

METAMORPHOSES – *An exhibition Metamorphosis presenting photographic diptychs by fifteen artists from the London Group and two invited guest artists.*

Co-curated by Paul Tecklenberg and Darren Nisbett.

The LG artists showing are; Vanya Balogh, Stephen Carley, Angela Eames, Eric Fong, Genetic Moo, Vaughan Grylls, Susan Haire, Jane Humphrey, Sam Jarman, Charlotte C Mortensson, Darren Nisbett, Simon Read, Paul Tecklenberg, David Theobald, Carol Wyss and invited guests Andrew Cooper and Carl Wilson.

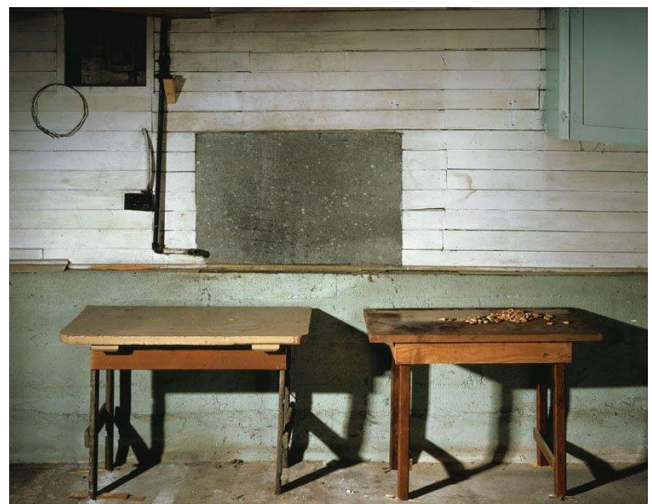
(June 8 - June 20, at The Cello Factory, 33-34 Cornwall Road, Waterloo, London, SE1 8TJ.)

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A PURVEYOR OF THE PRESENT - *Angela Eames*

John Berger wrote in 1972 that, *"the true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time. One might argue that photography is as close to music as to painting. I have said that a photograph bears witness to a human choice being exercised. This choice is not between photographing x and y: but between photographing at x moment or at y moment. The objects recorded in any photograph (from the most effective to the most commonplace) carry approximately the same weight, the same conviction. What varies is the intensity with which we are made aware of the poles of absence and presence. Between these two poles photography finds its proper meaning. (The most popular use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent.)"*¹



An Octopus 1990, Jeff Wall



Some Beans 1990, Jeff Wall

The visual example of the Canadian artist Jeff Wall's work (*An Octopus* and *Some Beans*) provides background for brief discussion around the diptych format. Wall states that he begins *"by not photographing"*. As he walks the streets, he remembers visual instances and then later recalls them through his photographic working process. *He is still a photographer*, he maintains, one for whom memory plays a central role in his analysis. His subject matter and ideas are researched meticulously often over a lengthy period of time in order to construct, build or generate a final scenario, By photographically recording these at times provocative, visual performances, he produces works which in their scale, demand active participation from the viewer. *An Octopus* and *Some Beans*, two largescale photographic light box images, (colour transparencies mounted onto light boxes), identical except for the octopus in one of them and the pile of beans in the other, are a pair of pictures that persistently

invite comparison, but there are no rules for doing so. Wall himself considers that these works allow for greater uncertainty in the meanings of his pictures. In short, the emphasis for the viewer, is on *what it is* as opposed to *how it is*.

Rather like the childhood visual puzzle - Spot the Difference, in the case of Octopus/Beans the viewer is drawn into a game. What are the differences between the two images? Is that tiny ball of fluff in this image present in that image? Is the grubby but beautiful detail the same in both images? The viewer intuitively engages in the binary aspect of this imaging, summoning up notions of duality, before and/or after, same and/or different, right and/or left, back and/or front, even real and/or unreal, in their search for corroborative detail. Both octopus and beans seem somewhat out of place, incongruous in their sitting on mismatched tables, which might appear to reference the schoolroom or learning environment, bolstered by the grey rectangular board which conjures up memories of chalky blackboard, but the very evidential presence of octopus and beans quickly eradicates any perception of displacement on the part of the viewer. As usual, *the viewer sees and the viewer believes...* For Wall, these particular works of 1990, provided a watershed moment, marking for him a new direction in his work and allowing him to explore the interface between representation and abstraction. He patently, blurs the line between mediation and maintaining the façade of the objective viewer. Slipping between these two worlds he prioritises the potential of being confronted with something that looks familiar yet remains enigmatic.

As exemplified above, the photographic diptych is a visual work created in two corresponding parts. The two parts are usually the same size. Visual information might be spliced across the two separate entities as a form of narrative. Subject matter might be reiterated or be seen from differing viewpoints but when the two parts are viewed together, as one, they create a visual dialogue or mediation, predicating in the mind of the viewer, a third and distinct work of art - a state of completion. One plus one equals three, so to speak...

Chinese texts as early as the 5th Century B.C. have referenced the phenomenon of the camera obscura but it wasn't until the Arab scholar Ibn Al-Haytham (known as Alhazen), generally credited as being the first person to study optics, invented the precursor to the pinhole camera, that light could be seen to be used to project an image onto a flat surface. A potted history of photography might describe the invention of photography as the outcome of many centuries of human investigation which sped up significantly during the last 200 years... Previously, painters had led the way in the pursuit of visual realism, particularly in relation to the representation of the human visage. Then in the early 1820s Joseph Nicéphore Niépce developed heliography and made the first photographic print from a photo-engraved printing plate. In 1839, Louis Daguerre developed the daguerreotype but it wasn't until 1841 when Henry Fox Talbot sensitized paper to light using a silver-salt solution, exposed the paper to light and rendered a subject in gradated greys on a background of black - that the first negative was produced.

In 1984, the Japanese company Canon, demonstrated a digital camera thereby announcing the arrival of digital photography soon to become ubiquitous. So much so, that on a dark note, Stephen Heyman wrote in The New York Times in 2015, *"The cultural ripple effects of this photo-intensive present are everywhere. In academia, researchers have warned that taking too many photos of your children may breed egocentrism, that oversharing pictures on social networks can damage real-life relationships and that comprehensively documenting special moments hurts one's ability to remember them."*²

For the individual artist, photography has since very quickly progressed from being merely a means of representation to becoming thoroughly embedded in their everyday armoury of media, there to use and abuse in a hybridised pictorial world. From wet (liquid) through to dry (electronic) darkroom, studio or mobile phone, photography has evolved from being a visual realisation of the momentary (however long that moment might last) and the real, to providing a means by which to construct or composite - the unreal. Though the gods of photography might have intended this medium to be sacred and immutable or transparent in the most predictable sense, it has been in transition since the first photograph was made by Niépce. Manipulation of the photographic image within the actual processing of images in the darkroom has been with us from the outset; burning, dodging, retouching and double or multi-exposure being used for a myriad of purposes, most significantly within the realms of journalism and political propaganda. The digital arena allows for the very raw fabric of the photographic, be that negative, print or code to be transformed (through electronic transfer, scanning, cropping, layering, colour manipulation etc.) and for the deconstruction and reconstruction of imagery through imaginative intervention. Photography itself might be seen to have metamorphosed.

The diptych in parallel to its counterpart *the double-page spread of a book*, can tell the viewer a story but as Berger wrote in, *Understanding a Photograph*, "*the most popular use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent*". The photographic diptych can also invite the viewer to engage with either impartial or manipulated content as agency for confrontational questioning, conciliatory vindication, or simply factual clarification. If the very principle of photography is that the resulting printed image is not *unique* then adoption and usage of this raw material, by the visual artist, in the assembly of new and distinct visual works, be they singular or binary, is entirely valid. Reflecting upon the opening citation from Berger, the photograph as a memento of the absent has now perhaps been usurped by the photograph *as a purveyor of the present*.

¹ John Berger, "Understanding a Photograph" in *Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things*, 1972.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/23/arts/international/photos-photos-everywhere.html>