw the development of the postmodern movement, a period in which a number of artists employed typological methods in portrait photography. Chief among these were the European photographers Thomas Ruff and Rineke Dijkstra. In Ruff’s series of portraits of the 80s and 90s, his friends and family are typically shown with emotionless expressions, in oversized passport-style photographs, the detail of which can be confronting and overwhelming to the viewer. Ruff’s work is reminiscent of the industrial typologies of his teachers, Bernd and Hilla Becher; though in this instance he uses the face rather than buildings and structures to differentiate the minutiae of individual appearance. Ruff’s subjects never smile. His portraits seem almost empty because they “have a sense of capturing real reality”. As constructs of the ubiquitous identification photograph he asserts that they also reflect the politics of his generation:

We grew up in the seventies. And in the seventies in Germany we had a so-called ‘Terrorismushysterie’: the secret service surveyed people who were against nuclear

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48 Interviewed in Masters of Photography: Part 4, Diane Arbus  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nC12FgLU (Accessed 21/4/09)  
49 “Postmodern” literally means ‘after modernism’ and can be understood as a reaction to modernism. Whereas modernism was often associated with identity, unity, authority, and certainty, postmodernism is often associated with difference, separation, textuality, and skepticism.  
50 Known for their large-scale industrial typologies, Bernd and Hilla Becher taught at the famous Dusseldorf School in Germany.  
power; the government created or invented a so-called 'Berufsverbot'. This meant left-wing teachers were dismissed, so sometimes it was better not to tell what you were thinking. All over we have those video cameras, in the supermarkets, the car park. In big places everywhere you've got those cameras. If you stand in front of a customs officer, you try to make a face like the one in your passport. So why should my portraits be communicative at a time when you could be prosecuted for your sympathies.52

Whist Ruff profited from the Becher's lessons, he quickly distinguished himself from his teachers by delving into colour, a move that radically challenged the presumed authenticity of the black-and-white image on which traditions of documentary photography had long been based. As he points out: "Colour is close to reality. The eye sees in color. Black and white is too abstract for me."53

53 Ibid
Ruff began his photographic portraits of friends and fellow art students in 1980. The portrait series, which now numbers in excess of one hundred, are identified only by name. They otherwise remain anonymous. In a style reminiscent of Sander's, Ruff's instruction to each sitter is simple: that they project themselves as they wish to appear.

Ruff's earlier portraits in the series were printed to life size. His insistence, however, that "photography is merely a technique for the creation of pictures — just like paintings" led him to use flat, neutral lighting that renders every facial feature starkly visible when enlarged to five times its original life size. It's as if he wished to question the camera's status as a reliable witness. Since 1986 he has produced his photographs exclusively in this oversized format. Ruff's photographs challenge the notion that appearance can achieve representation. He asserts that he has no desire to get at some deeper meaning or the inner essence of what he photographs, yet he recognizes that aesthetic judgments or socio-cultural content are inscribed there. His published interviews indicate that he is a photographer who knows precisely where his interests lie (in the image produced and its means of production) and precisely where his control leaves off (at the level of interpretation). He has stated that:

My portraits look so Apollonian because the sitters provide a perfect surface onto which the viewer can project anything, bad and good experiences alike. They’re neutral and friendly, like Buddhas. They’re vessels you can fill with all of your wishes and desires.

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Thus his subjects are given over to our scrutiny. As such, his oft-cited claim that "photography can only reproduce the surface of things" must be tempered with his assertion that "what people see, eventually, is only what's already inside them."

Ruff emerges as an aloof technician. Whilst he is interested in the workings of the camera, he isn’t at all concerned with the psychology of his subjects, or indeed in anything interior. His portraits seem distant and are anonymous; even the human face (for Walter Benjamin, the last refuge of the ‘aura’) has been drawn into the camera’s machinery, leaving no trace of subjective life. The young Germans in the Portraits 1987-89 series appear less as individual people than as samples from some scientific typography. The results are repetitious and almost dull, but he pushes his approach so far, that dullness becomes fascinating, and on occasion somewhat disturbing. For Ruff, psychology and subjectivity are suspect notions, that blur and distort what is actually there, ultimately making a ‘realistic’ approach impossible. Asked to define ‘realism’, Ruff replies in uber-postmodern style: “letting the machine do the work it would do anyway. If things are the way they are, why should I try to make them look different?”

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57 Ibid
In the end, perhaps it is his ability to maintain this tension between what we see and what we think we see, between what is there and what seems to be there that holds us captive to his art of making pictures.

Plate 4-24 Thomas Ruff

4.5 Rineke Dijkstra

Dutch art photographer Rineke Dijkstra also adopts a typological methodology. Working in series of mostly individual portraits, she focuses on people in transitional stages of life, such as adolescents and pre-adolescents on the beach (Beach series), women who have just given birth (Mothers series), refugee and migrant children (Almerisa series) as well as new army recruits (Israeli Soldiers series). Placing her subjects against minimalist backgrounds, she faces them towards the camera. The simplicity of her photographs persuades us to focus our attention on the isolated subject. Dijkstra's intention is to make normal things appear special but to also have them firmly planted in reality. Like Sander, Arbus and Ruff before her, she eschews the details of her subject's surroundings:

If you show too much of a subject's personal life, the viewer will immediately make assumptions. If you leave out the details, the viewer has to look for much subtler hints such as how her shoelaces are tied, or her lipstick or the state of her nail varnish.59

![Plate 4-25 Rineke Dijkstra, Almerisa, the Netherlands, 1994 - 2002](image)

In Dijkstra’s *Beach* series, taken between 1992 and 1996 in Poland, the Ukraine, Belgium, Croatia, England and North America, she positions teenagers in the middle of the composition in the most classically formulaic and symmetrical way possible. But although ostensibly a simple, repetitive format, her approach emphasises difference rather than uniformity. The more you look, the more the metaphors pile up. Certainly, Dijkstra works from the premise that portraiture is an art of surface predicated on a paradox; that the rendering of someone’s features could somehow ultimately reveal more than just their outward appearance.

![Plate 4-26 Rineke Dijkstra, Beach portraits series, 1992 - 1996](image)

This is never more obvious than in her *Beach* portraits, in which that terrible transitional time of adolescence is emphasised by the subject’s isolation, the semi-nudity and by the literally shifting ground these young people stand on, between the earth, sea and sky. What could so easily be overlooked – the slight clenching of a young girl’s fist, an awkward hip bone, oily pores, a tiny scar, a strand of hair – is blown up and dignified, but never exaggerated. The tiny, unavoidable signifiers of individual experience subsume cultural differences; it is impossible to tell where any of these beaches are, or where any of these kids come from.
Like Sander with Arbus, it is also instructive to compare the approach of Dijkstra with these predecessors. The people she photographs often bear a name, but equally represent a group, a phenomenon that transcends the purely individual. In this sense she is a disciple of both Arbus and Sander’s typological approach to portraiture. Dijkstra records the location and date of the photograph, but not the name of the person who exists as its subject. She uses a large-format camera like Sander but in a modern twist employs an electronic flash to highlight detail and sharpness like Arbus. Dijkstra insists that she never manipulates that information to imply any message or understanding. Which is interesting since all of this intent isolates the paradox of portraiture, in fact of photography overall, and of the human experience they both attempt to approach: that a surplus of facts is no guarantee of knowledge. As photographer and mentor Lisette Model once told Arbus, “the more specific you are, the more general it’ll be”. Dijkstra’s portraits give us more than we ask for and in doing so she grants her subjects a level of dignity at an awkward time in their lives.

A concern that re-emerged in the 90s was the search for authenticity and the desire for truth. This is core to the work of Dijkstra. The visual language she employs in her attempts to reveal the hidden is not so much rhetorical in nature than it is modest. As Hripsimme Visser suggests:

The introverted silence of the subjects of her portraits is given an almost monumental presence that ambiguously seizes the viewer and never lets go of them.61

Whilst her subjects clearly belong to a defined group – almost Sanderesque – what is unique to Dijkstra’s approach is not that she photographs “the group or the individual and his or her rootage in society, but that she captures elusiveness and intangibility.”62 What links all of Dijkstra’s subjects together then, is not so much their individual identity but “the simple fact that they are vehicles, possibly to reveal something that is essential to our humanity.”63

61 Hripsimme Visser, “Regarding the photographs of Rineke Dijkstra” in Rineke Dijkstra: Monograph (Hatje Cantz: 2004), 11
62 Ibid, 13
63 Ibid, 11
Plate 4-27  Rineke Dijkstra, Isabel, June 26, 2003

Plate 4-28  Rineke Dijkstra, The Buzzclub, Liverpool, UK & Mysteryworld, Zaandam, NL 1996-1997
4.6 Conclusion: The Endurance of Typologies in Portraiture

It is naked, mysterious and commonplace. It haunts our work, our love and our fantasies. We read a face as we read a clock: to orient ourselves, to see what we are right now, right here, to place ourselves and everyone else in the nervous entanglements of our own society. (Ben Maddow, 1977)

The enduring interest in the human face and what can be revealed through a photograph is founded in the early social sciences and 19th century pursuits to better comprehend the nature of humanity. Today, the activity of photographing people has become a complex form of social interaction, yet photographic portraiture is one of the few genres in which both the subject and the artist continue to successfully insist on our attention.

Contemporary photographic practice that draws from earlier traditions of typologies in portraiture is still imbricated in ideas of place, trace and memory. As Ruff asserts, such photographs can never be a blank slate, but come with historical and social baggage intact. They are essentially about culture and the phenomena of culture – the culture of the subject as well as the culture of the photographer and the viewer. The photograph itself then becomes a document of this triangular relationship. As Anne Hoy points out, “in the resulting sense of actuality lies much of the portrait’s force”. Paradoxically, we remain drawn to our own enigma, one in which the face plays centre stage but frustratingly reveals very little. Indeed, whilst photographic portraits often promise to tell stories about their subjects and their lives, they seldom deliver. They show far more detail than we could ever remember had we not brought a camera – more, actually, than we see – and we are inclined to try to work the portrait’s details into a meaningful, causal order. It is hard not to wonder about the subjects in a portrait, but photographs are cripples at outcomes and the material of narration is mostly beyond them. Nevertheless we cannot stop ourselves from looking and we continue to look for something deeper, hidden in the veiled expressions of the human face.

In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes considers photography’s unique relationship to the genre of portraiture and our ongoing search for meaning:

64 Anne H. Hoy, The Book of Photography: the history, the technique, the art, the future (The National Geographic Society & Random House: 2005), 85
What I want, in short is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) ‘self’; but it is the contrary that must be said: ‘myself’ never coincides with my images; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and ‘myself’ which is light, divided, dispersed.65

Portraits inevitably fail to convey our inner life, yet we continue to pose for them; and the images that are produced function to identify us even when we don’t recognize ourselves in them. And whilst many people have felt that what photographs cannot show must be revealed with captions66 “the poetic ambiguity born in the imbalance between photography’s overabundant detail and its poverty in everything else surely is the medium’s true gift to the modern arts”.67

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65 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida (Hill and Wang: 1981), 12
The divine shock of the ordinary: contemporary photography and the aesthetics of the everyday.

If you want to see the invisible, carefully observe the visible.
(The Talmud)
5.1 Definitions and usage of various terms:

This essay explores the increased interest in banal and deadpan photography in contemporary art. Though closely linked to vernacular photography i.e. snapshots and the photography of the everyday, I do not seek to discuss ‘vernacular photography’ in the context of an academic theory as related by scholars such as Geoffrey Batchen. Rather I use the terms ‘banal’ and deadpan’ as an aesthetic interpretation of the vernacular that also references the snapshot. The following definitions have been sourced from the Encarta-Webster’s Dictionary.

**Banal:** *ban-al adj*
boringly ordinary and lacking in originality

**Deadpan:** *dead-pan adj*
1. deliberately showing no expression or emotion
2. spoken or delivered with no expression or emotion

**Snapshot:** *snap-shot n*
1. a photograph, especially one taken by an amateur with simple equipment.
   Also called a snap
2. a record or view of a particular point in a sequence of events or continuing process

**Other terms of interest:**

**Ennui:** *en-nui n*
weariness and dissatisfaction with life that results from a loss of interest or sense of excitement

**Boring:** *bor-ing adj*
stimulating no interest or enthusiasm

**Candid:** *can-did adj*
1. honest or direct in a way that people find either refreshing or distasteful
2. photographed or filmed without the subject knowing or having the opportunity to prepare or pose
3. free from prejudice or bias (archaic)
4. with innocence or purity of heart untainted by malicious thoughts and feelings (archaic)

n. a photograph that is taken, unposed and informally, of a person or group

**Prosaic**: pro·sa·ic adj
1. not having any features that are interesting or imaginative
2. characteristic of, resembling, or consisting of prose
3. lacking complications or subtleties

**Mundane**: mun·dane adj
1. commonplace, not unusual, and often boring
2. relating to matters of this world
5.2 Introduction: the banal photograph

We have a birth certificate to show that we were born and a death certificate to show that we died. Photographs show that we lived. (Author unknown)\(^{68}\)

The emergence of the banal in our visual lexicon can be traced to both a rich history of traditional photographic practice (portrait, documentary and so on) as well as prosaic usage (vernacular photography). This essay seeks to identify the lineage of banal and deadpan in contemporary photography through the work of American photographer William Eggleston, as well as English photographers Martin Parr and Richard Billingham. The work of English duo Broomberg and Chanarin is discussed to demonstrate how the aesthetic of banality in photography can challenge and reframe the aesthetic encounter, that is, the way in which a ‘boring’ photograph with seemingly ‘boring’ subject-matter might evoke an emotional and thus meaningful response in the viewer.

The origins of banal – or as it is sometimes called, deadpan photography – in contemporary art might be found by delving into the family snapshot album and looking closely at the aesthetic of the candid or vernacular image. Snapshots are ubiquitous photographs generally made by ordinary people. In capturing the everyday and the familiar, they have preserved on film the ceremonies of their lives (and thus the sociological shaping of public rituals), their loved ones and the places in which they lived and visited. David Kenyon, a British cultural studies scholar, suggests that, “vernacular photography is the shared picture language of ordinary people... a language that allows for the exploration of personal experience through picturing [my italics].”\(^{69}\)

Photographs of travel and holidays, family snapshots, photos of friends, class portraits, identification photographs and photo-booth images all concern themselves with the documentation of the domestic – moments that, when photographed, become episodic narratives with an important function of memory.

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The term ‘snapshot aesthetic’ was first theorised in 1908 by Austrian critic, Joseph August Lux, who championed the use of Kodak cameras like the Box Brownie in his book Künsterlische Kodakgeheimnisse (Artistic Secrets of the Kodak). He argued that the ease of using the camera meant that people could photograph and document their surroundings and thus produce a type of stability in the ebb and flow of the modern world.70

The first half of the twentieth century saw major technological advancements in photography enabling the proliferation of vernacular photography by the masses. This process of the medium’s democratization, along with the development of the conceptual art71 movement in the 1960s, would have a major impact on the development of fine art photography’s interest in banality as a genre and the snapshot as an aesthetic tool.

Since the mid-1960s, conceptual artists have denied any interest in photography per se. From the artists’ perspective, photography was only useful or interesting insofar as it was instrumental in conveying or recording ideas. Dennis Oppenheim declared the photographs

71 “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” (Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, Artforum, June 1967) http://www.marimateroneill.com/pub/sol_lewitt_paragraphs_1967.pdf (accessed 10/5/10)
"were there simply to indicate a radical art that had already vanished. The photograph was necessary only as a residue for communication."\textsuperscript{72}

This lack of investment in photography allowed conceptual artists to generate new possibilities for the medium. However, they were not alone in this enterprise. During the late 1960s, fine art photographers such as Gary Winogrand, Lee Friedlander and Diane Arbus shared the conceptualists' interest in identifying and subverting the conventions of photographic vision. The era in which Winogrand, Friedlander and Arbus worked is important to note, as they were situated within the context of an urban post-war society. They portrayed America at a cultural crossroads, a country becoming increasingly associated with consumerism and television. The banality of everyday life became their motif and they expressed it through snapshot-inspired 'street' photographs.

As an identifiable trend in fine art photography, the term 'snapshot aesthetic' did not emerge until Szarkowski\textsuperscript{73} brought to prominence the work of Winogrand, Friedlander and Arbus in his influential exhibition "New Documents" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1967. This exhibition identified a new trend in photography: pictures that seemed to have a casual, snapshot-like look and portrayed their subject matter as ordinarily as an amateur might.\textsuperscript{74} Off-centered and abstract compositions were favoured and subject matter was presented with little linear narrative, relying instead on the juxtaposition and apparent disjunction between photographs.

The 'snapshot aesthetic' boasted a broad aesthetic range and with Szarkowski's curatorial influence, the trend became especially fashionable from the late 1970s on, as in the work of Stephen Shore, Martin Parr, William Eggleston and others. A spate of books and magazine portfolios from the 1970s onward celebrated vernacular photographic genres, and in the case of the snapshot often emphasized the humorous and disturbing ways that point-and-shoot cameras exposed the workings of photography's marriage of artifice and fact. Heads were lopped off; airplanes landed on dogs' noses and countless students in nascent photography programs of the time sought to achieve these very 'naive' effects. But as Joel

\textsuperscript{72} Dennis Oppenheim, cited by Alison de Lima Greene, \textit{Sontag, On Photography.}, Spot Vol. 12, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 5.

\textsuperscript{73} John Szarkowski was head of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 1962 to 1991.

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{New Topographies} \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Topographics} (Accessed 10/8/09)
Smith asserts, "serendipitous surrealism was less compelling when it evinced effort; the point was to refer viewers to an ironic wit at loose in the phenomenal world, revealed accidentally by the evidently unthinking (snapped) camera image." 75

The interest in banality was also evident in the 1975 exhibition of urban and rural landscapes, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* shown at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY. The exhibition – recently restaged at the L.A. County Museum of Art – included work by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel Jr. As Leah Ollman points out:

The show put a name to a phenomenon – the proliferation of straight, seemingly uninflected photography of the banal, built environment – and that name stuck. What remains cause for discussion is what exactly ‘New Topographies’ meant and why the term and its attendant attributes have had such an enduring influence.76

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75 Joel Smith, “The Snapshot’s Museum Afterlife”, in *Afterimage* (September 2001), 8 – 11.
76 Leah Ollman LACMA traces photography’s New Topographics movement
Reacting against the status quo, in both photography and society more broadly, these photographers gave a new legitimacy to the imagery of the banal. In his catalogue introduction to the 1975 exhibition, the curator William Jenkins defined the show’s common denominator as ‘a problem of style’, ‘stylistic anonymity’ and an ‘alleged absence of style’.\textsuperscript{77}

The pictures are stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion and opinion [...] rigorous purity, deadpan humour and a casual disregard for the importance of the images.\textsuperscript{78}

In keeping with the counter-culture ethos of the time, throughout the 1970s artists were experimenting with alternative printing methods, manipulations of the negative and printing on unorthodox surfaces. However, in the \textit{New Topographies} exhibition, with the exception of Stephen Shore who worked in colour, all the work was shot in medium or large format and printed in conventional black and white with minimal or no alteration. This formal approach to the banal and the everyday proved a turning point,\textsuperscript{79} laying a foundation from which contemporary photographers continue to explore the world and engage with the prosaic and mundane.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[scale=0.5]{plate5-3.jpg}
\caption{Plate 5-3 John Schott, \textit{John, El Nido Motel}, 1973}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{79} The influence of the ‘Becher School’ with its cool, taxonomising gaze cannot be underestimated in this regard.
5.3 William Eggleston

William Eggleston’s work has dramatically blurred the boundaries between a vernacular and high art aesthetic. His approach is distanced yet familiar, with a savant’s acuity for detail and composition. Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, Eggleston wasn’t interested in authorship of the documentary kind but with the unformed intersections of light and colour that his camera was able to capture and record.

Plate 5-4 William Eggleston, Red Ceiling, Greenwood, Mississippi, 1973

Eggleston began taking colour photographs in the early 1960s. His breakthrough exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1976 showed that colour photography could also be artistic, and not merely commercial. At the time, his work was misunderstood with critics condemning his seemingly casual snapshots of everyday Southern life as “perfectly banal...perfectly boring, certainly... the truth is, these pictures belong to the world of snapshot chic.”

Despite the controversy, Eggleston achieved success with the exhibition’s accompanying book William Eggleston’s Guide and secured a reputation for his lyrical, colour photography. His uninhibited images were shot quickly from quirky angles and dripped

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80 Hilton Kramer, NYT Review, 1976 as referenced in Mark Holborn’s article: William Eggleston: Introduction to Ancient and Modern
with saturated colour (he was a master of the dye transfer technique).\textsuperscript{81} Everything in front of the camera was worthy of a picture, even if it appeared trivial or banal. This approach to the obvious contrasted with the lofty subjects of the master photographers of the time, such as Cecil Beaton, Irving Penn and Richard Avedon. Eventually, Eggleston’s photographs would be viewed as refreshingly democratic in form and content, a tonic to the staged and studio-manipulated fine-art photography, which until then was generally accepted as being in black and white. Eggleston composed his photographs randomly and accepted everything that fell into his viewfinder. This approach integrated the incalculable into the picture, thus accepting the element of chance. At the time, the nature of his work defied the logic of traditional photographic narrative, however its coherence would later be revealed in Eggleston’s numerous books, the perfect platform from which to disseminate his work.

Walker Evans was a seminal influence for Eggleston. Evans’s record of American vernacular architecture, shot in what he defined as the ‘documentary style’ with seeming neutrality, proved a model. Focusing on the real and everyday, Eggleston turned away from the idealized landscape imagery of the past. He expanded the landscape genre to include not only nature but also culture, not just the sublime but also the mundane.

Indeed, Eggleston’s work makes frequent use of the flotsam of the visible world. Junkyards, tract-housing, strip malls, and decay feature prominently in his photographs, where the minute often becomes monumental. "I had this notion of what I called a democratic way of looking around,” Eggleston once stated, "that nothing was more important or less important."\textsuperscript{82}

In his road trip series \textit{Los Alamos} (2003) the colour snapshot aesthetic is conspicuously at work. Comprising over two thousand images in all, the series is visual evidence of his wanderings in Memphis, Mississippi, New Orleans, Southern California and Las Vegas, between 1972 and 1975. Here is Eggleston’s insistence that we look at the obvious.

\textsuperscript{81} Dye transfer printing is a process that has a higher degree of color saturation than other methods. It was largely used in advertising and fashion photography.

\textsuperscript{82} Thomas Weski, \textit{The Tender Cruel Camera}, http://www.egglestontrust.com/hasselblad_weski.html (accessed 26 July 09)
For example, in the image above, a car with elongated fins sits chained to a telephone pole and in its unmoving wake lies a trail of debris, cups, beer cans, and a piece of cardboard with the General Electric logo on it, placed like a shield below the bright red tail lights of the car. The photograph is cropped across the back end of the car, framing the debris as exhaust. The limp chain does nothing to dispel that notion and, oddly, its own inertia anchors the photograph's composition.
In the neon glow of another photograph of a typical American motel, the brooding loneliness of the road is eerily revealed in the simple composition of an empty bed with its pious brown coverlet, the glass ashtray anticipating a refill of chain-smoked cigarette butts and the symbolic phone, for that last, perhaps desperate phone call. Eggleston's ability to invoke narrative through simple composition and careful lighting, reflects the beatnik rhythm of his generation\(^{83}\) grating against the staid all-American and Christian ethos of the day. There is often a darkness to Eggleston’s work, a raw sense of foreboding that suggests warnings of Armageddon and yet life goes on. But other photographs reveal a warm and gentle sense of humour, as in the image below from the same series.


Eggleston avoids the cliché of the set-up of dolls arranged on the hood of the car, by conjuring the wind out of the stillness of the blue sky in the photograph's background and sending it whipping through the arrangement. What ensues for the viewer is the sense of a madcap joy ride taking place, and the dolls, in that instant, come alive, clutching at each other for balance or on the verge of toppling over. Some are already down and in danger of

\(^{83}\) “Much of Beat culture represented a negative stance rather than a positive one. It was animated more by a vague feeling of cultural and emotional displacement, dissatisfaction, and yearning, than by a specific purpose or program.” As clarified by Ray Camey, a leading authority on beat culture, in "The Beat Movement in Film," his notes for a 1995 Whitney Museum exhibition and screening. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beatin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beatin) (accessed 16/11/09)
slipping off the car's bonnet. One doll looks away, marveling at all the commotion whilst the deep blue of the sky looms up behind them.

According to Eggleston, "there is no particular reason to search for meaning" in his work. He assumes, what Szarkowski calls, the 'Degas Position', where "the nominal subjects of his pictures are no more than a pretext for the making of colour photographs." However, it is clear that he uses an informed approach. Subjectively controlled colours and exaggerated perspectives change everyday objects into visual metaphors for an alienated world. The interaction of the colours, form and content in his photographs lend normal things or situations additional meaning. The vernacular of an everyday (and everyman) America can suddenly seem threatening.

In his photograph titled 'Karco', the perfect rule-of-thirds is employed but overlaid with a confusion of signage in a riot of colour. An almost clichéd image that could only be found in America, Eggleston reveals a banal yet classic setting. It is a brief glimpse and like Eggleston, we do not linger for long, moving on to yet another seemingly ordinary scene.

Plate 5-8 William Eggleston, Karco, circa 1983-86, from 'The Democratic Forest', 1989

In his photograph titled ‘Karco’, the perfect rule-of-thirds is employed but overlaid with a confusion of signage in a riot of colour. An almost clichéd image that could only be found in America, Eggleston reveals a banal yet classic setting. It is a brief glimpse and like Eggleston, we do not linger for long, moving on to yet another seemingly ordinary scene.

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Like fellow photographer Robert Frank, Eggleston never stuck to the rules. As a result, his pictorial language created a sensation because of its radical subjectivity as well as its content. Expressive, rather than critical like Frank, Eggleston's unadorned view of American society retains a particularly Southern gothic charm. Nonetheless, he dryly comments, "I have never considered myself making what one would call Southern art, the pictures look Southern simply because that's where they were taken."\(^{86}\)

![Plate 5-9 William Eggleston, Untitled, circa 1975](image)

However, as writer Mark Holborn points out:

It is precisely his knowledge of the very heart of the Delta, coupled with the cultivated European sensibility of an educated Southern background that informs both the rawness and the sheer lyricism of his work.\(^{87}\)
Whilst Eggleston rarely takes more than one picture of a scene, there is a meticulous pattern and discipline to his world view, one in which he can study with the same clarity, fullness and elegance, flower petals or handguns, mansions or trash. He continues to cut to the heart of the ordinary like some intrepid explorer. He can be anywhere, in the kitchen or on the road, staring at the dirt or looking up at the sky. His photographs then, are not necessarily valuable as social documents: they seem resistant to any universal or exemplary meaning and appear as hermetic as an album of snapshots. What is left in the end for the viewer to deconstruct is a world full of neutral possibilities.
5.4 Martin Parr

If Eggleston is considered to be a ‘father of banal photography’ then British photographer Martin Parr is a ‘prodigal son’. Best known for a direct photographic style that reflects upon his own Englishness, he records his observations like an obsessed cultural taxonomist. Parr’s quest to photograph the absurd and surreal in everyday life is enhanced by his use and subversion of the language of advertising and propaganda photography. The results give his work an aesthetic similar to fashion photographers such as David LaChapelle, whose fantasy world of a hyper-rich and oversaturated kaleidoscope of colour matches Parr’s curious view of the world around him.

Plate 5-11  David LaChapelle, Jesus is my homeboy: Last Supper, 2003

Parr is not necessarily aiming for documentary accuracy in the traditional sense but nevertheless offers a fresh perspective on how cultures are not only defined by their traditions but also how they adapt to globalised forms of consumerism. Parr finds the irony and sad humor in the bizarre, visual juxtapositions he encounters.

88 Parr is also a prolific collector of kitsch objects. See his book Objects in which he has photographed a number of his collections, from Saddam watches, to Thatcher ceramic ware to dinner trays.
Despite the fact that Parr almost always favours the mundane over the outlandish, there is a consistent cultural rhetoric in his images. From the food we eat to the clothes we wear, to the places we visit. He explains his interest like this:

I myself am very middle class. One of the things I wanted to do as a photographer was to connect the subject matter which I was actually part of with photography. Photographers tend to be attracted to things very different to where they are from... they tend to like things very different from their own lifestyle, so one of the rules I try to engage with is to try to photograph things that I am part of. So all the things like consumerism, tourism and being middle class is something I've been very interested in.

Parr’s pictures depict an alternative to the ‘family of man’ narrative, one in which he is a man of the people, laughing at them as much as he laughs at his own participation in the boring-ness of the everyday. An avowed contrarian, he consciously seeks out subjects that other photographers deliberately overlook, epitomised for example in his series British

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89 Parr’s interest in our foibles could well be compared with Diane Arbus’s fascination with what she termed the ‘flaw’, though Parr’s perspective is certainly lighter in tone.

Food (1995), for which his intention was “to photograph the worst English cuisine rather than the best, because I thought it might be interesting.”91 The resulting images are simultaneously repellent, appealing and hilarious.

![Plate 5-13](image1)

**Plate 5-13** Martin Parr, Untitled [metal gravy from the series British Food, 1995]

![Plate 5-14](image2)

**Plate 5-14** Martin Parr, Untitled [buttered dish], from the series British Food, 1995

![Plate 5-15](image3)

**Plate 5-15** Martin Parr, Untitled [Rock Novelty food], from the series British Food, 1995

![Plate 5-16](image4)

**Plate 5-16** Untitled [eggs and meat plate], from the series British Food, 1995

Inspiration for Parr’s approach came not from his peers in the UK but from the US and the colourful snapshot approach that was gaining momentum with the likes of Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. Entranced by the newly revealed possibilities of colour photography, Parr conscientiously steered away from the traditional black and white documentary approach that he had been using until then:

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91 [http://markpowerblog.com/2009/08/02/i-know-what-i-did-this-summer/](http://markpowerblog.com/2009/08/02/i-know-what-i-did-this-summer/) (accessed 4/1/10)
Colour was regarded as something for snapshot photography or the professional, not for the serious photographer in the UK. After William Eggleston's Guide, it had the official stamp of approval, and people like myself started to see this work where colour was such an integral part of the pictures.\(^2\)

Despite the benign aesthetic of the snapshot approach, Parr’s colour photographs offer the viewer a complex amount of information and retain a palpable sense of documentary drama. They may seem absurd on the surface, yet there is a uncomfortable familiarity about their subject matter. Somehow we are all complicit in the bad joke. His insightful compositions of ubiquitous scenes and banal landscapes, close-ups of kitsch objects and awkward portraits are replete with shrewd visual observations, and these are especially evident when looked at in the context of his numerous books. As curator and photography scholar Val Williams succinctly points out:

Martin Parr’s photographs can make us feel very uncomfortable. He has made a comedy about the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the places we go; scrutinized the very way we live our lives. Some might say that Martin Parr has exploited our lack of taste and good judgment by picturing it all, latterly in the brightest of colours, exposing our petty vanities to the world.\(^3\)

This discomfort is particularly evident in Parr’s seminal book *Think of England* (1996 – 2000), which explores the mindset, and traditions of the English. The photographs are presented in an inherently English and ironic manner and constitute a social map of English attitudes and lifestyles. Images of the upper classes at Ascot sit alongside a myriad of British clichés, from charity shops, car boot sales, seaside resorts, to herbaceous borders, cucumber sandwiches and cups of tea and in true ‘Parrworld’ form, baked beans and bad footwear. Shot with a ring flash (normally used in medical photography), Parr emphasizes the unflattering foibles of his compatriots, who seem stuck in their imagined worlds, barely able to see beyond their own immediate surrounds. With characteristic humour, he re-imagines British culture as it desperately clings on to the meaning and rituals of the past. As Grahame Clarke observes:


Parr's England is always part of a larger social reality, inhabited by a mass of figures who vie for the appropriate panorama and prospect in order to escape from the suburban and urban constrictions of their own lives.\textsuperscript{94}

\textit{Plate 5-17} Martin Parr, from the series Think of England, 1995 – 2003


\textsuperscript{94} Graham Clarke, \textit{The Photograph} (New York, Oxford University Press: 1997), 71.
Henri Cartier-Bresson once remarked that he liked taking photographs in England because its people played out their social roles with emphasis, as if they were actors on stage. In front of Parr’s camera the English still perform stalwartly before his lens, rarely departing from type. However, contrary to Cartier-Bresson’s refined monochrome pictures, Parr commands attention through his brash use of colour and frequency of pattern. Subtlety is overwhelmingly absent and epitomises his style and approach. Whilst Parr has been criticized for his interpretation of the English condition, he explains, “I am only photographing what is obvious, and part of my way of working is to tap into people’s prejudices, and depict all aspects of things happening in today’s society”.

The Cost of Living (1986 – 1989) is another series that demonstrates how Parr has uniquely documented representations of a changing society. A critique of Thatcherism and the effect of government policies on the working class, Parr’s response was to look away from the obvious documentary material of the affected working class and to concentrate instead on the consuming middle class.

Plate 5-19 Martin Parr, Royal Commonwealth Society function for a summer evening, Bristol. (From The Cost of Living, 1986 – 1989)

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Writing about this series Val Williams suggests that, “it is about anxiety on a quiet but nevertheless colossal scale”.97

Despite its simple appearances, Parr’s photography is, in fact, quite complex. His photographic directness does not usually allow for aesthetic contemplation by the viewer, so the viewer initially addresses the content. In *The Cost of Living* series (and indeed in much of his work) there is a palpable sense of claustrophobia in the images, which subtly reveals the strangeness of ‘normal’ middle class lives. Parr’s ability to read the surreal in the everyday is at the heart of his work and can be confronting, with many critics considering his photographs an affront to their way of life.98 Despite the criticism, there is little doubt that the world Parr serves up is one in which many of us have our eyes wide shut.

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98 See Philip Jones-Griffith’s quote on page 57 (footnote #102).
Over the years, Parr’s work has evolved to a more narrow focus, and references his specific interest in the wealth of the western world. This is exemplified by his latest series *Luxury*: documenting the ostentatiously wealthy population of the world. 

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99 The IDEX, the 9th International Defence Exhibition and Conference held at the Abu Dhabi Exhibition Centre, 2009.

His colour palette has become even more saturated, a deliberate reflection of the digital and other technological changes that have affected the very societies he chooses to photograph—changes that Parr himself has wholeheartedly embraced. It is also interesting to note Parr's membership of the prestigious Magnum Agency. Though tainted by controversy due to his seemingly ‘unconcerned’ approach, he is one of Magnum’s top fiscal earners and one of their most popular photographers. Certainly at the beginning, Parr’s territory was very different to the Magnum veterans. As Parr points out:

Magnum photographers were meant to go out on a crusade... to places like famine and war and... I went out and went round the corner to the local supermarket because this to me is the front line.  

Not surprisingly, Parr’s application brought Magnum’s old guard to the barricades, especially his most vociferous opponent, Philip Jones Griffiths who stated:

Anyone who was described as Margaret Thatcher's favourite photographer certainly didn't belong in Magnum. His photographs titillate in some way, but the fact is that they are meaningless. 

Plate 5-23 Martin Parr, Cup of Tea from the series “Commonsense”, 1995 – 1999

102 Ibid
Like many photographers working in the genre of banal photography, Parr has been accused of breaching the rules and making a mockery of the medium. A closer inspection of the work reveals that the minutiae of our daily lives, and the way in which we order the worlds we imagine and inhabit, are just as worthy of our attention. The narratives may be less obvious but are just as important in the quest to better understand our own, very human conditions.
5.5 Postmodernism, the Banal Aesthetic and Richard Billingham

According to cultural studies scholar Meaghan Morris, banality is part of the modern history of taste and generally indicates a negative value judgment. Banality, in her view, is a sensibility intrinsic to modernity. However, Eugenie Shinkle argues that as an aesthetic, banality "suggests something more specific to post-modernity." She goes on:

As a photographic genre, banality can thus be described as a kind of post-industrial realism, a turn away from the spectacular and an often pitiless focus on its antithesis.

From Shinkle's perspective, the post-modern world might be read as a place of unrelenting monotony. A place where vernacular conventions in photography with their snapshot aesthetic and disposable imagery can play an existential role in comprehending the seemingly unbearable experience of being in the everyday. Perhaps then, banal photography's detached, distant and analytical style represents a distillation of our cultural mood? Certainly its uniformity reflects the homogeneity of our mass-produced, chain-store world. It might also represent the way people feel disconnected from one another, even as technology makes them more interconnected than ever. Banal photography then, offers a refuge from emotion at a time when many are overwhelmed with worries about terrorism, war and ecological disaster. In essence it asks us to slow down and look closer.

In recent years banal photography as a genre and style has gained both momentum and kudos in the art world with many contemporary photographers earning international recognition through their use of the snapshot aesthetic. However, as Charlotte Cotton in her book The Photograph as Contemporary Art points out:

Candid work that is artistically powerful is nevertheless difficult, for it initially seeks to identify and portray everyday life and normality, then portray and

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105 Ibid
maintain that sense of the mundane, and yet paradoxically transform the casual into the realm of the praised and notable. The balance between registering the banal, keeping that very sense of the banal, and yet making it unique is therefore fraught with peril, but very powerful when successful.¹⁰⁶

Richard Billingham’s series *Ray’s a Laugh* is an example of candid work that transcends its vernacular intentions. Taken over a period of seven years and originally intended as studies for paintings, Billingham – then unconcerned with the technical formality of photography – used an ordinary auto-focus camera and developed the films at the local Quicksave colour lab:¹⁰⁷

In all these photographs I never bothered with things like the negatives. Some of them got marked and scratched. I just used the cheapest film and took them to be processed at the cheapest place. I was just trying to make order out of chaos.¹⁰⁸

![Plate 5-24 Richard Billingham, Untitled from the series Ray’s a Laugh](image)

The resulting photographs are both a cruel and tender observation of his dysfunctional parents, Liz and Ray, his younger brother, Jason, and their menagerie of house pets. Billingham focuses especially on his father, documenting Ray’s chronic alcoholism in its

¹⁰⁸ Ibid
various manifestations, the less ambiguous images of which include Ray lying next to the toilet bowl, Ray swigging booze and several violent scuffles between Liz and Ray.

Showing alongside other ‘Young British Artists’ such as Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst at Charles Saatchi’s 1997 Sensation exhibition, Billingham’s vision of intimate life gave new meaning to the notion of family values. The photographs were mostly taken in his parent’s home, a cramped British council flat decorated in a carnivalesque style by his mother. The rooms, though brightly painted and wallpapered, are stuffed full of broken-down furniture. Shelves and tabletops are cluttered with miscellaneous and inconsequential ornaments and evoke a few ‘Coronation Street’ clichés. But this is not the stuff of television drama (though it certainly looks the part), rather it is a rendering of Billingham’s skillful eye and knowledge of art.

The image of Liz lying on the living room sofa, for example, is indicative of his wistful approach. The composition consciously references the 19th century Goya painting The Clothed Maja. But it does so with an element of irony. Liz’s floral-printed mu-mu reflects the chintz wallpaper, a quintessentially British design feature. She leans back like the many classic figures before her, hands behind her head and belligerently dainty. However, in composing the image, Billingham sneaks in clues to their disordered life. By the velour couch sits a spread of junk: a ball of wool, a magazine, the un-zippered cushion – the foam
contents of which spill out of its cover – and a bottle of medicine. Some of the stark realities of life in the Billingham household are revealed, its moments of quiet, vernacular domesticity, its humour, disarray and tragedy.

Plate 5-26 Francisco José de Goya, “The Clothed Maja (La Maja Vestida)”, c. 1803.

Throughout the series Billingham breaks all the unspoken rules of documentary photography; his pictures are out of focus, over-exposed and printed with a grain so visible that the image beneath is almost obscured. Billingham’s lack of concern for photographic technique can be interpreted as a form of new realism, an impolite, confessional genre that reflects the vernacular usage of the medium by every day people in every day life. Despite
his original intentions and ambitions as a painter, Billingham’s shift into art photography came about at a time when established modes of photography were being challenged. Juliana Engberg describes Billingham’s first exhibition as follows:

Displayed in a line were scrungy photographs - poorly lit, blurry, oddly framed, made from crappy film stock ... of scenes from a family life that cut through a century of posed studio portrait groups. Ray’s a Laugh entered visual culture at a time when the aesthetics of the everyday were in process of demolishing the contrived directorial mode of photo-making. Billingham’s images didn’t just evolve the genre; they smashed their way through to another kind of vérité encounter.109

Billingham’s photographs are spontaneous and painfully honest. Their gritty realism and ‘insider’ perspective is more voyeuristic than other photographers working in the diaristic mode such as Nan Goldin and Larry Clark. Engberg points out that “they tested the limits of reception”.110 Billingham’s images are certainly less self-conscious and posed, and their affecting power lies not only in his employment of the snapshot aesthetic but very much in his choice of subject matter and where he positions himself within the family paradigm: “Billingham [takes] pictures that maintain a familiarity with their subject while at the same time [uphold] the cold-blooded distance of an observer.”111

Billingham’s reaction when his father falls face-first out of the easy chair and onto the floor is not to catch him but rather to snap a photo.

110 Ibid
Likewise, the shot of Ray over the toilet, which has been discussed as follows:

It’s a remarkable photograph, claustrophobic and disorienting; still, one might notice that Billingham chose to photograph the old man and then publish the photograph, rather than immediately picking him up and cleaning him off.\(^{112}\)

Billingham’s approach might be regarded as one of callousness and indifference, or perhaps one of simple routine. As the photographer points out:

> Every night I came in from college and Ray would be lying passed-out on the bed; checking his breathing was always the first thing I did. So taking pictures was also a way of preserving him a bit at the start. Seeing him on his back in the toilet was an accepted part of family life.”¹¹³

Yet despite this apparent emotional distance there is an unmistakable affection for his subjects. Richard Cork, the judge of the Citibank Private Bank Photography Prize (which was awarded to Billingham in 1997), notes, “Billingham’s shocking frankness is seasoned with love as well.”¹¹⁴ This dichotomy is inherent to the genre of banal photography. Lewis argues that photography “is automatically exploitative of its subjects, yet it can be agreed that we take pictures of the things we adore.”¹¹⁵ In this context, Billingham shows his love for his family simply by exploiting them as subjects.

Conversely, just as Billingham seems detached, his family also seems distant towards him. They acknowledge his presence in only a few of his photographs and with the small size of the flat and the ruthless flash of his camera, this obliviousness is noteworthy. Additionally, a number of the photographs are spontaneous (including one of Jason pegging Ray in the head with a tennis ball, and another of Ray throwing one of the cats across the living room), which would lead one to believe that “Billingham simply sat in his living room and waited, camera in hand, for something to happen, and while it says something about his parents’ oblivion that they act like he’s not there, it says something even stronger about his own self-imposed emotional distance.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Ibid
In spite of the abjection and idle desperation, the hopelessness and the mess, a positive energy perseveres through the images. And it is this paradox of comedy and tragedy, of animation and stagnation that evinces their extraordinary power. Guardian art critic Gordon Burn sums it up perfectly:

It is a brilliant essay on the psychopathology of family life which is brave enough to suggest that destitution – squalor and degradation – can produce images that are not only not ugly, but actually galvanizing and beautiful. ¹¹⁷

Following on from the sternly objective approach of the Düsseldorf School of photographers, whose highly regarded members include Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff, banal photography scoops art-world cachet – yet the question remains, why is ‘deadpan’ so popular at the moment? Is it because we no longer trust the ‘truth-telling’ capacity of photography? Surely, the deadpan approach, by removing any hint of rhetoric or persuasion, does its utmost to avoid making any claims of truth for itself?

The theories that explain this are diverse, stemming from a reaction to modernism (as outlined by Meaghan Morris) to the explosion of communication and digital technologies. Eugénie Shinkle argues that the persistence of banality as a genre in photography “speaks volumes about the longings and desires of the postmodern subject.” She goes on to suggest that; “the art institution can still provide the possibility for a sort of critical encounter with banality, and for the transformation of perception that it enables.”

Pursuing a similar conviction, Richard Goldstein argues that consciousness opens up alongside changes in perception, thus "banality means one thing when it is embedded in Family Ties and quite another when it surfaces in art. Then the sensibility of ‘capitalist realism’ can become transcendent – which is why banality is so potentially useful as a style".

In other words, an aesthetic engagement with the banal has the capacity to demand a different kind of vision, “an attention to the material circumstances of looking, which might then be transformed into ethical and political action.” An example of this action can be seen in a number of Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin’s photographic collaborations. Originally creative directors for the Benetton magazine Colors, their approach is evident in books like Ghetto (2003), dealing with various forms of institutional confinement; Mr

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119 Ibid
121 Ibid
122 Published by the Italian clothing company Benetton, Colors was launched in 1991 to celebrate cultural relativism and global diversity, mainly via the ‘universal language’ of photography. Despite considerable controversy it has nevertheless published some interesting editions, particularly under the stewardship of Broomberg and Chanarin.
Mkhize's Portrait (2004), about post-apartheid South Africa; and Chicago (2006), a chilling portrayal of contemporary Israel seemingly reconciled to a permanent state of emergency.

Despite the documentary overtones to their work, their photographs are created using a large format camera and colour film, a time consuming process that necessitates elaborate preparation. This approach is at the heart of banal photography, which aims to reveal in painful detail the minutiae of the everyday. Certainly their deadpan style defies the conventional grand narratives of war, seeking instead its banal realities. Artist and writer David Campany has termed this kind of practice, “Late Photography” in which:

Many photographers have responded to the eclipse of their medium by seeing it as a new challenge and a new possibility. They approach the relative primitivism of their means of representation as an advantage, even a virtue. They forego the medium's prior grasp of events, leaving them to video and television. They opt instead to take as their subject the aftermath of those events. In a reversal of Robert Capa's call to get close to the action, proximity is often replaced by distance. Quick reactions give way to slow deliberation. The jittery snapshot is replaced by a cool and sober stare. Lateness replaces timeliness. The event is passed over for its traces. Here reportage takes a forensic turn and in doing so it openly accepts that it will be an insufficient and partial account of things.1 2 3

Indeed, Broomberg and Chanarin's photographs do not play the role of reliable witness, dutifully recording events without bias. They even suggest that “as unreliable witnesses, we have gathered together ‘evidence’ of our experiences and present our findings here; a muddle of fact and fantasy.”1 2 4

Their approach is to announce themselves present at the scene, working from a simple conceptual framework that interrupts the idea of the photographer as invisible. They turn their backs from unmediated scenes of violence typically found in war and conflict journalism and in the process deny the photograph as evidence. And it is precisely the ambiguity that makes their photographs so much more interesting and engaging. As they

critically point out “since we do still demand illustrations to our news then there is a chance
to make images that challenge our preconceptions, rather than regurgitate old clichés”.125

mundane scenes. They form part of an investigation into the many myths surrounding
contemporary Israel where frequently, things aren't always as they seem. The book's title
refers to the artificial Arab town built at Tze'elim Military Base in the Negev Desert where
the Israeli Defence Force has rehearsed military operations for more than 30 years.
Essentially a practice ground for inner-city warfare (the architecture is based on Palestinian
towns such as Ramallah and Nablus) many of the photographs reveal the disturbing
atmosphere of this entirely fabricated town.

125 Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Unconcerned but not Indifferent.*
*choppedliver.info/pdf/unconcerned.pdf* (Accessed 13/11/09)
The power of the book lies in the fact that there are no images of actual violence or conflict, not even traces. Nevertheless (and despite the theatre-set feel of the location) the photographs are still confronting. Many depict apparently ordinary objects, such as a rock or a watermelon, which in reality are all bombs or rather, re-creations of bombs made by the Israeli Police Force's Bomb Disposal Unit and based on designs used in actual attacks. The models are housed in an informal museum in Jerusalem that reveals where they were used and how many people were injured or killed.
Photographs like these then constitute a second layer of representation, where the images are presented as fragments rather than a whole. A trace of a trace. It is a deeply allegorical mode of photography, one that works successfully against the aestheticization of suffering and which has the capacity to transform established perceptions. As David Evans points out, Broomberg and Chanarin have realized that the subtle art of “nudges and suggestions can more effectively influence an audience than emphatic gestures.”

Indeed, the film director Wim Wenders has suggested that: “the most political decision you make is where you direct people’s eyes.” Framed like this then, banal photography has the potential to contribute to a return to issue-based art. The photographs of Broomberg and Chanarin make the very act of looking a political one. In the process they re-engage us with difficult but pertinent issues and insist on commanding in us a keener sense of responsibility, awareness and global citizenship.

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Plate 5-35 Broomberg and Chanarin, Tze'elim Military Base, Negev Desert, Israel, from the series “Chicago”

Plate 5-36 Broomberg and Chanarin, Tze'elim Military Base, Negev Desert, Israel, from the series “Chicago”
5.7 Conclusion

In many ways, banal photography is a reaction to the slice-of-life traditional, documentary format. That approach was built upon the idea that great photography is a kind of athletic-intellectual gymnastics in which photographers stalk subjects or arrange to be at the very centre of things and, in a split-second, focus and compose their pictures to capture the ‘decisive moment’ – the telling gesture, the subject at the height of the action.

Eggleston, Parr and Billingham, along with Broomberg and Chanarin, are just a few contemporary photographers who have made use of photography’s flaws as an evidentiary tool and in the process questioned the validity of the ‘decisive moment’. Theirs is a cool, detached but keenly sharp approach. They use colour, emphasising a dispassionate and prosaic perspective. They remain largely impartial witnesses, and most importantly, for them there is no decisive moment. Instead they have captured a series of unresolved and lingering moments.

Charlotte Cotton points out that a deadpan gaze shifts art photography “outside the hyperbolic, sentimental and subjective.” It is sometimes difficult to gauge a sense of the photographer’s intentions and even if revealed, it isn’t necessarily a guide to understanding the meaning behind the images. Emotional connections to banal photography aren’t straightforward. In fact, work of this kind is decidedly complex and relies on the relationship between the viewer and the image to discern any sense of insight or meaning. Banal photography presents a unique way of looking at and interpreting the world because it presents us with evidence or specimens, rigorously and dispassionately recorded, enabling viewers to study types, structures and forms. It is relentlessly clinical but when presented well, can be monumental because of its capacity to frame a new space for observation. One in which the lyrical nature of the images (ie. how photography sees the world) precedes the political and social intentions of the images (ie. how the photographer sees the world). As Eggleston clearly stated, life “is what it is, I just take pictures”.

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129 Indeed, it is important to note that banal photography is most often shown in the clinical space of a gallery setting. This allows for a more forensic examination and deeper contemplation of the works, which is intrinsic to the aesthetic mode of the genre.

Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts curator, William Stover, suggests that the power of banal photography lies in its capacity to:

... present everything on an even playing field. The subjects, they're just standing or just being. Not smiling, not crying, not doing anything, just being. That allows them to be much more than they are. That allows them to be an everyman, so to speak. That allows them to be universal.\(^{131}\)

Banal photography thus retains the capacity to shift our perceptions of what we see when we look at images of the everyday. It resonates simply because it relies on our comprehension of what we think we are seeing, but by subverting the cultural status of what is being depicted it forces the viewer to re-interpret and shift their initial reading. If one looks carefully the results can be enlightening. Banal photography finds its truest success in the divine shock of the ordinary, where its benign and elegiac aesthetic can convey a complexity of meaning and a more acute awareness of the world in which we live.

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