The Crisis of the Artificial: Why Does Everything Look the Same?

( VOLUME I )

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THE CRISIS OF THE ARTIFICIAL: 
WHY DOES EVERYTHING LOOK THE SAME?

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The Abstract

In this thesis I will argue that the realist photograph conditions us to see, experience, and imagine the world in a narrow realist manner. I will contend that the questions we ask through realist photo-observation frame the world as a concrete reality. I will propose a framing theory for the use of photo-observation in design that encompasses abstraction and artifice to counter this by imagining reality as malleable. I will contend that my research presents another way to understand the nature of the questions one can ask through a photograph. This leads to a further question, although not restricted to photography, about the reality we are designing in the post-industrial age and that is ‘why does everything look the same?’

I present the case that ethnography has a long history of using photo-observation as a method of inquiry and there exists an extensive body of literature that discusses how to do it. More significantly much of this literature interrogates the epistemological and ontological dimensions of doing it. Regardless of the differing epistemological and ontological views that exist in the ethnographic research community, each view has a well-developed theoretical framework for using photo-observation. And though the ethnographic literature theorises the relationship between photography, the production of knowledge, and the problematic nature of notions of reality and truth, photo-realism is still the modus operandi of ethnographers.

By contrast design has relatively recently assumed the ethnographic turn and many research methods from ethnography, photo-observation included, are used by design practitioners and researchers in their inquiry. Where there is some literature that discusses how to do photo-observation for design there is a paucity of material that deals in any substantive way with the epistemological and ontological implications of doing so. Photo-realism is also the modus operandi of design researchers using photo-observation but it is used without any thought given to these implications or the epistemological and ontological differences that exist between ethnography and design. I will contend that ethnography is essentially concerned with telling us ‘what-is’. It is in the main a narrative practice and the realist photograph, as data, is an object of interrogation, analysis, and interpretation to be written about. I will argue that design, by comparison, is fundamentally concerned with ‘what-might-be’ and that in spite of it being a transformative practice that shapes the world through images and objects its use of photo-observation conforms to the realist pattern.

Through my research I present the case that irrespective of these differences the use of photo-observation in both fields presupposes that photography can be used to ask questions. Inevitably these questions attend to reality - and what we may ask of it - but not in the commonplace sense of a reality the photograph apparently shows, the canonised and naturalised regime of pictorial realism that derives from its indexical relationship to its subject. The more fundamental questions pertain to the reality that we inevitably transform through the interplay of the imaginary and the images of photography via our embodied perception of the world. This is the subject of design, and though some critical theorists have touched it upon, it has not been theorised through design practice. With reference to several case studies of my own abstract photographic practice I present a new theory and new point of view for design to ask questions using photo-observational research and escape the banality of the real.
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Inevitably my thanks to and acknowledgment of Professor Craig Bremner, my supervisor, take precedence. Craig probably won’t mind me saying he didn’t teach me anything because he doesn’t really believe in teaching. Rather he guided me, via his considered questions and concise reflections, through my learning. Much of this learning is reflected in these pages, and as much again has no place in a PhD thesis but I will carry through life. His friendship, questions, humour, and sage advice have been central to my development as a scholar and my growth as a person.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother Judith. Given my teacher’s comments on all of my school reports (each of which she diligently kept) and my previous aptitude for study I think she would have been amused and surprised I got this far.
VOLUME I: THESIS
“I don’t know where the artificial stops and the real starts.”

Andy Warhol
Chapter 1: Introduction, Looking at What

In this chapter I will outline the key issues I am addressing through my research; the conceptual framework in which they sit; and the background work, both creative and academic, that led me to them. I will do this with minimal reference to relevant literature or theory, in order to present my subject concisely, prior to arguing my thesis in subsequent chapters. As a consequence, this chapter will read as a series of related biographical and rhetorical statements with little apparent theoretical substance.

A Practice In Reality

I developed an interest in photography in the 1970s and used the camera to document things that interested me - family, pets, friends, and holiday locations. I had no formal training or awareness of any ‘official’ discourse – professional or theoretical – around it. I dabbled with photography in high school art classes where the history of art taught did not include any reference to it as an art. Such theorising as there was revolved around unspoken realist formalism. Despite my interest in photography most of my high school artwork was in the medium of (very bad) painting with the exception of an infamous performance piece, which as luck would have it was photographically documented.

After a sabbatical from study, lasting several years, I applied for and was accepted into art school in 1983. My first year was a typical foundation year that involved the compulsory experience of working in all media on offer. I was interested in working in sculpture and film: the former because I liked making things with my hands and the latter because I liked watching movies. Lecturers that were more interested in conceptual sculptural work, that challenged the material foundations of the medium, thwarted my interest in sculpture. I also decided against film because I found the effort required to organise so many people to participate more trouble than it was worth. Once again I was reminded how much I didn’t enjoy the physical experience of painting and drawing, largely because I was so bad at it I’d wince whenever I had to do it. To cope with my feelings of discomfort I decided to make my


8 pints of milk on canvas, 1979. Photo by Tom Kristensen. Reproduced by permission of Tom Kristensen.
paintings so self-consciously bad that even the lecturers had to laugh. In the end I settled on photography as my major because I enjoyed the experience of doing it and I liked the staff.

Through the latter two years of my high schooling and much of my undergraduate art education I was an avowed anti-intellectual. I was not interested in analysing my motivation for making art or exploring the meaning of my work or the work of others. My philosophy was that if it felt good doing it and I liked the look of it, then that was all that mattered. This intuitive logic was based on a half-arsed interest and a poorly formed understanding of 19th century Romanticism garnered from reading much fiction from that period during my teenage years. Ironically my earliest photographic experiences at college were rooted in a modernist conception of photo-documentary practice, largely a result of the specific interests of the teaching staff in the program. In addition the photographic theory that was taught was a modernist historiography that privileged varieties of photo-realism and occasionally entered the Freudian territory of psychoanalytic theory. I was uncomfortable photographing people I did not know – feeling self-conscious and intrusive, a handicap in photo-documentary work - preferring instead landscapes, inanimate objects and friends, I was therefore relieved to begin working in the studio where I quickly discovered the joys of making my own little worlds to photograph. My work during this period was figurative but I was constructing fictive scenarios, alternative realities as it were, as opposed to documenting the seen world.

I finished my undergraduate degree in 1986 and with little else to do I enrolled in a postgraduate diploma in 1987 to further develop my work and kill time. On the whole my studio work followed a similar path of image constructions, however I challenged myself to undertake a photo-documentary project to overcome my fears about it. I completed this project with some success but have never returned to this genre, clarifying my preference for the experience of working with ‘actors’ or inanimate objects in the studio over photographing strangers. Two key events on this project crystallised my preference and led to me using the resulting work to critique the process of photo-documenting strangers. The first event was photographing a man being handcuffed by police. After I pressed the shutter mechanism the
man turned to me and screamed “don’t fucken take my photograph ya cunt” – a reasonable demand. I felt threatened and realised that my photograph could make him look guilty, when he may have been innocent of any crime. The second event was when I went to photograph a severely disabled woman in a wheel chair, busking, playing the harmonica very badly. Upon seeing me she turned her deformed body away from me and in a slurred voice said, “no photo no photo”. I did not take the photo but felt ashamed that I had given no thought to how this woman may feel about being photographed.

Because of my discomfort in photographing strangers I was reluctant to move in closer to them, maintaining a certain distance from them that worked against getting compelling photographs. In the genre of photo-documentary photography “if your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough” (Capa 1954). This view speaks very much of the embodied nature of photographic practice that is not the same as the detached, ocular-centric manner in which it is often portrayed. Here the issue of distance is the actual spatial dimension, occurring in time, in which the act of photography unfolds. My reactions to these events were very physical, and were echoed throughout the project to varying degrees. Despite my dislike of this genre I did undertake paid commissions photographing bands in the then vibrant independent music scene of Sydney. The vast majority of these shots, although realistic, were not strictly documentary photographs. Rather they occupied a more fictive space for they were portrayals of bands and band members performing for the camera, striking poses as I directed them. This reinforced my real preference for more symbolically laden studio constructions.

During my post-graduate studies I was introduced to the work of Roland Barthes and semiotics in general. Semiotics not only pressed my anti-intellectual buttons, it caused me significant unease as I felt it undermined my authorial voice as a photographic artist. I accepted the basic premise that viewers of a photographic image would make their own meaning of it, yet I could not reconcile the idea that the meaning I thought I was making in my work was not necessarily relevant in that. As a maker of photographic images, someone interested in the constructive dimensions of a creative practice, I saw semiotics as a
deconstructive and ultimately disempowering theory. I recognise the political imperatives of it now, as I will outline later in this thesis, but I felt that any theory of photography that did not accommodate a theory of making images was limited. It is evident that I have an aversion to realist photography as the basis of my own practice. Although much of my student work and subsequent professional collage based work was figurative, it was certainly not realist. Reality was not something I was trying to depict ‘objectively’; rather I was constructing fictional scenarios as a way of commenting on social issues circulating in the world.

In the early 1990s I became a full time photographic academic. In order to reinvent myself I took a break from all forms of photographic image making for about five years and came to grips with the intellectual aspects of academic life, finally turning that part of my brain on. I returned to photography, somewhat reluctantly in 1995. The scarcity of time available to me as a fulltime academic and father of three small children drove my reluctance. I had little opportunity to devote myself to the painstaking nature of my earlier work. The only way out, as I saw it, was to avail myself of the photographic opportunities of my everyday life. This meant confronting ‘real’ reality, not the fictive ones I constructed. I did this through the guise of landscape photography, taking photographs on family trips and holidays. Given my lack of interest in realism I began working against the conventions of much landscape photography. Conventions seen in the work of the high modernist photographer Ansel Adams and his pre-occupation with the accurate photographic depiction of scenery through the use of maximum depth of field, large landscape format high-resolution film and the precise rendering of tonal range. His virtuosity in the media resulted in idealised landscapes with an apparent high fidelity to the vistas he was photographing. I, on the other hand, was deliberately pushing the image out of focus, using a square format camera, and often ignoring vista for detail. Through the use of soft focus my early landscapes were reminiscent of 19th century Pictorialism, no doubt informed by my aforementioned interest in Romanticism. This phase of my work was short lived, in part because I was bored photographing reality, even if I was playing with the conventions of realism. Ironically now that I had overcome my anti-intellectualism I struggled to enjoy photography because I could see no intellectual justification for what I was doing. I
even questioned the point of photography given the oceans of images of the seen world that were starting to flood the semiosphere as a result of the growing digitisation of the medium and the emergence of the internet. In short: apart from being critical of conventional, and indeed much conceptual, photographic practice I had lost a critical position in relation to my own practice.

In the following years I became interested in the emerging field of design research and ran many student projects exploring its potential. It quickly became apparent that photographic observation was a commonly used method. Academic fields that use photographic based research methods, including design, commonly agree that photographs are framed by the subjective intent, bias and ideological agendas of the photographer/researcher (Harper 1998, p29; Prosser & Schwartz 1998, p116). Notwithstanding this, these fields are still dependent on a largely realist frame; the accurate depiction of subject matter before the lens is an essential pre-requisite to collecting rigorously sound research data in photographic form (see Cruickshank & Mason 2003, pp6-7, 21; Ireland 2003, pp26-27; Pink 2006, pp50, 68; Keller et al 2006, p19).

Despite understanding the rationale for privileging the realist frame in ethnographic based research my disinterest in the photo documentation of the seen world and my increasing interest in the transformative aspects of design led me to question the former’s suitability for the latter. This was reinforced by my observation that most of my students undertook realist photo documentation of the seen world, then semiotically deconstructed the images they produced - to empty them of all possible meaning they could - only to struggle in using them as drivers of change, a central feature of design. Inevitably what they did was document a series of predictable everyday objects, scenes and events that reinforced their reading of an existing reality but looked, on one level, like a catalogue of banality to me. This is not to say that these catalogues did not reveal interesting trends, or patterns of behaviour, but that describing and interpreting what was depicted in the photographs did little for the design projection of what-might-be. It appeared to me that these students were largely unable to take a critical stance in relation to their images beyond a semiotic critique. They lacked a critical perspective that would enable them to see beyond the appearance of the real, the seen world they had photographed, and delve into the more abstract dimensions of the fictive space that design operates in. This is not entirely surprising as their understanding of photography, its relationship to the everyday and notions of reality have been informed not only by the habits they had already developed through their lifetime but by the habits of countless photographers before them.

**FRAMEWORK? WHAT FRAMEWORK?**

My research for this thesis started as an investigation into the utility of photo-observation methods, drawn from phenomenological ethnography, for visual communication research and practice. This is still the core motivation for my research, however as I delved deeper into the framing theories surrounding photo-observation, in its ethnographic and design settings, I became aware that the more significant task of examining the nature of those theories and settings needed to be undertaken.

Since the inception of photography, an extensive array of critics and scholars have theorised it largely as a vehicle for depicting reality and communicating meaning. Despite such critiques, the framing theories of photography as a creative practice have been poorly developed and articulated from within the practice itself. This stands in contrast to the practice of photo-observation in ethnography where ethnographers using these methods have articulated the framing theories of such use from within their discipline. The field of design has by and large adopted these ethnographic framing theories for photography on the basis of the perceived similarities between ethnography and design. This adoption has occurred with little attention paid to the differences between these fields and design has not developed or articulated an appropriate framing theory for its own use of photo-observation. My research is focused on the implications of this adoption and the articulation of a more appropriate framing theory.

I will argue that through its uncritical adoption of ethnographic photo-observation, design has collapsed the critical distance that ethnographers typically establish between themselves,
their methods of research, and the interpretation and communication of their findings. I will demonstrate that ethnographers generally see photographs as representations of reality to be read as a way of establishing critical distance. I will contend that the ethnographic approach to reading the photographic image as a representation of reality is at odds with the manner in which design conceives of transforming the reality of the world through images. The conception of this transformation is an imaginative act that is situated in a present reality but projects, through the image, a possible future reality. I will argue that by reading photographs as representations of reality, design is conditioned by the constraints of conceptual thought, in the form of representational theory, and the realist program of the camera. In arguing this I will essentially be asking the question for design – “What is the consequence for the reality we imagine, through the image, if our source of images about our present reality are largely photographic and we read them as representations of reality?” My superficial response to this question is that as a consequence of reading the realist photograph as a representation of reality we design a world that looks increasingly the same. More significantly, however, my response to this first question is to then pose another question and that is – “What happens if we regard the photograph as part of the horizon of our embodied perception of reality as opposed to an object that represents reality?” In responding to this question I will argue that embodied perception is an inevitable condition of being human and that as design is concerned with both the perception of the world-as-found and imagining the world-as-it-might-be then design is also an inevitable condition of being human.

Given the centrality of the image to design in imagining the world-as-it-might-be I will then ask one final key question and that is – “How can we establish a critical distance from the photograph that challenges the established patterns of seeing that are embedded in its program?” I will argue, with reference to my own photographic practice, and the rich but under theorised practice of abstract photography that we can do this firstly by seeing the photograph as a part of the horizon of our perception, a kind of embodied and aware seeing, and secondly by extending our use of photo-observation to include abstraction. In this way it is possible to contend that the outcomes of design are not inevitable, even if the act of design is. I will address the questions outlined in this section with reference to ethnographic and design research literature through the various chapters of my thesis. Before outlining the structure of my argument, with reference to specific chapters, I will summarise a series of key concepts that frame both my view of design and my take on reality in order to clarify my understanding of them.

**Would the Real Design Please Stand Up**

Design has been characterised in many ways through its history. Perhaps the most compelling views are those of design as a form of art, as a technical process, and as being concerned with the creation of the artificial. This latter notion was first put forward by Herbert Simon (1996[1969]) who argued that the world humans inhabited and created was artificial and to better understand it, and how it was created, a science of the artificial needed to be developed. He saw this as the (analytic and descriptive) science of the (synthetic and prescriptive) practice of engineering design, in which desired courses of human action were enacted. There have been a number of reinterpretations of design and the artificial but it is generally agreed that the premise of the relationship between the two holds. Setting aside critiques I have of some aspects of these views I have conducted my inquiry on the basis that design is about the conception and production of the artificial and that “the world is now inherently an artificial place” (Roxburgh & Kasunic 2004, p12). To be clear; by artificial I mean human made, distinct from naturally occurring, and not the idea of the artificial being fake. However the semantic interplay of these conceptions of the artificial is also relevant to my research. Also significant in my view of design is the idea that although it unfolds in the present it is also concerned with the future. The act of conceiving of a designed ‘thing and the production of that thing occur in the present of the seen world, the here-and-now (Roxburgh & Bremner 1999).

I have deliberately used the simplistic term ‘thing’ here as a catch all for the many and varied ‘things’ that designers design, from objects to forms of communication to systems and processes. Despite being rooted in the present design conception is concerned with imagining things that don’t yet exist, it is fundamentally concerned with imagining the possible future world, what-might-be.

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1 See for example Hillier 1985 and Manzini 1992.
I have always had a strong aversion to undertaking photographic work that in any way resembles realist photo-documentation or photo-observation of the seen world. My creative practice has mainly involved photo-based image making, using both analogue and digital collage and montage techniques, in the guise of editorial illustration. These illustrations accompanied articles exploring contemporary social issues and it was my job to visually interpret, reflect upon, and communicate the articles’ salient points. The images I made were constructed or fabricated scenarios that were fundamentally artificial, in this instance I do mean artificial as fake or fictitious, and they existed as an end in themselves. It may seem obvious to state that this aspect of my historical practice has come into sharper focus as a consequence of my research, and that my research has been shaped by this practice, but it is worth articulating this point in order to identify the nature of this relationship. My past work exists in the realm of the artificial in that it is human-made and as such parallels my framing of design. It is also artificial as it involves making visual images of fictitious or fake scenarios. In my analogue practice these scenarios were constructed, photographed then destroyed; the reproduced photograph being the final artefact. In my digital practice the scenarios were constructed in virtual space, and beyond their reproduction as images in magazines, never existed as an artefact in a concrete sense as we commonly understand the term. Here the relationship between the artifice of my work and the idea of the artificial as it applies to design is stretched in that the majority of design is not conceived to be an artifice in the way that I conceive my work. It would be fair to say however, that design prototypes do represent fictitious possible future scenarios of things yet to be made and on this level function as a kind of artifice for they embody the transformation of the abstract into the concrete.

A distinction between my past work and my current framing of design should also be articulated at this point. Inevitably any creative endeavour that is about making or producing things is concerned with the future at the very basic level of the thing being made. By this I mean that the thing being created is connected to the future through the sense of imagining and anticipating what shape it might take. At the point of conception the thing being created will only exist in material form in the future. Historically design has been overwhelmingly concerned with creating things to make life better. Design’s concern with the future in this regard relates not only to imagining what form the thing being made will take, but also relates to how we might live our lives as a result of this thing being made. On a superficial level my work has never had such a purposeful or utilitarian concern with changing how people live their lives and differs from such a framing of design. Rather it has mainly been concerned with the experience people might have of it when engaging with it. However it would be naive of me to imagine that my work has not made an impression on at least one viewer and caused them to think a bit differently from before, thus potentially facilitating some aspect of change in their life or how they see the world. Such change being exemplary of what Merleau-Ponty calls the image sensitising itself (2010, p19). The principal of his concept is that the images we make of the world change our perception of the world and thus change our sense of reality of it.

The insights outlined in this section have been crucial in developing the framework of my thesis in that I recognise design as being simultaneously: both artificial and artifice; concerned with what-might-be; and located in the ‘reality’ of the here-and-now. It plays between the space of the abstract and the concrete. The inevitable confusion this apparent contradictory state of affairs presents is part of what I have previously called the “crisis of the artificial” (Roxburgh 2006, p152). My research is aimed at interrogating this crisis, specifically as it is played out through the relationship between photography and design research, with a view to developing a theoretical framework that may ameliorate the crisis. That I am engaged in such an inquiry is hardly surprising for “the occurrence of interest in methodology in a certain field is usually a sign of crisis within that field…” Rittel (1972, p5)

**THE REALITY OF THE HERE-AND-NOW**

“Recent theories of cultural production that deal directly (or by implication) with design recognise it as a process that is socially, materially and economically situated and enacted” (Roxburgh & Bremner 1999, p8).
As design is situated and unfolds in the present, and is embedded in complex networks of relations, it makes sense that an analysis of how it works within those networks has been a feature of much design scholarship for the best part of the last half-century. Simon’s conception of the science of the artificial, which gave rise to what is commonly referred to as design science, was the first coherent attempt at such an analysis. It has more recently been followed by the sociological analysis of design and design practice, which I will call design sociology henceforth. These approaches take the design process as their object of study and seek to examine design to better understand it. I regard this approach as trying to understand the ‘reality’ of design. Where the science of the artificial and design sociology seek to examine and describe design in the here-and-now, design itself uses the seen world of the present as a source of information to transform it, to conceive of what-might-be. Herein lies the difference between how design itself uses its situation in the present compared to design science and design sociology. The former uses it to transform, the latter to describe.

This distinction is exemplary of the difference between the fundamentally synthetic nature of design practice and the analytic nature of design science and design sociology.

Given the importance of the here-and-now to both design as a practice, and design as an object of study, it is not surprising that designers have adopted the methods and frameworks of science, sociology, and ethnography. However the distinction between a synthetic engagement with the present and one based in analysis has been largely overlooked in doing so. Trying to develop a methodology drawn from the analytic frameworks of science and ethnography that sees the contemporary world as a kind of reality to observe and report on is at odds with how design functions, exists in, and draws on the present to project into and transform the future. The use of photo-observation in design without the development of an associated and suitable framing theory is typical of this and is indicative of a lack of criticality in the field of design. The confusion between the ‘reality’ of the here-and-now and the artificiality and artifice of what-might-be is symptomatic of the crisis of the artificial. This is further reinforced by the ambivalent approach design has towards reality. Although reality is understood as a contested concept in the fields that design aims to mimic, design has a far more pragmatic, and unreflective, attitude towards it for design regards reality as ultimately plastic; by this I mean malleable or changeable.

The Reality of Reality

A brief discussion on my position in relation to conceptions of reality is warranted here given the relationship photography and design has with it. I will firstly do this in a general and biographical sense but then turn briefly to the work of Merleau-Ponty for his conception of reality is more nuanced than the standard binary characterisations of it. At one end of the spectrum is the materialist view of the world, characterised by positivism. Materialists regard the material objects that make up the world as something that exist separate and external to our experience of them; reality therefore exists separate to human experience. At the other end of the spectrum is the idealist view of the world, typified by solipsism. Idealists challenge the material existence of objects, the world, and reality, and they argue that reality is based in the mind.

Being the son of an industrial chemist and being indoctrinated into scientific thinking and reasoning in high school it is little wonder that, upon reflection, for much of my young adult life my conception of reality would conform to that of a positivist. These core beliefs remained largely unshaken despite my interest in visual arts, 19th century Romantic literature, and my eventual visual arts education. It wasn’t until my post-graduate education, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that I became fully conscious of the subjectivist view of the world through exposure to cultural studies and post-structuralist literature. This caused me to question my positivist inclinations but I rapidly became dis-satisfied with the relativist stance of much of the literature from these fields.

I was eventually drawn to constructivist theories of reality because of their attempt to reconcile the relationship between objects and humans, the material and experience, and the emphasis they place on the social nature of our understanding of the world. Given my interest in design, theories of technology rooted in a constructivist paradigm such as actor
network theory resonated with me. Actor network theory contends that individuals, social institutions and processes, and objects are co-determinate and exist in an ongoing, ever changing network of relations (see Law 1992; Mackay & Gillespie 1992). However I do not accept that these relations are equal, as many actor network theorists argue, hence my interest in radical constructivism, as I see human agency as being greater than the effects of inanimate things. Radical constructivism, takes a deliberately provocative stance on the question of an external reality and foregrounds human experience in our relationship to it. Radical constructivists take the position that one can neither know nor not know if there is such a thing as a mind independent reality. As such the object, what we conceive of as material reality, is metaphorically out of ones grasp. The potential uncertainty this creates around the existence of a material reality is philosophically no bad thing because it provides a platform for an ongoing critical engagement with the material and our experience of it. However, being a photographer and designer with an interest in the use and embodied experience I have of materials (the things I regard as existing in the material realm), I would argue that, philosophically speaking, the radical constructivist position undermines the experience of making as it calls into question the existence of the material realm. It is for this reason that in my journey to conceiving of my relationship towards reality I finally turned to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology for he articulates a relationship between the subject and world that is premised in embodied perception rather than the primacy of the mind.

In critiquing the positivist underpinnings of scientific thought Merleau-Ponty argues “science manipulates things and gives up living in them” and that it treats “everything as though it were an object-in-general” (1964, p159). This “objectivist picture” sees the world “(including even our own bodies) as existing entirely independent of ourselves and interacting with our own experience in a merely causal fashion” (Matthews 2002, p.45). Seeing the world as an object separate to us is a direct consequence of the primacy of the mind where the self “only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into thought” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, pp162-163). This he argues is a construction and science needs to recognise it is a construction based in a living dynamic world, not a mechanical one. Merleau-Ponty’s contention that the positivist view of the world is a construction correlates with constructivist theory. However, both positivist science and constructivism, and most particularly radical constructivism, hold the mind as the primary locale of this construction. Where Merleau-Ponty differs is that he does not regard the human subject to be a mind observing or constructing the world but rather the human subject is enmeshed in the world through embodied perception. For Merleau-Ponty scientific thinking is a form of thinking that “looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general” and it needs to “return to the ‘there is’ that underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body – not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine” (1964, p160). In this return, our conception of reality is not based upon a neutral observing mind (positivism) nor is it based upon a consciously constructing mind (constructivism) rather it is based upon our experience of being in the world as a perceiving thoughtful and embodied being. This creates quite a different orientation to the world and reality and I will deal with this in more detail in Chapter 6. However, in summary, what Merleau-Ponty argues is that the world is not a fixed entity available to our perception, nor is our perception determined by the world, rather that they are mutually constituted. That is, the world changes its shape, and hence reality changes, as we orient ourselves through it via embodied perception and that as a consequence of this orientation our perception of the world also changes. For Merleau-Ponty “vision is not an operation of thought” for we are “immersed in the visible” by our body and as such “the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world” (1964, p162). The boundary between the self and the world, the body and reality is thus a permeable and ever changing boundary. The “body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p163). It is the mutually transformative dimension of the relationship between the perceiving embodied self and a perceivable reality that is particularly relevant to my work for it signals the perceptual foundations of design, itself an activity that transforms the reality we perceive. I will deal with this further in Chapter 6 also.
My journey through various stances on the nature of reality, and any apparent equivocation I may have in being definitive about adopting a singular stance, has less to do with any intellectual uncertainty and more to do with an interest in taking different positions in order to understand my relation to reality from different perspectives. This is in part a pragmatic attitude resulting from years of creative practice in which I have actively played with notions of reality through images. For this reason I ultimately subscribe to the view that reality is what “stands in our path towards death; hence: what we are interested in” (Flusser 2007[1983], p84).

The Experience Of The Here-And-Now

Compounding the confusion around the manner in which ethnography and design science engage with the contemporary world (compared to design practice), are issues pertaining to objectivity and subjectivity. I have argued elsewhere that design practice has, through its history, been overly concerned with subjectivity in the guise of designer experience (Roxburgh & Bremner 1999; Roxburgh 2003). I have also argued that design science and design sociology have been overly influenced by the notion of objectivity in framing either research into design, or design methodology (Roxburgh & Bremner 1999). The former seeks to privilege the individual experience of the designer in the design process. The latter seeks to eliminate the subjectivity of the researcher when design is the object of study, or that of the designer when design is a methodology. It is increasingly understood that such a dichotomy is false. Contemporary phenomenological ethnography is more concerned with observing, documenting and understanding human experience and the subjective experience of the researcher is acknowledged in any such endeavour. What this acknowledgement exemplifies is the idea of critical distance as opposed to the fallacy of human objectivity. In contemporary design practice there is a growing interest in understanding and designing for human experience that parallels the developments in ethnography. However, a similar accounting of designer subjectivity in the form of critical distance is generally absent.

The apparent similarity between the interest in subjective human experience in contemporary ethnography and design practice has resulted in a blind spot regarding the significant differences between them. Contemporary ethnography’s focus on understanding human experience of the here-and-now still privileges a type of ‘objectivity’ that in turn creates a particular picture of ‘reality’ that fundamentally clashes with the embodied subjective experience of designing. This relates to both theories of reality and the modes of communication privileged by these fields.Crudely put, observation in ethnography is about looking for meaning, where conceptual thought and words are privileged, whereas design is concerned with looking for making and privileges imaginative thought and images. Ethnography seeks to describe our ‘realities’. It narrates the world and in doing so it simultaneously constructs an experience of the world and transforms our understanding of it. This in turn transforms our sense of the world’s reality. Such transformation operates at a conceptual level and may or may not have material consequences beyond perception and narration. Design is different for it actively seeks to create the world. It is pre-eminently concerned with transforming the reality of the world but has a history of doing so from a largely instrumental and uncritical perspective. It seeks to construct our realities first and may or may not describe them later. Design is an actively interventionist pursuit compared to ethnography and as such its engagement with reality is different. To be sure, an ethnographer’s observation of the world is inevitably a form of intervention for the presence of the ethnographer has an impact upon the site and people being observed. In ethnographic terms this is known as reactivity. However, rarely does the ethnographer seek to intervene in the very material essence of the world in the manner in which designers do. I will deal with this issue further in Chapter 2.

As I have already outlined, reality and our experience of it can be seen as existing on a continuum - at one end there is the materialist view of the world and at the other the idealist view of the world. Most contemporary social theories tend towards the view that our understanding of reality is constructed through experience, be it socially or individually constructed; in essence reality is something we construct. As such the old binary distinctions of object and subject have been called into question, as have concepts of a fixed and singular reality - hence the shift to an interest in experience. In spite of this shift contemporary
ethnography, from which design so heavily borrows, is still fundamentally a field of analysis and interpretation with an object of study (our experience of the present, or indeed past) and a goal to inform. In contrast design is a field of interpretation and synthesis in which the goal is to transform our experience of the here-and-now, often in the form of ‘objects’. This points to a conceptual shift from an object filled world to a subject filled world in which we are the subject of our project. The project of design is no longer about the object, its historical pre-occupation, but about the subject – us - and how we choose to live. This is evident in the shift in the field of design from an interest in the meaning of things to an interest in our experience of them. It is also why recognising that the world design creates through its objects is inherently artificial for the artificial world we create through design is the concrete manifestation of the world we imagine we want. By looking to ethnography for an intellectual framework, design’s transformative potential is conditioned in a particular way. It becomes conditioned by the logic of conceptual thought and the ideas of reality that attend to that. By looking at the languages of communication that these respective fields use for conducting and reporting their work we can see where this conditioning takes place given that these languages (text or image) and the types of thought (conceptual or imaginative) they employ are different. Working without an appropriate framing theory for photo-observation in design, or worse still simply adopting the ethnographic frame, means that the framework is at odds with design’s epistemology.

**Telling Us What We Can See**

Established fields of research, such as ethnography, have rich bodies of discourse on their modes of inquiry, communication and attendant framing theories. Design is still relatively new in such an endeavour and the tendency to borrow is strong. In Chapter 2 I will cover the relevant history of this borrowing as well as the problems of ‘fit’ associated with it. I will explore the issue of fit, with particular reference to the use of realist photo-observation in ethnography and design, to draw out its implications on both design practice and the world that design imagines. In summary these implications relate back to my earlier comments on how the contemporary world is examined, used and reported by ethnography compared to design. In turn this comparison implicates the language that each field uses to depict and communicate their engagement and understanding of this world. The dominant mode of communication and representation ethnography uses is the written word, although there is a rich but somewhat marginal sub-field of visual ethnography that uses visual media. The dominant mode of communication and representation that design uses is visual and its use is fundamentally different from how it is used in ethnography. I would also contend that there is a rich but somewhat marginal sub-field of design writing.

Ethnographically framed methods depend on a high level of congruence between what is seen and understood and how this is told. The desire for congruence is to minimise the ‘fingerprints’ (subjective influence) of the ethnographer on that account. In relation to photo-observation methods, the apparent proximity of the photo to the ‘real’, between what is seen and photographed, is close. Design is historically framed from the perspective of the designer getting their hands on everything they can. In design, the image is central in communicating concepts and propositions, is concerned with the depiction of a possible future not the present, and as such functions at a level of abstraction as it is not real in the sense that we commonly understand the term. By this I mean that the images used exist as real but the thing they depict does not in a concrete material sense, although it is real in a conceptual sense. The adoption of ethnographic photo-observation methods for design has occurred with little apparent understanding of the incongruity between these perspectives and the evidence is that in spite of the transformative nature of design it too relies heavily on the photo’s proximity to the real in imagining and imaging what-might-be. This has consequences for the reality that designers can imagine for it is conditioned by the reality that realist photographs can, or can’t, depict.

The insights I have gained around these issues, which stem from the need to develop a more appropriate framing theory for photo-observation in design, point to my concern with the language of design. In short a framing theory from a field other than design, such as science or ethnography, will have an impact on the type of language that design communicates through. I regard the use of photo-observation in design research as one dialect within the
broader lexicon of design but will make the case that that dialect is currently constrained by an inappropriate framing theory and conditioned, to invoke Flusser (2007), by the program of photo-realism. I will argue that changing that theory will result in a different dialect being developed, one that is more appropriate for design. My point is that such an appropriate framing theory must be more in keeping with the synthetic and transformative nature of design.

**Picturing What We Can’t See**

There is an inevitable tension between ethnographic depictions of everyday experience, be it in words and/or images, and design’s inclination to transform the everyday into something new; the here-and-now rubs up against what-might-be. This tension is evident in design’s unquestioning use of ethnographically framed realist photo-observation methods. In spite of design being an interventionist practice when it comes to reality, design sees reality and representation as fundamentally malleable and abstract. Ethnographically framed photographs are very good at ‘describing’ what we see in front of the camera. As such we conflate the photograph with reality and because we do they remain largely objects of analysis and depiction. As design transforms and functions at a level of abstraction (especially during the actual process of designing) it is largely a process of synthesis and interpretation. The language of analysis and description, the product of conceptual thought, is predominantly one of words and relies heavily on explicitly coded rules of grammar. The language of synthesis that design uses, on the other hand, is predominantly visual and despite there being implicit conventions it has no such explicitly coded rules, despite the development of such a grammar having been attempted (see for example Kress and Van Leeuwin 1996). Herein lies the crux of the issue with the unquestioning use of realist photo-observation in design research. The realist photo, being exemplary of analysis and description, is a manifestation of conceptual thought whereas design is a practice steeped in imaginative thought. Our experience of the imaginative space of designing becomes conditioned by a manifestation of conceptual space in the form of the realist photograph.

**The Questions That I’m Asking**

Ironically, embodied experience, which is crucial to our experience of design, can be relatively easily described in words but because it is not an observable thing it is very difficult to depict visually. We can of course photograph the physical traces or circumstances in which experiences unfold but not the experience a person has of them. Whilst I am not suggesting that written and spoken language are not crucial in the lexicon of design, and neither would I argue that conceptual thought has no place, I will make the argument that given design’s lexicon is largely visual it seems bizarre that we should use realist photo-observation methods when conducting research for design for experience when photography is incapable of depicting it. This brings me to the central crux of the thesis and this is that a realist photographic framework is inappropriate, in and of itself, when conducting research for design for experience given experience cannot be depicted and design is both artificial and indeed artifice.

As conducting research is concerned with asking questions to develop insight, it is implied that we must be asking questions of or through our photographs if we are using photo-observation. This then leads me to pose the following question: ‘what is the nature of the questions one can ask through a photograph?’ Inevitably the questions we can ask attend to reality - and what we may ask of reality - but not in the commonplace and obvious sense of the reality the photograph apparently shows; the taken for granted naturalised regime of pictorial realism that derives from the photographs causal indexicality. The more fundamental questions we can ask pertain to the reality that we inevitably transform through the interplay of the imaginary and the images of photography via our embodied perception of the world. This leads to a further, and more significant question that is not just about the photograph, but it could be, rather it is about the reality we have created in the post-industrial age. That question is ‘why does everything look the same?’ The first question is really a stepping-stone into exploring the manner in which the photographic image conditions the way in which we imagine the world. That exploration is a way of answering the second question. In doing so I will critique realist photo-observation and propose an alternative theoretical framework for the use of photography in design research.
SEEING WHAT WE FEEL

I will suggest that the theoretical framework I am articulating for design’s use of photo-observation methods has broader implications for design practice and is a way of beginning to respond to the question ‘why does everything look the same?’ My research to date, and the accompanying photographic practice I have developed through it, suggests to me that the blind spot I outlined earlier is not limited to overlooking the significant differences between ethnography and design. It is also associated with the manner in which the subjectivity of the designer plays out in the relationship between the two. Justifiably the overt subjectively framed practices of design of past eras had to be called into question. Both in questioning it and in adopting theories from other fields, such as ethnography, the role of the designer seems less certain than it once was. Whilst not advocating a return to the designer as hero model, I will make a claim for the subjectivity of the designer to be re-imagined. A re-imagined sense of subjectivity includes the tacit understanding of the embodied nature of designing. Rather than seeing the designer’s subjectivity as a liability in realistically framed design research I will make a claim for an understanding of it to be explicitly encouraged in conceiving of artificially framed design research. I call this conception the aesthetics of research. The underlying principal of this conception is that the aesthetic dimensions (that is, embodied experience) of the methods of research we use, and the manner in which we interpret our findings should be at the forefront of how we conduct research, not pushed to the side, as it is with realistically framed photo-observation. Taking such a stance points to what I call the design imperative, which is the consciousness with which we frame and conduct (or see) our research before we act upon it (design). The underlying principal of this approach is to be responsive to what we see, how we see it and how we act upon it, to develop a sense of critical distance.

RECOUNTING WHAT I BELIEVE

For the purpose of clarity I will now recap both what I am arguing in my thesis and the manner in which I frame my understanding of key areas of my research. I am looking at the use of photo-observation methods, drawn from phenomenological ethnography, for visual communication research and practice. In doing this I will be critiquing the lack, or inappropriateness, of the current framing theory of such use and articulating an alternative framing theory. I hold the view that design is concerned with the conception and production of the artificial and that the world most of humankind now inhabits is an inherently artificial place. I understand design to be simultaneously rooted in the present and fundamentally concerned with the future and in order to make projections of the possible future world design must develop representational strategies that operate at the level of artifice, for they represent things that don’t exist2. I view the apparent contradiction of design’s simultaneous concern with the present and the future as being a contributing factor in what I call the crisis of the artificial and that the importation of theories and methods from other fields feeds this crisis. The crisis of the artificial has been exacerbated because the framing theories and methods adopted have come from largely analytic fields whereas design is primarily synthetic. Despite the shift ethnography has undergone, and the manner in which it now questions assumptions about reality and experience, it still requires a degree of congruence to exist between what it observes and how it describes it. In addition the partiality of the observer has to be acknowledged, in order to minimise its impact, resulting in a kind of objectivity that describes particular pictures of the here-and-now. Ethnography’s interest in human experience has been paralleled by an interest in design for experience yet design is dependent on the partiality of the designer in conceiving of new realities. An aspect of that partiality - the subjective embodied experience of the designer - is their facility with modes of representation for depicting what-might-be. This is a fundamentally abstract enterprise and it does not necessarily require any congruence to exist between what is observed and what is represented. As such I hold the view that a framing theory for the use of photo-observation in design should not be premised solely on realism but should encompass abstraction, evocation and transformation, resulting in what I would call artificially framed researched methods, against the realistically framed methods of science and ethnography. Finally, what I call the aesthetics of research is premised on the notion that we should learn how to see before we act, and that

2 It is fair to say that the past also plays a role in projecting from the present to the future. Not that we can design in the past but we can design with reference to it for past experience, events and knowledge are subsumed into the present in which design unfolds.
we understand seeing and designing as fundamentally transformative and ideological. This is in itself an ideological position.

**Stating What I Will Argue**

I will take up the arguments touched upon in this chapter in the following manner:

In “Chapter 2: Looking Really Artificial” I will overview the key literature on ethnographic photo-observation and demonstrate that it has both a long history and a long history of unpacking and critiquing the relationship between the photograph, reality, and the production of ethnographic knowledge. I will then cover the relatively scant literature on design research photo-observation and argue that it has a short history and little to no unpacking and critiquing of the relationship between the photograph, reality, and the production of design ‘knowledge’, in whatever form that may take. I will articulate what I see as the similarities and differences — that is the ethnographic analysis of the seen world as record compared to the design transformation of the seen world as artificial — between these fields and argue that because of these differences design should question its uncritical use of realist photos for such transformation. Irrespective of the apparent differences between the crude distinctions of ethnographic analysis and design synthesis that I articulate I will argue that these are currently seen as boundaries between the artifice of objective and subjective domains to be policed. I will propose the view, with reference to both the literature and my photographic practice, that rather than seeing these as boundaries they should be reconceived to be a framing device that can be manipulated to create critical distance. I will contend that in the unquestioning use of realist photo-observation, design has suffered a loss of critical distance and argue that visual communication design in particular has created a tsunami of images of the ‘real’ as so much banality as a consequence.

In “Chapter 3: Real Photography” I will take a step back to overview some of the extensive photographic theory and discourse that has developed through the medium’s history by way of providing some context to the use of photo-observation, in ethnography and design, and to indicate why the realist frame persists. I will argue that even at the outset the photograph’s indexical relation to reality and meaning has been exhaustively critiqued and explored and that such critique has largely come from outside of photographic practice. More significantly I will note that such theorising has been focused on predominantly descriptive documentary images of people and places and little theorising has been developed from more evocative indeed abstract photography. I will explore the notion of the index, derived from critical theory, as being preoccupied with the causal relationship between the photograph and what it depicts and argue that this has lead to the lost pleasure of the image and become as doctrinaire and essentialist as the more connoisseurial theories that preceded it. I will then turn to the notion of intentionality of photographic taking or making as being an under theorised aspect of photography and characterise it as being existentially indexical. I will conclude by arguing that existential indexicality as a concept and photographic abstraction as a practice highlight the loss of space called critical distance that realist photo-observation in design is symptomatic of. I will argue that, conceptually speaking, abstract photography as a practice has a lot in common with design as a practice (they are both concerned with asking questions about the nature of reality in order to transform it) and points to phenomenology as an alternative theoretical framework.

In “Chapter 4: Real Abstract Photography” I take up the argument that abstract photography offers an insight into how design might use photo-observation and escape the banal. I cover the fairly limited published theoretical discourse on abstract photography and note that it too is concerned with reality. I note that although much early abstract work was concerned with showing the true reality of the world - and conceptually in that regard not too far from the realist use of photography – it has been primarily concerned through its history with creating new realities. Where they differ is that realist photo-observation is framed as a practice of discovery or depiction, abstract photography is framed as a practice of revelation or transformation. I will argue that abstract photographers are concerned with asking questions about the nature of reality and that it is a practice that creates a space between the world, the imaginary, and the image. I will argue that this space is critical distance and as it is theorised through practice it points in turn towards phenomenology as a way of further developing a suitable framing theory for design photo-observation.
From here I will pick up the idea of the use of the spatial dimension to develop photographic theory and do so with reference to my own practice in the form of a sequence of photographic projects that formed part of my research. I will argue that the realist photographs of the everyday that are flooding the digital world are creating a tsunami of banality and that this tsunami is in essence a project of mass creativity that is archival in nature. I will argue that the tsunami has further eroded our critical distance from the photograph yet in spite, or perhaps because of it, our social uses of photography persists, if not grows. I will argue that most consumer users of photography are unconcerned by this situation yet understand something of the vexed relationship photography has had to reality. I will argue that the archival project of photographic mass creativity uses a set of highly circumscribed processes and apparatus and is indicative of what I call the crisis of the artificial. I will make the point that we are increasingly drawing on a reductive set of realist depictions of the real to transform it which is why ‘everything looks the same’.

In the concluding “Chapter 6: Shaping Abstraction” I will explore the arc of my photographic projects in relation to theories of abstraction and existential phenomenology as a way of developing a theory from practice. This arc and these theories are in essence the questions I have asked through the photograph. I will outline this exploration with particular reference to two key concepts. The first being the image sensitising itself: the concept that images are not representations but part of the horizon of our embodied perception of reality. I will argue that perception is an embodied, creative, and inevitable condition of being human and that we need to take responsibility for it. I will argue that everything looks the same because of our over reliance on the realist photograph as our central image form. From there I will contend that design is inevitable, even if its objects are not, and that the insight I have developed of the relationship between the transformative act of perception and the creative act of design is crucial in understanding the need for critical distance in our practice. Critical distance is directly related to the nature of the questions one can ask through a photograph. This then leads me to the second concept, that of the critical gesture: the idea of an aware and critically engaged form of practice that seeks to work against established patterns of photographic seeing. The significant point that I will make is that through these concepts and questions we can challenge the constraining effects of the program of the camera, that has parallels in the instrumental practices of design, that leads us to imagining a world where everything looks the same.
Chapter 2: Looking Really Artificial

The Really Abstract

In this chapter I will provide an overview of some of the key literature relating to photo-based methods of observation in ethnography then do the same with the literature of design. I will firstly demonstrate that there is a growing body of academic literature around the significance of the visual in the generation and dissemination of knowledge, what has been called a visual epistemology. Despite this emergent terrain being contested it is not my intention to recount the permutations of it; rather I am noting its existence to simply establish my research as being part of it. I do this because my practice, visual communication, is directly implicated in the vast quantities of visual messages that flood our semiosphere and is an oft-commented feature of much of this literature. It is not my aim to definitively locate my research in this terrain but to note that as an inquiry into a specific kind of practice within it, it contributes something to that emerging epistemology; locating where my work may fit is a task for another time. I say this because my work is primarily concerned with the use of photo-based methods of observation from ethnography in design practice and research and it is in relation to the literature from these fields that I will locate my work.

In reviewing some of the key literature on ethnographic photo-observation I will make the argument that despite the relationship between the photograph and reality having been significantly unpacked during its one hundred or so years of practice, realism is still the dominant framework used for such methods. This, I will argue, relates to the overwhelming emphasis ethnography places on observing and understanding contemporary culture, the here-and-now, and the meanings it makes of it. I will contend that ethnography is mainly concerned with descriptive accounts of social phenomena, even if these are framed as interpretative, and that realist photographs are well suited to this task given they are themselves largely descriptive.

In reviewing the relatively scant literature on design photo-observation I will make the claim that there has been no comparative unpacking of the relationship between the photograph and reality and that the use of photo realism has not been theorised at all. I will argue that this is not just theoretically problematic but problematic given design now places emphasis on observing and understanding contemporary culture in order to imagine what-might-be. I will contend that design is mainly concerned with transforming the world through the image, even if framed as logical, and that realist photographs alone are not so well suited to the task given they are largely descriptive. In reviewing the relevant literature I will also explore the importance of visual forms of inquiry, representation, and communication other than photography to demonstrate that these are typically abstract compared to the use of realist photography.

Why Bother Looking?

It is commonplace now to hear that we live in an overwhelmingly visual world or that our modes of communication are becoming increasingly visual (Emmison & Smith 2006, pix; Walker & Chaplin 1997, p3). The rise of visual culture as a relatively new field of study, informed as it is by a range of humanities sub-disciplines, is indicative that this view has gained currency. However Pink argues that this view is too simplistic and that human cultures have at different times been as, if not more, visually literate than current western society (2006, p42). Furthermore, she argues that the growing dominance of what is in essence an ocularcentric discourse, renders to the margins other and as valid sensory ways of knowing (Pink 2006, pp44-45). Pink is engaged in the anthropology of the senses which aims to research the relationships between the embodied sensory experience people have of the world and their understanding of it. Despite championing a broader approach to sensory ways of knowing, Pink’s methodological foundation is drawn from visual anthropology and although she addresses the problems of using visual methods, for exploring and representing non-visual sensory experience, it is somewhat telling that her key methods are visual. Whilst agreeing with Pink’s more nuanced view of the role of all the senses, I would contend that the forms of mass and networked communication that have proliferated in the last twenty to fifty years has lead to an apparent limitless amount of visual messages zapping around the semiosphere in a way that is unprecedented in human history. The field and practice of visual communication, in which my research is based, is implicated in such a phenomenon.
Stafford provides an historical account of the way in which human’s have used the visual in formal knowledge production and claims that there is in fact an emerging visual epistemology (Stafford 1997, pp8-9 & 23-25; Stafford 2009). In doing so she overviews a range of seemingly conventional disciplines that use the visual, and often emerging visual technologies, such as: philosophy; diagnostic medical imaging; astronomy; cognitive sciences; neurobiology; artificial intelligence; and genetics. Anthropology is premised on observation and a range of visual methods and attendant framing theories form a substantial body of knowledge (see Banks 2001, Becker 1981, Collier & Collier 1986, Pink 2006, Prosser 1998). Visual culture itself is concerned with deconstructing the role of the visual in communication and knowing (Elkins 2003; Walker and Chalpin 1997). Education too has embraced the visual as a means of inquiry, communication and knowing (Mitchell & Webber 1998, Wetton & McWhirter 1998). Somewhat ironically, the work in language literacy, based in constructivist education theory, is designed to assist students with reading comprehension and written expression by using visual mapping techniques (Hyerle1996; Sinatra 2000). Such is the belief that our modes of communication have become increasingly visual that Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) have attempted to develop a grammar for visual communication as codified as linguistic grammar. My somewhat schematic summary of some of the relevant literature is not intended to pass as a detailed critique of the development of a visual epistemology in these fields, rather it is to indicate that the visual is widely considered a significant object of study and mode of inquiry.

**Seeing the Real**

Anthropology emerged in the mid 19th century and was heavily influenced by the natural sciences, which were then largely concerned with the task of biological classification. Consequently it was initially engaged with the categorisation of the human race, based upon theories of social evolution, prevalent at the time (Edwards 1992, pp5-6; Harper 1998, p25). Prior to the development of fieldwork, anthropology was largely undertaken by armchair anthropologists; so called because they “received their information second-hand from missionaries, soldiers and traders” and formulated social theory on that basis (Plowman 2003,
The shift to direct observation occurred when Malinowski undertook what is commonly regarded as the first significant and extended piece of ethnographic fieldwork in his early 20th century study of the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands (see Malinowski 1984 [1922]). Pink claims that the 1894 fieldwork of Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, who studied Australian Aboriginals, and the 1898 anthropological expedition of Alfred Cort Haddon to the Torres Straits Islands, predates this by ten–twenty years (2006, p5). Regardless of historical precedence, all three examples demonstrate the first concerted attempts at systematic fieldwork that privileged first-hand observation of social phenomena in the form of participant observation. Objectivity and analysis were the principal theoretical frameworks. To maintain the objectivity of the study and eliminate reactivity—the change in the behaviour of those observed as a result of the presence of the observer—long-term observation was the norm. It was believed that as the observed became used to the presence of the observer, the behaviour of those being observed would return to normal. This approach to participant observation is premised on the assumption of a manageable ‘distance’ between the observer and the observed.

Kelsey and Stimson argue that the scientific use of photography dominated in the 19th century, when the medium was invented, and that the photograph was understood as objective fact (2008, pxii). Ethnography, they note, emerged parallel to this usage and it informed the way ethnographers used photographs. They contend that although the ethnographic photograph was regarded as factual, because it required evaluation to become evidence it inevitably involved subjective judgement. The contradictory nature of the simultaneous framing of the photograph as objective and subjective was absorbed, they argue, with the emergence of modernism (Kelsey and Stimson 2008, pxii–pxiv). Thus the assumption of a manageable distance, obtained through the guise of objectivity, collapsed. The inability to recognise the collapse of this supposed distance has all the hallmarks of positivism. Berger notes that “positivism and the camera and sociology grew up together” and that “what sustained them all as practices was the belief that observable quantifiable facts, recorded by scientists and experts, would one day offer man such total knowledge about nature and society that he would be able to order them both” (Berger and Mohr 1982, p99).
Significantly the expeditions of Malinowski, Haddon, and Spencer and Gillen, all used various photographic based media to record their observations, the most common being still photography. Ball and Smith contend that ethnographers have long regarded the still photograph as one of the key ways of representing the seen world because the “claim to realism represented by photography has made it an attractive tool for the anthropologist and sociologist: it appears to permit the rapid and faithful recording of visual phenomena” (1992, p4). They also argue that because of its mechanical nature that in one sense it cannot lie, and given the largely descriptive concerns of ethnography the “precise record of material reality that photography provides is a powerful appeal” (Ball and Smith 1992, p6). Ethnographically, the photograph was initially used as visual evidence to demonstrate the difference between exotic and familiar cultures as well as an illustrative device to reinforce theories developed through written analysis. Thus utilised, photography is not integral to the development of new knowledge, but used late in the project “as a highly selective confirmation that certain things are so” (Spindler 1967, px). The use of photography in social research in such a manner was typical of the time. It was not until the work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson (1942) that an attempt was made to use photography as an integral component of social inquiry to generate new knowledge (Harper 1998, pp25-6). Geertz has argued that Bateson and Mead manifestly failed in this endeavour and claims that Bateson eventually conceded as much (1988, pp3-4). However, the significance of their work lay in their attempt to provide a detailed and complex picture, through photography, of the social groups they were studying, in contrast to the more illustrative approach of earlier anthropologists. Their work remains a hallmark piece of ethnographic photo-observation. Despite the rigour and complexity of Bateson and Mead’s work it was based on the assumption that photography could provide unproblematic evidence of social situations and resist the interpretation of meaning we know attends our viewing of photographs.

The idea of photography used as an interpretative tool of social inquiry came to the fore in the 1960’s. It owes as much to the emergence of critical sociology in the 1960’s as it
does to the documentary photography of Americans like Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans (Harper 1998, p28). The conceptual shift, that this signalled, from an objective frame to a more subjective one occurred as a consequence of the recognition of the partiality of photographic intervention, the photo-observer’s subjectivity, and the perceived limitations of the objective frame. The application of photography, so framed, contributed to the understanding of cultures not through the presentation of evidence but through interpretation. Ruby (1988) explores various manifestations of this approach in documentary film making where the subjectivity of the observer / filmmaker is interrogated alongside the social observations they are filming, as a means to a very particular end. The means being an acknowledgement of the observers subjectivity, the author function, and matters of reactivity and the end being a relational dialogue between those and the situation observed made manifest in the ethnographic account.

Geertz (1988) deals with the author function of ethnography in detail and problematises the relationship between the subjectivity of the observer and the apparent objectivity that their ethnographic account. He notes that the tension between the subjective and objective in ethnography has been disguised from being “a matter of how best to get an honest story honestly told” and cast as an epistemological problem of “how to prevent subjective views from colouring objective facts” (Geertz 1988, p9). He sees this as a “clash between the expository conventions of author-saturated texts and those of author evacuated ones” and that is a manifestation of how the “ethnographic enterprise is imagined to be a clash between seeing things as one would have them and seeing them as they really are” (Geertz 1988, p9). This signals a shift in how we understand reality and our relationship to it. For photographic methods it signals a shift away from using them in the analytical projects of firstly content analysis, with its atomising quantitative approach, and secondly structuralist analysis, with its pre-occupation with meaning, to an interpretative application through phenomenological inquiry, with an interest in lived experience (Ball and Smith 1992, pp54-70). Phenomenological ethnography acknowledges the partiality of the researcher and the constructed nature of the ethnographic account. Research is not about the
production of an authoritative and definitive account of the state of affairs observed, it is a ‘dialogue’ about a set of experiences. The photograph is seen as an interpretation rather than a reflection of reality.

**Interpreting the Real**

A more radical approach to ethnography emerged in the 1980s, influenced heavily by post-modern philosophy. It aimed “not to foster the growth of knowledge but to re-structure experience… to re-assimilate, to re-integrate the self in society and to re-structure the conduct of everyday life” (Marcus and Fischer 1986, p125). This approach can be seen as a response to several factors, these being: the political objectives of post-modernism in general - the restructuring of (small p) politics; the crisis of the real - the challenge to the notion of a knowable, objective reality; the crisis of representation - the challenge to photography’s ability to document an objective reality. Despite such a shift the underlying interest of much ethnography still lies in an analytic account, be it monologue or dialogue, of the seen world (Ball and Smith 1992, p5). These changes in the framing of ethnography point to a widespread acknowledgement that observation, and by implication photo-observation, is informed by the subjective intent, bias, and the ideological agendas of the observer (Harper 1998, p29; Prosser & Schwartz 1998, p116). In spite of these changes the use of photography in ethnography is still undertaken using a largely realist framework. This is premised on the general acceptance of an observable material reality that appears to be concrete, whilst recognising social reality is an ever-changing malleable phenomenon. As such, it is generally agreed that the accurate depiction of subject matter before the lens is an essential pre-requisite to collecting rigorously sound research data.

Becker (1974) explores the relationship between professional photo-documentary practice and sociological photo-observation. He makes the point that the former could learn much from sociology by developing a more sophisticated framing theory, stating that “shooting what seems interesting usually satisfies the photographer’s need for a method” (Becker 1974, p16). In other words they take great photos but their theory is weak. He argues that
sociologists have sophisticated social framing theories that inform how, what, where, when, and why they observe and note phenomena, yet these theories translate poorly into sociological photo-documentation. In a sense this parallels Geertz’s mediation on the author function of anthropology, although granted he was reflecting on anthropological writing, in that he examines the critical role that the interpretative rhetoric of anthropological writers play in their accounts (1988, pp5-8). Becker believes that sociologists should learn to “refine over a period of time the image they create of something” which in turn results in the image expressing “more clearly, concisely, and unambiguously their basic understanding of those things” (Becker 1974, p21). In other words sociologists may have good theory but their photos are often poor. Becker demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between the photographic image and concepts of truth and reality, noting that such things are ideologically, institutionally, and subjectively framed (1974, pp14-15). These relationships are acknowledged as important considerations in the framing of sociological inquiry and analysis. In spite of acknowledging reality as a contested concept, as is its relationship to photos, it is clear Becker believes that the photograph must maintain congruence between what is seen and what is photographed to be sociologically useful. This indicates a realist photographic framework is privileged.

Collier and Collier regard the camera as an ideal tool for observation because it “can record on a low scale of abstraction” and “faithfully records” what is within the “focus and scope of its lens” (1986, p7). Furthermore they argue, the “nonverbal language of photorealism is a language that is most understood interculturally and cross culturally” and that the “fluency of recognition” that flows from this “is the basic reason the camera can be of such importance in anthropological communication and analysis” (Collier and Collier 1986, p9). It is evident that realism is their privileged framework. When writing about camera technique they reinforce the need to take sharp in-focus photographs, make sure the subject is well lit, and ensure that adequate coverage of a scene and its context is recorded to maintain accuracy (Collier and Collier 1986, pp211-213). Irrespective of their privileging of realism they recognise that the anthropologist’s subjectivity necessarily frames what is
being photographed and how the photograph is interpreted (Collier and Collier 1986, p153). They argue that good photo ethnography depends on how the analysis of the photo data is transformed into insight and that “both art and science face the challenge of abstracting new insights and experience from the visible shape of reality” and that the new knowledge produced “creates a new reality” (Collier and Collier 1986, p169). Photographs are not mere illustrations of a theory or point of view, but form the basis of the development of systematic knowledge (Collier and Collier 1986, p170).

Although Collier and Collier outline a fairly simplistic view of reality, the relationship between their conception of photo-observation and the manner in which they abstract insight from it into the creation of new knowledge is pertinent to my research for I am exploring the relationship between notions of reality and abstraction through photo-based methods in the design process. It is also significant that they see writing as the main mode of disseminating this knowledge. There are clear parallels between how Collier and Collier see the development of knowledge and how design might be characterised. However, the mode of dissemination of ethnography and design are fundamentally different, as are the intent of both disciplines. I will return to this shortly.

Pink (2006) works across still photography and video and explicitly acknowledges the role of inter-subjectivity in framing her production of anthropological accounts. She describes one of her techniques where her subjects take her on tours of their homes while she videotapes them. These are not videos that record observed events as they occur, but are hour-long tours that work to a checklist of topics, not unlike semi-structured interviews. The inter-subjective interplay occurs between both Pink’s framework, and the manner in which she questions and selectively focuses on phenomena, and the performative response of her subjects. Although Pink rightly states that these recordings “are clearly not realist representations of the everyday lives of my informants”, they are a documentation of a real embodied performance in which informants used a variety of visual and sensory props (Pink 2006, p68). Despite acknowledging the performative nature of the content Pink also argues that the resulting videos are “consciously framed realist recordings and products of this experience” (Pink 2006, p68). It is clear that although the method itself is a form of creative practice it is framed from a realist perspective. Pink is critical of attempts to develop a more radical visual anthropology that encompasses visual art practices to extend anthropological ways of knowing in spite of her more nuanced view of how we conceive reality. Her key concern with more radical approaches rests with the communication of anthropological knowledge. She states “without being anthropologically framed such filmic representations… cannot communicate anthropologically about cross-cultural difference” (Pink 2006, p50). Such techniques would create a form of narrative other anthropologists would be unfamiliar with, inhibiting the anthropological utility of the account. This echoes Becker’s and the Colliers’ concern that anthropological photos need to maintain a fidelity to what is observed.

The literature I have reviewed is by no means an exhaustive analysis of relatively mainstream visual ethnography, rather it is indicative of the overwhelming view of that mainstream. It is worth pointing out that visual ethnography itself is regarded as a marginal sub field within conventional ethnography. Within this sub field there are of course differing views on what constitutes acceptable practice. Visual ethnography challenges the conventions of mainstream ethnographic practice itself by arguing that the visual is as valid a form of inquiry, analysis, and dissemination as the written word. This runs counter to conventional ethnography that privileges the written word as the only appropriate means to generate ethnographic knowledge and maintain an appropriate distance. The idea of difference that Pink touches upon relates back to the earlier point I made about the assumption of distance. Difference in ethnography is based on the notion of the other; the distance between observed and observer is premised on difference. Distance is a device we manipulate to narrate or illustrate our point of view, our interpretation of the difference between what we see and what we depict; what we say and what we mean; and what we tell and how it is experienced. The idea of distance is what Geertz deals with in examining the author function in anthropological writing. The reason that mainstream visual ethnography regards the accurate, or realistic, depiction of subject matter before the lens of the camera as central to the generation and dissemination of sound
ethnographic knowledge is to maintain the assumption of that distance. Maintaining that assumption is also the manipulation of distance.

**SEEING THE REAL AS ABSTRACT**

Grimshaw and Ravetz promote a more radical approach to visual ethnography. They argue that the current visual forms at the disposal of the ethnographer are limiting. Furthermore, they argue that there is a clear demarcation between the anthropology of the visual and visual practice itself and infer that this is in part why the visual methods at their disposal are limited (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2005, p8). Like Pink they are interested in challenging the "narrow concerns of occularity to investigate ways of knowing located in the body and the senses" (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2005, p9). This echoes the concern Stafford expresses about the linguistic bias of mainstream academia that perpetuates "the false separation of how things are presented from what they express" (Stafford 1997, p3). Additionally it also signals the move away from the semiotic preoccupation with meaning to the phenomenological interest in embodied experience. Interestingly Grimshaw and Ravetz recognise that a move to ethnography that draws on artistic forms of visual practice "involves quite different assumptions about the making and presenting of knowledge" (2005, p15). Their perspective indicates an awareness that knowledge in an artistic sense is embodied, in both the process of making and the thing made, and is at times tacit. There are implications for such an approach upon the manner in which design research and practice unfold which I will deal with later, but suffice to say it relates to the management of distance.

Grimshaw, like Pink, seeks to challenge the discursive dominance of the written word in anthropology by "dislodging textual habits" and "effecting the shift from what David MacDougall calls a word-sentence to an image-sequence approach" (Grimshaw 2005 p18). Where she differs from Pink is in her willingness to push the boundaries of the forms and techniques of visual representation of anthropological knowledge by drawing on arts practice. She takes this position because she argues that anthropological film making no longer makes claims to being objective or a science, rather it is "a very particular sensibility anchored in

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experiential knowledge” (Grimshaw 2005, p25). This suggests that as objective knowledge is no longer the aim of anthropology, or indeed possible, and that as knowledge is generated through a dialogue between the ethnographer and subjects (or participants as she calls them), then an abandonment of conventional practice is not only warranted but required. Such a phenomenological interest in embodied experience and knowing is central to artistic and, by extension, design practice. What Grimshaw recognises is the fallacy of the assumption of distance maintained by a belief in the separation of object from subject, and she sees distance instead as a form of critical awareness. Critical distance if you will. Something artists are well versed in.

Grimshaw acknowledges that the shift she advocates creates tension in ethnographic work between a more conventional approach that favours observation and explanation on one hand, and a more radical approach that favours experience and participation on the other (2005, p25). A more radical approach is less concerned with the discursive production of knowledge through language, and more interested in an exploration of the haptic knowledge generated through the “re-embodiment of the self as the foundation for renewed engagement with everyday life” (Grimshaw 2005, p23). Critical to her approach is an exploration of the possibility of not only rendering experience through visual ethnographic representation but also reflecting upon that experience from within the representation itself. Such self-conscious and explicit reflexivity encompassed in any ethnographic representation may suggest a clue to the difference between how ethnography may use arts practices and how design might use ethnographic practices. Grimshaw advocates a more radical approach to ethnography and recognises that it is not about the documentation of an observed reality but the transformation of knowledge, and indeed reality. It is also clear that although she accepts the contested notion of reality, she is centrally concerned with understanding what she calls social realities nonetheless (Grimshaw 2005, p21). She is clear in her take on reality for she regards such social realities as not “simple minded realism, a reflection of life” rather it is “an interrogation of it” (Grimshaw 2005, p24). This suggests a conceptual equivalence to arts practice but still indicates a focus on the here-and-now. Although transformation takes place - the transformation of knowledge - it stands in contrast to design, which I contend is primarily concerned with the transformation of the here-and-now. While there are apparent similarities there are subtle and significant differences and these are the differences between the making of meaning (the ethnographic interest in understanding experience and its relationship to knowing) and the meaning of making (the design interest in the experience of making). In spite of these differences the shift that this signals in ethnography is significant for my research for it heralds a shift away from ethnography as being simply descriptive to embracing the descriptive and evocative potential of image based approaches drawn from the visual arts. I am less interested in the descriptive, which still implies an observed concrete reality, and more interested in the evocative that implies a malleable reality. In spite of my reservations of the usefulness of Grimshaw’s approach for design, it is refreshing to see an interest in a more radical approach to ethnography that acknowledges visual arts practices have something to offer in terms of ways of knowing. So much so that Grimshaw states that it is time for anthropology to move beyond the anthropology of art, where art is the object of study, to make possible the “art of anthropology”, where art methods are central to anthropological knowing (Grimshaw 2005, p27). Such a move parallels a concept I have written about elsewhere that I call the aesthetics of research (Roxburgh 2010). Central to my concept is the aesthetic and embodied framing of research methods for design practice, of which I see my own practical work contributing to. I will return to and expand upon this theme in Chapter 6.

Ravetz makes the point that “ethnography is not a method restricted to the social sciences, but an activity that is constituted in and by the conditions of modernity” (Ravetz 2005, p70). Ethnography searches for new understanding through juxtaposing similarity and difference and such juxtaposition resembles the artistic technique of montage. Montage can be seen then as a conceptual technique deeply embedded in both modern art and anthropology. Ravetz sees the relationship between art and ethnography as also revolving around similar interests in learning about and communicating experience. However she also recognises the historical distinction between the two for “artists learn through making (research by
practice), exploring the world through imaginative material and conceptual interventions, whereas the ethnographer is trained to retain an analytical distance, to learn through text-based interpretation” (Ravetz 2005, p.135). As a way of addressing this disjuncture Ravetz conceives social research as being concerned with the “process of making social objects” that are “shaped in the creative tension between social experience (participation) and reflexive communication (observation)” (Ravetz 2005, p.70). Critical distance is established in such an approach by zooming in and out between the proximity of participation and the distance of reflexive communication. Ravetz’s anthropological practice is founded on the integration of the perceived similarities between ethnography and arts practice. She is however aware that anthropology elevates the social world, the here-and-now, while art privileges the visual imagination and the unreal, or what-might-be. It is the dialogue between these perspectives that she sees as opening up new ways of anthropological knowing and in many respects simply recognises the artificial at the heart of conventional anthropological knowing anyway.

Ravetz’s education as an artist led her “to think of anthropological study as a kind of knowledge in-the-round, a process that involves objects that have to be made” whilst her training as an anthropologist encouraged her “to understand the social forms of people’s lives, not from the outside but also from an imaginative position within” (Ravetz 2005, p.78).

Ravetz acknowledges that the perceived threat to anthropology of her work is a fear of untruth, however she regards her approach as simply opening up the anthropological imagination that is an essential part of ethnography. Her ambition is lofty and conceptually well grounded, but on the basis of her presented case studies it is clear that a concern with a perceived material reality still frames the manner in which she deploys the visual in her research. Granted the camera framing and editing strategies, based on the principles of montage, are derived from her embodied experience of the social worlds she has participated in (including arts practice), realist depictions of what is before the lens of her video camera are still central to her work. However, the significance of her work is the awareness that our perceptions and representations of the social world are in essence abstractions of a sort and that the generation of anthropological knowledge is a creative act in itself.

 Regardless of the theoretical frame that the ethnographic literature subscribes to, what is evident is that observation, however conceived, is central to the production of ethnographic knowledge and that distance, however understood, is key. In the next section I will explore the design literature in relation to photo-observation. I will note that although the issue of distance is often invoked in theorising design practice and research there is no comparative literature to that in ethnography, which seeks to establish a theoretical framework for the use of photo-observation. Before I do this however, I will cover material that explores the notion of distance in relation to other forms of visual methods and research communication in design. I will then examine the uncontested use of realist photo-observation in design research, as evidenced in the literature.

Seeing the Abstract as Real

Searle (1983) argues that there is a critical relationship between human intention and vision. He contends that how we see the world (vision) and how we perceive the world (understand) informs how we subsequently act (behave) within and upon the world (change) (1983, pp37-78). As acting upon the world almost invariably means change and involves intention I see this as the foundation of design in the broadest possible sense. Whilst not explicitly dealing with design, Searle’s view of the relationship between seeing and acting implicates it for seeing frames our intention. Notwithstanding that Searle’s view is occularcentric, and renders other sensory ways of knowing invisible, I agree that the visual is a significant feature of how we apprehend and engage with the world. It seems obvious to state that visual communication is primarily perceived and understood through vision, yet I do so in order to set parameters around my research. I state the obvious because although an exploration of the role of other sensory experiences in visual communication research and practice would be interesting, it remains outside the scope of my thesis.

Searle’s view has strong parallels with Herbert Simon’s conception of design for he argues, “everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” (1996[1969], p111). Despite Simon’s all-encompassing view of what

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2 The terms in italics in brackets are my interpretations of Searle’s concepts.
constitutes design he specifically focuses on its professional manifestation. Significantly, he argues that visual perception, visual memory, and visual representation are central to the process of design thinking and creation (Simon 1981, pp131-135). Here too intention and action are predicated on seeing. Typically, drawing has been regarded as one of the central methods that designers use to develop and visualise their concepts, plans, and representations of the thing that they are designing (Jones 1992[1970], pp20-23). Simon was one of the earliest scholars to imply that drawing was not the only form of visual representation designers required given the increasingly complex design scenario’s that were emerging in the 20th century. He argued that the precondition for success in working with complex design problems was the development of a taxonomy of abstract visual representations. His suggested taxonomy included mapping techniques, flow chart diagrams, and mathematical equations, to name a few, thus extending the modes of visual representation beyond drawing (Simon 1996[1969], p133). Such techniques, he argued, were required in order to visualise abstract concepts and processes, things that could not be seen.

Developing a taxonomy of abstract visual abstractions was picked up by the design methods movement in the 1960s and most clearly articulated by Alexander (1964), and Jones (1992[1970]). Design methodologists argued that traditional design, design-by-drawing, was not up to the task of dealing with complex design problems. Lawson (1980, p18) argued that problems that were not visible tended not to come to the attention of those who practiced design-by-drawing. Design-by-drawing was an improvement on craft production for “trial and error is separated from production by using a scale drawing in place of the product as a medium for experiment and change” (Jones 1992[1970], p20). This separation is cost and time efficient and enables production on a large and industrial scale. However Jones recognised that in working with higher order design problems without something analogous to drawing, the designer “has no medium in which to communicate the essence of the mental imagery with which he could conceive of a tentative solution” but that to stick to traditional drawing would “utterly inhibit innovation at the systems level” (1992[1970], p42). Jones outlined perhaps the most comprehensive array of visual methods to that point. Most of
the methods had a visual manifestation and were used to represent concepts, relationships, decision making options, variables, processes, and so on (Jones 1992[1970], pp75-396).

These methods were used to represent things that could not be seen but only experienced or conceived, and in this sense are largely abstract as there is no obvious relationship between the visual appearance of the method and things that could be seen in the world. They were used in a sense to make the abstract real.

Alexander embarked upon an equally ambitious response to the problems of complex design and its representation by developing a representational form of language, largely based on the language of mathematics, to eliminate from the design process “the bias of language and experience” (1964, p78). He argued that in craft there was a direct relationship between the form (F) of the thing being made and the context (C) in which it was situated and that there was no form of representation that mediated or sat between the context and the thing being made. In design-by-drawing the context of the design problem and the thing being conceived was mediated and represented by drawing. Alexander argued that the drawing was an abstraction of the actual situation in which the design problem existed and as such was full of the designer’s bias. He argued that to eradicate this bias a further level of abstraction from the reality of the design situation was required, and then only the abstract structural features of the problem would be retained (Alexander 1964, pp76-78). Eradicating a designer’s bias brings one closer to the ‘truth’ or reality of the situation being examined.

The merits and shortcomings of design methods have been well documented and I have no intention of going over that ground again. The point that is interesting about it was its recognition that visual representation is central to design research and practice and that such representation functions at a fundamentally abstract level. Interestingly, despite the concerns about the limitations of drawing its significance in the design process has continued to pre-occupy a wide range of researchers (see Henderson 1995; Oxman 1997; Suwa & Tversky 1997; Van Der Lugt 2000). This continued interest does not invalidate the claims of design methods that design-by-drawing had limitations. Rather, it underscores the point that visual

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representation is still a critical tool in design research and practice. The ongoing interest in drawing reinforces the importance of abstraction in design research and practice because drawings, even realistic ones, are themselves abstractions. It is also telling that despite much of the work in Note’s on the Synthesis of Form being premised on mathematical language, what Alexander calls the “mathematical treatment of decomposition” (1964, p174), the levels of complex relationships he is dealing with find representational form in his very beautiful codified abstract diagrams. These are not images of a concrete reality but images of ideas about the nature of those relationships; they do not depict seen phenomena but are drawings nonetheless. This point is germane to my research for although I am dealing with photo-observation, and given that photographs invariably depict something ‘real’ - that is there is a strong correlation between the image and what is documented - I am treating the photograph as a form of abstraction also, quite literally. My abstract approach to the photograph is antithetical to the use of photo-observation in design research, which is premised on a realist frame. I am using abstraction to explore the notion of distance, but not distance based upon the fallacy of the object / subject divide. Rather, distance as a form of criticality. I will discuss this at length at a later point.

Seeing the Visible as Real

In casting about for new ways of conducting design research and practice design methods adopted a quasi-scientific approach in which objectivity and rationality were privileged frameworks. This was typified by the problem solving metaphor for design. Problems could be identified and solutions rationally and objectively developed to solve them. Dilnot (1998), Downton (2003) and Glanville (1999) are but several scholars who have argued that for too long design knowledge has lived in the shadows of scientific knowledge. Elsewhere I have argued that this has resulted in an object oriented view of design in which subjectivity is not valued and that this is the binary opposite of the other dominant framing of design that sees it as a form of art (Roxburgh & Bremner 1999). ‘Design as art’ privileges subjectivity - usually that of the designer - to the exclusion of both transparent logic and other subjective engagements with design such as that of clients, users, manufacturers etc. A more moderate
pathway between these apparent polar opposites has emerged in a more human focused approach that typically draws on the fields of sociology and anthropology, in particular various interpretations of ethnographic fieldwork.

Plowman (2003, pp36-37) notes that it is generally believed that the pioneering work of Xerox PARC in the 1980s was the first instance of ethnographic methods used in the design process. He challenges this view and argues that the roots of socially oriented design can be traced back to the Bauhaus School (1919-1933) and later the HfG Ulm School (1953-1968). There is little evidence to suggest that the Bauhaus taught ethnographic fieldwork but at least one staff member, Kandinsky, had training in it. Margolin contends that the original Bauhaus curriculum was based on “craft ideologies” and was therefore unable to “formulate a concept of design education that would have successfully addressed the function of technology, management, and social policy in the design process” (1991). The HfG Ulm School on the other hand did have “courses in sociology, and in other humanities and social science subjects” (Margolin 1991). The interest the Ulm school showed in the social sciences was paralleled by Henry Dreyfuss in the USA who published Designing for People (2003 [1955]) in which he advocated the importance of field research in the design process to help ensure the usefulness of industrial design products.

Dreyfuss contends that “experience, observation and research” are crucial attributes for industrial designers to succeed in what he calls “the science of appearance” (Dreyfuss 2003[1955], p65). He acknowledges the utility of employing specialist researchers to develop questions and “carefully appraising the answers to arrive at the consumers’ real desires” but privileges “first-hand research in the matter of keeping up to the minute on the sales moods of the public” (Dreyfuss 2003[1955], p67). It is clear that Dreyfuss draws on market research logic here. Setting this aside, for I am not especially interested in critiquing market research logic, it is noteworthy that first hand observation is his preferred method. Dreyfuss outlines, in anecdote form, several instances where designers conduct such research themselves (2003[1955], pp67-71).
In a number of Dreyfuss’ examples the designer/researcher plays the role of consumer where they handle, test, and compare products in department store settings, or travel on numerous aircraft to carry out similar kinds of analysis. In another example full-scale mock-ups of ocean liner interiors were built and “guinea-pig travellers” were invited to use them so that the designers could observe the functionality of the interior’s space and fittings. In these brief anecdotes Dreyfuss provides no detailed intellectual framework for the manner in which he conducts this performative form of research (which interestingly is the kind of subjective account that Jones is critical of, as I will come to shortly). Nonetheless, it is indicative that observation, and indeed embodied experience, presumably drawn from social science are regarded as crucial methods for successful design research. Photo-observation does not rate a mention in Dreyfuss’ work, yet despite this it is significant as a historical marker of an awareness of the role of observation in design research. Where photography does make an appearance it is clear that its use as a research tool is to accurately and realistically depict competing models of products to enable a form of visual analysis (Dreyfuss 2003[1955], p280). There is however, no articulation of how this visual analysis is done or what techniques are used. In spite of the absence of an analytical method it is evident that in Dreyfuss’ work realistic photographs of an object can be readily and unproblematically substituted for the actual object.

Design methods, informed as it is by an interpretation of scientific method, not surprisingly recognises the role of observation in the design process. Jones argues that once “efforts are made to observe what is going on, vast quantities of design-relevant information are quickly generated” (Jones 1992[1970], p236). However, he also believes that “more objective accounts of what one notices about the behaviour of other users” is more useful than “subjective accounts of what one notices oneself in the act of using a piece of equipment” (Jones 1992[1970], p236). He outlines a number of his design methods that use observation in one form or another, often requiring some kind of photographic documentation. These are ethnographic in the sense that these methods use direct observation in the field (but not always) yet are often framed without the typical ethnographic interest in the meaning people
give things. Rather, it is an approach to observation that is more concerned with the objective observation of the functional aspects of objects and people’s interactions with them. It is mainly concerned with ergonomic principles and measuring human performance, and testing them within experimental and actual scenarios (Jones 1992[1970], pp233-239).

Photo-observation first gets mentioned as a tool for documenting objects to enable the analysis of the images to search for “visual inconsistencies” in the object in order that design improvements can be envisaged (Jones 1992[1970], p209). Needless to say, in such a method there needs to be a high degree of congruence between the object observed and the photograph taken. Photo-documentation re-appears when Jones outlines a method “to make visible, patterns of behaviour upon which critical design decisions depend” (1992[1970], p259). It is one of many methods used to do so and in the case study presented the documentation was undertaken using film. In Jones’ work the emphasis is on realistic photographic and filmic documentation. Interestingly, the resultant images are analysed to identify and codify patterns of behaviour that are subsequently transformed into tabulated and more abstract data (Jones 1992[1970], pp266-267). In spite of the overwhelmingly scientific and objective basis of Jones’ methods, he does recognise that his codifying approach “is an artificial sensing medium that brings unseeable things within the reach of the natural senses” (1992[1970], p269). It is worth pointing out that Jones’ apparently objective process is simultaneously interpretive and subjective because it is human subjects that transform the realist images into abstract data. Despite Jones’ realist framing of photo-documentation it is his interest in abstraction that is relevant to my work. I have been literally using abstraction in my photographic work to interrogate it conceptually as a way of exploring the idea of critical distance in design. I do so because I am interested in seeing what happens when you move the act of abstraction back up the research chain to the point of observation.

The use of ethnographic research methods in design has taken off in the past ten to twenty years and is most prevalent in the area of user-based, participatory or co-design. There are nuanced differences between these areas yet they are all concerned with the observation and / or participation of key stakeholders in the development of the design outcome. More often
than not this involves either real or imagined end users. Much of the research effort goes into understanding the contexts of usage that a product, built environment, or service will play out in. This implies a need to engage with the experience users have of the designed world. Ethnographic techniques have long been used to gain such insight in the field of anthropology so it is not surprising design research has taken an ethnographic turn.

Sanoff states that designers “have overlooked the application of social science techniques for acquiring visual information” for design (1991, pix). He argues that research must form the basis of design decisions and that it should become part of an “informed designer’s intuition” (Sanoff 1991, pxii). He presents a series of design case studies that have used a range of different visual methods of inquiry, drawn from the social science field of environment-behaviour (E-B) research. These case studies have a strong user-based or participatory design focus and Sanoff argues that the methods facilitate both a deeper understanding of people’s perception of their environment and provide an opportunity for a dialogue with the people who use it (1991, ppxi-xii). However, given the E-B framework, there is a strong quantitative slant to how many of the techniques are implemented and analysed, despite Sanoff noting that he is interested in extending the E-B agenda to encompass issues of meaning and experience (Sanoff 1991, p1). Highlighting such issues, as important factors in designing for people, is indicative of the influence of the ethnographic interest in meaning and experience. Notwithstanding Sanoff’s interest in users’ subjective experience, his approach to design is largely rooted in the problem / solution paradigm with the goal of “some improvement in man’s lot” (Goodey in Sanoff 1991, p74). This reinforces the underlying objective framework in which his methods unfold, for the notion of improvement draws on the modernist concern with measurable progress. Not surprisingly then, his use of photo-based research methods is premised on realist visual representation. In outlining his framework for using photo-observation he draws on an array of theories derived from or including realist painting tradition, Renaissance rational geometry, and more recent principles of perspective (Sanoff 1991, pp11-14). Despite espousing a view that values the high correspondence between the form of visual representation and the scene represented, Sanoff is aware that
such images are not a duplication of the real and that they record information, not sensory data (Sanoff 1991, p11).

Sanoff is concerned with understanding the subjective meanings and experiences users have of their designed environment but his research techniques are devised to ensure such understanding is arrived at scientifically and objectively, all the while acknowledging that such objectivity is a human construct. His techniques include, for example: multiple sorting - where users sort images based upon their own criteria (Sanoff 1991, pp5-7); categorising visual cues - where users sort photos based upon pre-determined descriptive attributes (Sanoff, pp15-20); photo-elicited interviews - in which users are interviewed about their perceptions of environments, using photographs of them as prompts (Sanoff 1991, pp34-36); visual questionnaires - which require users to describe supplied photographs and answer questions related to them (Sanoff 1991, pp.53-56); and visual appraisal - which involves users numerically ranking photographs of buildings to pre-set statements or questions (Sanoff 1991, pp56-61). These are by no means all the techniques outlined but are indicative of Sanoff’s concern for removing researcher bias from the research process. They also point to the analytical framework that Sanoff privileges in constructing his research and this has some parallels with the work of Jones outlined earlier. Where Jones is interested in photo-observation for ergonomic purposes Sanoff is more interested in using it to access meaning and experience. Both however use it to abstract non-visual data from the photographs analysed. Sanoff believes that “the information locked in visual content must then be transformed by the observer into a useful, analysable form” (1991, p75). The purpose of doing so is to gain insight into the relationships people have in their mind “between images, decision making, and behaviour” to inform design decisions (Sanoff 1991, p87).

Many of Sanoff’s photo-based methods are premised on revealing and analysing people’s experiences of existing designed spaces in order to inform the design of new spaces. This can be seen as pre-design research that is based in the here-and-now. However, he also outlines a number of photo-based methods that are concerned with peoples’ responses to
proposed spaces, or what-might-be. The techniques used encompass various forms of photo collage to: evaluate street signage proposals (Sanoff 1991, pp64-68); rate peoples view of the quality of streetscape changes (Sanoff 1991, pp98); and to show people proposed buildings in situ to gauge reactions early in the design process (Sanoff 1991, pp147-150).

Each of these techniques, in spite of starting with images of actual things, end up as a form of artifice as they depict designed spaces that have yet to be made and exist only in photo-based representation. They are an artifice that uses the conventions of realist depiction to make them look as ‘real’ as possible. On one level this indicates a privileging, in Sanoff’s research techniques, of both the realist photographic frame and the associated analytical gaze. Not surprising for he regards his use of photographs as “a step towards a more objective analysis of perceived experience” (Sanoff 1991, p98). However, it also suggests some slippage between the analytic realm of objective research into the synthetic and interpretive realm of design. This slippage is also implicit in certain case studies where it is evident the analytic aspect of photos is critical but also shifts in the transformative act of design. In his case study on the participatory design of an elementary school, realist photographs depicting activities of the school are incorporated into layout schematics that also include verbal descriptions of the environment (Sanoff 1991, pp174-178). Whilst realist photographs anchor discussions back to a ‘real’ world, the context in which they are used also enable them to be transformed into a world that is yet to exist. Despite the privileging of realist photographs this example suggests to me that the slippage between the analytic inference of the photograph as object of research and the synthetic nature of design is of little consequence to Sanoff, as is the potential loss of critical distance that accompanies the slippage.

Zeisel (2005[1984]), like Sanoff, is also concerned with environment behaviour research for design of the built environment. His approach is premised on being “people-centred and evidence-based” which is indicative that rationalism and logic, although used alongside creativity, are driving forces in his work (Zeisel 2005[1984], p13). In outlining his conception of design, Zeisel is well aware that the problem / solution paradigm is an oversimplification of the design process. He argues that designing is not a series of linear steps in a sequence...
and that imagination and intuition are of equal importance to logic and analysis (Zeisel 2005[1984], pp21-32). Like Sanoff, Zeisel presents a compelling rationale, supported by substantial case study work, for the E-B design agenda and there is much of value for design practice and theory contained within it. However the design problem / solution logic prevails, indicating the lineage of his approach is drawn from design methods, itself privileging a particular interpretation of the scientific method. As consequence the analytical frame circumscribes Zeisel’s work. Zeisel argues researchers carefully devise research programs “to increase their control over the consequences of their actions” and that when such an approach is applied to design it is to improve the quality of design (Zeisel 2005[1984], p119).

This echoes the instrumental logic that Berger alluded to, which I outlined at the start of this chapter, and is indicative of the modernist desire to control complexity. Zeisel argues that the benefits of his approach is that the knowledge generated through the research, and the methods used to get there, can be clearly communicated to others to evaluate, critique, and learn from. This reveals a quasi-scientific logic and, somewhat surprisingly, resonates with Pink’s claims about the importance of the legibility of anthropological knowledge.

Zeisel proceeds to outline a series of criteria, and how they can be used, to establish and maintain research quality. The criteria include; intersubjectivity, where researchers assess each others methods to determine how appropriate, reliable, and valid they are; reliability, in which the value of a method is determined by whether it yielded the same results with repeated use in situations that did not change; and validity, which is a form of triangulation to determine whether comparable results can be achieved using different methods (Zeisel 2005[1984], pp120-129). This approach suggests that the researcher can unproblematically separate themselves from, or minimise their presence within, the systems they are observing and designing in, and is typical of a kind of positivist logic. This in turn has implications for the manner in which photo-based research methods are used and suggests a view of the photograph as an unproblematic representation of reality.

The importance of representation in exploring and communicating design problems, and developing solutions for design possibilities, is a significant aspect of Zeisel’s work. It also
parallels Simon’s view that understanding “how representations are created and how they contribute to the solution of problems will become an essential component in the future theory of design” (Simon in Zeisel 2005[1984], p24). Photo-based methods are a common tool used in Zeisel’s research. In discussing observation as a method, and by implication photography’s role in that, Zeisel recognises that observation is a broad term and that the hallmarks of good observation is the relationship between a single observation (noting an unusual phenomena), looking for regularity or frequency of similar phenomena, and observing the context in which that phenomena occurs (Zeisel 2005[1984], pp41-42). In this framework photography is used to document phenomena and behaviour so that there is a high degree of congruence between what is observed and what the photograph looks like. The resultant photographs are ultimately used for analytical purposes: on one hand to count the frequency of phenomena in order to develop hypotheses about frequency, patterns, and social meanings of behaviour; and on the other hand to be used for illustrative purposes in presenting and arguing findings (Zeisel 2005[1984], pp168 & 179-182). The photograph’s powerful claims to realism are essential requisites when used in such a way. Zeisel’s approach is largely about finding proof of emerging hypotheses, yet there is recognition that they can also be generative of insights through recording relationships or patterns of behaviour. The significance of any such insight is only established through subsequent analysis. Despite the insights derived from these methods being used to inform the design solutions developed, there is no evidence that the aesthetic and material properties of the photographs are in any way generative in that.

Seeing the Visible as Abstract

Anderson’s café furniture project uses photo-based observation as a way of gathering contextual information of user behaviour in actual settings to inform the design phase (2004, pp88-95). This extends conventional ergonomic interest by shifting away from a concern with how an object functions to observing user functions and behaviour as well as that contextual setting. Anderson’s work parallels the concerns of Zeisel and Sanoff but what marks it as different is the theoretical framing Anderson applies to his use of photo-observation. Where Zeisel and Sanoff are often concerned with the quantitative aspects
of their analysis of photographic data Anderson has no such pretensions. In spite of using
realist photography his work has a stronger interpretive and subjective orientation, based
on an understanding that he “will observe in a personal, non-quantifiable manner” and
that his “observations will be unique and non-transferable” (Anderson 2004, p91). This is
a significant shift in the understanding of observation and is in keeping with the move to
interpretive phenomenological ethnography. The work of Zeisel and Sanoff suggest a largely
unproblematic reading of the photographic depiction of the real and many of their techniques
are developed to eliminate misunderstanding and variations of interpretation across different
viewers of the image. Anderson on the other hand makes no such attempt, drawing on the
work of Glanville who argues that we “must take responsibility for our observing, our
knowing, our acting, our being: for we cannot pass on our observing: it is ours, integrally
ours” (Glanville in Anderson 2004, p91).

Ireland draws on her experience of using ethnographic methods at market research firm
Cheskin, and defines ethnography as the “in depth observation of people’s behaviour, beliefs
and preferences by observing and interacting with them in a natural environment” (2003,
p23). She goes on to briefly outline the use of photography in her research practice, which
is limited to insider or user generated photos of their life with accompanying descriptive
notes. All of this points to photography being framed by an unarticulated common-sense
conception of reality. Interestingly, Ireland goes on to outline one technique that relies less
on this framework and functions more at the level of artifice and abstraction (2003, pp28-29).
This technique involves the development of ‘typical’ user personas, using visual and
textual descriptors, drawn from research into users to evoke during the design stages of a
project. These are not real people but fictitious characters developed through the amalgam
of attributes from research findings, and as such are contrived. Pruitt and Grudin (2006)
note that, photographs, as well as other contextual information, are important in developing
personas. They regard personas as “abstract representations of users” developed with a focus
on design (Pruitt and Grudin 2006, p311). In their case study they draw on both existing
ethnographic data and new field studies, amongst other methods, to develop “realistic
personas” (Pruitt and Grudin 2006, p329). It is clear, but not explicitly stated, that realist framed photography is favoured in order to make these fictitious characters as convincing as possible. In this instance the realist photograph is an object of analysis that is simultaneously used in a process of synthesis. However, the process of synthesis is not the development of a specific design outcome but is the design of the persona itself. The simultaneous appearance of these apparently contradictory frameworks - analysis and synthesis - points to some degree of slippage between them. In spite of this, the photograph is not transformative in and of itself, rather it is illustrative of the character that has been designed and as such the transformative act is located elsewhere in the process. It is located at the point of conception of the personas characteristics.

The use of personas is extended into a technique called informance, in which researchers and / or actors role-play scenarios to better understand user concerns and experience. This process subsumes ethnography and empathy in “acts of pretending which transform empathy into action” (Johnson 2003, p39). Dishman provides a more detailed overview of informance than Johnson and schematically indicates that realist-framed photo-observation is one of the methods of research used to build up a picture of “real people in real contexts” (2003, p48). Informance is performative and the embodied sensory experience of the participants is central to it; “using live bodies interacting in real space and real contexts with props to produce a plausible story – as part of the design process itself” (Dishman 2003, p42). Ironically, despite the focus on the real, the reality engaged through informance itself is a contrivance. It is a performance of reality not the ‘reality’ the researchers were observing. I mention personas and informance because they highlight two points. Firstly they indicate that there is clearly a role in ethnographically based design research for methods that are operating at a level of artifice and interpretation; and secondly they reinforce a sense of demarcation between the analytic mode, and realist photography’s relation to it, and the synthetic aspects of design.

The relationship between the realist inference of the photographic image and the contrived nature of the language of representation around it is something that Strickland explores,
albeit in the context of observational cinema, in her design research practice (2003, pp118-128). Strickland makes the point that ethnographic observational cinema has long privileged a fairly simplistic realist framework: “the extraordinary precision of the camera-eye as a descriptive aid” has in turn led anthropologists to consider “film pre-eminently as a tool for gathering data” because it “deals so overwhelmingly with the specific rather than the abstract” and as such “is often considered incapable of serious intellectual articulation” (MacDougall in Strickland 2003, p131). This limited conception of anthropological cinema, and by association photo-observation, restricts these methods to objects of analysis rather than vehicles for synthesis. In her critique Strickland is conscious that such a framing is both an imposed artifice and that entertainment cinema, which is nothing but artifice in that it does not document ‘real’ phenomena, is constructed using models of realist fictions (Strickland 2003, pp124-125). In spite of making a distinction between these two very different genres of cinematic representation, Strickland argues, “postmodern theory overturned the old idea of a world whose existence is independent of our representations of it” (Strickland 2003, p125). Both forms of film making, in this regard, can be seen as highly constructed and in the context of observational cinema the attempts to neutralise the filmmaker’s intervention by eliminating camera movement and minimising editing is naïve at best “for a minimum of [filmic] structure does not yield a maximum of truth” (Strickland 2003, p125).

In her account of her own practice it is evident that Strickland, despite using fundamentally realist depictions of the seen world, recognises that the artificial nature and the aesthetic dimensions of her chosen media and its modes of representation are central to how knowledge is developed and design concepts generated. Further underlining this more synthetic or interpretive approach to her research practice is her belief that observational cinema is “essentially a manner of revealing rather than a language of telling” suggesting that what she is developing is a designerly, as opposed to ethnographic, way of seeing (Strickland 2003, p126). Strickland’s work in design echoes the work I have already reviewed of Grimshaw and Ravetz in ethnography. Despite the different intentions of design and ethnography what Strickland, and Grimshaw and Ravetz share is an interest in exploring...
the space and slippage between the analytic aspects of looking and the synthetic aspects of making; in ethnographic terms the making of knowledge of things and in design terms the making of things of knowledge.

**Seeing the Artificial as Image**

The available literature around the use of photo-observation in design is almost exclusively related to 3D design with no evidence of publication of its use in visual communication. This can be accounted for by the longer history of interest in how people use and interact with products and spaces in industrial and architectural design than has been the case in visual communication, which has come late to the game in relation to user based design. It can also be accounted for by the general perception and practice of visual communication as being largely related to consumer based design (i.e. flogging stuff via the medium of advertising) and making things look nice at the latter stages of the design process when others have made the strategic design decisions. I have touched upon the way in which ethnographically informed photo-observation has been used in a variety of design fields such as industrial design (Anderson, Plowman, Jones, Dreyfuss), architectural or built environment design (Sanoff, Strickland, Zeisel), and strategic market research for design (Ireland). It is evident from the literature that realist photographs are the stock in trade in this setting and that there is an absence of any discussion around the contested notions of reality as it relates to photography, or how its use should be theoretically framed. This situation is in marked contrast to the long history of discourse in ethnography about these matters. That ethnography still privileges realist photographic depiction in spite of these debates is not the issue; the issue is that ethnography has had them and design has not. The lack of a comparable debate in design literature around the use of drawing as a research, recording, ideation, or communication technique. In such literature there is a clear understanding of the abstract and interpretive nature of drawing as it is used in design.5 The lack of a debate around the use of realist photo-observation in design points to the tendency of design to borrow methods from other disciplines without a clear agenda for translating them into design (developing design

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framing theories). As I have previously stated an uncontested realist use of photo-observation techniques in design is odd given the understanding of the role of abstraction in the design process, as evidenced by the pioneering work of design methods.

Much of the design literature reviewed displays a tendency to establish boundaries between the analytic inference of the realist photograph and the synthetic nature of design. This is underscored by the problem / solution paradigm that underpins much of it. In spite of these boundaries being established there is evident slippage between them. Such boundaries are a human construct designed to establish distance but given the problematic and unacknowledged slippage that occurs across them it is evident they are something of a moveable feast. Instead of policing them, as the analysis / synthesis or problem / solution paradigms of design tend to do, I am interested in developing an awareness around the artificial nature of such boundaries in order that they can be more consciously recognised and manipulated. In other words rather than these constructs being regarded as boundaries to be policed I see them as frames that can be manipulated. As a consequence of taking such an approach the idea of critical distance comes back into focus because it is by working through this distance that these frames can be manipulated. This a crucial point for I am exploring, through my photography, the relationship between the apparently real and the apparently abstract. My research involves not only the literal framing of the photographic image but also the conceptual framing of the relationship between the two and touches upon the manner in which we move from the concrete to the abstract and back again through the transformative practice of design. In the next few chapters I will discuss the literature around abstract photography as well as my own photographic practice, as a way of beginning to articulate what a framing theory for photo-observation in design that includes abstraction might look like, what role critical distance might play in this, and the consequences of not addressing these issues.
CHAPTER 3: REAL PHOTOGRAPHY

THE REAL ABSTRACT, REALLY

The contested nature of reality as it relates to photography has been a constant in photographic discourse and theory pretty much since the invention of the medium itself. In the previous chapter I avoided any detailed discussion of the broader theoretical discussions that have accompanied the medium throughout its history, concentrating instead on the very particular theoretical discussions associated with its use in ethnographic practice and the absence of any similar discussion in design. In this chapter it is my intention to overview the very broad territory of photographic theory and discourse as a way of locating these more specific discourses in relation to them. This in turn will provide me with a platform from which, in Chapter 4, I will investigate abstract photography, an overlooked strand of photographic practice and theory. From there I will propose an alternative theoretical framework for photographic practices associated with design research.

SEEING PHOTOGRAPHIC REALITY

Photography’s use as a tool of observation of a ‘world-out-there’ and the associated relationship to notions of reality has a long history. As far back as the 11th century astronomers used the camera obscura to view solar eclipses (Trachtenberg 1990, p4). By the late 1500s, and with the addition of a focusable lens, they were widely used by artists to accurately render perspective in their drawings and paintings (Lemagny & Rouille 1987, p12). The birth of photography as we know it came in the mid 1800s during the scientific age, with the ability to fix images on a base and view them in daylight. Not surprisingly the earliest writings on photography theorised its relation to reality and it was often understood at this stage as being “a thing that we often see through in order to get information about the world” (Kriebel 2007, p3).

As photography was the product of science, and one of the key discourses around it in the 19th century was scientific, it was generally held to be a representation of “absolute truth” (Kriebel 2007, p7). Its capacity to render apparently accurate depictions of what was in
front of the lens via a mechanical apparatus, the camera, led to the common view that
“through the camera, nature paints herself” (Trachtenberg 1990, p14). This is indicative of empiricist science of the time where the production of knowledge was based upon observable phenomena. The relationship between the photograph and the reality it depicted was also underscored by the naturalistic tendencies of post-Renaissance and pre-20th Century European art (Banks 1998, p15).

Because photographs were not hand generated they were regarded as an unproblematic record of an observed reality and appeared to usurp the role of painting in depicting it. Photography was largely a child of the scientific age yet its relationship to art was also at issue at this time. Kriebel notes that in the mid 19th century Poe saw photography as a powerful artistic medium because of its perceived relationship to truth while Baudelaire, in contrast, believed it “contributed to the impoverishment of the artistic imagination, only fuelling the popular notion that art and truth lie in the exact replication of the visual world rather than the world of the imagination” (Kriebel 2007, p7). Despite representing competing views of photography’s relationship to art they foreground the idea that photography replicates reality. They do so because both views are premised on an empiricist view of the world-out-there as an object that can be unproblematically recorded by photography.

Baudelaire’s view is typical of the sense of crisis that confronted figurative realism in painting with the advent of a medium that could apparently replicate the real in more accurate detail. It has been argued that photography usurped the traditional role of painting in depicting the real thus paving the way for the move towards increasingly less figurative and more abstract painting (Grundberg 1990, p159). Ranciere however argues this is not the case. He notes that painting had once been the representative regime preserved for the wealthy, noble, and powerful to depict their lives. He argues that the emergence of genre paintings of everyday scenes and commoners - what I’d call the democratisation of subject matter - challenged this exclusive pictorial reserve and hastened paintings shift to modernism and abstraction (Ranciere 2007, p76). Alternatively Rexer notes that although photography may have urged
painting towards abstraction, to some extent “painting and the other arts had always engaged in abstraction to a greater or lesser degree” for they were all “constructions of vision” (2009, p26). Regardless of the reasons for painting moving towards abstraction the undercurrent in these perspectives is that for photography to be conceived of as an art, and not simply the replication of a world-out-there, it has to be both conceptually driven and implicitly abstract. The emergence of photographic pictorialism, based it has often been argued on mimicking impressionist painting, can be seen as a trend in that direction. I will outline in the next chapter that this is an overly simplistic reading of pictorialism.

**Exposing Photographic Reality**

Indexicality is a term that has dominated photographic theory for some time and has a range of permutations that although related differ somewhat. I will explore these in more detail as this chapter unfolds. I will be using the term causal indexicality to refer specifically to the optical, and hence physical, connection between the photograph of a subject and the subject that was in front of the camera when that photograph was taken. In other words the relationship between the photograph and the concrete reality it is assumed to record. As will become apparent the notion of casual indexicality is simplistic, probably untenable in and of itself, and based upon a very narrow conception of photography. I derive this term from Scruton who argues that photography is not an art and cannot be a medium of representation (the basis of art forms) because the relation between photograph and subject “is causal not intentional” (1981, p579).

Theorisation about photography shifted in the early half of the 20th century from debates about its capacity to record an observed reality, or its value as an artistic medium, to concern about its political and ideological dimensions. Walter Benjamin saw photography in Marxist terms as a tool of capitalist repression because it “transfigures the world by aestheticising it, reporting on surfaces, not struggles” (Kriebel 2007, p11). Benjamin’s thesis was that we would be distracted by the surface appearance of images and overlook political and social struggles around us. Surprisingly, Benjamin was concerned with the very ability of

Venetian Canal, 1897. Alfred Stieglitz.
photography to depict accurately what is in front of the camera, its causal indexicality. He saw photography conceived as a window to the world as part of the broader ideology of New Objectivity, and its “stock in trade was reportage” (Benjamin 1999[1934], p774). He critiqued the photographic conventions that emerged in New Objective photography as “transforming even abject poverty – by apprehending it in a fashionably perfected manner – into an object of enjoyment (Benjamin 1999[1934], p775). The economic function of such photography was to bring into mass circulation and consumption “subjects that had earlier withdrawn themselves from it (springtime, famous people, foreign countries)” whilst its political function was to “renew from within – that is, fashionably – the world as it is” (Benjamin 1999 [1934], p775). The explosion of visible imagery at this time, mass produced and circulated, of which photography is emblematic, is the moment “in which society learns to recognise itself, in the double mirror of significant portraits and insignificant anecdotes that form metonymies of a world by transposing the artistic practices of the image hieroglyph and the suspensive image into the social negotiation of resemblances” (Ranciere 2007, p16). As a consequence we learned to see ourselves in these images of the world-out-there and the art function of the image (making the unseen visible) was overtaken by the function of seeing the visible. Ranciere describes one of arts functions as being to “make seen what does not pertain to the visible” (2007, p12). Benjamin’s critique of the growth of photographic images and their public circulation in the early 20th century, where seeing the visible is becomes privileged, indicates that the photograph conditions us to see the world in a particular way. I will take this idea up in Chapter 5.

We learned to see ourselves as a society, in the early 20th century, within the context of a growing market economy where the image itself was a commodity and commerce was quick to appropriate the procedures and idioms of various image forms for commercial purposes. It was also at this time that Marx, Ranciere notes, urged us to decipher the appearance of “the seemingly a-historical body of the commodity and to penetrate into the productive hell concealed by the words of economics” to reveal “the secret of social appearances” (Ranciere 2007, p16). Such social appearances, as depicted using the visual, aesthetic, conventions of
realist photography gave “members of a ‘society’ with uncertain reference points the means of seeing and amusing themselves in the form of defined types” (Ranciere 2007, p16). These photographic conventions show an idealised image of the world as an immutable reality, because of the causally indexical relationship between subject and photograph that apparently reveals an actual reality, reinforcing the political and social status quo. This reality is also an a-historical construct; the photograph being simultaneously bound up in commodity exchange and a mirror through which we recognise ourselves. The aesthetic conventions of realist photography, in this critique, are only of interest inasmuch as they have ideological ramifications and are used to distract people from the reality of political struggle. This stands in marked contrast to the later formalists who were concerned with photographic aesthetics for their own sake.

In order to see through the ideological agenda of New Objective photography Benjamin argued “what we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it revolutionary use value” (Benjamin 1999[1934], p775). The work of early 20th century photo-documentary photographers / journalists such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine exemplify such an approach. Their photographs of the oppressed and exploited helped to overturn more pernicious aspects of early capitalist practices in America, such as the use of child labour, when published in newspapers with accompanying text. Documenting such political or social reality was contingent on the correlation between the photograph taken and the world-out-there; photographic reality was thus central in revealing social reality in order to challenge political reality (ideology) and force social change, re-shaping reality and society. Kelsey and Stimson characterise this approach as the “social turn” in photographic history (2008, pxvii). The difference between this practice and New Objective photography is the intent of the photographer, and the role of text in locating the photograph within a context, so that it does not simply become “a fetish” through its “capitulation to fashion” (Benjamin 1999[1931], p526).

The interest in the political and ideological dimensions of photography, driven by Marxist critique, paralleled emerging theories and practices of avant-garde photography expounded
by groups such as the Dadaists, Surrealists and Constructivists. Where the New Objectivity reinforced its ideological hegemony through realist photography of the world-out-there, the avant-garde was less concerned with representing an observed reality than constructing meaning, through photographic manipulation, about larger political realities. In doing this they believed they were developing new realities “in an act of unmasking or construction” (Benjamin 1999[1931], p526). Despite being radically different in appearance to the work of Riis and Hine, the early 20th century avant-garde photographers used collage and montage to also unmask and construct, not only to re-shape reality and society but with a view to them becoming the visual vocabulary of the oppressed (Kelsey & Stimson 2008, pxviii). Benjamin credits “the Surrealists with having trained pioneers of such photographic construction” (Benjamin 1999[1931], p526) and argues that much of the Dadaist’s “revolutionary content has gone into photomontage” (Benjamin 1999[1934], pp774). Ranciere also recognises the Marxist dimension of these avant-garde movements, noting that the Dadaists and Surrealists appropriated the “disused objects and icons” of commodity exchange into their montages and collages for the “derision of a society x-rayed by Marxist analysis” (Ranciere 2007, p17).

The visual aesthetic of the image is again implicated in both the photographic representation of the world-out-there (Riis and Hine) and the photographic construction of a new reality (the avant-garde). In the former it is the aesthetic of realist photography, and the apparent transparency between the surface of the image and the depicted reality. The transparency between image and reality can be revealing, as per the work of Riis and Hine, or deceptive, as per fashionable commercial imagery. In the latter it is the emerging techniques of manipulation and abstraction (such as montage, collage, and photograms) that were used to construct new realities through the intervention of the surface of the image. Irrespective of the radically different approaches and visual aesthetic of realist photography and the avant-garde in revealing, concealing or constructing reality, the Marxist take on photography signals a shift in theorising, and indeed practicing, photography. Such critique recognises the transformative potential of photographic practice in exploring the relationship between the appearance of reality and political struggle with a view to creating new realities. Where
once the view prevailed that the causal indexicality of the photograph gave us a window onto the world, theories emerged that recognised intentionality and ideology as crucial aspects of understanding, conceiving, and making photographs. The emergence of these theories foregrounded what I call existential indexicality; the experiential, human dimension of indexicality, the index as pointing to the intentions we have when we conceive and make photographs. Simplistically, the conception of intention takes place in the imaginary and the transformation of reality occurs through the making of the photographic image. However, this idea of existential indexicality foregrounds the interplay of the visible image and the imaginary in such a way that it does not so easily delineate where conception ends and transformation begins, because intention and making are both embodied human activities. Existential indexicality then is the embodied experience we have of imagining and transforming reality through the image.

Conceptually, the transformative aspect of making and taking photographs is similar to design in that design is also fundamentally concerned with imagining new realities. Dilnot describes design as operating between “the realms of what is and what is not yet and may never be” (1998, p90). From this I will characterise design as being concerned with ‘what-might-be’. Where design has been conceived as the science (Simon 1996[1969]) or the ecology of the artificial (Manzini 1992), Benjamin’s view of the constructivist potential of photography pre-figures the notion of artifice in this transformative conception of design for he quoted Brecht in 1931: “something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed” (Benjamin 1999[1931], p526). However, the shift in photographic discourse is more concerned with political and social realities whereas design, superficially at least, is concerned with the more pragmatic realities of daily life. The constructivist view of photography signals an emerging awareness that the photographic image - be it a realistic depiction of a world-out-there or the actual construction of a new photographic reality - can enable us to imagine the world as being different. This transformative aspect of photography I will take up at a later stage, in relation to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

**Reading Photographic Reality**

The idea of the careful construction of meaning within photographs, and/or the captioning of them, precedes the next key shift in photographic theory - the semiotic deconstruction of photographic meaning - in a continuation of the political interrogation of photography. Barthes, whose work is seminal in what is regarded as the literary turn in photographic theory, saw photography not as documenting reality, nor a universal language but as “a form of coded, historically contingent, ideological speech, amenable to scientific study” (Kriebel 2007, p13). Although this theory frames photography as a subjective or institutional ideological tool, and not as the objective recorder of an external reality, in studying it scientifically it remains an object as such, underscoring the idea of a world-out-there. The structuralist framework Barthes worked within reinforces this idea. The key point that Barthes makes is that interpretative meaning (connotation) is not derived from the fundamental correspondence between the structural features of the photograph (denotation) and the world-out-there (the referent) that has been photographed, rather it is dependent on contexts of reading or viewing the image (1988[1977], pp46-51). However, it is “the syntagm of the denoted message” - its’ taken for granted, familiar appearance – “which naturalises the system of the connoted message” (Barthes 1988[1977], p51). Meaning, and the reality construed from it, is not within the photograph per se, or indeed the object photographed but projected on to it by the viewer. Barthes calls this complex relationship between denotation and connotation the rhetoric of the image. With connotation, reality is not simply ‘out-there’ but ‘in-here’. However, in structuralism, which is Barthes framework the ‘in-here’ - our context of reading meaning - exists in language at a social, structural, level. I would argue that it is an ‘in-here’ that is simultaneously ‘out-there’. This structural dimension to meaning is similar to what is called “collateral knowledge” – that is the social knowledge we bring to bear on our reading of things (Lefebvre 2007, p235). Lefebvre has derived the term collateral knowledge from Peirce’s terms collateral observations and collateral experience.

Barthes contends that the referent (the object photographed) and the index (the photograph itself) can never be separated and as such the photograph becomes invisible. He calls this

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the “stubbornness of the referent” (1984, p6.). Consequently we do not see the photograph, 
we see only the referent and thus commonly conflate the photograph with our experience of 
reality, and hence assume meaning and reality are derived from the photo. Barthes argues 
instead that despite the existence of this relationship the photograph is fundamentally 
analogical (1984, p88). Analogues are not the same as the original, the real thing, and it is the 
gap between the analogue (the denotative referent) and the perceived reality projected onto to 
it (the connotative) that makes up the ideological space that Marxist analyses such as Barthes, 
and Benjamin before him, interrogate.

Early scientific photographic discourse could be seen then as a particular kind of 
phenomenological enterprise where a system of knowledge is generated through the 
experience of observing and documenting phenomena in which the correlation between 
the thing observed and the photographic documentation of it is crucial; reality is outside us 
(out-there) to be observed, experienced and understood. Barthes’ early structuralist approach 
was a challenge to this in that he argued instead that the meaning we make of things resided 
not in the thing itself but rather in the structures of language that enable meaning and an 
understanding of experience possible. This laid the foundations for and was superseded by 
post-structuralist critiques that included Barthes’ own drift towards post-structuralism. Where 
Barthes originally argued photos were “constituted by and constitutive of a contextually 
driven social language”, post-structuralists sought to demonstrate “that discourse, and not 
universal essences constitute the object” (Kriebel 2007, p24).

Krauss largely concurs with Barthes that the photograph is simultaneously index (denotative) 
and icon (connotative) in that there is a correspondence between the photograph taken and 
the referent (1986, p211). In doing this she extends the structuralist dimension of Barthes’ 
early work by exploring the discursive aspects of our understanding of photography 
rather than the structural aspects of it. In short she argues that any true meaning of what 
photography is, is problematic as emerging discourses about it appropriate or eradicate prior 
discourses. For example, the dominant empiricist scientific understanding of photography 
in the 19th century was gradually overwritten in the 20th century by aesthetic discourses of it 
as a means of legitimising it as an art form (Krauss 1989, pp287-299). Significantly, Krauss 
is far more interested in the referential nature of photography than Barthes. Where Barthes 
saw the relationship between the photograph and its subject as analogical, Krauss sees it as 
indexical. She argues that the direct, one to one relationship, between the photograph and the 
object photographed means that they are, to quote Barthes, “a message without a code” and 
that as such meaning is supplied to the photograph through external discourse (Krauss, 1986 
p203 & p212). It is the relationship between indexicality and the meanings these external 
discourses bring to the photograph that is central to her analysis. As discourses compete, shift 
and change so to do the meanings we make of photographs, as does any notion of reality 
associated with them. As a consequence universal codes, or meaning, are not possible for 
they are inherently unstable.

It is the shifting territory of the real that critics such as Baudrillard take up in their 
analysis of the media image, of which the photograph is implicated. Where early scientific 
discourse about photography may have seen photography and reality as unproblematically 
interchangeable, and the writings of Benjamin and Barthes challenged the ideological 
notion of such a photographic reality, Baudrillard goes further for he believes that such 
is the extent of this interchange that in the popular imagination the image has become 
the reality supplanting the reality documented by it. He calls this phenomenon the 
simulacra (Baudrillard 1988, p172 & p185). Krauss herself pursues a similar line of 
inquiry, specifically in relation to photography, and argues that it is through the endless 
reproducibility of the photograph, the lack of differentiation between the original and the 
copy, that we come to the “total collapse of difference” that leaves us lost in a maze of 
copies and resemblances (1984, pp58-59). The collapse of difference signals the loss of 
critical distance that I articulated in the previous chapter. Where scientific discourse saw the 
relationship between the photograph and reality as unproblematic, critics such as Baudrillard 
and Krauss sought to highlight its problematic nature by endlessly deconstructing 
the photograph as text to discover meaning; meaning that was of course socially and ideologically constituted through discourse and constantly shifting.
Like Krauss, Sekula also explores the discursive dimensions of photography that he argues “emerged and proliferated as a mode of communication within the larger context of a developing capitalist world order” (1984, p80). Sekula rejects Barthes’ idea that the meaning of a photograph can be separated into denotative and connotative domains. The causally indexical relationship between photograph and subject is at the heart of the notion of denotative, descriptive, meaning. Sekula argues instead “every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone’s investment in the sending of a message” (1984, pp5-6).

The sending of such messages occurs through discourse, and as Krauss argued, discourses compete and change. Where Barthes sees photographic meaning being derived from the universal structures of language, Sekula’s interest in discourse requires an interrogation of the contexts in which those discourses emanate and circulate in order to understand the meaning of the photograph.

Tagg also rejects Barthes’ view that every photograph is “co-natural with its referent” and ensures a level of denotative meaning (Barthes in Tagg 1988, p1). He argues that every photo “is a result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic” (Tagg 1988, p2). These distortions occur both as a consequence of the technology of photography and the discursive uses photographs are put to. Like Sekula, Tagg sees socially situated and evolving discourses as where photographic meaning lies. The truth value and reality claims of photography are formulated and validated within social and institutional practices, not by the causal, indexical relation between the photograph and its subject (1988, pp63-64).

From the outset of the invention of photography its relationship to reality has been one of the central theoretical pre-occupations. It has variously been understood as capturing a phenomenal reality; manufacturing an ideological reality; distorting reality; and eventually supplanting reality. Wells makes the point that “historically, critical thinking about photography to some extent stalled on the altar of facticity, on misguided ideas of photographic ‘truth’” (2007, p343). Certainly from the moment its perceived ability to capture
a phenomenal reality began to be challenged, and its ideological uses were deconstructed, the debates have gradually drifted to an almost endless discussion of what photographs mean in relation to truth and reality.

**Seeing Photography Artfully**

The move towards the discursive formulation of photography as an artistic practice - admittedly an idea that had been nipping at the heels of a empiricist scientific view since the invention of photography – can be seen as a shift in focus away from the political and semiotic discourses surrounding photography, as a form of mass communication, towards an aesthetisised discourse. A key player in this shift was John Szarkowski and his work as curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York from 1962 until 1991. Where Barthes saw photographic meaning as contingent on language and post-structuralists saw it as contingent on discourse, Szarkowski believed in the notion of essential photographic meaning that could be derived from within the photograph itself (1966, pp6-11). Central to Szarkowski’s theory was a systematic approach to isolating the formal elements of photography. However his interest in photography as a fine art practice was restricted to photographs that were more or less congruent with the objects and scenes that were photographed; for he “wished to reserve unexamined for photography that classical system of representation that depends on the assumed transparency of the picture surface” (Phillips 1982, p37). This is further borne out in the two key metaphors he conceived around distinctive photographic practices: photography as a mirror of the world and photography as a window to the world. Both imply the accurate rendition of subject matter before the camera but Szarkowski argues that, on an analytical level, they are distinctly different in their inference, yet in practical terms poles of a continuum. As I demonstrate through my diagram, both poles see the world as existing our there but that we know it in different ways depending on which position we assume.

Photography as a window to the world infers an objective photographic gaze “through which one might better know the world” (Szarkowski 1978, p25). In essence such a photographic...
practice is concerned with the realistic visual description of the world-out-there. Photography as a mirror of the world infers the interpretive dimension of photographic practice and the photograph as “reflecting a portrait of the artist who made it” (Szarkowski 1978, p25). The world-in-here as it were. Ball and Smith make the point that “the mirror is a powerful metaphor for exploring realism” yet the “mirror like character of photographs will not guarantee their realism” for “mirrors, even metaphorical ones, can also distort” (1992, p16). This suggests that photography framed as a window to the world is not likely to distort, an idea that is at odds with the post-structuralist critiques of photography.

Where Szarkowski sees photography as having unique properties which, when coupled with the intentionality of the photographer, enable it to be considered as art, Scruton rejects it as such, echoing the competing views of Poe and Baudelaire a century before. Scruton advances his argument by comparing photography and painting in their ‘abstract ideal’ state, nevertheless he recognises this is not the actuality of their practice. The ideal state of both painting and photography is premised largely on realism. He argues that photography is not a medium of intentional artistic expression because of the causal relationship between the image and its subject compared to the intentional relationship in painting between its subject and the image. For Scruton the aim of painting is to record the appearance of things so as to capture the experience of observing them. The causal nature of photography is based upon his observation that the appearance of the subject is very similar if not the same as its photographic depiction whereas it is not in painting; because we see the subject in the picture of both photos and painting we conflate causality with intentionality (Scruton 1981, p579). He contends that intentionality implies thought that in turn implies representation, whereas causality doesn’t imply intentionality and cannot be associated with representation. What is represented in a painting does not have to have existed, not so with what is in a photo. What is depicted in a photograph, had to have existed (Scruton 1981, p580). With painting then we see what it represents but we do not mistake a painting for what it represents in the same way we do with what photographs depict. This echoes Barthes’ notion of the “stubbornness of the referent” (Barthes 1984, p6).

Apart from the role of causal indexicality in construing one practice as representation and another as depiction Scruton also argues that the distinction is further underscored by the technical properties of both mediums; we see the marks on the canvas in even the most realistic paintings yet the photograph is free of such marks, its surface is in a sense transparent (1981, p581). Scruton believes that representational art, as opposed to art that is merely representational, is aesthetically important and that aesthetic appreciation of it is not dependant on issues of the truth or falseness of an image, as is the case with photography. Aesthetic appreciation signifies an interest in the object for its own sake irrespective of content; interest is focused largely on the picture itself (the material properties of the painting, it’s crafting) rather than what is represented (Scruton 1981, pp585-586). In painting we can understand its content whilst being indifferent to or unconcerned with its literal truth, not so photography because we are always concerned with issues of literal truth (Scruton 1981, p589).

Photography then has a causal relationship to its subject and depicts it by reproducing a copy of its appearance. This is in contrast to painting that has a relationship to its subject through an interpretation of its appearance. Scruton contends that as a consequence of the causal relationship the photographer’s intention has no bearing on how a photograph is seen, not so the painting. The photograph therefore, is not an interpretation of reality but of how something looked (Scruton 1981, pp587-588). So characterised, the photograph can only represent by resemblance, rather than by interpretation, and has lost its importance for “the photograph is a means to the end of seeing its subject: in painting, on the other hand, the subject is the means to the end of its own representation” (Scruton 1981, p590). For Scruton then “if one finds a photograph beautiful, it is because one finds something beautiful in its subject… a painting may be beautiful, on the other hand, even when it represents something ugly” (1981, p590).

Scruton returns to the notion of ideal photography, implicitly understood as photo-documentary photography, and begins to argue that even in its non-ideal states it fails as
a representational art. He contends that even if we fake what is before the camera, that representation is not situated in the photograph of the contrived subject but in the act of contriving the subject that is being photographed; the representational act occurs before the photograph that documents it is taken and “the fictional incompetence of photography … severely limits the aesthetic significance of representation in photography” (Scruton 1981, p588). Scruton does acknowledge that there are certain circumstances in which photography can function like painting as a representational form of art. These circumstances include the manipulation of film development and printing processes as well as the practices of collage and montage. However, he believes that when these techniques are used the photographer becomes a painter and photography moves away from ideal photography towards ideal painting. He argues then that the history of photography is the history of trying to break the causal indexical link between the subject photographed and the photograph of the subject and insert intentionality into it in order for it to be accepted as representational art (Scruton 1981, pp591-594). For Scruton, representation equals intentionality minus causal indexicality.

THE CAUSE OF PHOTOGRAPHIC INDEXICALITY

In some respects whether photography is a form of art or not is irrelevant to my research. What is relevant to my work within those debates, however, is a certain attitude towards notions of reality and the conception of intention. As a consequence I need to state my position within the context of these debates to locate the alternative theoretical framework I am proposing for photo-observation as it could be used in design research. The central focus of these debates revolves around the apparently contentious relationship between the image, its representational ability, and the intentionality of the image-maker. Regardless of which side of the debate critics fall on, the concept of the representational image is usually invoked as being a visible, and visual, material object. That is ‘image’ is conflated with some form of physically manifest, visible, visual representation, or depiction, such as a painting, photograph or drawing.

Ranciere argues that “the image is not exclusive to the visible” - making the point that words and sounds are capable of producing mental pictures or images in our minds (2007, p7). The
idea of image refers to two different things, which he calls the “double poetics of the image” (Ranciere 2007, p11). Firstly “there is the simple relationship that produces the likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful copy, but simply what suffices to stand for it” (Ranciere 2007, p6). This would encompass the photograph and its causally indexical relationship to a world-out-there. Secondly “there is the interplay of oppositions that produces what we call art: or precisely the alteration of resemblance” (Ranciere 2007, p6). Art so conceived can take many forms, including photography, for “this is the sense in which art is made up of images, regardless of whether it is figurative, or whether we recognise the form of identifiable characters and spectacles in it. The images of art are operations that produce discrepancy and dissemblance” (Ranciere 2007, p7). What is implied here is intentionality. Ranciere goes on to argue that it is by exploiting the double poetics of the image, by making images that are “simultaneously or separately, two things: the legible testimony of a history written on faces or objects and pure blocs of visibility, impervious to any narrativisation, any intersection of meaning” that photography became an art (2007, p11). However, photography as an art did not start with the invention of the camera, as is commonly assumed, for the double poetics of the image emerged before it “when novel writing redistributed the relations between the visible and the sayable that were specific to the representative regime in the arts and which were exemplified in dramatic speech” (Ranciere 2007, p12). Art itself, and by association photography, then owes its status as a representative regime of resemblance to literature, to the poetics of language that narrates and describes that which is “visible, yet not present, seen” and words that “make seen what does not pertain to the visible, by reinforcing, attenuating or dissimulating the expression of an idea, by making the strength or control of an emotion felt” (Ranciere 2007, p12).

Where the likes of Baudelaire and Scruton argued that photography could not function as art because of causal indexicality, Ranciere does not see it as an impediment. On the contrary it is the tension between the casual aspect of the photograph and the other aspect of the poetics of the image – the idea of discrepancy and dissemblance derived from literary tropes - that characterises its particular attribute as an art form. Photography struggled at the outset as an
art form, not because it couldn’t function as such, but because it came into being at a point in the world’s history “when a major trade in collective imagery was created, when the forms of an art developed that was devoted to a set of functions at once dispersed and complementary: giving members of a ‘society’ with uncertain reference points the means of seeing and amusing themselves in the form of defined types; creating around market products a halo of words and images that made them desirable; assembling, thanks to mechanised presses and the new procedure of lithography, an encyclopedia of the shared human inheritance: remote life forms, works of art, popularised bodies of knowledge” (Ranciere, p16). It was in these circumstances that Ranciere locates the seeds of both the semiotic deconstruction of the image and the resultant lost pleasure of it. Semiotics was, in part, a form of Marxist analysis that sought to reveal the hidden messages and power of commodity markets in media and advertising images in order to subvert “political and commodity domination” (Ranciere 2007, p18). The appropriation of the artistic image by the market was seen by semioticians, such as Barthes, as the “end of the image”; a point Ranciere rejects arguing it occurred earlier, at the turn of the century, with the emergence of non image based conceptual art (2007, p18). Furthermore he argues that the constant search for hidden meaning led to the lost pleasure of the image for they cannot “conceal secrets which are no longer such to anyone” and “no longer hide anything” (Ranciere 2007, p22). If everything is revealed, what pleasure is there to take from the image, there is nothing left to discover for oneself.

Seeing the photograph as equivalent to the real, as a consequence of the causal indexical relationship between the photograph and subject, and the loss of pleasure in the image, resulting from the constant semiotic search for hidden meaning, are the consequence of taking essentialist views of what the photographic image is, or as importantly isn’t. Although the intellectual frameworks from which these positions have sprung have provided useful insights and critiques, their shortcomings as forms of analysis are also plain to see. Baetens lists the benefits of the critiques as being: Anti-technofetishism – the challenge to a dominant discourse in photography that privileges technique and technology; Anti-essentialism – the move away from photographs being seen as a “realist slice of time” to a view that sees the
photograph as located in time, telling a story and capable of "narrating fiction"; Anti-formalist – the shift from the pre-occupation with how images look to what they mean, and the contextual issues that attend meaning; and Anti-logocentrism – the distrust of the singularity of meaning essentialists would ascribe to a photograph (2007, pp58-61). The shortcomings stemming from these critiques result from seeing the photograph in such a singular way that they preclude the heterogeneous manner in which it is used and understood not only by theorists of a particular persuasion, but by people more generally. Ranciere recognises this failing and responds by outlining three broad classifications of the image that encompass such heterogeneity. Images where causal indexicality is to the fore in their conception and comprehension he calls the “naked image” that contain the “trace of history, of testimony to a reality that is generally accepted not to tolerate any other form of presentation” (Ranciere 2007, pp22-23). Images that are fundamentally about themselves, images that are a critique of art and art making, “sheer presence, without signification”, the “voici” he calls the “ostensive image” (Ranciere 2007, pp22-23). Finally there is what he calls the “metaphorical image”, the “viola”. These are images that aim “to play with form and products of imagery, rather than carry out demystification” (Ranciere 2007, p24). The metaphorical image can be seen as a return to the pleasure of the image for its own sake and is “art freed from critical seriousness” and as importantly marks “a distance from the leisure industry” (Ranciere 2007, p25). In recognising the heterogeneous nature of the image Ranciere argues that an interrogation of it in any one of these categories alone is futile. Furthermore, he argues that it is the interaction of exchanges that occur across them that is where analysis of the image should be focused.

Whereas the photographic work I have undertaken in my research is fundamentally abstract, and a critique of the preponderance of the realist framework, it has also played across the space between the legibility of the real and the illegibility of pure abstraction, in ways that resonate with the ideas of the naked image, the ostensive image, and the metaphorical image. My conscious effort to take realist photographs saw me exploring the territory of the naked image, something I have long avoided in my practice. By then moving on to take photographs that had no apparent connection back to the seen world, in essence they were pure visual
abstractions, I began to move into the realm of the ostensive image. A realm I have never really explored either. From there I began to literally construct photographic images, drawing on both of these prior explorations and their resultant photographs, in a manner that saw me exploring the domain of the metaphorical image. I cannot claim to have been conscious of using Ranciere’s image classifications at the time of undertaking these explorations of the image, having only read The Future of the Image half way through them. It would be fair to say then that I have semi-retrospectively recognised the parallels of Ranciere’s framework and the manner in which I was working. This retrospection is of no great consequence. What is consequential in discovering these parallels is the insight I derived from both the actual explorations and the subsequent reflection upon them using Ranciere’s framework. This insight relates to both the critical distance I was able to establish by exploring different approaches to the photographic image and the critical distance I was able to establish by revisiting that work using his framework. The idea of critical distance that emerged through taking and making photographic imagery I have begun to understand as what I call ‘embodied seeing’. The idea of embodied seeing derives from my understanding of theories of existential phenomenology and my experience of engaged, critical practice. It is essentially concerned with self-aware embodied observation and the manipulation of critical distance rather than a pre-occupation with the theoretically fashionable notion of the index. I will return to the idea of embodied seeing in Chapter 6.

The Experience of Photographic Indexicality

Brunet argues that the vogue for indexicality, the “indexical turn”, has dominated critical thinking about photography since the late 1970s and emerged in the writings of Barthes and Krauss (2008, p43). He contends that their writing was used “to formulate conceptual artistic practice, not only or not primarily photographic, that foregrounded indexicality as their veritable theme, against any representational interpretation” (Brunet 2008, p43). The simplistic concept of indexicality such theory promulgated – based largely on the indexical as relating only to the physical appearances and not experience of objects – framed photography as a non-representational medium. This use of “indexicality as a restriction or a background to iconicity” positioned academic and artistic knowledge against and above common knowledge of it and was done not so much to gain “a new understanding of photography but for the scholarly legitimisation of conceptual practices and claims” (Brunet 2008, p43).

Similarly, McCauley believes that the photograph as a conceptual problem is a consequence of academic, political and psychological anxieties. These anxieties derive from the fear that our sense of reality has dissolved into spectacle and virtuality. She argues that the intellectual focus on conceptualising the index is based upon this anxiety of the real and that this permeates theoretical texts on photography (McCauley 2007, pp404-405). Furthermore, she argues that most people, outside of these circles, don’t share these anxieties for they don’t mistake the image for reality. Like Brunet, McCauley also notes that the pre-occupation with the index appears to have paralleled the use of photography by conceptual artists that framed their approach to photography as a more authentic artistic practice compared to that of the photographer artisan. Such theorising, she notes, gives rise to and validates the conceptual approach to photography (McCauley 2007, pp406-409).

Baetens makes the point that the field of photographic discourse, once largely the preserve of photographic practitioners, was gradually “professionalised” through the 20th century by critics and theoreticians who were first and foremost writers and brought to their critiques a pre-occupation with literary theory (2007, pp56-57). Baetens argues that the shift to literary discourse often “becomes a kind of ‘language game’ that is played for and by academic peers, in an arena that is no longer either that of the photographic practice itself or that of the social life and social action” it is imbedded in (Baetens 2007, p56). The idea of literary discourse becoming a language game is exemplary of Krauss’ view of the contest of photographic discourses. I hasten to add that no matter the perceived negative consequences that may arise from such discursive colonisation it is still very much a part of the “social life and social action” of photography. It should be noted also that it is far removed from the everyday experience of many makers, takers and viewers of photography.
Where McCauley and Brunet see the pre-occupation with the index in such theory as being used to either invalidate photography as a representational medium or validate it as a conceptual arts practice, Baetens concentrates instead on the implications such theorising has on the relationship of photography to meaning and representation. Baetens never mentions the index, or the indexical turn, but his interest in the impact that literary theory has had on the relationship of photography to meaning and representation invokes the idea of the index whilst approaching it from another direction. His main concern with the literary theorising of photography, and its insistence on defining photography in relation to meaning, is that meaning cannot be constrained for it “is context bound and context is limitless” (Culler in Baetens 2007, p54). Because context is limitless it becomes impossible to fix meaning or delineate a subject, and if it becomes impossible to do this then the representative possibilities of photography come into question. Baetens describes this position as antilogocentrism and notes that it is paradoxical. On the one hand its strength is to challenge the notion of a photograph having a fixed, universal meaning. On the other its weakness is its “fundamental distrust of the representative possibilities of language which seem ‘inherently’ … incapable of bridging the gap between sign and referent and of stopping the infinite deferral of meaning due to the stream of free-floating signifiers” (Baetens 2007, p61). Baetens argues that the paradox of photographic representation he has outlined is the scenario of the post-modern sublime and it is far from the experience of the many people that engage with photography in many different ways. Where Baetens recognises the importance of the literary take on photographic theory he also contends that the endless discussion on the limits of representation reinforces “the myth of the unspeakable” and blinds us to a more productive engagement with photographic theory that is derived from a wider set of experiences of photography than the narrow constructs of literary expertise (Baetens 2007, p68). An engagement with a broader set of experiences of photography is suggestive of a return to phenomenology, but one framed from an existential perspective rather than an empiricist one.

Brunet returns to Peirce’s classification of signs, his semiology, as a way of invoking an existential phenomenological theory of photography. Semiology might seem like the wrong place to start given that it was semiotics, as interpreted by particular theorists and overlayed onto photography, which got us into the predicament of what photography is and means in the first place. However Brunet argues that Peirce’s work has been largely misinterpreted by much of this scholarly discourse and points out that the most important aspect of Peirce’s concept of indexicality is not that photographs are simply physically indexical of the object depicted but that they have an "existential connection to the object(s) they depict" (2008, p34). As such, part of the photographs’ indexicality is inscribed in our experience of the actual, or similar, objects the photograph depicts. The photographs indexicality is not exclusive too nor dependent on the appearance of an object in a photograph. This broader conception of indexicality is more significant than the physical similarity between the photograph and what it depicts (its causally indexical and iconic function) for it implicates collateral knowledge. Collateral knowledge, in this context, is the knowledge of and the relationships we have as a society between objects and photographs and with photographs as objects (Brunet 2008, p36). The broader conception of the indexical nature of the photograph that emerges from collateral knowledge is possible because the photograph “is a sign... that merges two orders of experience (past and present)”, which relates to time, “and two modes of relation to the object (iconic or analogical and indexical or experiential)”, which relates to space (Brunet 2008, p36). Therefore, “indexicality, far from being an immediate, ‘given’ feature of photographic experience, is indeed the consequence of our knowledge of photography” and, I would add, by extension our experience of the objects in photographs (Brunet 2008, p37). This touches upon the common, or commonsense, experience of photography; in essence we only understand the indexical nature of photography because we have an understanding of how photography works.

According to Brunet (2008) Peirce argued that there was a fairly straightforward understanding of the iconic status of photographs in the late 1800s, as opposed to people simply seeing them an absolute picture of reality. This he argued was a consequence of a general understanding of how they were made and that especially with the advent of consumer photography in the early 20th century there was much widespread social discourse
about photographs as being “picture-making” (Brunet 2008, pp38-40). The significance of this is that, in spite of what many recent critics believe, it demonstrated awareness that photography was not simply the objective documentation of reality – “photographs were read as photographs because everyone knew, at least roughly, about their mode of production – which was in itself unambiguous” (Brunet 2008, p42). Brunet argues that the importance of Peirce was not so much his invention of the semiological concept of indexicality but that his work is indicative of “a time when a fairly traditional social discourse on photography became philosophically relevant and conscious” (2008, p42).

Lefebvre, like Brunet, states that the pre-occupation with indexicality in much photographic theory stems from a fundamental mis-reading of Peirce’s semiotic theory and argues that although indexicality is an important semiotic aspect of photographic representation it is not at all there is to it (2007, pp220-221). He demonstrates this by arguing that every phenomenon “may be represented iconically (through some likeness to a quality that it possesses) indexically (by way of a real connection to some thing), or symbolically (by being so interpreted)” (Lefebvre 2007, p225). Further, and more significantly, he argues that photographs are not just indexical of an object in front of the camera when exposures are made, but existentially connected to “the photographer (without whom there would be no photograph), the lens that was used, the choice of film stock, an aesthetic taste or an aesthetic movement…” and so on (Lefebvre 2007, pp228-229). As a consequence of conceiving indexicality more broadly, Lefebvre takes issue with the idea that painting is more existentially indexical than the photograph, and can function as a medium of representation where the photograph cannot. He does this, again with reference to Peirce, by noting that “every embodied sign, from the moment that it stands for something, is by logical necessity indexically connected to reality in one way or another… for it would be impossible to find pure icons in the world” (Lefebvre 2007, p233). He goes on to add that “an embodied sign, for instance a work of fiction or a painting, that is totally disconnected from - or better yet unconnectable to – our world is not only an impossibility but also would be beyond intelligibility” (Lefebvre 2007, p233). In other words we cannot conceive of things that do not in some sense exist, for once a thing is conceived it exists and its conception has to be within our experience, our realm of existence. As a consequence, the notion of collateral knowledge, the way we interpret signs as part of our collective or social knowledge, enables us to see the photograph as a form of representation.

In summary then, the commonsense notion of photographic indexicality that Peirce explored was understood as a way of regarding photographs as connected to an object and our experience of objects and photographs. Furthermore, such indexicality encompassed a general understanding of how photographs were made and this included a photographer’s intention. And finally it included an understanding that photographs had an iconic or representational function. In contrast to this, post 1960s concepts of indexicality, derived from literary theory, saw photographs as only being a physical trace of an object. Such theory deconstructed and erased the idea of a commonsense viewer experience of photography and lead to the conclusion that the photograph could not be representational. This in turn lead to the idea that there can be no intentionality when it comes to photo making or taking. Against the denial of authorial intentionality, semiotic deconstruction located the maker of meaning of the photograph with the viewer as per Barthes’ famous argument in The Death of the Author (1988[1967]). So the intention of meaning of the maker of the image ceases to exist whilst the intention of the meaning of the viewer of the image is born. The apparent contradiction concerning the intentionality of meaning of the image may be attributed to the shortcomings of a doctrinaire literary approach to photographic theory. Certainly the singular focus through which much of it has been framed - the pre-occupation with the index - is the appropriate place for such attribution. However it is a consequence also of the unique attributes of photography itself, it’s contradictory dimensions and it’s ability to depict things that can be seen, and invoke things that cannot, that reminds us of Ranciere’s double poetics of the image.

Theirry de Duve proposes a framework that bares some similarities to Ranciere’s but also contains some clear distinctions. He acknowledges the significance of the semiotic view of the indexical as being a connection back to some actual object but also argues that there is
an abstract aspect of photography that goes beyond the pre-occupation with meaning and touches upon the existential phenomenological dimensions of it. In so doing he conceives of the photograph existing simultaneously along two series, or lines. The first line, which I have diagramatised, is the “superficial series” for it “generates the photograph as a semiotic object abstracted from reality, the surface of the photograph so to speak” (de Duve 2007, p111). Typically the idea of the surface of the photograph would indicate a formalist predilection with shape, tone, and texture but here de Duve is inferring surface as a launch pad for the semiotic preoccupation with the deconstruction of meaning. Alternatively, surface could be construed as the landscape upon which this preoccupation arrives. Either way the photograph is merely the geography of an exercise in conceptual abstraction divorced from the circumstances and contexts of making and taking a photograph. The second line, which I have also diagramatised, is the “referential series … where the photograph as a physical sign is linked to the world through optical causality” and “the reality taken into account is the one framed by the act of taking a photograph” (de Duve 2007, p111). This second line implies a more commonsense understanding and experience of photography, where we see photographs we view as showing us something real and where we have intentions when we take photographs. De Duve argues that the uniqueness of photography is that it exists simultaneously along these two lines, lines that only cross at a single point, with that point being where the paradox of the photograph exists. At their crossing these lines “twist to form an unnatural, yet nature-determined sign” and this is why the photograph appears artificial (our knowledge that it is not the same as reality) despite us being convinced of its realistic accuracy (de Duve 2007, p113). The contradictory nature of the photograph may also be understood by the concept of the dicent and the rheme. A sign that is interpreted as a fact is known as a dicent; what we do with photographs because of their causal connection to a world-out-there. A sign that is interpreted as “the mere possibility of fact” is known as a rheme (Lefebvre 2007, pp237-241). Entirely abstract photographs, which may have a causal connection to a world-out-there but where subject matter is indeterminate, can be conceived as a rheme. Granted, these examples are the extreme ends of a continuum and photographs often can and do exist as both.
Where de Duve conceives the semiological and phenomenological aspects of the photograph on intersecting lines Ranciere regards them as being points at either end of a continuum (as I illustrate in this diagram) that is also implied in the idea of the dicent and rheme. There is a subtle but significant distinction between these concepts for a continuum is premised on a simpler binary construct whereas intersecting lines suggest a matrix based upon the logic of perceptual mapping. It should be noted that the underlying logic of perceptual mapping is also binary. However, it presents the theoretical conception of photography as a dimensional field, as opposed to a single line, enabling more complex sets of relationships to be identified within that field. Irrespective of these differences the significance of both conceptions is an engagement with the existential phenomenological dimensions of the image.

**Finding Existential Indexicality**

Kelsey and Stimson frame indexicality in a more expansive manner than literary essentialists in theorising photography to encompass its existential phenomenological dimensions. With a nod to Peirce’s concept of collateral observations and experience they argue that “the meaning of photography for most of its history has stemmed primarily from its double indexicality, that is, its peculiar pointing both outward to the world before the camera and inward to the photographer behind it” (Kelsey & Stimson 2008, pxi). Photographic indexicality so conceived can deliver “a visually replete trace of those things, while also indicating a comportment, a registering sensibility or sensitivity, a point of view” (Kelsey & Stimson 2008, pxi). The thing to note here is that the phenomenological dimension they are interested in engaging with is not so much the contexts of the experience of viewing photographs but the contexts of the experience of making them. They argue that the reason for doing this is that the theoretical critique of photography developed through the 1970s and 80s which was “principally about a contest of meaning” is increasingly looking irrelevant because “although many writers continue to wield critique confidently as a form of intervention or resistance, institutional power has increasingly internalised or exploited critique’s bread and butter notion of difference, its core structure of opposition, its primary concern with the contest of meaning” (Kelsey
As a result, where we once trusted the truth claims of the photograph as a consequence of causal indexicality, we now distrust them because: firstly the critical contest of meaning generated by literary theory means they have no fixed meaning; and secondly, such critique, and this contest, were colonised by “institutional power”, usually in the form of media and entertainment industries. Rather than look to the photograph then, for any sign of veracity, it becomes necessary to look to the contexts of its production for “trust in photography, once vested in its indexicality, must now be lodged in its ability to facilitate social commitments that recognise the traffic between the burgeoning image world and the social and political realities in which it is materialised” (Kelsey & Stimson 2008, ppxiv). Despite not being the complete picture of these contexts, the indexicality of the photograph as the pointing “inward to the photographer behind it”, is part of this context of production (Kelsey & Stimson 2008, ppxi).

The idea of the contexts of production brings to mind the work of Stuart Hall and his seminal paper Encoding / Decoding (1990 [1980]). Hall challenged the prevailing models of media communication as being simplistic and unidirectional – from producer to audience. In outlining what is fundamentally a social constructionist model of communication, he argued that media messages were discursive and that their meaning was not solely located in either the message itself or the reader of that message. Instead he argued that meaning was negotiated between intention and reception. With that in mind he argued that an examination of the mechanisms of encoding (producing those messages) and decoding (receiving and making sense of those messages) should be the task of communication studies. His theories were in part derived from French theorists such as Barthes, and it would appear that despite his emphasis on both encoding and decoding much of the subsequent theoretical analysis undertaken in the field of media studies focused largely on decoding the meaning of media texts. This has clearly paralleled the prevailing obsession with the meaning of photographs in the field of photographic theory. While I have touched upon why these theoretical obsessions have prevailed, it is clear we have reached the limits of meaning and representation and that the literary or indexical turn in photography has taken us into a cul-de-sac. Baetens argues that we should move on from our fixation with these limits and instead search for clarity, simplicity and transparency whilst knowing all the while that complexity abounds. He cautions that this will be no easy task for the “hardest thing to do now is taken for simplicity and straightforwardness, whereas the search for infinite deconstructive jouissance has become the easiest way” (2007, p69). In short, it is easier to develop theories that pull apart or deconstruct things than it is to develop theories that are about making and constructing things. It is time now to reorient our attention away from meaning and representation alone and engage with the contexts in which they exist, those of making, taking, and understanding photographs and photography.

Drawing on Foucault’s idea of the author function, McCauley argues that rather than seeing the photograph as X or revealing Y, because of how it is made or its relationship to the referent, it would be more productive to consider the photograph “as an idea as much as a thing, in which repressed human concerns about making, keeping and losing resurface” (2007, p420). This she notes, defines it as a social praxis rather than an object and appears to return it the realm of more general human experience rather than simply an object of academic argument. She argues that much theory about photography is meta-theory (theory about other peoples theories) rather than an actual rethinking of photography “based on new ways of looking at a broad array of historically different moments” (McCauley 2007, p421). I would argue that such meta-theory is part of this broad array of moments. In taking a fairly pragmatic, and indeed commonsense approach, McCauley argues that we are drawn to photographs because of their clarity and approximation to the real (but we don’t confuse the two) and that an understanding of how they are made (in a general sense) changes the way we view them rather than that being a consequence of anything inherent in the image itself (2007, pp422-423). The obsession with “indexicality as a conceptual way of describing the relationship between a photograph and its mode of creation tells us little about the meaning of the photograph to its viewers” (McCauley 2007, p147). Although meaning is not central to my concern as a maker of photographic images, what is significant is that the obsession with it theoretically renders photography as a passive recording device in which human intention and
intervention (in taking, making and viewing photographs) are absent, whereas one aspect of what draws us to them is this very intervention. This suggests then that contextual information about photographic making is central to our understanding of photographs, which is again reminiscent of the concept of collateral knowledge.

Our obsession with indexicality has also come about as a consequence of the rapid, and relatively recent, digitisation of photography and the ease with which photographs can be altered. Such ease of manipulation has led to many claims that photographic truth is well and truly dead (see Brand et al 1985; Richtin 1990; Mitchell 1994). It should be noted that the history of photography is full of instances of photographic images being manipulated to present alternative truths. One only need look at the practice of retouching photographs during Stalin’s reign to remove from them people whose executions he had ordered. On the other hand we can look at the work of American Surrealist photographer Jerry Uelsmann, who constructs seamless montages of improbable worlds that are photo-real. However, it is fair to say that what once required highly skilled and time-consuming expertise can now be done by most people on a personal computer. In spite of this, Brunet argues that there persists a multitude of “traditional social uses of photography” that appear to accept the veracity of the photographic image in the digital age (2008, p44). The chain of events involved in the production and distribution of the image now informs our sense of the photograph’s veracity rather than us taking photographic truth as a given. As a result we have “validated an epistemological shift from a kind of semio-technological essentialism to a kind of cultural or pragmatic relativism” (Brunet 2008, p45). And, I would add, it has seen the resurrection of the ‘author’ of the image after having been semiotically dead for the best part of four decades.

The relevance of Peirce’s semiology in all of this discussion is not so much his thinking on indexicality. Although this is important, it is his views on collateral observations and experience – what Lefebvre defines as collateral knowledge - for it is through them that we develop a sense of the veracity of the image. Peirce’s concept of the index, as interpreted by many art critics and theorists, and the way in which he used it are different, Brunet has...
argued (2007). In Peirce’s conception of the index the common experience people had of objects, of photographs and of how photographs were made, were encompassed by the existential dimension of indexicality. This existential dimension is the basis of collateral knowledge and part of that knowledge was that photographs could be representational.

Many theorists overlook the notion of collateral knowledge and exclude the existential component of photographic indexicality. By Constraining the idea of the index to what I have previously called causal indexicality, and analytically separating it from the contexts in which it circulates - the realm of experience - the photograph is rendered non representational.

The idea of the photograph as non-representational has been further reinforced by the preoccupation with meaning, which it must be noted is only one aspect of experience not its defining feature. By shifting back to an engagement with the experiential aspects of the photograph we move from a semiotic and indexical framing of the photograph to an existential phenomenology of it. Indexicality in a phenomenological sense is not constrained to the causal or physical relationship between the subject of a photograph and the photograph itself but must encompass existential indexicality, that is our experiences of the subject of a photograph, the photograph itself, and of taking and making photographs. As a consequence I would conceive of indexicality as having an ecology that encompasses the different permutations of indexicality and our relationship to them; an ecology of the index as it were.

Our practical understanding of photographs as icons and even symbols, through our everyday experiences that is our collateral knowledge of them, demonstrates the “methodological fiction” of pure “image-signs in themselves” for “we cannot distinguish between a sign and its usage” (Lefebvre 2007, p243). It is also why Lefebvre argues it is important to avoid defining photographs on the basis of the “connection that obtains between the photograph and the object depicted would constitute, from a semiotic perspective, the essence of the medium” (Lefebvre 2007, p243). Although the notion of causal indexicality is a significant aspect of photographs it is but one, albeit arguably powerful, aspect of how we experience and understand them. But by looking to how we experience and understand photographs we begin to “define things through their use rather than through a metaphysical quest for essence”
which as Lefebvre points out “surely constitutes one of the most important legacies of Peirce’s pragmatist philosophy” (2007, p242). This clearly implies the need for a phenomenological theory of photography albeit one framed from an existentia perspective.

Stimson argues that theorising photography based upon an understanding of the embodied nature of its practice is likely to be more fruitful than the contest of meaning suggested by semiotic approaches. In doing so he argues that photography should be considered as an ‘abstract’ concept, not as an essentialist reading of the term abstract would imply; not “photography as representation, style, or brute fact” nor the “cumbersome category known as ‘conceptual photography’” (Stimson 2008, p107). Instead Stimson conceives of such abstraction as the process of firstly particularisation (which I’d note is an essentialist task) but then more significantly connecting this back to broader contexts to imagine “photography as idea, photography as it is experienced as a nation unto itself” (2008, p107). He calls this the “body photographic” and, I would argue, it is conceptually similar to idea of collateral knowledge (Stimson 2008, p105). Furthermore, I would argue that these conceptions of photographic theory are more capable of encompassing the heterogeneous perspectives and experiences of photography compared to the dominant model of photographic theory - literary deconstruction. The notion of embodiment that Stimson introduces is a way of thinking about the “lived reality in an idea”, of moving from the “particular to universal and back again” as a “gesture of abstraction” that we know through “lived bodily experience”; it is the way in which we internally engage with the world (Stimson 2008, p105). Stimson’s goal is not “to find the meaning of photography in the one exemplary photograph” – for I would argue that if semiotics taught us anything it is the folly of trying to fix meaning – “but instead to gather the experience of each and every photograph into a common understanding”, to understand its “baggage” (2008, p111).

In outlining a phenomenological theory of photography, Stimson explores the work of two seminal photographers to argue that their very different approaches are a form of embodied criticality, “a critical gesture” (2008, p113). The first photographer is Robert Frank and the Political Rally - Chicago, 1958. Robert Frank. Copyright © Robert Frank, from The Americans; courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.
second is Henri Cartier-Bresson. In doing so he notes that he is drawing on what Merleau-Ponty calls “the structure of the world outlined by gesture” and that his purpose is not to understand the meaning of it, rather it is to extend our critical faculties from the mind alone to our embodied experience: “gesture as the intersection of objective understanding and subjective experience” (Stimson 2008, p113). This intersection is “the moment of the subject’s affective movement from particular experience outward toward the universal as tiny detail comes to transcend itself in subjective experience”, where photography pits “punctum against studium, decisive moment against all other moments, experience against theory, body against mind” (Stimson 2008, p114).

Wells argues that with the advent of digital photography debates about veracity of the photograph, particularly in relation to photojournalism, have shifted the “emphasis from the authenticity of the image to that of the maker” (2007, p343). The reintegration of the subject, in this case the resurrected author, has come about because the idea of photographic truth does not lie in “superficialities of resemblance” alone but is contested through our experience and knowledge of wider contextual phenomena that surround the making, taking and circulation of the photograph (Wells 2007, p343). Here the idea of the objective, the photograph as a document of a world-out-there, rubs up against the subjective, the critical gesture of the photographer. In addition I would add the chain of subjective editorial decisions that get made along the way in the circulation of such images. For if Hall taught us anything it was that media messages have many parents.

Wells argues that the obsession with indexicality and the critical spectator’s subjectivity - with the interminable focus on the punctum - sidetracks a more general discussion about photography. She notes theorising photography is mainly based on portraiture and photo-documentary photography and that landscape photography has escaped such theoretical discussion. She speculates on what the implications of using it as a theoretical starting point might be and contends that although landscape photographs contain detail that may invoke...
discussions about the indexical, “there is something about the stilled scene, not animated by immediate narrative, which means that mood (studium?)” is invoked (Wells 2007, p344). For Wells, looking at such photographs is where “pleasures of the imagination are triggered more by associative memory than by any literalness of the image” (2007, p344). Wells’ interest in more evocative forms of photography, such as landscape, is redolent of Ranciere’s metaphorical image. In conceiving of a photographic theory based on evocative image it does not mean discussion about the indexical or the punctum remain mute, instead it reminds “us not to always focus on portraiture and documentary as a starting point for theorisation” and “that the right brain is also in play (Wells 2007, p345).

The paradox of literary theory’s obsession with the indexical (object) and the viewer’s subjectivity, as it pertains to the punctum, is paralleled in Wells’ thesis. Although she argues that we should base our sense of the veracity of the photo on the “reputation of the photographer… - indeed a range of factors” (both which can be seen as part of the world-out-there), it is her own subjective reading of landscape photography that she uses to propose an alternative starting point for developing theory (Wells 2007, p343). Not that I have a problem with such a paradox for it brings together object and subject, mind and embodied experience, in ways that resonate with my interest in developing an existential phenomenological approach to both photographic practice and theory. Such paradox is I believe part of the complexity that Baetens talked about earlier; the capacity to hold what appear to be contradictory views. It is why we can simultaneously see a photograph as showing us something real whilst at the same time know that it is not reality. Rather than strive for some kind of theoretical purity and attempt to eliminate all contradiction, which is the task of the essentialist no matter their hue, a shift to a theory of photography framed by existential phenomenology seems to be a more human centered approach connected to our embodied use, experience and understanding of things. The endless deconstruction of meaning, the post modern sublime, typical of the literary turns’ reading of photographs is symptomatic of a joyless doctrinaire logic that beats down any exception to a narrow world view.
Wells’ comments about landscape photography, and more importantly by inference the
studium, as well as looking to the wider contexts of making and taking photographs as a
starting point to reinvigorate photographic theory affirms my own work. As a maker and taker
of photographic images I have been exploring the territory of both landscape and abstract
photography: firstly with a view to self consciously making ‘beautiful’ images – whatever that
might mean - as a reaction to my decades long dissatisfaction with the prevailing semiotic
norms and the tedium of much conceptual photography; and secondly as a way of beginning
to develop a theoretical framework derived through making and taking photographs rather
than one applied in deconstructing them. Wells’ idea that we might rely more on pleasures
of the imagination than the literalness of the image resonates with my critique of photo-
observation as it is used by design, pre-occupied as it is with the real, which is why I have
ventured into abstract photography as an alternative frame for such research. However where
one might assume that a shift towards the evocative and abstract, as suggested by Wells, may
result in a theoretical framework more generous in spirit than the indexical turn, it would be
fair to say that the literature in the relatively under theorised enclave of abstract photography
is as doctrinaire. I will explore this territory in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4 REAL ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY

THE ABSTRACT ABSTRACT

In Chapter 2, I provided an overview of the history of photo-observation research methods in ethnography. I argued that although there had been a marked shift in the discourse concerning the contested nature of reality as it related to photography - from the camera capturing an unproblematic, observable reality through to a view that the photograph is a means through which assumptions behind social realities can be interrogated and communicated – that realist photographic representation prevailed as being the only acceptable means of communicating ethnographic knowledge. I also noted that despite the prevalence of this view, the debates around the use of photo-observation and the efforts made to develop appropriate framing theories for that use were extensive. Also in that chapter, I covered the relatively scant literature available on the use of photo-observation research methods in design. I argued that while design researchers had turned to ethnography as a source of research methods there was no comparable discourse to that in ethnography that demonstrated a sustained critique or interrogation of the use of photo-observation as a research method with a view to developing appropriate framing theories for its use. Furthermore, I outlined what I saw as some of the similarities and, more significantly, key differences between ethnographic and design research. These differences are based on ethnography’s pre-occupation with describing the here-and-now (which I associated with an interest in the making of meaning) and design’s pre-occupation with what-might-be (and the associated interest in the meaning, or experience, of making). Although I acknowledged the abstract dimensions and creative nature of both disciplines I argued that the interplay between what we regard as real and the abstract realm in which design conception functions sets it apart, superficially at least, from ethnography. I also argued that the unquestioning adoption of realist photo-observation techniques in design in light of this difference struck me as odd and that a framing theory for it that included abstraction was warranted.

In this chapter I will explore abstract photography, an aspect of photographic practice that receives little attention compared to realist photography, with a view to beginning the task of developing such a framing theory. Firstly I will overview some of the practices and associated debates that constitute abstract photography and explore these in relation to notions of reality. I will touch upon the relationship and distance between the image and the imaginary and argue that this signals an interesting shift in photographic theory that challenges the overwhelming semiotic disposition of much photographic theory of the late 20th century. I will then conclude the chapter by noting that shift represents an emerging interest in theorising photography from a phenomenological perspective, which I will then cover in more detail in Chapter 5.

THE ARTIFICE OF ABSTRACTION

Abstract photography is a relatively small footnote in the history of photographic discourse and theory compared with the vast volume of material published on figurative or realist photography (Witkovsky 2010). Arguably this is the case because the overwhelming majority of photographs taken in the world are depictions of actual events, scenes, objects, and people, which are therefore categorised as realist. Jäger goes further and argues that abstract photography has never really been part of the discourse of art (2002, p7). Given the uneasy relationship that photography has had with art this exclusion is not surprising. Much of the limited published material on abstract photography exists in the form of; often, idiosyncratic manifestos or essays by practitioners (see Moholy-Nagy 1973[1925]; Janus 1977; Enyeart & Solomon 1986); biographical monographs (see Birgus 2001); and the occasional scholarly paper, book chapter or collections of essays (see Berger & Mohr 1979; Newhall 1980; Heron & Williams 1996; French 1999; Grundberg 1999; Bunnell 2006). To date, only Rexer (2009) has made an attempt to publish anything like an overview of the field and literature. As my thesis is not about abstract photography per se, rather it is about the relationship between abstracting imagery and the imaginary in design research, I have no intention of repeating that task here but will draw quite heavily on Rexer’s work in developing my argument.

The key intellectual frames in western discourse that have developed concurrent to the history of photography have been influenced by an empiricist tradition that seeks to
understand, to varying degrees, the nature of reality and human experience of it. Given these circumstances it is hardly surprising that photographic discourse has focused on critiquing photographs of an idealised version of bourgeois life, issues of representation and identity, or notions of truth and reality, for these are more likely than not to pertain to photographs of human subjects and their artefacts. Witkovsky identifies another thread of photographic theory that is focused on the idea of medium specificity and aimed at finding “aesthetic coherence” in order to position photography as an art-form “distinct from other creative domains” (2010, p214). This thread is best exemplified in the writings of John Szarkowski that I touched upon in Chapter 3. Witkovsky argues that the effort to develop the idea of medium specificity has largely failed, “defeated on the plane of the overtly figurative or documentary” (2010, p214). This view echoes the sentiments of Wells, which I mentioned in Chapter 3, who argued that as a theoretical model the semiotic deconstruction of photo-realism had “stalled on the altar of facticity” (2007, p343). Where Wells suggests critical theory should turn to landscape photographs that are more concerned with evoking mood (studium) than describing things (punctum), Witkovsky argues that the “campaign for totalisation”, as he characterises critical theory, is now gathering “its forces on the field of the apparently abstract” (2010, p214). Despite suggesting different objects of study for critical theory they both signal a move towards more evocative images as a basis of theorising photography. They also see such a move being a result of concerns about the veracity of the photographic image in the digital age.

Witkovsky argues the turn to abstraction is not only driven by a desire to define photography as a coherent field of creative practice but also by the “supposedly post-photographic future… where the indexical imprint of the real is replaced by the total manipulability of the digital” (Witkovsky 2010, p214). It is not immediately evident but this preoccupation with the photograph’s manipulability is still driven by concerns about indexicality and associated concepts of truth and reality. If only from the perspective that in the post-photographic digital future, images may no longer have a causal indexical connection back to an observed reality of a world-out-there and cannot therefore be trusted. Many commentators have noted the
apparent loss of trust in the photograph in the digital era because of this (see Brand et al 1985; Richtin 1990; Mitchell 1994). Still others contend that in spite of their knowledge of the potential for digital manipulation people still generally trust the ‘truth’ claims of photographs (McCauley 2007; Wells 2007; Brunet 2008). I have previously suggested that such claims of distrust are mainly limited to theorists with a particular (and often indexical) axe to grind whereas there is an emerging body of qualitative research into how people actually use digital cameras and photographs that suggests most people don’t share these concerns (Roxburgh 2008). Such research points to the limitations of the indexical theory of photography as a way of understanding how people - outside of the rarified realm of high art practice and theory - make, share and understand photographs and the process of photography. As Witkovsky points out, the indexical essentialists (as I call them) fail to recognise the limitations of their theoretical framework in coming to terms with the implications of the technological shifts that have occurred recently in photography. They simply try to transpose their framework onto abstract photography and the post-photographic future. When one reads the literature on abstract photographic history and practice it is not surprising an obsession with the indexical persists for debates about the nature of reality abound within it already. What these debates overlook, both those that emanate from within and those that have more recently been transposed on to it, is the heterogeneous ways in which photographs are made, used and understood by a wide array of people, all with differing agendas and interests. All of this points to the need to reimagine the theoretical framework of photographic practice, beyond the indexical, in a way that provides space for divergent views to rub up against each.

Wells’ argument to look too landscape photography that evokes mood “rather than the particularities of content” of descriptive imagery, points to the experiential dimensions of photography as a site of theoretical formulation in order to address our trust in the photograph (2007, p345). In doing so she is implying an engagement with phenomenology, not that she makes a claim for it. Coincidentally it was landscape photography that I turned to in my own practice at the earliest stages of my research, not because I was concerned about photographic truth but because I was interested in the phenomenological dimensions of making and taking
photographic images that were evocative. It was also with these dimensions in mind that I turned to an examination of abstract photography for it is a manner of image making that often produces images that are difficult to connect back, causally speaking, to things we recognise as existing in the world-out-there. Rather such images are generally more evocative, less descriptive; pointing to the intentions of the maker of the image or the experience we, as viewers, have and the meaning we try to make of them, given we are often confounded by what we see. Consequently their indexicality, such as it is, is more existential and less causal and experience is therefore privileged over notions of objective truth or an observable reality, but as we shall see these are not entirely absent from abstract photographic discourse.

In looking at the literature on abstract photography it becomes apparent that two broad types of practice can be crudely defined. Needless to say, as with most attempts to categorise phenomena, there is slippage and overlap between these types of practice. Firstly, there is abstract photography that is concerned with viewing anew the seen world by decontextualising familiar scenes and objects from time and space through compositional strategies, in camera techniques, and in process manipulation. The resulting photographs have a causal connection back to ‘real’ objects and scenes that, with varying degrees of effort, can be discerned by the viewer. It is often referred to as figurative abstraction, denoting this causal connection. Secondly, and juxtaposed against figurative abstraction, is abstract photography that is concerned with creating photographic images of things not seen that, in its most extreme manifestation, bare no apparent causal trace of the seen world. This kind of practice is philosophically concerned with creating images of unseen worlds. Practitioners in this field generally regard it as the purest form of photographic abstraction and it is often referred to as concrete photography to indicate what they see as its generative rather than imitative dimensions. Photographs in this form of practice are the visually abstract concrete manifestation of an abstract idea about photography. Issues of subjectivity and objectivity, intentionality versus the mechanical, modernism and progress, and the index and notions of reality, swirl in and around these two views of abstract photography and undercut many of the fairly essentialist claims each of them make. It is not my intention to unravel the complexity


Multiple portrait, 1927. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

Fire escape with a man, 1925. Alexander Rodchenko.
of the field of contradictions that characterises abstract photography and place them all in neat little piles, for that is the impossible task of the essentialist anyway. Rather, I propose to view abstract photography in general terms to draw out the significance of abstraction, both as a practice and an attitude to approaching and apprehending the world, that I believe can contribute to developing an appropriate framing theory for photo-observation in design. It is my contention that developing such a theory will help shift the use of photo-observation beyond a simplistic and uncontested reliance on realism and begin to encompass aspects of the evocative and experiential.

**Impressions of Abstraction**

“Photography provided a new lexicon of seeing not simply the world reproduced, but the world seen as reproduction. This step is necessarily an abstracting one, reducing three dimensions to two; binocular vision to monocular or even nonocular (pinhole vision); movement and continuity to discontinuous stasis.”

*(Rexer 2009, p27)*

Definitions of abstract photography are varied and contested. As I outlined in Chapter 3 even realistic, figurative, photo-documentary images can be regarded as abstract. Because “a photo in itself is an object that represents a reality” the image shown in it “is not reality itself, but always a fundamental abstraction of it” (FOAM 2009). Two related factors are implicated in defining realist photographs as abstract. The first is the photograph-as-image as an abstraction of and not the reality observed. Diprose, with reference to Merleau-Ponty would argue that the image is also our reality, not in the sense of simulacra as proffered by Baudrillard, but rather in the sense that the image is a part of how we experience and apprehend reality (Diprose 2010). This might go some way to explain why, as Rexer notes, “photography was adopted as a standard of naturalism, by painters as well as the general public” (2009, p27). The second factor implicated is the photograph’s relation to time and space. Photographic exposures usually occur in a fraction of a second and immediately excise a visible image of the seen world from its continuum in time and space. They become decontextualised from our experience, in time and space, of that moment and hence are an abstraction for “in the mere selection of the image, in the barest act of cutting something
away from the flux of visual experience, the elements of any image are intrinsically displaced, cast in new relations to each other, suddenly accorded prominence” (Rexer 2009, p16). It is why, for example, the Surrealists saw the fundamentally photo-documentary images of Eugene Atget as abstract, partly because they were devoid of any human presence but more significantly because they lacked “any sense of temporal context” (Rexer 2009, p70). Chappell calls the cutting away of the image from time and space “camera vision” and that it “operates as an intelligent function between the human eyes and the totality of understanding in a moment of active awareness” (in Bunnell 2006, p130). Furthermore, he argues, that through camera vision he is able to “arrest and refine” the “flow of impressions, creating an independent image in space” (in Bunnell 2006, p130).

Baetens contends that the pre-occupation with time in much photographic discourse is a consequence of the dominance of literary or critical theory. Superficially this pre-occupation seems logical given that time plays a crucial technical role in the process of exposure - the length of time in which an image is made in the camera. By extension it is also logical given that when a photographic exposure is made it is like a single point of time extracted from the continuum of time that we experience before and after making it. But regarding time as the central problem of theorising photography is, as Baetens argues, a very direct consequence of literary theory’s “notion of sequence or sequentiality”, which Sontag’s view suggests (Baetens 2007, p62). By foregrounding sequentiality as central to narrative it is inevitable that a single image that has been temporally decontextualised will be viewed as incapable of narration. Baetens argues that this view has come about because “a very specific conception of time is transplanted from the medium of the text to that of the photograph” (2007, p62). Further he argues that even within literary theory itself “the issue of time is far from being uncontested” pointing to a “strong inclination to support the ‘spatial’, explicitly antitemporal structure of literary works” (Baetens 2007, p64). The temporal pre-occupation in theory not only overshadows the spatial dimension of photography it conflates the spatial with the temporal. As a consequence, the photographic image’s decontextualisation from space is a far less theorised phenomenon. I will return to the spatial aspect of photography in the following chapter.
Setting aside the issue of the temporal dominance of photographic theory two different responses appear to have emerged to overcome the impact temporal decontextualising has on narrative in relation to photography. The most obvious response being to provide more contextual information in the form of yet more realist photographs of the phenomena being photographed to try and indicate how it unfolds through time and space. Such has been the approach taken by photo ethnographers and photojournalists; in order to better represent the reality observed, more of it is photographed. The development of photo sequences or narratives, quite cinematic in their structure, is the result. Taken to its logical conclusion: to minimise the degree of abstraction and photographically parallel as much as possible the reality observed, everything everywhere would need to be photographed. On a philosophical level this appears to be happening with the explosion of digital photography and the distribution of those images, as Bremner (2010) has argued. The idea of everything everywhere existing as an image is precisely the paradox of a (photo) media rich landscape that Baudrillard was alerting us to in his conception of the simulacra. On a practical level it is literally impossible to photograph everything everywhere but that does not stop the philosophical level impinging on the literal.

The second response to the temporal dominance of photographic theory is the use of montage. Lovejoy notes that new forms of photography emerged early in its history that “challenged the single-image concept of representation” that used “fractured, multiple images, re-contextualised from reality to create an abstract synthesis” of that reality (1990, p257). These forms can be covered by the term montage - from the French for build or assemble. With varied histories, agendas and media (including still photography and cinema), their common ground was an effort to re-contextualise the excised image. As I noted in Chapter 3, Benjamin was enthusiastic about the photo-montage because of its potential to re-contextualise missing information. Lovejoy describes montage “as a theory of relationships wherein vital missing information (significance or meaning that could not be contained in the actual picture) is hidden in the relational space between two images” (1990, p263). This suggests that the phenomenological dimensions of experience, unfolding through time and...
space, can be ascertained as a consequence of exploring these relationships. The resulting images, although often containing bits of recognisable photographs of objects, people and scenes bore little visual correlation to the seen world. Where visual fidelity to the seen world was not of primary concern, photo-montage can be seen as the ground zero of real photographic abstraction. Realistic photographs, even if generally agreed to function on a conceptually abstract level, are not considered abstract in the purest sense, in part because they quickly became “the standard of naturalism” (Rexer 2009, p27); and also because the mechanical nature of photography seemed to preclude too much of the subjective intent of the photographer, that being a necessary pre-condition for true abstraction.

Rexer points out that the sun diagrams of photographic pioneers - Herschel, Fox-Talbot and Atkins – are perhaps the earliest examples non-realist abstract photography (2009, pp27-28). These images were essentially photograms of plants that recorded little realistic detail; rather light was filtered through the plants to make tonally variegated silhouettes resulting in images that, despite being causally connected back to an actual object did not directly resemble that object. These images were recognised at the time as a form of abstraction but I would argue that any abstraction in the photographs was more a consequence of the limits of the technology available at that time than any overtly conscious decision to make photographic images that did not resemble the seen world. In marked contrast the photogram was used by early modernists such as Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray as central part of the visual language of photo-montage, over half a century later.

Photo-montage was not, as is commonly assumed, the invention of the abstract purists of early modernism but was a technique used early in the history of photography where it was called combination printing. Combination printing was used to overcome the problems of exposure inherent in the relatively crude film emulsions at the time. These films were incapable of recording accurate exposure of, for example, a building and the sky because of the extreme contrast in light, relative to the films ability to render it. To overcome this one film plate correctly exposing the sky was made and another plate correctly exposing the building was
made. These two negative plates were combined in the print exposure process to produce an image in which the photographed scene accorded with how it appeared to the naked eye of the photographer, Henry Peach Robinson was a pioneer of the technique making a single photographic image from multiple negatives. However it was Rejlander who fully recognised the potential of combining separate photographic negatives into a single image to produce fantastical photographs that used symbolism and allegory in much the same way classical painting did. The irony is that the technique itself, developed by those who saw photography as science, was quickly co-opted by those who saw it as an art, who in turn were rejected by the later abstract purists because their work was imitative of painting.

Robinson was also a pioneering figure of late 19th century photo pictorialism. In the discourse and history of abstract photography, photo pictorialism is either conveniently overlooked or alternatively derided by abstract purists and objective realists alike. It is often characterised, and caricatured, as being imitative of impressionist style painting; neither being a true representation of the seen world (realism) nor exploring the unique properties of the medium that would enable it to become the visual art of the 20th century (figurative abstraction). However the motivation of the pictorialists were varied and complex and have contributed to our understanding of the abstract nature of photography, even if superficially the work appears to be imitative of a style of painting. Although the pictorialists have been accused of imitating impressionism, the imperative of photography to “endeavour at producing a broad and general effect” for artistic purposes - as opposed to the scientific desire to “represent or aim at the attainment of every minute detail” - was noted at the establishment of the Royal Photographic Society of London in 1853, some 30 years before pictorialism was born (Newton 1980[1853], p79). Sir William J. Newton, believed that “the object is better obtained by the whole subject being a little out of focus, thereby giving a greater breadth of effect, and consequently more suggestive of the true character of nature” (Newton 1980[1853], p79). This is significant firstly because it is commonly believed that the use of soft focus by the pictorialists was derived from impressionist painting, (which didn’t begin to appear until the 1870s), and secondly because the hint of abstraction that soft focus introduces was employed in order to see a truer picture of reality.
The pictorialists understood the “penetrating dimension of photography” as enabling them “to infiltrate behind surface appearances” and “render underlying truths” (Bunnell 2006, p38). Precise focal detail, associated with objective, scientific photography, was not the path to these truths but the impressionistic use of soft focus was. The use of soft focus was an attempt to develop photography “toward visual and aesthetic independence from naturalism”, or realistic descriptive photographic depiction (Rexer 2009, p49). To that end the pictorialists also used unusual printing techniques, such as gum bichromate, the platinum process, and bromoil printing (Steiglitz 1980[1899], pp164-165). They did so not simply for their painterly appearances but because they provided control over the appearances of the final images that did not necessarily correspond with how the world actually appeared. Such choices were important for they established that the “photograph as a work of art was a crafted object like any other, in any medium, revealing of the artist’s hand” (Bunnell 2006, p43). Pictorialist “photographs were the product of the creative imagination and the insightful, craftsmanlike effort of the self-conscious photographic artist” (Bunnell 2006, 032).

Pictorialism is a generic term applied to the practices and beliefs of two photographic organisations that held very similar views: the Brotherhood of the Linked Ring founded in the UK in 1892; and the Photo Secessionists founded in the USA in 1903. The Brotherhood of the Linked Ring seceded from the Royal Photographic Society, founded in 1853, as a consequence of arguments over whether photography could be an art, involving the subjective interpretation of reality, or was a science, involving the objective depiction of reality. The Photo Secessionists were interested in the “possibilities for the medium … that went beyond the immediately visual”; whether it could “capture or express the spiritual dimension of life” or “offer correlative or ‘equivalents’ for invisible emotions and ideas” (Rexer 2009, p47). Their interest in symbolist and impressionist painting was based on their belief in “photography as a medium of subjective expression” that could “displace the source of photographic imagery from the world to the mind” (Rexer 2009, p47). Such displacement signals a shift from an obsession with the objectively framed causal indexicality of the photograph to subjectively framed existential indexicality, a pointing in rather than a pointing...
Stieglitz himself wrote that “with photography, speaking artistically of it, it is a very severe mental process, and taxes all the artist’s energies even after he has mastered technique” and that “the originality of a work of art refers to the originality of the thing expressed” (1980[1899], p164).

Not all pictorialists rejected positivism entirely. Rexer says of Edward Steichen, the founder of the Photo Secessionists, that he seemed “to imply that true photography, artistically motivated, ought be able to colonise its own province of the invisible, the latent, the unseen, and the merely photographic” (2009, p52). Revealing the latent and unseen is not so far removed from the idea of revealing the hidden rules of nature that analytic scientific positivism was concerned with. Nor is it so far from revealing the innate reality that the figurative abstractionists were interested in. Photography, it seems, is the perfect medium to reveal reality for “as no painting or sculpture ever can, photography satisfies, in positivistic terms, the deep desire of a secular age for evidence of some transcendent order of experience” (Rexer 2009, p55). This positivist inclination can also be seen in the work of Peter Henry Emerson. Often called a pictorialist Emerson rejected what he saw as their imitative approach, especially the montage work of Robinson. Emerson believed “that any viable theory of art photography should be based upon principles of aesthetics that were scientifically sound” (Nickel 2008, p64). His photographs appear superficially similar to the work of the pictorialists but they were based on the principles of what he called naturalism. Emerson’s approach to photographic naturalism (as distinct from the naturalism Rexer mentions, which is realism by another name) was to “approximate the experience of normal human vision” by shooting slightly off focus, rather than using the pin sharp focus cameras were capable of (Nickel 2008, p64). Emerson believed that as the camera was capable of sharper focus than the human eye, then to photograph on the basis of what the camera was capable of, and not how human vision worked, “would be to create a false impression of our experience of nature” (Nickel 2008, p64). His theories of aesthetics were founded on “an understanding of the psychology and physiology of human perception” developed as a result of his medical training (Nickel 2008, p66). Importantly Emerson makes a clear distinction between
naturalism and realism. Realism he saw as “merely a register of bald facts mathematically true” whilst naturalism was concerned with “true reality as it is perceived by a human observer” (Nickel 2008, p66). Emerson was aware of vision as being the embodied experience of a subjective observer and not some kind of objective disembodied gaze. In Emerson’s framework then, reality does not exist outside of observation but is dependent on it, pointing to the importance, but not primacy, of subjectivity. This is clear evidence, early in the history of photography, of an emerging awareness of its phenomenological dimensions, the promise of which was not fulfilled during the 20th century.

Emerson’s understanding of the embodied and sensory nature of vision meant he was interested in evoking through images, and where necessary words, other non-visual sensory experience in what Nickel calls a “synesthetic strategy” (2008, pp72-73). Emerson’s interest in the nature of perception was based on Helmholtz’s models of perceptual cognition in which the brain fills in the gaps between information supplied “discontinuously by the eyes” and, I would also assume, other sensory receptors (Nickel 2008, p73). The discontinuity of sight means that “ocular data is full of chaotic shifts and gaps” that the brain compensates for “by supplementing real-time images with previous knowledge and visual experience, synthesising the two in a way that allows eye motion to anticipate and create a sehbild, the internal mental image, we take for perception” (Nickel 2008, p73). Such a view of perception indicates that experience is central to how we perceive the world and understand those perceptions and, by extension, it plays a role in how we understand photographs that are fragments themselves analogous to the idea of fragmented ocular data. Nickel argues that Emerson’s work should be seen as a gambit “to relinquish something of the photograph’s perceived indexicality in the service of an operation more synthetic, more laden with the weight of time and the internal workings of imagination and reflection” (2008, p73). The indexicality Nickel is referring to here is what I have previously described as causal indexicality. I would argue that Emerson’s work, despite relinquishing something of that, exemplifies an existential indexicality. It is rooted in what Peirce called collateral observation and experience and is in essence phenomenological. Nickel calls this “subjectivised empiricism” which I would argue is different from what I call the subjectivist imperialism of most pictorialists (2008, p73). By subjectivist imperialism I mean the total privileging of the subjective intent of the photographer that the pictorialists championed.

Although the pictorialists are derided by modernist abstract purists, their work signals a consciousness of the conceptually abstract dimensions of photographic practice at a time when the overwhelming convention was objective realism. In addition, the interests of the pictorialists in the potential of photography to reveal the hidden dimensions of experience, or reality, were not so different to the interests of the modernists. However, the images the pictorialists produced in seeking to reveal this reality were certainly different in appearance to those of the modernists. What many of these early photographers exemplify is an understanding that “photography was quintessentially a conceptual art, not a quotation at all but a visual reconstruction of reality, a simulacrum with a difference” (Rexer 2009, p32).

Real Abstraction

Thierry de Duve argues that there are two generally understood ways in which realistic photographs (he calls them snapshots) are seen: either as natural evidence of a vanished past (a picture) or as an abrupt artefact designed to capture life but unable to convey it (an event). Such photography freezes movement instantaneously and “produces a petrified analogue of it” (de Duve 2007, p110). He notes that in both forms of photography what is happening at the surface of the photograph (the image) has its counterpart in reality. As live or natural evidence then, such photographs guarantee “the death of the referent” and “the suspension of time” (de Duve 2007, p109). Realist photographs indicate that life outside the photograph continues, that time flows by, but that the subject or object of the photograph has slipped away. The uniqueness of such photographs as a form of visual representation, de Duve contends, is that they function principally as an index, causally related to their object or subject but simultaneously they are also icon (through their resemblance to the subject) and to an extent a symbol (as a consequence of the camera being a kind of codifying device) (2007, p110). As a result, de Duve argues, “the referent may not be
excluded from the system of signs considered” (hence photography equals naturalism) but that “common sense distinguishes an image from reality” although “reality does indeed wedge its way into the image” (2007, p111).

Kosuth, a conceptual artist, consciously explores the relationship between object, photograph, language, meaning, intention and reference. He developed “a tripartite division of the aesthetic signifier” that encompassed an object, the object’s photographic reproduction, and the linguistic sign in the form of the name (noun) of that object (Buchloh in Kotz 2005, p8). “Having been extracted from the ‘real’ world of use and re-placed to function within the world of art, the objects re-present themselves… as the combination of three equal parts, a photograph, an object, and a text”, and therefore as art works “are statements of fact, not simply about external reality, but about the means to represent it” (Rorimer in Kotz 2005, pp7-8). Kosuth’s work functions in what Kotz calls an “ascending spiral of abstraction” (2005, p9). The significance of this spiral being that even if the photograph of an object may be realistic it is an abstraction because of the excision of the image from the time and space of our experience of the actual object photographed. These issues, the photograph as record or interpretation, removed from time and space, are at the heart of de Duve’s conception of the “superficial” and “referential series”, outlined in the previous chapter. The dilemma about how to regard the photograph arises because of the “photographs paradoxical treatment of reality in motion” (de Duve 2007, p112).

The snapshot freezes motion so that it appears to be an accurate depiction of an event at a very specific point in time, divorced from all moments in time preceding or following it, in a manner that we do not experience time, which is through motion and thus space. If the photographer blurs motion using slow shutter speeds (time exposures) to interpret the sensation of movement (the passage of time through space) in a way that makes the image less real, then according to de Duve the photograph starts to become unhinged from its indexical relationship to the subject matter recorded. The snapshot de Duve regards as belonging to the referential series because it is purely syntagmatic; it is concerned with surface, is descriptive.
He regards the time exposure as paradigmatic since it is more concerned with interpretative content of the event photographed. de Duve argues that there is no dialectic between syntagm and paradigm yet both series cross at a single point. The paradox of this crossing point, as I outlined in the previous chapter, is that we understand the photograph as artificial, as an abstraction of reality, yet we are convinced of the existence of the reality shown because of the photograph’s realistic accuracy (de Duve 2007, p113). de Duve also argues that the snapshot is emblematic of time because it divorces the moment from its trajectory through space (the unfolding of time), and that the time-exposure is emblematic of space because it is not concerned with the singular moment but tries to convey this temporal trajectory (2007, p115). Interestingly he notes that the aesthetic ideal of the snapshot is sharpness whilst that of the time exposure is blurriness. However the time exposure requires even just one point of sharpness otherwise the photograph would “become totally abstract” and “constitute a denial of its referential ties” (de Duve 2007, p117). de Duve clearly understands the conceptually abstract nature of realist photography but it is evident that he regards truly abstract photography as having no “referential ties”.

In Chapter 3 I interpreted de Duve’s conception of the superficial and referential series in diagrammatic form. The idea of the referential series as being syntagmatic and the superficial series as being paradigmatic can be worked into that diagrammatic form. In doing so what becomes evident is that these concepts are driven less by any absolute sense in which the photographs relates to reality and more by the manner in which we conceive reality in the first instance. To put it another way our sense of how the photograph relates to reality is simply determined by our sense of reality in the first place. The ongoing debates about the true nature of the relation between the photograph and reality, as de Duve implies, is because it exists on two apparently different trajectories that in essence conform to either a materialist or idealist logic. de Duve’s conception of the superficial and referential series highlights those logics and indicates that the point at which they cross is where the paradoxical aspect of photography as an image form is located.
The existential indexical dimension of photography, that the genius of selection points to, situates realist photographs as abstract for they are an interpretation of the visible world, even if they appear to look the same as that visible world. As such, abstraction occurs at a fundamentally conceptual level, which is profoundly abstract.

The existential aspect of photographic indexicality is what Szarkowski refers to when he calls photography a mirror to the world. Despite this existential dimension Szarkowski believed that the casual dimension of photographic indexicality – photography as a window to the world – was central to photography being regarded as an art form in its own right. He believed that an aesthetic language exclusive to photography could be achieved by isolating the formal elements unique to it and its causal relation to reality. For him the uniqueness of photographic art could be derived from systematically identifying five qualities inherent in or particular to the medium (Kriebel 2007, p16). Analytically, these appear discrete but Szarkowski was well aware that “they should be regarded as interdependent aspects of a single problem” (Szarkowski 1966, p7). These aspects are:

- The thing itself - the actual subject matter photographed
- The detail – the fragmentary, as opposed to narrative, disposition of the medium
- The frame – the selection of what to include and exclude when taking a photograph
- Time – photographs as a discrete parcel of time
- Vantage point – the spatial perspective from which a photograph is taken

(Szarkowski 1966)
synthesis, but on selection” (Szarkowski 1966, p6). This in turn points to the other aspect of realist photography as a form of abstraction. Here abstraction is premised on clarifying, filtering and anticipating the subjects and moments to photograph. In the context of his logic Szarkowski is right to say that photography is not a synthetic process because clarifying, filtering and selection all point to an analytical endeavour. Anticipation implies an order of synthesis, albeit different to that which we normally associate with artistic practice for it suggests subjectivity, whereas clarifying and filtering carries the veneer of objectivity. Anticipation also implies the temporal aspects of photography. Regardless of such fine distinctions these features point to an atomistic view of the world. By this I mean the tendency of an analytic view to break every thing down into what is perceived to be its constituent parts and as a result grasp the true reality of that thing. Clarifying and filtering in turn reference the next two qualities identified by Szarkowski, the detail and the frame. Szarkowski makes the point that photography is especially good at recording the detail of things and as a consequence suffers from narrative poverty (1966, p8). By particularising the subject through the inescapable presence of the frame of the viewfinder, by choosing what to include and exclude, what to bring to prominence and what not to, scenes and subjects are dislocated from their physical and spatial contexts. Conceived like this, the frame of the camera “stops being a window into the world and becomes a privileged aesthetic and conceptual locus” (Bunnell 2006, p92). As a consequence photography is a conceptually abstract practice tied to the abstracting tendency of analysis and its decontextualising effect, even if its pictures look real. The idea of decontextualising was pursued by many of the photographers Szarkowski championed through the visual exploration of form or shape in a kind of realist abstraction. I should clarify here that I am overemphasising the degree to which Szarkowski was interested in the theoretical, and indeed practical, consequences of recognising realistic photography as a conceptually abstract process, beyond an engagement with formalism. Much of what I have drawn out is implied or acknowledged in passing for Szarkowski believed in “a broadly documentary catechism for photography” that was centred on “the trinity of camera-photographer-world” and was “a human and humanist enterprise” where “the world confirmed the vision of the photographer and vice versa” (Rexer
Although the formalist approach opens the way to an engagement with photographic abstraction, which could be regarded as pure formalism, Szarkowski stops short of doing so (Phillips 1982, pp56-88).

Nonetheless Szarkowski understood the implications of the decontextualising effect ‘detail’, ‘frame’, ‘clarifying’ and ‘filtering’ had, not just on the formal properties of photographs but on their narrative capacity for he argued that “photographs could not be read as stories” yet “they could be read as symbols” (1966, p8). This more or less accords with de Duve’s understanding of the snapshot - principally index and icon, and to a lesser degree symbol - however Szarkowski privileges the symbol over the icon. I would contend that the photograph as realist or formal abstraction - which is premised on the visual distillation of the scene or object into its most essential components – operates mainly on an iconic basis. Smith sees the iconographic as central to understanding such photographs, as is evident in his analysis of the work of exemplary formal abstract photographer Aaron Siskind (Enyeart & Solomon 1986, pp30-47). I would argue that such images function in much the same way Otto Neureth’s isotype human figures do, for example, in that they are generic emblems of specific and particular things that are heterogeneous in actuality. However, because the photograph has a causal connection back to the actual the symbolic wedges itself in between that and the iconic function of such images.

As we have seen with the work of de Duve the issue of time is crucial in any conception of photography. By choosing the precise moment to make an exposure, events are dislocated from their temporal continuum. Szarkowski argues that the temporal moment in photographs is always the present for “a photograph describes only that period of time in which it was made” yet it does allude “to the past and the future in so far as they exist in the present, the past through its surviving relics, the future through prophecy visible in the present” (1966, p10). He makes no explicit mention of this fragmenting of time being abstract in and of itself but does acknowledge that the capacity of photography to immobilise “thin slices of time” has been a “continuing fascination for the photographer” that has “little to do with what was
happening” thus imply its abstracting tendency if we assume that “what was happening” was reality (1966, p10). Szarkowski sees the potential of immobilising “thin slices of time” as enabling photographers to see “the momentary patterning of lines and shapes that had been previously concealed within the flux of movement” (1966, p10). Formal abstraction is privileged over conceptual abstraction as a result and points to the fundamentally visual nature of his attitude towards the idea of abstraction. This is reinforced when he argues that French photographer Cartier-Bresson’s famous dictum ‘the decisive moment’ has been misunderstood to refer to taking a photograph at the dramatic climax of an unfolding scene when it was simply referring to a visual climax (Szarkowski 1966, p10). If we look to the work of Ray Metzker we can see this idea of the visual climax taken to its logical conclusion. Metzker was interested in the systematic investigation of the use of the medium more “for its own sake than as a conveyance of descriptive meaning” (Bunnell 2006, p218). His highly graphic images are not only concerned with “recessional depth” but should be read “as a patterning of forms on a flat surface” (Bunnell 2006, p22). Even if Metzker’s photographs are causally connected back to a seen world these are essentially visual explorations and he regarded them as the purest form of photography.

The final unique quality that photography had, according to Szarkowski, was the potential for the obscurity of vantage point, when taking photographs, to reveal the subject in new and unusual ways not ordinarily encountered in our view of the world. Where once photography was seen as distorting how we saw the world it became apparent early in photography’s history that people began to “think photographically”, that is, to anticipate in a scene what it might look like taken from an unusual vantage point (Szarkowski 1966, p11). In this sense then our ability to imagine what Szarkowski referred to as the invisible picture, or what Cartier-Bresson calls the decisive moment, informs and indeed transforms our view of reality. Again this is abstract in the conceptual sense, which is of less interest to Szarkowski, and has its corollary in a visual approach to composition. It is the latter that Szarkowski was interested in. Although not explicitly articulated, and in spite of his privileging the visual dimension of photographic abstraction (and one largely based on realistic images at that), it is
the conceptually abstract dimensions of photographic practice and its transformative potential
that Szarkowski vaguely touches upon that is of most interest to me. It is suggestive of the
relationship between our experiences of the images we make of the world and our experiences
of the world; or, how our experiences of those images transform our experiences of the world,
the image sensitising itself. The image sensitising itself is the idea that the visible images
or pictures we see of the world cause us to see the world differently and thus change our
perception of reality. Visible images are therefore not a mere copy or representation of reality,
but are a part of it (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p19). This idea is developed by Merleau-Ponty and I
will explore it in more detail in Chapter 6.

Szarkowski’s work is also significant as it is emblematic of a modernist purity and a belief
in photography to reveal some essential or universal truth. Many photographers, such as
Ruth Bernhard, engaged in the kind of figurative abstraction he championed subscribed
to this belief also. Bernhard’s aim, for example, was “to transform the complexities of the
figure into harmonies of simplified form revealing the innate reality”; (in Bunnell 2006, p82). Bunnell argues that such photographers were engaged in the “pursuit of revelation”
of meaning (2006, p126). If we return briefly to Kosuth’s work we can see that even though
it is rooted in a conceptual logical positivism it points directly to this broader, conceptual,
aspect of abstraction and this in turn points to the atomistic tendencies of the larger positivist
framework that photography itself has been embedded in through much of its history. So
where Szarkowski champions photography of a sort that abstracts reality to a degree, in
order to reveal some hidden aspect of that reality, Kosuth’s work points out the conceptually
abstract nature of such practices. What Szarkowski and Kosuth views on photography share
is an investigative impetus, hence my earlier comments about the issue being empirical rather
than scientific or artistic. Rexer makes the point that “we find that the investigative dimension
of photography is its one constant, intrinsic to its modernity” which is “an outgrowth of its
positivist, scientific roots” (2009, p11). This implies that there is a conceptual continuum that
underpins all photographs regardless of whether they might be realistic depictions of the seen
world or not. Abstract photography is not a by-way of practice then, Rexer contends, but “its
undercurrent, the index of its self-awareness and proof of its continuing urge to transcend the visual through the visual” (2009, p12).

The abstract dimension of realist photographs, their extraction as a single image from the time space continuum of experience, has long been acknowledged in much photographic theory. It is why Benjamin, for example, when critiquing New Objective Photography wrote that photographers needed to give their “picture a caption” (1999 [1934], p775). Setting aside his political agenda, his point was that realist photographs, as single moment decontextualised abstractions of the world-as-seen, transfigured “the world by aestheticising it, reporting on surfaces, not struggles” (Kriebel 2007, p11). Similarly Sontag regards the photograph as incapable of conveying moral knowledge because it has been decontextualised from time and its relation to the world is that of appearances and not understanding. For her the photograph is rooted in an “amorous relation” with the world “which is based on how something looks”, whereas “understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand” (Sontag 1977, p24). Similarly de Duve argues that a realist photograph is incapable of forming a narrative function because it is taken at a singular point in time whereas narrative unfolds through time and thus space. The time exposure, however, he believes is more capable of conveying narrative as it attempts to convey the passing of time, and hence space (de Duve 2007, p117).

MODERN ABSTRACTION

Jäger, like many others, argues that the overwhelming view of photography in the 19th century was that it could not be an art because its ability to realistically render subject matter - its causal indexicality - reinforced its objective nature and its proximity to reality. He argues that this has lead to various manipulations of the medium – pictorialism, montage, and collage – in an attempt to elevate it to art, to privilege its existential indexicality. As a consequence, he argues, photographs shifted from: being icons - where the semblance between an object and its visual representation is obvious; to symbols - where the idea communicated is more important than the object (reality) shown; to abstract or “pure photography” - where the subject matter of photography was photography itself (Jäger 2002, p12). Each of these shifts, although premised on a reaction against the one preceding it, presents a paradoxical view of what photography is. Rexer, aware of such paradoxes, speaks of photography in the early 20th century as becoming the vehicle for “unseen seeing” (2009, p69). Unseen seeing can be understood as an attempt to encompass the simplistic distinctions of photography as either an objective technology of mechanical reproduction capable of capturing realistic visual information not previously available to the human eye, or a new medium of the arts to be used to create subjective interpretations of the experience of reality. The existence of such paradoxical views is merely emblematic of the larger set of circumstances that formed the field on which those debates about photography were played out; that being the advent of 20th century modernism, with all of its seemingly contradictory ideologies around notions of the universal and the particular, and the idea of progress. Rexer argues that there were three major “developments that changed the scope and forms of Western artistic expression” and “elevated photography, still a scarcely acknowledged art, to the status of the art medium of the world to come” (2009, p69). According to Rexer these three developments were Freud’s publication of the Interpretation of Dreams, Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, and the Russian revolution. He argues that the combined effect of these events was to “displace individual consciousness as the locus and subject of creative expression and the source of human action”; and relocating it to the “vast, transpersonal, ven cosmic forces working through the motions of the world, the unfolding of history, and the psychic lives of human beings” (2009, p69).

Looking at each of these developments in turn, the surrealists in particular were inspired by Freud’s work and believed that “no matter how apparently real, the world was there at the behest of the viewer’s imagination and the photographer’s (limited) agency” (Rexer 2009, p72). Their interest in “Freudian notions of the subconscious mind” fuelled their “belief that the irrational could be harnessed as an instrument of refusal directed against the prevailing culture” (Grundberg 1999[1988] p123). This views parallels notions of social constructivism, locating the conception of reality from ‘out there’ (positivism), to ‘in here’ - ‘in here’ being,
in a form of a collective unconsciousness, simultaneously the mind of the artist and that of the viewer. The surrealists were quick to adopt the idea of montage because of “the power of reconvened images to promote new readings of the real” (Rexer 2009, p72). Artists – such as Hoch, Rossler, Hajek-Halke – “treated photographs as readymades, extracting images from their original contexts and usages… to take on new meaning, which often contradicted what might have been their original sense” (Rexer 2009, p72).

Einstein, Rexer argues, rejected an empiricist view of the world - what you know is what you see - for a conceptual view of the world “that thinking leads to knowledge” (2009, p79). E=MC² is emblematic of the conceptual act of ‘thinking the world’ versus the empirical act of ‘seeing the world’. Setting aside the simplistic binary distinction this makes between seeing and knowing it throws into sharp relief the abstract dimension that a conceptual view of the world operates in. The purpose of art and science in this modern sense, according to Rexer “is to discover the reality that lies behind, beneath or beyond appearances” (2009, p79). If in an effort to reveal the hidden realities behind appearances one adopts a conceptual view of the world, regarding it as abstract and not concrete, then using abstraction as an instrumental device, a method of inquiry, or mode communication seems entirely logical. Such logic underpins the Design Methods movement as I outlined in Chapter 2.

Like the pictorialists, the early modernists looked to photography’s history “in order to understand how the medium might be extended to provide a truer picture of what they all believed was a more complex reality” (Rexer 2009, p75). Despite producing markedly different looking work, what they had in common was the idea that moving away from descriptive photography would lay the foundations for glimpsing this reality. The pictorialists were motivated largely by a desire to establish photography as an art as opposed to a science. They believed that the interpretative dimension of their practice could produce pictures of the world based how people experienced it as emotional embodied beings rather than based on simple appearances. Where this lead to a form of what I would call ‘impressionistic naturalism’ the modernists saw pictorialism as a bourgeoisie trope that
was a relic of the old world. Modernist abstraction was less interested in how the world appeared and more interested in how it might look: both in the sense of its underlying, invisible structures but also in the sense of re-imaging the future appearance of the world. For avant-garde artists such as Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy the impact of the Russian Revolution lead to “a renovation of vision and consciousness” that would cast off the shackles of “bourgeois ideas… and their concomitant images … including, especially, the very notion of representation itself” for “after all, representation, especially in painting and sculpture, was bound up with conventions of an academic realism” (Rexer 2009, p73). Rexer argues that because of this such artists regarded painting and sculpture as “incapable of developing images of a prospective future in which all the relations of a society will have changed” (Rexer 2009, p73). These artists saw photography as the only representational form capable of developing images of a prospective future because it was mechanical and associated with technological progress; “it stood for historical materialism’s inevitability: individuals were an impediment; the social mass was the unit of the future” (Rexer 2009, p73). In line with such revolutionary fervour “Lissitzky and Rodchenko pushed photography in directions that diminished its conventional connection to an observed reality – accentuating its composing and abstracting tendencies – even as they exploited its powerful facticity for propaganda” (Rexer 2009, p73).

Modernist abstract photography can be seen then as having two interconnected agendas. On one hand it was trying “to solicit from a chaotic world the underlying forms of a more beautiful coherence” by using radical compositional strategies (Rexer 2009, p77). The agenda here was to reveal that underlying reality of the world through abstraction in a visual and artistic equivalent to the logic of E=MC². On the other hand there was a more radical agenda that was politically motivated and more concerned with using abstract photography to create images of a new, yet to exist reality. Desnos writes of Man Ray’s work as being neither “artistic deformation” nor a “servile reproduction of ‘nature’” but a process where he “makes the solar spectre participate in adventurous constructions” (Desnos 1980[1929], pp228-229). These constructions were the creation of new realities. Whether trying to reveal an underlying
reality, create new realities, or responding to historical materialism’s inevitability both of these approaches point to the transpersonal, ven cosmic forces Rexer refers to. Such forces, he argues, “required new, unprecedented images – images without pictures” (Rexer 2009, p69).

**Pure Abstraction**

The concept of images without pictures may seem impossible, however it is a concept that reminds me of Ranciere’s point, outlined in the previous chapter, that “the image is not exclusive to the visible” (2007, p7). The idea of the image not being exclusive to the visual places it in a conceptually more abstract space than the idea of the pictorial image. Given that the images required to depict a yet to exist reality had no visible precedent, and as a consequence existed at a conceptually abstract level, it is not surprising that visual abstraction would form the basis of those pictures. That photographic abstraction was the specific form of abstraction used to make those pictures can be explained by how the photograph operates along de Duve’s two lines. The power of the photograph, its call to reality, lies in the referential series (the causal connection of the photograph to the world) yet simultaneously it has an existential dimension that lies in the superficial series (the realm of interpretation). Photographic abstraction can be seen to be exploring and exploiting the point where these two series intersects. One series, the referential, speaks of the concrete material dimensions of the world (an essential assumption for positivism which is a feature of modernism) and the other, the superficial, speaks of the unseen, abstract dimensions, of the world that were either described by scientific and social theory or envisaged by radical political theory. That photographic abstraction so readily explores and exploits this intersecting point is emblematic of the competing tensions at play in wider society at the time. Where these theories were reshaping the conceptual image of the world the modernist avant-garde were busy creating the pictures of it by playing with the unique double poetics of the photographic image.

On one level, concepts such as “images without pictures” the “referentless image” and “unseen seeing”, can be regarded as literary oxymorons, or simply impossible. Ranciere, as I mentioned, provides us with a way of coming to terms with “images without pictures”.
“Unseen seeing” refers to the ability of the camera to capture and depict things that the human eye cannot, but by inference also touches upon the idea of mental images of a world yet to be, which of course falls within the scope of Ranciere’s notion of the image. Perhaps the most troubling concept is the idea of the “referentless image” for it suggests an image that refers to nothing. If we take photography as only having a causal indexical connection back to the seen world then of course this is literally impossible: how can an image be without a reference, if it depicts objects from the seen world? Alternatively if we take photography as only having an existential connection to the world, then maybe it is theoretically possible to speak of a “referentless image” but I would contend this is also impossible for the reference point for the photograph would at the very least be the concept the photographer had of the image they wanted to make. Such an image then, as Lefebvre points out, is literally impossible (2007, p233). However these concepts should be read metaphorically for they evoke the possibility of the seemingly impossible, without literally promising to deliver on it, despite there being some that believe they can. What they have in common is the idea of photographic images that have no clear precedent in the visible world; that are attempting a radical break with the past in order to see the present differently or imagine, in fact image, the future. As a consequence, photography is seen then as a medium capable of constructing a new reality rather than simply a medium that documents an existing one, even one that is hidden. This signals “a shift… from reproductive to productive photography”; what Gottfried Jäger calls concrete or pure photography (Rexer 2009, p74). Jäger’s interest in “pure photography” is not with “the picture as end product but the process of picture producing” itself (2002, p13). In pure or concrete photography the emphasis moves from “art that is photographic, image taking” to art “that is photogenic, image giving” (Jäger 2002, p13). Thus conceived, realist photographs present and interpret the world whereas abstract photography is more akin to the desire to “change it and create a new world” (Jäger 2002, p13). Therefore we can trace a photographic trajectory that looks something like this:

- realists depict the world
- pictorialists interpret the world
- modernist abstract photographers reveal the true nature of the world
- pure photographers re-imagine the world

The idea of “unseen seeing” then, relates not just to the ability of photography to reveal aspects of the seen world never before seen (realism); or provide us with images that evoke a sense of emotional experience (pictorialism); but it pertains to the idea of photography as the medium of choice, and the only medium capable of, producing images of a world that was yet to exist (abstract modernism and concrete photography). Jäger identifies 3 photographic themes that parallel this trajectory. He notes that the apparent discrete nature of each theme is a construct devised for analytical clarity rather than a true picture of the relationship between each movement in that trajectory (2002, p16). The first theme concerns reproduction and by implication this pertains most to realist photography. This theme correlates to the role of the photograph as icon, in Jäger’s terms, where there is a strong semblance between the photograph and the scene photographed – causal indexicality if you like. The second theme is the allegoric role of photography where the photograph as symbol is foregrounded. The allegoric role emerged, consequent to photography being conceived as an art, where existential indexicality takes precedence over the causal indexicality even if the causal is evident. Both the pictorialists and the modernist abstractionists worked within the allegorical realm. Finally there is the theme that relates to the concept of pure photography that Jäger regards as “the introspective self portrayal of the system itself” (2002, p16). Although recognising the abstract dimensions of each aspect within this trajectory Jäger regards the latter as being the truest form of abstraction. Jäger’s conception of pure photography that re-imagines the world has strong conceptual parallels to design - and hence my interest in abstract photography - for design is very much concerned with imagining what the future might be. However, I would argue that in re-imagining the world we also always depict, interpret and reveal it.

**Artificial Abstraction**

Jäger takes it as a given that all photographs create reality rather than record it, arguing that “the image is no longer seen as one transporting ‘reality’, but as a phenomena creating ‘reality’” (2002, p8). In certain respects this is the flip side to the previously covered discussion that realistic photo-documentary images can be considered as a form of
abstraction. If we accept that documentary photographs are conceptually abstract then each pictorial utterance becomes a reality in and of itself, and although they may have a causally indexical relationship back to a reality we observed in the seen world they are not that reality we have just seen. Once a photograph is made and circulated it becomes part of the seen world that we observe and hence the reality we experience, thus we have created part of that reality. I will come back to this discussion a bit later and interrogate the implications of it with particular reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the ‘image sensitising itself’ for there are specific conceptual, and perhaps practical, consequences that follow from creating new ‘realities’ from pictures of a seen, existing, ‘reality’. In short the consequences are that the reality created is increasingly conditioned by photographic images of the everyday and the reality we imagine through these images is increasingly banal. For now I would like to explore the idea of creating reality in relation to abstract photography, for this is the territory Jäger is interested in and it has implications for a different kind of theoretical framework for photography. Jäger provides 3 broad definitions of what constitutes abstract photography (2002, p33). These are:

1. Abstraction of the visible – where photographs have their content basis in the seen world but use techniques such as cropping, tonal adjustment, exposure etc, to draw out the essential features of an object or process.

Here abstraction correlates to the formalist or figurative approach to photographic abstraction I have previously touched upon.

2. Visualisation of the invisible – varieties of scientific photo imaging such as xray, ultra sound, photomicrography etc that extend the human eye into places it cannot naturally see.

I have not dealt with this approach other than in passing when talking about the ability of the camera to capture and depict things that the human eye cannot. Instead I have, rightly or wrongly, subsumed this into the generic term realistic photography because it is concerned with seeing things not previously seen because of improvements in optical technology and increases in shutter speeds not because of any deliberate disruption to the program of photography.
(3) Materialisation of pure visibility – where light and chemicals are the subject matter of photography.

It is this final definition of abstract photography that Jäger is concerned with and I have made passing reference to it in touching upon pure or concrete photography.

Jäger’s main interest in abstract photography is not with object-bound reproductive (realist / figurative) photography but rather with “the visualisation of an (abstract) idea which is captured by the camera” (2002, p8). There is nothing within that statement that would preclude definitions (1) and (2) from his field of interest, but when coupled with his disinterest in realist / figurative photography it becomes apparent that Jäger is talking about a different order of abstract photography altogether. Jäger does not consider pictorialists as abstract photographers, not so much because their photographs had a causal connection back to the seen world, but because he believes that they disavowed the technical nature of photographic production – they tried to distance themselves from it and make their work more like painting – whereas he argues that true abstract photography embraces it (2002, p16). It is for this reason that the photographic experimentations of the early modernist avant-garde, despite often having strong figurative dimensions, fall within his definition of abstract photography for their work “can be regarded as early documents of photographic self introspection” (Jäger 2002, p16).

Jäger regards realist photography as “objective photography”, for it is concerned with “the superficially visible world of observed objects” (2002, p12). He regards art photography, typified by the pictorialists and symbolists, as “subjective photography”, for it is concerned with the “obscure invisible world of observing subjects” (Jäger 2002, p12). Typically abstract photography would be considered to exist within the realm of subjective photography because of its associations with artistic practice and by extension the foregrounding of existential indexicality. Crucially, however, Jäger departs from such conventional binary logic by proposing a third photographic tendency as a way of distinguishing pure photographic abstraction from its more conventional antecedents. His primary focus is on photography “that
refers first and foremost to itself” that is concerned with “its own immanent reality and makes itself the object: a photograph of the photograph” (2002, p13). In these terms true abstract photographs present no depiction of a perceived object and therefore become the object themselves. This is the basis of what he calls generative or concrete photography.

Wiesing holds a similar view but he is less concerned with what abstract photography is - its historical dimension - and more interested in what it could be. Like Jäger he regards photography, conventionally understood as realist pictorial photography, to be about the cause / effect relationship between object and photographic image. He argues that the pre-occupation with the conventions of the “pictorial object” means that we do not see the structures of the image or picture surface; the lines, shapes, tones and textures – the visible mechanics that make up the image (Wiesing 2002, p85). Although he overlooks the formalist approach to abstraction that many of the early modernist avant-garde experimented with, Wiesing does touch upon its conceptual logic of creating new visible worlds. For Wiesing photographs that point to something else are a symbol or sign and “exemplify the possibilities of photographic representation” (2002, p88). He contends that pure abstraction, on the other hand, is not concerned with “what or who but how” (Wiesing 2002, p88). Wiesing’s view parallels Jäger’s interest, with its clear rejection of concern with the causally indexical nature of realist photography, the what and who of subject matter. Wiesing is more concerned with the how of pure abstraction, the idea of photography that refers only to itself.

In general terms Wiesing defines abstract as “something [that] is independent, detached and without direct association” and in specific terms he argues that “something is abstract when it has no relationship to visible concrete objects.” For Wiesing where realist photography “creates predictable representations of visible objects” abstraction is “not so much a repudiation of something, but repudiation of visible association with a concrete object” (2002, p76). Therefore abstract photography “is a thing, mostly a piece of paper, which has been photographically produced, on which visible forms can be seen, which the observer can either not at all or only with difficulty identify as the representation of objects” (Wiesing 2002, p82). By extension then pure abstract photography “is only possible if it does not show any recognisable objects in its works in order to make something else more clearly visible” (Wiesing 2002, p83).

Abstract photography is thus concerned with “directing attention at the essential characteristics of a thing” (Wiesing 2002, p77). It is premised as much on the reductiveist idea of excluding the non-essential characteristics of the thing being photographed as it is on the essentialist enterprise of distilling the thing being photographed to its core features. Such a thing can exist in the seen world, as is the case with the formalist abstraction of objects photographed. Abstract photography of this order distills the physical or formal characteristics of the thing-as-object to its fundamental essence. This view has strong parallels with eidetic phenomenology as I will outline in Chapter 6. What Wiesing and Jäger are proposing is an essentialist end point for abstract photography, where the prevailing logic of abstraction is taken to an extreme conclusion for the thing being reduced to its essential characteristics is the idea of photography itself. In this schema it is thing-as-concept or thing-as-process that are being abstracted to their essential characteristics, although the resultant photographs are themselves objects. In short, it is the idea of the photographic process itself that is the subject of the abstract photograph.

Jäger recognises the extreme nature of his framing of abstraction, as it embodies the countervailing logic of objective realism. He cites the work of German art historian Wilhelm Worringer as the basis of his rationale. Worringer, writes Jäger, saw “the need for empathy with the world of objects as complementary to the need for abstraction” as a “universal phenomena” (2002, p13). Worringer himself argued that “as the need for empathy is a prerequisite for the kind of aesthetic satisfaction to be found in the beauty of the organic, so the need for abstraction finds its realisation of beauty in life negating inorganic elements” (in Jäger 2002, p13). For Jäger then, photography that encompasses any degree of figuration – either in the guise of objective realism or subjective interpretation - is a fundamentally aesthetic activity that is a consequence of “the eternal desire to present and interpret the
perceived world” (2002, p13). Abstraction, and in particular his conception of pure abstraction in the form of concrete photography, is a consequence of “the eternal desire to change it and create a new world” (Jäger 2002, p13). Linking abstraction to the beauty of inorganic elements and the creation of a new world points to the very powerful conceptual implications for this line of work for design; the significance of which is the invocation of the idea of the artificial which is the central pre-occupation of design. Abstraction in Worringer’s schema is founded on the principal of an aesthetic engagement with both the natural and artificial worlds. It straddles across an embodied existential phenomenology and a reductivist eidetic one. Significantly, it is the reductive phenomenology that Jäger appears to pick up on.

Jäger derives the term concrete photography from Theo van Doesburg’s 1930s publication Manifesto of Concrete Art but he traces its roots as a practice to the vortographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn in the early 20th century and his publication of The Future of Pictorial Photography, for in these photography became “self-referential” and foregrounded “its very own ‘form and structure’” (2004, p188). Vortographs, so called because Coburn subscribed to the theories of Vorticism, were abstract photographs made using a kaleidoscopic apparatus as the camera lense. Vorticism, conceived by Ezra Pound, was concerned with abstraction as a way of creating new realities. It can be seen as a conscious shift away from impressionism, which wasn’t considered true abstraction. “Impressionism, being malleable, merely received impressions and was the plaything of conditions, but … Vorticism exerted a certain fluid energy on the conditions and, instead of simply reflecting or observing, rather devises things new” (Deppner 2002, p169). The Vorticist’s rejection of Impressionism parallels Jäger’s rejection of pictorialism as a truly abstract photographic practice. The theories of Vorticism were applied to traditional art mediums and Pound also rejected the suitability of photography for Vorticism “because he saw in it a lack of harmony between eye and hand” (Deppner 2002, p170). However he accepted that Coburn’s vortographs were capable of making things anew, albeit in a lower level manner to painting, and were a superior form of photographic image making to the prevailing trends to date, these being realism and pictorialism.
For Jäger “concrete photography is the expression of the autonomous image, which neither wants to reproduce objects nor represent symbols, but simply follow its own laws” (2004, p188). As a result the representational medium of photography becomes “the object represented” (Jäger 2004, p188). However, according to Jäger’s logic it doesn’t simply end with the photograph representing only itself for “it contributes to the sensual and intellectual perception of our world” (2004, p189). This is, in Jäger’s terms, the generative dimension of concrete photography for through the shift in perception we begin to reimagine the world. The belief in the capacity of abstract photography to create new worlds or orders of experience is a constant in the literature and is indicative of the idea of progress that can be traced back to the early 20th century avant-garde. Rexer notes that after seeing the horrors of WWI Moholy-Nagy sought “to represent a new and more positive vision of the future” and “set out to cleanse his symbolic and visual vocabulary of all that he carried from a defunct world.” He used photograms to do so “in order to evoke ‘immediate optical experience’” for the “referentless image” heralds “an open-ended future unconstrained by the past” (Rexer 2009, p67). Jäger also touches upon the significance of Moholy-Nagy’s work in relation to concrete photography with much the same conclusion (2002, p19; 2004, p188).

It is interesting to note that in tracing Jäger’s conceptual arc through his exploration of objective realism, to subjective interpretation and on to concrete photography we find ourselves, ironically, back at a position that is seemingly as doctrinaire and objective as objective realism. However it is a position that is firmly rooted in the world of the artificial as opposed to the world of reality. For example, Jäger talks about the Fotoform movement, founded by Otto Steinert in Germany in the 1950s, that used a rational approach to creating a “new existential basis with the help of abstraction” (2002, p25). Fotoform continued the generative photographic traditions established at the Bauhaus as well as those of the New Objectivity movement. Jäger also explores Herbert W. Franke’s interest in the generative tendencies of cybernetic aesthetics during the 1960s that sought to “distance itself from subjective sensitivities” to “rationalise inner creative processes using the modern concept of information and the theories surrounding it” (Jäger 2002, p25). What is evident
through Jäger’s line of inquiry is an interest in a programmatic approach to photographic abstraction that privileges the mechanical aspects of photographic processes in image creation over the objective depiction of the seen world and the subjective interpretation of much art photography.

**Phenomenal Abstraction**

The end point of concrete photography as the true form of abstraction is as an essentialist position as its apparent opposite, objective realism, and precludes a more all encompassing view of what abstract photography can be. Rexer notes that Jäger’s desire to abandon the term abstract photography altogether, and use the term concrete photography instead, is based on Jäger’s view that, conceptually at least, all photographs fall “into a category of abstraction” (Rexer 2009, p18). Rexer rejects such an all-encompassing characterisation of abstract photography and speaks of abstract photographs as “photographs that refuse to disclose fully the images they contain” (2009, p9). Similarly, Witkovsky is critical of Jäger calling him a proselytiser of an especially narrow view of what constitutes abstract photography (2010, pp214-215). He believes that Jäger is pre-occupied with abstract photography that is exclusively “looking at its own circumstances … in an imagined bliss of medium-specific self-presence” (Witkovsky 2010, p215). Witkovsky proposes an alternative, and I would say phenomenological, approach to conceiving of photographic abstraction that is not based upon the conventional dichotomy of “pure photoreality” - which I take for realist photography - and “photography of photography” – being the Jägerian approach to abstraction (2010, p215).

Witkovsky and Rexer are justified in criticising Jäger’s approach as an essentialist activity, as I myself have done. However, I also see his work as a conscious reaction against the tendencies of much of the photographic discourse and practice that regards the photograph as either a picture of reality (as contested as that term is and understood to be) or as a text to be read, both of which are just other forms of essentialism. Witkovsky is right in characterising Jäger’s view as a reaction to the conventional dichotomy of “pure photoreality” and the “photography of photography”, but when you locate Jäger’s concepts in the larger context of

Walead Beshty ©, Six-Sided Picture (CMYRGB), March 25th 2010, Irvine, California. Fuji Crystal Archive Super Type C color photographic paper 30 x 40 inches. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Reproduced courtesy of the artist
his musings, as I have done in diagrammatic form, a more complex picture of the relationship between abstraction and photography emerges. I have established that no matter how photography is understood or practiced, or what visual form it may take, the one constant of it is its relationship to reality, the world. From this then I have conceived, in this diagram, of realists depicting the reality photographically, pictorialists interpreting it photographically, modernists revealing it photographically, and generative or concrete photographers generating it photographically. I would also contend that the space between the practice of realists and pictorialists is primarily concerned with the photograph as an icon, the space between the practice of pictorialists and modernists is primarily concerned with the photograph as a symbol, the space between the practice of modernists and concrete photographers is primarily concerned with the photograph as an abstraction, and finally the space that concrete photographers are concerned with is the generation of a concrete reality through their photographs that potentially becomes the concrete reality that realist photographers depict.

Although Jäger himself is only concerned with this last segment of this picture his work plays a crucial, if provocative role, in re-imaging photography away from its indexical framing towards a theoretical framing from practice. Underlying Jäger’s provocations is the idea that abstract photography in the form of concrete photography is non-representational. For Jäger “the question of abstraction does not refer so much to a given object which is more or less abstractly represented through a photo. It is not a matter of an abstracting photography; the question is, rather, about an abstraction of photography. It becomes more and more ‘abstract’ loses in representation, gains in pictorial power. In its abstraction it becomes independent, autonomous and frees itself from representational functions” (Jäger et al. 2002, pp280-281).

The Jägerian view, Rexer argues, “emphasises the denotative independence of the photographic process and places a premium on the creation of new and unbehelden images” and frames such “uninterpretable photography” as “pure photography, occupied with its means, not with its meanings or associations” (2009, p18). Rexer understands the constitutive power of such photography and despite being critical of the essentialist pose that Jäger adopts he accepts its significance as a form of “conceptual or critical abstraction” (Rexer 2009, p20).
However, where Wiesing and Jäger reject the representational nature of such photographs, Rexer appears to be equivocal in doing so for he regards them as being able to “incite moods and, by at least suggesting visual analogies, inspire metaphors” although “above all they can promulgate new categories of aesthetic experience, with the clear implication that the artist and the universe itself, through its laws collaborate in advancing the beautiful and by extension human consciousness” (2009, p20). The question that arises here then is how can a visible image, even one that possesses no previously seen content, have no representational capacity? The short answer is that it can’t, as I have already argued in this chapter. Such images may not represent an object in the seen world (which to be precise we should call figurative representation to distinguish from the more ambiguous term representation) yet at the very least they represent the concept behind them, if not literally, then at least by implication or association. In other words they represent the existential indexical dimension. Jäger himself seems to unwittingly make this point for he writes that “concrete photography represents: the concretisation of photography, a form of fundamental artistic self-examination and self-reflection that aims to foreground its very own conditions” (2005, p15). Furthermore by inciting moods or “suggesting visual analogies” in those that view concrete photographs they automatically take on a representational function in the sense that they stand for, or are emblematic of, what viewers project onto or take away from them.

The concept of an image that does not represent may make sense if we regard representation to only be about figurative representation where the figure is entirely unrecognisable as a consequence of visual abstraction, but it is a concept that fails if we consider ideas as the subject matter of the image. Ranciere argues that the idea of non-representation in art is not about non-figuration; that representation in art is not about resemblances but about ideas, about subject and content, about what is shown and not shown, about what is known and not known; it is about what he calls the three representative constraints of art (2007, p119). On writing about the idea of the unrepresentable Ranciere asks two questions: “under what conditions might it be said that certain events cannot be represented?” and “under what conditions can an unrepresentable
phenomena of this kind be given a specific conceptual shape?” (2007, p109). It is apparent these questions are rhetorical as Ranciere is “motivated by a certain intolerance for an inflated use of the notion of the unrepresentable, and a constellation of allied notions: the unrepresentable, the unthinkable, the untreatable, the irredeemable” (2007, p109).

Ranciere presents two generally held views about the idea of the unrepresentable in the context of “representation as a regime of thinking about art” before outlining what he regards are the flaws in them (Ranciere 2007, p109). The first view is the belief that certain things “cannot be brought before our eyes”, that it is impossible “to make the essential character of the thing in question present” in material form, which in turn suggests “an incapacity on the part of art” (Ranciere 2007, pp109-110). Ranciere makes no distinction between thing as object or idea, but it is thing as idea that is clearly inferred. The second view relates to the power or effectiveness of art - how well it can do something rather than what it can or can’t do. In this view certain things are unrepresentable because of “the surplus of presence, which betrays the singularity of the event or situation” (Ranciere 2007, p110). The “surplus of material presence” correlates to a state of unreality as it “removes from the thing represented its weight of existence” (Ranciere 2007, p110). In other words a thing’s ubiquity inhibits the ability of it to be materially represented, and because of this – both its ubiquity and resistance to representation arising from its ubiquity - it assumes the appearance of the unreal. Ranciere argues that in this line of thinking the interplay of the surplus of material presence and the removal of its weight of existence “delivers the thing represented over to affects of pleasure, play or distance which are incompatible with the gravity of the experience it contains”. Such phenomena are, in Platonic terms, simulacrum or “mimetic artifice” (Ranciere 2007, p110). Herein lies a flaw in the prevailing logic of this argument, one that Ranciere himself implies. On one hand in the conditions of the surplus of presence things cannot be represented because of their ubiquity yet on the other hand to attempt to do so delivers the thing over to the realm of mimetic artifice or simulacrum that by definition must have some representational dimension. The issue here then is not so much about whether something can be represented in these circumstances or not, but the nature of the representation. What this points to for me is
less the apparent impossibility of representation in such circumstances but a sense of loss of
an ideal of authenticity as well as the production of banality, for the simulacrum, as mimetic
artifice, is in Platonic terms a second rate copy of the actual.

I should be clear here about the context in which I refer to the notion of an ideal of
authenticity. Firstly I am referring to authenticity in the context of a discussion about
photography and more specifically the relationship between photography and the reality it
appears capable or incapable of depicting. Authenticity in this regard relates to the causal
connection between the photograph and what it depicts, the trace of appearances that Berger
and Mohr (2001[1979]) and Sontag (1977, p154) talk about. Berger notes that on one hand
the causal trace guarantees the authenticity of the photograph; it is an authentic depiction
of the scene. However he is well aware that the idea of authenticity is undermined because
the image "is isolated from all other events that came before it and go after it... it has been
seized from that ongoing experience which is the true authenticity” (Berger and Mohr
2001[1979], p166). Authenticity here is actual human experience unfolding in time and space
not an image excised from it. My notion of an ideal of authenticity then is a short hand way
of describing the common sense view - untroubled by these philosophical concerns - of the
photograph as being an authentic depiction of something that actually existed or occurred,
the idea that the photographic image shows us an actual reality. The problem with this idea,
however, is that the vast volume of photographic images we are confronted with means “the
everyday is now an image covering the surface of the modern world” (Brenner 2010, p48).
Umbrico and Vionnet both explore this situation by using photographs from the internet
that have been uploaded by tourists or happy snappers. Their work highlights the point that
we cannot so easily separate our ‘authentic’ experience of the world from the images of
those ‘authentic’ experiences that cover it. These are the conditions of the simulacrum that
Baudrillard wrote about.

Plato, Ranciere notes, “counter-poses the straightforward tale” that is without artifice and
leaves no “doubt as to the identity of its teller” as a way of overcoming the conditions of
the simulacrum (2007, p110). This elevates the “prestige of the word of the witness in two forms”, the “straightforward tale, which does not constitute art but simply conveys an individual’s experience” and “the witness’s narrative as a new mode of art” (2007, pp110-111). The straightforward tale is “a platonic ethical framework… where what is judged is simply images, where what is examined is simply their relationship to their origin (are they worthy of what they represent) and their destination (what affects do they produce on those who receive them?)” (Ranciere 2007, p111). It is a logic that realist photography is emblematic of, the apparent straightforward and objective recording of appearances, its causal indexicality, which I have previously addressed. Elevating the witness’s narrative to an art is not concerned with “recounting the event” but being witness to a “there was that exceeds thought, not only through its own particular surplus, but because the peculiarity of the there was in general is to exceed thought” (Ranciere 2007, p111). This, Ranciere argues, has resulted in the art of the sublime the purpose of which is “to record the trace of the unthinkable” (2007, p111). The Jägerian line of thinking about abstract photography is also exemplary of the sublime for it privileges either the existential indexicality of the photographer artist trying to reveal the unseeable or the processes of photography itself, in a form of self-referentiality, used to produce “the autonomous image”.

Ranciere argues that the straightforward tale and the witness’s narrative as art have become intertwined. Where he sees these lines as being intertwined I contend that they have in fact become conflated. If we return to de Duve’s conception of the superficial and referential series, or lines, we can get a clearer sense of what is at stake here. It is perhaps a poetic coincidence that the superficial series, which is concerned with existential indexicality, parallels the idea of the “imitative artifice” of the simulacrum whereas the referential series parallels the “plain tale” of causal indexicality. I previously argued, in Chapter 3, that so conceived photography is mapped as a complex dimensional field as opposed to a simple binary conception of objective versus subjective determination. The idea of a dimensional field is suggestive of an ecology that has a spatial aspect to it in regards to the sets of relations that may be mapped through it. In collapsing this field, or intertwining these lines, we end up with a new form of art “that revokes representation in favour of either a platonic plain tale or a new art of the sublime” (Ranciere 2007, p111). More than that we also lose a sense of the spatial dimensions of that field, even if that field is at this point only conceptual.

In the new form of art that arises from these intertwined line, which Ranciere calls the “aesthetic regime”, all subjects are suitable for and equal as the subject of art (2007, p118). The conflation of these lines results in a relativist purgatory of a perpetual paradox where all things are at once worthy as the subject matter of art but the sheer ubiquity of all things makes it impossible to represent them as its subject. If “everything is equal, equally representable” then the “equally representable spells the ruin of the representative system” for it results in a form of passivity, an “inertia of the visible that comes to paralyse action and absorb meanings” (Ranciere 2007, pp120-121). Finally, it results in “the primacy of description over action” where such primacy “is in fact that of a form of the visible which does not make visible, which deprives action of its power of intelligibility… of ordered distribution of knowledge effects and pathos effects” (Ranciere 2007, p121). This reminds me of Baetens’ view that the post-modern sublime arose from a pre-occupation with semiotics resulting in a “fundamental distrust of the representative possibilities of language” because of the impossible task “of bridging the gap between sign and referent” and the consequential “infinite deferral of meaning” (2007, p61). Accordingly, it is both the material and semiotic ubiquity of things that makes them unrepresentable.

All of these concerns speak to me of the previously identified problems of art taking the literary turn, that the pre-occupation with semiotics is emblematic of, and a consequential loss of critical or authorial nerve, hardly surprising given the death of the author and the relativist end point of post-modernism in extremis. The consequence of both the “aesthetic regime” and the “post-modern sublime” is that we have “transformed problems of the adjustment of representative distance into problems of the impossibility of representation” (Ranciere 2007, p112). In other words the view of art where certain things are considered unrepresentable has come about because of the conflation of two different lines of thinking and has resulted in the loss of a critical stance as implied by the idea of representative distance. By losing our nerve,
our critical stance, our sense of representative distance, we attempt to show everything and as a consequence we see nothing. I would argue then that the conditions of the simulacrum, that arises in these circumstances, is not so much that we fail to distinguish the image from the real but that we lack the ability to distinguish the relative significance of one event over another. This in turn points to the loss of the act of judgement, a term that fell out of favour with the rise of post-modernism and is, I believe, in need of rehabilitation. In turn, I would also argue that the conditions of the simulacrum have caused us to lose sight of the idea of space on a number of levels. Firstly the loss of space that results from collapsing lines that ordinarily cross only at a single point and secondly the loss of the space that is implied by the loss of representative distance or a critical stance. Space in this regard appears to exist only as conceptual space. However, there is a phenomenological dimension to it for critical distance, or judgement, is enacted by embodied human subjects.

Ranciere outlines a more conservative conception of representation as a way of overcoming the problems that arise from intertwining the lines of the straightforward tale and the witness’s narrative as art. He argues that representation as a mode of art has historically involved three constraints. The first constraint he outlines is the dependency representation has on visible speech. This constraint combines an “operation of substitution” with “an operation of exhibition” (Ranciere 2007, pp113). The ‘operation of substitution’ brings before our eyes that which has been removed from space and time, the visible depiction of objects that we can see in the real world. The ‘operation of exhibition’ makes what is “intrinsically hidden from sight, the inner springs motivating characters and events, visible” (Ranciere 2007, pp113). This first constraint then is concerned with “making visible” and “not making visible” (Ranciere 2007, pp113-114). It is concerned with what is revealed and not revealed. The second constraint of representation concerns the “relationship between knowing and not knowing” (Ranciere 2007, pp114). This constraint is concerned with showing us things we know and revealing things we don’t know. Ranciere describes this as involving the “ordered deployment of meaning” that contains the “paradoxical logic” of the “relationship between what is understood or anticipated and what comes as a surprise” (Ranciere 2007, pp114). We are drawn into a work of art through our recognition of what we know in it so that we might discover, often to our surprise, something that we did not know. These two constraints then lead to the third constraint, the “adjustment of reality” (Ranciere 2007, p116). The adjustment of reality is the manner in which we understand the content of art to be fictional and its entities “exempt from any judgement of existence” yet as these entities are “beings of resemblance” we feel empathy for their feelings and actions (Ranciere 2007, p116). This constraint marks the “boundary and passage between the enjoyment of suspense in fiction and the actual pleasure of recognition” (Ranciere 2007, p116). It is concerned with how the fictional aspect of art has a resemblance in the actual, and enables us to recognise and empathise. Our sense of the actual, or reality if you will, is in turn transformed because of the effects that recognition and empathy have on us. Ranciere argues that this third constraint is concerned with the “the rationale of fictions and the rationale of empirical facts” and that the space between them “is one of the representative regimes’ main elements” (Ranciere 2007, p120). There is a phenomenological dimension to this for it is embodied space in which we collapse the rationales into one another and see the image (as representation) as real.

I would like to return briefly to the point I made earlier that realist photographs of the everyday now cover the surface of the world. I noted then that as a consequence of this it had become increasingly difficult for us to separate our ‘authentic’ experience of the world from the images of those ‘authentic’ experiences that cover it, and that this is the condition of Baudrillard’s simulacrum. However, if we look at these circumstances in a slightly different way (that the images that cover the surface of the world authenticate our experience of it) then our relationship to the image and the idea of authenticity changes somewhat. Rather than confusing the image with reality we see the image as real, and part of that reality, yet we are able to maintain a sense of space between the image and reality as we see them as different orders of reality, not one and the same thing. Therefore it is our knowledge of this space and our capacity to manage and manipulate it that is in question here. The space that separates the rationales of fiction and empirical facts is conceptual space, embodied critical distance, and it enables us to recognise fiction and fact as different. In re-evaluating the semiotic system of
Peirce, which he claims has been misunderstood or selectively interpreted by most subsequent semioticians, Lefebvre makes a similar point.

Lefebvre, arguing the Peircean line, writes, “every embodied sign, from the moment it stands for something, is by logical necessity indexically connected to reality in one way or another” (2007, p233). Setting aside the contested nature of the idea of reality these indexical connections are either direct (what I have previously called causal indexicality) or indirect (what I have previously called existential indexicality) (Lefebvre 2007, pp228-229). These forms of indexicality encompass objects, processes, intentions, ideas and so on: all of the things that we imagine to make up our sense of reality, what we might call the rationale of empirical facts. It is through semiosis - the action and interaction of signs – via our embodied sensory experience that we apprehend that reality. It is through our ability to distinguish between the rationale of empirical facts and the rationale of fictions that “as a whole, the fictions of literature, of painting, of theatre, and of cinema are meaningful to us” (Lefebvre 2007, p233). Our ability to distinguish between these rationales touches upon the idea of collateral knowledge. Collateral knowledge is the societal knowledge we have about things, the relationships we have with things and our knowledge of those relationships. These relationships play out through experience in time and space and are therefore phenomenological.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter Peirce claimed that photographs were largely understood, through commonplace social discourse, to be the result of a picture making process where the pictures were a kind of icon rather than being seen as the same as reality itself, in spite of some of the specialist discourse of the time that conflated the two (Brunet 2008, pp38-40). In other words most people could distinguish between the picture and reality; they understood the fictive dimension of the photograph whilst simultaneously recognising the images they contained were often of real things from the seen world. It is both the separation of, and relationship between, these domains and our understanding of that relationship and the distance between them, as Ranciere pointed out, that is the core constitutive force of representation. The idea of the unrepresentable then is itself a myth for as Lefebvre argues, “in order to be intelligible, fictional or imaginary universes have to be related to the world” they cannot exist separate to it (2007, p233). An “embodied sign, for instance a work of fiction or a painting, that is totally disconnected from – or better yet, ‘unconnectable’ to – our world is not only an impossibility but also would be beyond intelligibility. In this sense the ultimate object of our representations, including fiction, can only be reality (the one and only)” (Lefebvre 2007, p233). For this reason Jäger’s concrete photography cannot escape representation, not simply because the photographs it produces are materially present visual representations of certain ideas about photography, but because the actual idea of such photographs being possible prior to their material existence makes them a reality of a certain order, albeit a conceptual reality. In other words we cannot conceive of things that do not exist without them existing at the moment of their conception for their conception can only occur within the realm of our experience, which is the central aspect of our reality. That they are yet to take a material form is really only a formality, although not an inevitability. The conception of such images resides in the domain of the imaginary.

In asking the question “what could abstract photography be?” Weising touches upon the conceptual dimension of photography. He doesn’t do this in relation to the production of specific artefacts in the form of abstract photographs, but rather in relation to abstract photography as a concept that will result in certain viewpoints being developed and, possibly, certain types of artefacts being produced (2002, p73). It is worth noting that the essence of this very thesis is mapping out a conceptual territory and making artefacts both in the form of thesis itself and the images I have made in, through and for that conceptual territory. Weising notes that his question “no longer involves the description of empirical realities, but the discovery of new conceptual possibilities” and although we may turn to historical examples to sense what is possible - because “anything that is real, must also be possible” – “reality does not offer a complete insight into the whole range of possibilities” (Weising 2002, pp73-74). The implication of here is twofold. The existence of prior examples of abstract photography speak of the ability of previous practitioners to imagine what it could be and
then make that manifest in material form through those historical examples. There is nothing really surprising in that, but we should take heart from the fact that others have faced similar conceptual challenges. What is most significant here is the implication that in turning to what we understand as our empirical material reality for conceiving of new possibilities we may constrict those possibilities. "The artist, indeed, shares with the philosopher the same claim: he is not so much interested in the completed works of his colleagues as in the new, unknown, and yet to be realised possibilities" (Weising 2002, p74).

In spite my criticism of the essentialist nature of Weising’s and Jäger’s views I recognise the conceptual significance of their contribution to our understanding of not only abstract photography but also more conventional forms of realist photography. What is interesting about these contributions is that they touch upon, only obliquely I would add, the consequences of only ever looking to our seen reality as the source of our conceptions of possible future scenarios (be those conceptual or artefactual) in a manner that resonates with Ranciere’s discussion of the simulacrum being derived from “the surplus of material presence” (2007, p110). The significance of Weising’s and Jäger’s provocations, and Ranciere’s views for that matter, is the insight that by only looking to our seen reality for these conceptions there is a tendency to perpetuate banality. By conceiving of photography as a more complex dimensional field we return to it the phenomenological dimension of space, which is after all the context, along with time, within which we experience and understand it.

**Experience + Understanding = Space**

I have talked about space in a number of different ways in this chapter and in doing so have made the claim that it implies or points to a phenomenological framing of photographic theory. Before I begin to articulate what such a theory might entail, the subject of the next chapter, I wish to recap the kinds of space I have talked about and their significance in relation to theorising photography. This is important for the spatial theorising of photography is far less developed compared to its temporal theorising, as Wells implies in her comments about the lack of theorising of landscape photography. Firstly there is the notion of space as the
physical world we inhabit and experience; that we take for our material, concrete reality. I have touched upon this briefly in reference to the compositional aspects of photography; how photographers arrange the shapes they see, in the world they inhabit, through the viewfinder of the camera. These compositional strategies clearly infer an embodied experience of the world as we take photographs of it. However they also infer an ocular-centric view for it ultimately privileges the translation of what we see of our experience in that world, through compositional strategies, into a two dimensional picture. Such photographs are abstracted as disembodied pictures of the shapes in that world we experienced, that to a degree is inevitable given the mechanics of still photography. Such an attitude towards space is exemplified in the formalist discourse promoted by Szarkowski where the mechanical inevitability of photography is celebrated as a unique aspect of the language of the medium.

The formalist approach to abstraction touches, in turn, upon the second notion of space where it is often coupled with time. I covered this coupling when discussing the idea of photographs excising a visible image of the world from its continuum in time and space; specifically the discussions about allowing motion blur or freezing movement that connect time and space in the sense that movement occurs over time and unfolds through space. I noted that discourses around the temporal aspects of photography were influenced largely by a specific type of literary theory that conflated space into time by privileging the relationship between time and narrative and consequently meaning. However, there is also a sense in which this conflation seems inevitable given that one of the key controls of making photographs is the shutter mechanism which determines exposure time. This does beg the question; what would a theory of photography based upon another key mechanical aspect of the camera - focal length and depth of field - look like? It is not my intention to develop such a theory for that would result in as narrow a perspective as has theorising photography’s temporal dimensions - just in a different guise. What these various musings on space point to, and indeed draws upon, is another kind of space that I have touched upon. That is conceptual space, where space is used as a metaphor for the broad field of ideas that circulate
about photography. The significance of abstraction as a practice within that space cannot be underestimated here, although it has been under theorised and under discussed compared to realist photography. My own photographic work has very deliberately played with the spatial aspect of photographic mechanics, in part, as a way of attempting to side-step the temporal and literary takes on photography, but also as a way of establishing the space of critical distance. I will cover this in more detail in Chapter 6.

The dominant voices in the development of much of the literary, indexical photographic discourse of the past half-century have been highly specialised academics or theorists who have usually referenced other academics or theorists in doing so. What has been absent, or marginalised, are the experiences and understandings of photographs and photography from people who take and make photographs – be they artists, commercial photographers, amateurs, or anyone in possession of a camera phone – who have not subscribed to or are unaware of this particular theoretical take on photography. The influence of literary theory, and other permutations of critical theory, has extended beyond the study of critical theory in the academy and impacted on both the understanding and education of creative or artistic practitioners (de Duve 1994). As a result, for the best part of the past 30 - 40 years the indexical theory of photography has been the theoretical mainstay of several generations of photographic artists. In these circumstances, anyone developing a theory from photographic practice is up against both individual institutional orthodoxy and global art institutional dogma. The work of Jäger and Weising is crucial in developing such theory from practice for it provides a critical, yet similarly doctrinaire, counterpoint to the literary indexical take on realist photography. Apart from taking a different line to the conception of photography, much abstract work in the field of concrete or pure photography plays with the spatial dimensions of photography and the mechanics of focus and depth of field. More importantly, it is practitioners that have, in the main, developed the limited discourses around this field. Experience and understanding then are central to moving beyond a narrow literary theory of photography towards a broader phenomenological theory.
It is worth noting that the work of many critics that have developed the field of photographic theory as we know it, have themselves been involved in a phenomenological enterprise of sorts, although they would probably decry such a characterisation of their work. Indeed Barthe’s himself, the seminal figure in the indexical framing of this theory, claims that is precisely what he was doing albeit somewhat cynically (1984, pp20-21). I say this for such theorists have brought to their encounters with photographs and photography, which inevitably occur in the world they experience, their understanding and experience of theory in developing that theory. I am not arguing that such an enterprise has been invalid within that framework but as a practitioner with a different understanding and experience of photography – one gained through years of practice and an immersion in a wide variety of photographic discourse – I have a quite different experience in my encounter with photographs and photography. It is the spatial dimension in which our embodied experience of photography and photographs occurs, and through which we develop an understanding of that, that has been largely absent in photography’s theorisation. In the next chapter I will interrogate aspects of photography’s conceptual space from the space of my own practice, in which I explored the constraints of the mechanics of camera optics as it relates to recording distance, focus and a sense of space with a view to articulating a phenomenological theorisation of photography. This in turn will lead me in to a discussion about the space between the photographic image and the imaginary, and the implication of their relationship on how design conceives the artificial.
Chapter 5: Experiencing Abstraction

An Abstract In Theory
In the last chapter I provided an overview of the limited published discourse on abstract photography. I started by noting that there has been a relatively recent shift in photographic discourse in general, towards an engagement with abstraction as a consequence of a number of factors. These include: the technological shift of photography from analogue to digital and the apparent crisis of photographic truth; the cul-de-sac that the literary turn of photographic theory has taken us into, driven in part by an obsessive fixation with the notion of the index; and the logic of the post-modern sublime and an exploration of the supposed limits of representation that abstraction may or may not transcend. In that chapter I also looked at the broad conceptions of photographic abstraction that ran from figurative photographs being considered as conceptual abstractions of reality; through to photographs that had no causal connection back to the seen world being regarded as the only true form of abstraction; and everything between. What became apparent was that despite each of these perspectives having differing agendas they all saw abstraction as revealing the unseen dimensions of reality or creating images of new realities. Despite this common thread, adherents of each phase of photographic abstraction regarded their view as being the truest manifestation of photography’s inherent capability and essence. Such perspectives were as doctrinaire as the more established discourses around realist photography that they were often reacting to.

Setting this aside what became evident was a common emerging thread around the idea of experience, and the photograph’s relation to it, which pointed to the need to move beyond the constraints of the semiotic disposition of much photographic theory. In addition I argued that the spatial dimensions of photography were under theorised. Both of these aspects signalled a turn towards phenomenology.

In this chapter I will begin to explore aspects of the spatial dimensions of photographic and design practice. One key aspect of the space of practice is the idea of critical distance, or in more conventional terms, judgement. Critical theorists inevitably bring to their interrogation of photography a sense of critical distance because critical theory and photographic practice are so different. The development of photographic theory using that particular distance, the space between words and images, is the dominant model of developing photographic theory. What I aim to explore in this chapter is the role that the critical distance of the photographer, the space between the world and the image, might play in the development of photographic theory. I will do this largely in relation to consumer photographic practice in this chapter.

In the final chapter I will then turn my attention to a discussion of phenomenology and photographic theory because this spatial dimension is not simply conceptual but embodied. At that point I will draw upon my own photographic practice to discuss the potential of phenomenology in developing a photographic theory.

The Image of the Artificial

“Images are significant surfaces. Images signify – mainly – something ‘out there’ in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions (as reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions). This specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as ‘imagination’.

(Flusser 2007[1983], p8).

Flusser argues that there have been two key turning points in the development of human culture. The first being the “invention of linear writing”, which he dates as appearing around the middle of the second millennium BC; and the second being the “invention of technological images” in the form of photography in the middle of the 19th century (Flusser 2007[1983], p7). He credits the invention of linear writing as the “beginning of ‘historical consciousness’ and ‘history’ in the narrower sense” signaling the emergence of “conceptual thinking” and its analytical and organising tendencies (Flusser 2007[1983], p10-11). “The linear world of history” that emerged from this is structurally different from the world of the image that preceded it because the “space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of magic, a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context” (Flusser 2007[1983], p9). In the world of linear writing...
“the circular time of magic” has been transcoded “into the linear time of history” (Flusser 2007[1983], p.10). Here cause and effect underpin progress through space and time. Where the world of linear writing privileges conceptual thought, the world of the image privileges imaginative thought. Flusser argues, “conceptual thought is more abstract than imaginative thought as all dimensions are abstracted from phenomena” and as a consequence humans take “one step further back from the world” (2007[1983], p.11). This stepping back signals a split of the ideal from the material, the subject from the object. Flusser notes that such a split has lead to an historical, dialectical struggle between the written word and the image. At the same time this dialectic has mutually reinforced these respective positions as “images become more conceptual” and “texts more imaginative” (Flusser 2007[1983], p.12).

The dynamics of the dialectic between conceptual and imaginative thought changed during the industrial revolution, itself only possible because of conceptual thinking. It was during this period that the two ‘media’ central to my thesis came into being, these being the emergence of the profession of design and the invention of the medium of photography.

Flusser sees the invention of photography, the technical image he is concerned with, as the second key turning point in human culture because it coalesces the programmatic agenda of conceptual thought, via the apparatus of the camera, with the imaginative world of the image. The technical image, according to Flusser “is an image produced by apparatuses” that are themselves “the products of applied scientific texts” (Flusser 2007[1983], p.14). The technical image is the indirect product of scientific texts, of conceptual thinking. Flusser argues that “ontologically, traditional images are abstractions of the first order insofar as they abstract from the concrete world while technical images are abstractions of the third order: They abstract from texts which abstract from traditional images which themselves abstract from the concrete world” (Flusser 2007[1983], p.14). I have depicted this concept in diagrammatic form. In this regard “traditional images signify phenomena whereas technical images signify concepts” and “decoding technical images consequently means to read off their actual status” (Flusser 2007[1983], p.14). As a consequence, traditional images are generally seen as pictures of symbolic orders and photographs are mainly seen as pictures of the actual world.
However, we know from my earlier analysis of Ranciere’s work, in Chapter 3, the situation with photography is not that simple because the magical world of the image keeps inserting itself into the frame of the technical apparatus that is the camera. The photograph has now assumed the position of ‘the’ mass traditional image because the circular time of magic has been stitched into the endless digital reproduction of now where everything is endlessly reproduced, rather than repeated, and everything circulates in a context lacking significance. Because the invention of photography brought together both conceptual and imaginative thought there has been heated and persistent disagreement over the true role of photography; art or science, fact or fiction, claim and counter claim.

The emergence of the design profession is as significant a phenomenon as the invention of the technical image in bringing together conceptual and imaginative thought. Flusser argues that towards the end of the 19th century “the unfortunate split” between “the world of arts and that of technology” began to be bridged by design (1999[1993], p18). Prior to this, “culture was split into two mutually exclusive branches: one scientific, quantifiable and ‘hard’, the other aesthetic, evaluative and ‘soft’” (Flusser 1999[1993], p18). The new profession of design was centrally concerned with the image because “the industrial revolution split idea from manufacture and turned the imagination of change into an image” (Bremner 2010, p48). Until industrial production emerged, craft was the dominant process for making things. With craft, the object was conceived and made by the same person. Industrial production followed the logic of mechanisation so that conception and making became separate specialist occupations. As a consequence someone was required to generate the images of the things to be made so the maker knew what to make. It was the designer that translated the idea, or imagining, of a thing to be made into “an image of the possible future” to be manufactured (Bremner 2010, p48). In the early stages of industrialisation it was the trained artist who more often than not got the job of creating these images (Forty 1986, pp35-36). Needless to say they were well versed in the imaginative and symbolic world of the traditional image.

Regardless of the type of image used, and it was almost invariably drawing in one form or another, the designer had to come to terms with the technical dimensions of industrial
production. Although these images may have appeared traditional they were essentially traditional images\textsuperscript{1} that had to be capable of translation into the technical world of production so that they could emerge as artefacts in the concrete world. Hence the process of industrial production becomes a conditioning tool of how traditional images should be used.

Design embodies both conceptual and imaginative thinking, working across the dialectic of both. It is "the site where art and technology (along with their respective evaluative and scientific ways of thinking) come together as equals, making a new form of culture possible" (Flusser 1999[1993], p19). Whether or not art and science are equals is debatable for the history of design discourse parallels similar debates in photography: claim and counter claim as to design’s true vocation, art or science, analysis or synthesis, creative or mechanical.

Setting aside the issue of equality the significance of this is that design practice and its technical images, both photographic and drawn, are central in producing a new form of culture: what Manzini (1992) calls the ecology of the artificial.

Where traditional images can be seen as abstractions of the first order and technical images as abstractions of the third order, the images of design can be seen as abstractions that lead to a fourth order of abstraction, the designed object. I have depicted this concept in diagrammatic form. The objects of design, although concrete in the end, are abstractions of the technical image of design, which are abstractions of texts, which are abstractions of traditional images, which are abstractions of the concrete world. The images of design signify the concept, or idea, of phenomena yet to become actual; they are often the consequence of both imaginative (traditional) and conceptual (technical) thinking. Decoding the images of design is to read off their conjectural rather than actual status. The conjectural dimension of design is philosophically "concerned with counterfactuals"; knowledge of the future that "does not qualify as anything other than a prediction that will be able to be checked against what actually transpires" (Downtown 2003, p60).

With the digital age upon us, the things we design and ‘make’ can exist apart from the concrete world we live in as an image on the screen in a different order of abstraction;

\textsuperscript{1} Interestingly at around the same time as this was unfolding, photographers were trying to make technical (photographic) images look traditional. If the images of design were instructions for what-might-be then perhaps these images were a nostalgic set of instructions for what-might-have-been.
where space and time collapse into the virtual. This is almost certainly the case with visual communication design as a distinct design practice. I say this because the things that visual communication design produces are almost always exclusively images and increasingly these exist only on a screen. If we look at the relationship between the seen world and the images of design it can be further imaged (and abstracted) as I have depicted it in diagrammatic form.

When viewed like this it is apparent that the images of visual communication design follow a different trajectory than most other images of design. The things most other design practices produce are intended to be things that we can touch and feel in the real world although they are likely to exist at some point as an image on a screen; that is they are conceived to become objects that appear in time and space. Here the abstract becomes concrete but more than this the concrete is a form of abstraction derived from a prior concrete existence. This is why the human made world is therefore fundamentally artificial for it is an endless cycle through the concrete and the abstract. Furthermore, the artificial dimension of the human made world is, perhaps bizarrely, fundamentally natural for it is the normal state of affairs of human endeavour and humans are, when all is said and done, a natural part of the planet’s eco-system. This of course points to a somewhat false dichotomy between conventional conceptions of the natural versus artificial world; i.e., our naturalness is our artificiality and our artificiality is our naturalness.

So the images of object design are plans to be made into actual objects. Such images are always only conjectural until they become an object. Once they become an object they become a kind of fact - even as these objects are in themselves an order of abstraction - hence my term the (f)actual. Because the images of visual communication can be simultaneously the plan and the thing, especially in the digital realm, they are of a different order of design image. They forever remain conjectural, never truly concrete in a philosophical sense. Even where they appear contained and actualised in some concrete form – for example as an image on a brochure – it is the brochure that is concrete not the image. It almost goes without saying that the images of visual communication design can of course influence the other images of design and these images in turn become objects and part of the (f)actual
world. Fundamentally however, the images of visual communication design are forever conjectural regardless of whether they circulate in the (f)actual world or the virtual world. They are forever becoming and never being, a kind of perpetual performance of reality. This is similar to the situation of consumer digital photography, which I will outline shortly, for much of the consumer photography uploaded and displayed on the internet is a kind of performance of reality. The conjectural has collapsed into the (f)actual, rather than preceding it, as seems to be the case of the images of object design. It is for this reason that the images of visual communication design, and indeed much contemporary realist photography, are simultaneously ubiquitous and ephemeral. They are everywhere at once yet fundamentally meaningless, prosaic, and disposable.

The distribution of so much domestic photographic imagery on the internet points to yet another order of abstraction, which unsurprisingly involves text. Text obviously exists at the level of the coding required to distribute and display these images but more significantly it is the role of the tag in cataloguing the image’s content. Bremner (2010) notes that the sheer volume of digital images now available on the web means that the only feasible way of finding images is through the terms typed into a search engine. Thus the written tag attached to the image - what it is of and when and where it was taken - is another level of abstraction that is conditioned by the conceptual thought underpinning linear writing. Text in the form of the tag signals “space/name relationship” not a “space/time relationship” (Bremner 2010, p49). Bremner notes “we are assured that this massive front of images published on the web is finally the much-anticipated arrival of the democratic project of mass creativity that is now called participatory culture” (2010, p49). However, his experience of such imagery indicates that the promise of mass creativity doesn’t quite deliver on the freedom it implies. In recounting his attempt to use digital images from the internet, to explain his ideas about design, Bremner quickly discovered the conditioning dimensions of the tag. Not only did he turn up the images he wanted, he turned up unexpected images as a consequence of the tags that had been assigned to them. He found that because the tag dictated what images appeared, his idea of what he wanted to say about design changed - the tag became the rationale for the idea: “instead of initiating my conversation with the digital via an idea (as I thought I was), the conversation ends up producing the idea” (Bremner 2010, p49). Bremner’s experience points a fundamental issue with the manner in which technical images are distributed on the internet and that is the extent to which they are coded by conceptual thought and condition how we see the world.

I have touched upon conditioning dimension of photography obliquely in Chapter 3 when discussing the work of Benjamin. Benjamin regarded ‘new objective photography’ as a tool of capitalist repression (a form of conditioned) in which suffering and struggle were aestheticised as images of palatable entertainment or used to represent a particular view of the world as the ideal to attain. The work of Baudrillard also deals with the conditioning dimensions of photography and the false reality, or in his case the hyperreality, it engenders and the manner in which it anaesthetises us to actual reality. Despite their critique of photography, and in their broader critique of media they also implicate design, neither offered anything more than a fairly pessimistic view of the emerging media world. For Benjamin and Baudrillard the invisible abstract structures of the world of capital, the forces of the industrial complex, are greater than human agency, and either difficult (as in Benjamin’s case) or impossible (in Baudrillard’s case) to resist. To be fair to Benjamin though, he did argue that the avant-garde photographers of the time offered a way of challenging the conditions of the technical image. Flusser (2007[1983]) on the other hand is more optimistic about the role of human agency in resisting the conditional affect of photography and like Benjamin he directly implicates photographic practice in this resistance.

Flusser’s critique, or philosophy, of design parallels his concerns with his critique of photography for he argues that the conceptual thinking that underpins aspects of design, and its technology, conditions the world in similar ways (Flusser 1999[1993]). Between these critiques it is evident Flusser is fundamentally concerned with the friction between conceptual and imaginative thought and the central role that design and photography play in collapsing these into one another and the consequences of this. These consequences are the
conditioning dimensions of the technical aspects of design whilst preserving the appearance of choice implied by its creative aspects. For Flusser, design “is the basis of all culture” and because of the conflation of conceptual and imaginative thought its agenda is “to deceive nature by means of technology, to replace what is natural with what is artificial and build a machine out of which there comes a god who is ourselves” (1999[1993], p19). Setting aside the binary construct evident in his thinking – nature vs artifice – it points to the power of design as a vehicle for creating the world in our own image, which of course implies human agency. However it is an agency not without its conditions for “the design behind all culture has to be deceptive (artful?) enough to turn mere mammals conditioned by nature into free artists” (Flusser 1999[1993], p19). In other words our capacity to become free artists, and in particular the capacity for all of humanity to participate in mass creativity, is a condition of the technology of design, or the conceptual thought underpinning it. The consequence of increasingly using mechanical, and now digital, apparatus to “abstract surfaces out of time and space and to project them back” into time and space (Flusser 2007[1983], p8), be it in the form of the technical images of photography or design, suggests human imagination is constrained by the automation inscribed within them. The diminution of the idiosyncratic touch of the human hand in the generation of the images and objects we design, using such technology, has lead to an increasing conformity in those images and objects. Our freedom comes with hidden constraints.

**The Banality of Reality and the Reality of Banality**

Contemporary domestic photography is emblematic of the hidden constraints embedded in the program of the camera. Once upon a time we were occasionally subjected to the dreaded family slide night of a visiting friend or relative where we politely watched an endless display of, often poorly executed, photographs of distant relatives, events or locations. We were bored with the monotony and sameness of it all yet we too could usually compile a similar photographic chronicle of our own lives to inflict upon others. The point being that many of us had such photographic collections and we valued them because we usually had direct experiences of the people, events and places within them. Conversely we were disinterested
in the collections of others because we didn’t have such a direct connection to the content of the photos, in spite of the fact that they probably chronicled similar things. In essence the collections of others were meaningless to us. But the difference between those experiences of domestic photography and now is that they were essentially privately shared and rarely encountered. This has all changed with digitisation. Everyone with a camera phone and a computer is busy chronicling the banality of their everyday lives through their self-predictive networked images that choke up the semiosphere. The photographic image is no longer projected back in to time and space but distributed via tags through virtual non-space.

From its inception photography has been used to document the everyday, with the novelty of the medium in its formative years ensuring such images were anything but banal even if the experiences and scenes documented were. My use of the term everyday refers to the content of photographs, the depiction of everyday events or things. My use of the word banal refers to the extent to which such photographs are prosaic, trite, mundane or commonplace. As photography pushed into unfamiliar territory on the coat tails of European colonial expansion, and often at the behest of anthropology, its stock in trade became the everyday lives and settings of other cultures, rendered exotic by their distance from ‘civilisation’. Arguably the novelty of photography, the expensive and specialised nature of its practice, and the extent to which the world had yet to be ‘discovered’, both literally and photographically, ensured it as a medium that could continue to surprise. The photographic exploration of ‘remote’ and ‘exotic’ features of the seen world continues to be standard fare. In contrast to this there also developed a type of photography that sought to explore the overlooked world of the local and / or familiar, corresponding with a similar shift in the study of culture in the form of sociology. Through the first third of the 20th century, August Sander documented a typology of German workers, familiar enough to German citizens but unique in its scale, ambition and subject matter. In roughly the same period, in America, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans photographed little known or seen aspects of their national life in the form of the poor, underprivileged or the exploited. Despite their subject matter being local its unfamiliarity to many of their compatriots ensured their photograph’s exotic status. Through
the 1930s to 1950s, Minor White, Edward Weston and Tina Modotti all sought to explore what they believed was the beauty in the commonplace and ordinary. The choice of such self-consciously common subject matter was rendered anything but banal, in photographic form, through a combination of technical virtuosity and the rigorous application of an almost classical visual aesthetic. George Eastman’s combined invention of inexpensive roll film, cheap processing and the box brownie at the turn of the 19th century ensured the medium itself was on its way to becoming an everyday part of life. Not surprisingly common place domestic scenes and family snaps began to fill the photo albums of many a middle class home; photographs that on one level all look the same, their distinguishing feature being the emotional connection each family had to them as records of their lives. Whilst maintaining an interest in the everyday, photographers such as Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander sought to break free of the constraints of technical virtuosity and classical aesthetics through their work from the 1940s to 60s. They developed a more spontaneous and less measured approach that had more in common with the look and feel of these family happy snaps. More recently an acute awareness of not only this visual aesthetic but of a preoccupation with truly banal subject matter is exemplified in the work of Ed Ruscha, William Eggleston (both from the 1960s on) and Andreas Gursky (from the 1990s on).

The penetration of photography into all nooks and crannies of life has been completed in recent years with the advent of inexpensive consumer digital cameras and, perhaps more significantly, their integration into mobile phones. The advent of digital photography and its potential for endless manipulation has caused major consternation amongst photographic theorists about the veracity of the photographic image, signalling, it would appear, the final nail being driven into the coffin of photographic truth and indeed photography itself. I have touched upon the truth claims of photography briefly in Chapters 2 and 3 and demonstrated that photographic truth has been a contested terrain in intellectual circles long before digitisation entered the picture. One would assume that digitisation has thrown assumptions about photography and reality into sharp relief for more than the cognoscenti of photographic theory, photo-based research, and artistic practice. In the previous chapter I noted that because...
of the relative ease of manipulating the digital photograph, compared to the specialised techniques required for its analogue counterpart, many have claimed that photographic truth is well and truly dead. Brunet however argues that in spite of the “technical liberties afforded by imaging software” there is a “remarkable persistence, in the digital age, of traditional social uses of photography” that accept the veracity of the image (2008, p44). Similarly Fisher points out that although our relationship with photographic images is now “haunted by doubts arising from the mutability of digital information” these doubts are not unfamiliar to us (2008, p19). He argues that the doubt about digital images “resonates with similar claims made of previous technological innovations” (Fisher 2008, p19). In other words it is familiar territory for photography. Brunet argues that our concern with the truthfulness, or otherwise, of a photograph has less to do “with digital technology per se than the perceived opacity or obscurity” of the chain of events involved in the production and distribution of the image (2008, p45). For the sake of ease I will call this the chain of confidence. He contends then that in the supposed “post-photographic era” that digitisation heralds, we have witnessed “an epistemological shift from a kind of semio-technological essentialism to a kind of cultural or pragmatic relativism” (Brunet 2008, p45). The reliance on a chain of confidence and the emergence of a pragmatic relativism signals a need to re-imagine photographic theory in phenomenological terms for these events are experiential phenomena, not objective forces, as technological determinism would see them.

It is ironic that the same digital technologies that enable the endless manipulation of the photographic image, signalling the apparent end of photography and photographic truth, also enable the endless reproduction of photographic images that depict everyday reality. It would seem that our faith in the medium to depict reality, despite being challenged by digital technology, has not been shaken. In fact we seem to be overwhelmed by images of the real circulating in the semiosphere. Baudrillard would contend that this is further evidence of hyper-reality supplanting ‘actual’ reality for he argued that the media depictions of reality, courtesy of the technological image, de-facto become the reality most of us believe (1988, pp172 & 185-186). His idea of the simulacra was conceived in the context of mass communication where the means of production, and more importantly, distribution were in the hands of few. In the context of mass communication our reality, or hyper-reality as he would have it, was produced by a limited number of sources. In the age of individual access to the means of production and distribution, a shift has occurred in the location of the production of this reality and consequently our experience of it. Our de-facto reality now encompasses our own digital depiction of it (in this instance photographic); through it we create our own hyper-reality and live in our own simulacra. This is evident in the phenomenal growth of computer social networking sites, in particular Facebook. The space, or distance, between the ‘real’ real and the virtual real appears to have collapsed in a number of ways as a consequence.

Baudrillard’s proposition of the hyper-real offers a pessimistic view of humankind’s relationship to technological images, implying that humans are easy to dupe. As a consequence his argument has strong parallels with the idea of technological determinism that posits technology and technological structures drive human behaviour. To dismiss Baudrillard’s analysis however, would be to overlook its philosophical significance for it does alert us to the need to look beyond the technological image itself to interrogate its means of production, distribution and use. For me it further highlights the need to move beyond a theory of photography based on the analysis of meaning and the indexical nature of the photograph (that is semiotics) and look towards phenomenology because production, distribution and use are things that unfold through time, in space and are experienced. Rather than seeing the hyper-real supplanting the real I would argue that the hyper-real signals something less sinister and that is simply the loss of critical distance. The loss of critical distance has been exacerbated because of the rate at which the production, distribution and use of photographs occurs in the digital age compared to the analogue.

With analogue photography we had to anticipate the best moment to take the photograph. We could only guess what the visual record of that moment would look like, until we got our prints back from the lab; this too entailed anticipation. More often than not we’d be disappointed that the images didn’t do justice to our memory of the moment, even though
they acted as an aid in re-activating that memory. Rhetorically, these photographs supersede the experience itself. With digital cameras and the loss of the space between moment, experience, record and view, our experience of photographing a moment has superseded both the photograph and the experience of the moment itself. We live and confirm the reality of a moment, and our experience of it, the moment we view it in pixel form on our camera or camera phone. All of these circumstances entail a kind of loss of anticipation. We may have an ideal in mind when taking digital photographs, and that does imply some sense of anticipation, yet the virtual elimination of time between shoot and view means it is a radically altered sense of anticipation. It is not so much the anticipation associated with the unexpected results often achieved through the time delay of analogue photography rather it is the anticipation of a pre-visualised and instantly viewable ideal. This new sense of anticipation has been conditioned by the digital technology; it is part of its program. As a result our sense of reality is not so much what we experience nor what we photograph ourselves experiencing; rather it is our experience of viewing the photograph of the experience, the moment after the experience itself. Notwithstanding the parallels this phenomena may appear to have with the idea of the hyper-real there is a growing body of empirical work that indicates we do differentiate between these different modes of experience (see Manovich 2003; Yoon 2003; Kindberg et al 2005; Hjorth 2006; van Dijck 2008). Recalling an earlier metaphor of photography this phenomena is a bit like a mirror with a slight time lag. It follows then that the meaning we make of an experience is the meaning we make of viewing it just after we’ve had it, not just when it actually occurred. Philosophically speaking then, our experience of the world is hypothetically meaningless unless we can see it a fraction of a second after we have had it. In Flusserian terms the technology is conditioning our experience of the world, hence our experience of reality. Hjorth talks about this as entailing a fast-forwarding present, where presence becomes co-presence; we become so consumed with the act of photographing that our experience of a moment is put on hold and is subsumed by the experience of photographing the moment (2006, p11). It is in such moments that the loss of critical distance is most evident for we are so consumed by the experience of photographing the moment we lose a certain sense of critical perspective. We become absorbed into the program of the apparatus. This is not inevitable but likely.

If analogue photography was once conceived as a mirror of our reality then what are the implications for the mirror metaphor with digital photography where we shoot and view until what is captured accords with our predetermined view of how we think our reality should look, or meets our standards of the reality we wish others to see? Here the camera is not a mirror of our perceived reality but of our preconceived reality. This has really been the case with photography all along it is just that the loss of anticipation has made it all the more commonplace. In the 1990s Finkelstein argued that we lived in the era of self production; that identity was a malleable thing that we would fashion through the things we wore and owned, and as such we would arrive at a place of being (1991, pp172-176). In exploring the relationship between photography and identity Koepnick conceives of the idea of “becoming over being”, implying that the journey to identity outstrips its destination, the process of identity formation is a constant and the destination never fully arrived at (2004, p96). With consumer digital photography our reality appears to be forever in the making, never arriving as such. We have passed through the era of self-production then, where we fashioned the self, and are now in the era of self-prediction where we rehearse the self (experience, shoot, view, experience, shoot, view…). Our digital cameras are no longer a mirror of a present reality but a mirror of the reality we re-present (design) as we photographically enact it.

The rapid rate at which many digital cameras can now shoot means that digital photography has to an extent simultaneously eliminated serendipity whilst exploiting it. By shooting endless variations of the same subject matter, many more than when we shot on film, we seek to leave nothing to chance and at the same time we seek to maximise the chance we have of capturing something approximating the decisive moment that we have preconceived. This increased automation reinforces the loss of anticipation. Analogue photography required us to be more conscious of what we were after due to the limits of the size of a roll of film and the size of the gap between shooting and viewing; we had to anticipate we had ‘the shot’. Much of the editing of analogue photography, for it is a practice of editing and anticipation, occurred during the process of shooting - what will I shoot?; what won’t I shoot?; do I have

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I must attribute credit the term self-prediction to Craig Bremner who used it on 26/8/07 in one of our many conversations about my research.
enough film left? What will it look like? These are all questions critical to analogue practice. Now we shoot without apparent limit, except perhaps the limits of our patience and digital memory. Thus we shoot copious variations of a scene and constantly review the images as we go, often deleting shots we think are no good. Judgement, or critical distance, is still exercised during this process, however it is a judgement about coverage through volume. We no longer anticipate ‘the shot’, as we see what we shoot as we go.

The volume of images that can now be generated is a daunting thing to deal with. As the days pass after we shoot, and we review the shots, we notice things we perhaps didn’t see at the time and the judgement we thought we exercised can come back to bite us, for although it is judgement enacted it is also judgement deferred. This is why we now view our images not in a photo album, where ‘the shot’ took pride of place, but on the screen saver where our indecision can be accommodated with only a cursory cull of the worst images. We are indecisive in the photographic depiction of our preconceived decisive moment. With the loss of anticipation comes the lack of decision. In seeking to maximise the chance of getting ‘the shot’ by leaving little to chance, through the camera’s automation, we have come to the era of the indecisive moment. The indecisive moment is a consequence of the loss of critical distance, that has been conditioned by the camera’s automation, and is evidenced by the sheer volume of photographs of our lives – our reality – that we post on the internet.

Affordable digital photography and computing (at least in developed nations) has seen a kind of commercial democratisation of both the medium and the means of its mass communication / distribution (Hjorth 2006, p3). The deluge of photographic imagery, coupled with the loss of anticipation in the era of the indecisive moment is quite literally seeing a virtual world being created that is an idealised version of the world we inhabit. This explosion of the photographic depiction of the everyday, displayed in digital networked environments, is becoming increasingly banal through sheer volume. The prosaic image supplants the poetic. Photographs of home and family, aspects of the everyday, have always been important vehicles for depicting family as normal (Hjorth 2006, p7, van Dijck 2008, p58). That their digital counterparts have now flooded the semiosphere is attributable to the commercial democratisation of the relevant media. The difference between these images compared to their pre-digital equivalents is: firstly the extent to which less formal depictions, happy snaps, are publicly available; and secondly the extent to which they are, by virtue of being self-predictive, more consciously contrived and idealised projections of how we want our individual worlds to be seen and the extent to which they are still fundamentally banal. It seems our ideal world is pretty much an increasingly reductive version of the one we already inhabit. It has been conditioned, automated and standardised.

That the self-predicted everyday worlds of ‘non-professional’ photographers are so prosaic doesn’t simply indicate a lack of technical and conceptual photographic sophistication. Nor does it simply rest upon the automation of the camera, although the conditioning affect of the digital is profound. It is also indicative that we draw comfort from our everyday moments and objects, the things that commonly make up our day-to-day lives, so it is not surprising we should photograph them. Nor is it surprising we should photograph them realistically for despite the capacity to manipulate digital photographs, realism is still the dominant framework of these practices (Manovich 2003, p248). The banality of such photographs and the manner in which they are distributed is an important indicator of a desire to be socially networked, not just on a digital level, for the evidence is that the digital is used to enhance the actual (Yoon 2003, pp330-332; Hjorth & Kim 2005, p54; van Dijck 2008, pp59-62). The desire to be accepted into these networks results in us “performing normalcy” (Hjorth 2006, p7). This is further underscored on a meta-social level by the manner in which such performances are also framed by media depictions of normalcy (Lee 2005). In other words we learn what is normal through the images of normal life we have available to us. Like the mythical Orobus, the serpent that consumes itself tail first, we are witnessing a cannibalisation of the everyday in that we are consuming an ever decreasing range of depictions of it at an ever increasing volume, thus reducing it to banality. What is significant about this phenomenon is that the content of the photograph is to an extent less important than the act of photographing and sharing it. As van Dijck argues sharing such pictures “as part of a conversation or reviewing
pictures to confirm social bonds between friends” is one of their primary functions (2008, p61). Thomas calls such use of digital photography “social chatter” and its aim is to confirm the bonds in social groups as well as to make statements such as “we are together” or “we are now” (2010, p64). Furthermore he argues, “the photographic act appears in other existential statements” – “I am here” (Thomas 2010, p64). In this regard such photographs are less an object, not simply because they exist in these scenarios in ‘immaterial’ digital form, but because they are shared as experiences as Kindberg et al reveal in their research (2005).

Hjorth argues that these trends do not necessarily result in homogeneity due to the importance of context as content (2006, pp7-8.) By this she means that to see through the mundanity of such imagery, to get to its meaning, the context in which it is produced has to become part of the content accompanying it through the digital networks it is distributed within. For Hjorth, context takes the form of other textual and digital media. Although this may be the case few of us have the patience to look beyond the image, to read the contextual, to understand the image as anything meaningful beyond the banal. As the volume of these idealised images of the everyday increases, the semio-sphere becomes evermore crowded with them. As such we are inclined to look at surface not substance, to look at the image of the everyday and ignore the text. As a consequence we have an ever-increasing number of images circulating that depict an ever-decreasing range of experiences of the everyday. Therefore our ability to find differentiated visual cues, beyond a reductive ‘ideal’, upon which to make further self predictions is rendered more impotent. If we lack the capacity to anticipate and resort instead to prediction through voluminous trial and error then we undermine our capacity to imagine things being other than they are, which is perhaps also why we are so locked into the banal. Like pornography little is left to the imagination, everything is on show. We cannot imagine changing reality if we no longer anticipate anything beyond the increasingly trite depictions of it. We are suffering then from the pornography of the everyday, the prosaic - it is no coincidence that pornography has been so dependent on photography.

As a result, photography is now sagging under the weight of its own history, its relationship to reality, and the contemporary ubiquity of photographic images and practice. My questioning of the point of photography has been sharpened as a consequence of these phenomena and my experiences. Like Bremner I wonder whether “the act of taking a photograph might have been superseded by the sheer abundance of pre-existing images” that have been “split from the surface of the world to float in a virtual non-space” (2010, p50). However, as he notes “we continue to take photographs simply because we can (Bremner 2010, p50). Because we do, and mainly in digital form, Bremner argues, “that the everyday is now an image covering the surface of the modern world” and as a consequence “the future possible of our imaginings is the image of the everyday” (2010, p48). In the digital setting the “photograph has changed its function from being an index of conditions to become a conditioning tool” (Bremner 2010, p49). With the almost endless generation of fairly generic photographs of the everyday, design has a decreasing variety of indexes of conditions to draw upon for imaging possible futures and less hope of revealing anything new to us for it is conditioned by a diminishing variety of photographic indexes. All that is revealed is a state of perpetual visibility of “everything in the everyday” (Bremner 2010, p49). Finkelstein has argued that if we treat the visible “as if it were self-revealing, then we have entered the realm of the despotic banal” (1991, p192).

The “surplus of material presence” such imagery is emblematic of is indeed banal and as Ranciere argues is not commensurate with the gravity of human experience (2007, p110). The distribution and exhibition of such images on, and via, the internet has ensured that they now inundate us on a daily basis. If the stock in trade of most domestic photographers is the documentation of everyday aspects of their lives and the sheer volume of this documentation renders such images banal, then the ubiquity of the medium and its digital distribution renders the practice of documentary photography itself banal. We are no longer faced with a crisis of photographic truth – a subset of the crisis of representation and the crisis of the real – as we are with a tsunami of photographic banality. This tsunami has contributed to what I call the crisis of the artificial.

The Crisis of the Artificial

Since Simon (1996[1969]) characterised design as being the science of the artificial, and a significant field of inquiry and human endeavor, there has been an ongoing pre-occupation
with methodology within it. Simon’s work signaled a decisive shift from design being considered a quasi-artistic endeavor to being a process that could be managed with predictable results. On writing about design research, Rittel argues that where there is an “interest in methodology in a certain field” it “is usually a sign of crisis within that field” (1972, p5). On this basis, and given the preoccupation with methodology since Simon, the field of design - the artificial - has been in crisis for pretty much the last five decades. Photography on the other hand appears to have been in one form of crisis or another since its inception, such is the extent of the ongoing debate about its relationship to reality and truth deriving from the accompanying pre-occupation with its indexical function.

When the dominant technology for recording photographic images was analogue film the photograph became an object of critical analysis. Critical analysis emphasised the constructedness of the photograph as text and signalled photography’s crisis of representation. No longer was the photograph seen as a window to the world but rather it was regarded as a text that could be manipulated. Kress and Van Leeuwen characterise the program of critical analysis of the photograph, and its relationship to reality, as a study of the “representation-as-reference” (1996, p234). They also argue that a shift in critical theory is required with the move of photographic technology into the digital realm. The need for this shift is driven by the relative ease of manipulating digital photographs so much so that they may have no basis in the seen world, or so the logic goes. The task before critical theory in these circumstances is to deconstruct, what Kress and Van Leeuwen call, “representation-as-design” (1996, p234). In other words critical theory needs to examine the ideologically constructed nature of the processes of designing such images. Design is therefore fully implicated in this agenda for design is primarily concerned with imagining future realities through the production of images. Both the interest within design itself in methodology, and the ideological deconstruction of design by critical theory, suggests that the field of design is under assault from both within and without. Design is in a sense a field in crisis, hence the crisis of the artificial. The focus of critical inquiry also challenges the view, still embedded in much design rhetoric, of design as a largely natural and intuitive process. The focus of design methodologists has been similar but not so much to critique its own ideological agenda, rather to better understand its processes to manage them. As I have previously outlined I see design as being primarily concerned with imagining change and the production of the artificial, or human-made, world. My interest in design stems from its ability to transform reality from the one we have to the one we imagine through the image. It is this idea of design, its ability to imagine change through the image, which is paralleled in my interrogation of reality and abstraction through my taking and making of photographs.

The history of design is typified by the importation of methods and frameworks from other disciplines (see Dilnot 1998; Glanville 1999; Downton 2003, pp35-53). Historically it has been conceived in largely binary terms, viewed as either an artistic (subjective) practice or a mainly technical (objective) activity (Davis 1987, pix; Rowe 1987, p1; Dilnot 1989, p249). Sometimes it is conceived as bridging these poles, as Flusser has (1999[1993]). Framed as an artistic activity, design is seen as the creative expression of gifted individuals who are largely responsible for the conception and production of the designed artefact (Forty 1986, pp6-7). Individual creative freedom and intuition are highly valued concepts and feature in much of the published discourse on design (see Gloag 1934; Pevsner 1960[1936]; Rand 1947; Bayley 1979; Loewy 1979; Pearce 1995; Kernan 1997). It is a discourse of creative production that draws heavily on the methodology and epistemology of art history and practice (Dilnot 1989, pp235-239). I call this the art of design. Seen as a technical process it is regarded as being a problem solving activity. Drawing upon the concept of bounded rationality and the use of logic, design conceived thus is preoccupied with the identification of the design problem in order to develop a design solution, often in type form (See Rowe 1987, pp39 & 49; Whitely 1993, pp9-10). Imagined like this, and drawing upon a positivist and rationalist epistemology, it views design processes, solutions, and outcomes as inevitable (Dilnot 1998, p75). Design as a form of science or logical practice is also a common feature of the published discourse (see Asimow 1962; Archer 1963-64; Churchman 1967; Simon 1996[1969]; Suckle 1980, pp67-77). I call this the science of design.

At the forefront of the rationalist approach to design was Design Methods. As I outlined in Chapter 2, Design Methods regarded the historical reliance on design-by-drawing as unsuited
to the task of the ever increasing complex design requirements of the modern world. Designby-drawing is a model of design premised on the ability of the designer to draw solutions to design problems. Design-by-drawing is seen as an interpretative method of inquiry that provides the level of abstraction necessary for design conception whilst maintaining some visual fidelity to a seen, or indeed imagined, reality. When design is characterised as a largely artistic activity, privileging intuition and visual aesthetics, the sources of information explored tend to be mainly visual. Design of this sort privileges imaginative thought. Lawson argues, “the disadvantage with drawing is that problems which are not visually apparent tend not to come to the designer’s attention” (1980, p18). This perceived disadvantage was the basis of Alexander’s search for an alternative form of representation – in his case mathematics, – to bring non-visual, abstract issues into the metaphoric field of view of the designer. It is evident that in critiquing the limits of design-by-drawing, Design Methods highlighted the idea that representation in complex settings is not simply concerned with representing the visible manifestations of what is known or experienced, the visually apparent aspects of the ‘problem’. Nor is it limited to representing what-might-be, the possible ‘solution’. The most significant aspect of representation, in relationship to complexity, is the ability or not of any medium to represent those issues or concerns that have no visible manifestation, that are fundamentally abstract in nature, hence design as a conceptual activity. Design Methods was critical in embarking upon an exploration of methods for design to deal with this challenge and in doing so design became a more conceptual activity. It rejected the assumption that design was wholly intuitive and proposed a procedurally based approach to design that regarded analysis – synthesis as the natural order of the day. The analysis of the design problem preceded the synthesis of the design solution. The two were separate, albeit related, acts in a design process that was presumed devoid of prejudice, preference and prior knowledge (Hillier 1996, p10-19). The Design Methods approach is indicative of a materialist view of the world that privileges conceptual thought.

Justifiably much of the criticism of the Design Methods movement is levelled at the overly analytical and objective model of design it proposed. Jones argued for analytical clarity in
the design process as a way of dealing with the complexity of higher order design problems, as opposed to relying solely on intuition, however he also argued that human subjectivity and intuition were an inescapable and desirable part of design as he was reconceiving it. This aspect of Jones’ work doesn’t feature in much of the criticism levelled at it and I would contend that his greatest failing was not that he was an absolute rationalist, he wasn’t, rather that he failed to propose any methods that adequately embraced subjectivity and intuition. Jones’ recognition of the importance of subjectivity is a crucial, but often overlooked, aspect of his work for it signals the potential for engaging with existential phenomenology. In comparison, the criticism levelled at Alexander seems more justified for despite accepting that subjectivity would play some part in Design Methods he seemed intent on eradicating it. Indeed Alexander (1971) himself recognised his original premise was deeply flawed. His attempt to eliminate subjectivity and overcome the limitations of design-by-drawing was to turn to mathematical representation as a vehicle for communicating the relationship between components of complex ‘problems’. His rationale for doing so was that he believed that design-by-drawing functioned at a level of abstraction, from the reality of the actual design situation, and as such was full of the designer’s bias (Alexander 1964, p76).

Perhaps the greatest failing of Alexander’s work is not its positivist framework, but that he proposed an additional layer of abstraction beyond that already created by design-by-drawing, that being the abstract language of mathematics. Such abstraction is a clear indication of the privileging of conceptual thought. The irony of this was that Alexander drew upon his own subjective context in developing his solution - he had a degree in mathematics as well as architecture. Additionally he failed to consider the context in which his proposed solution was supposed to be used, the world of design practice that largely adhered to the belief in imaginative thought. The use of maths was always going to be problematic given it is a highly abstract form of representation that few designers have experience in or an inclination towards. To overcome this problem, designers and prospective designers would need to be trained in the kind of complex maths Alexander proposed. To succeed this would have required a massive culture shift within design, one that was unlikely to occur. In choosing mathematics as the preferred form of representation Alexander produced a ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ he diagnosed that demonstrated, in his terms, a very poor ‘goodness of fit’. I would argue that this is largely a consequence of trying to eliminate subjectivity and experience from the research framework and push design into purely conceptual territory – taking sides in the dialectical struggle between the imaginative and the conceptual.

The marginalisation of drawing and the search for more ‘objective’ forms of modelling can also be seen as an attempt to develop a common language of communication across the interdisciplinary teams likely to be working on complex design problems. It is also a consequence of trying to get design to conform to a more professional and less artistic mode of behaviour, a reaction against its earlier idealist, artistic conception. It indicates insecurity in two of design’s attributes; subjectivity, in the guise of intuitive thinking; and making the unknown or abstract visible through visual modes of representation. Design Methods general distrust of subjective experience was symptomatic of a wider distrust with it in many academic fields at the time and an overwhelmingly rationalist view of the world. Implicit in an objective, rationalist approach to design is the marginalisation of human idiosyncrasy, choice and experience in the process of change. The limitations of a rationalist approach is that it invests its faith in what I call the myth of technical rationalism; faith in a future delivered by technological progress and objective, unemotional decisions based upon hard data in a context where human experience is marginal (Roxburgh & Bremner 1999). The opposite of the rational approach is the subjectively dominant understanding of design typified by what I have called the myth of creativity, the fallacy of which lies in an investment of faith in a future delivered by the unbridled imagination of a gifted few (Roxburgh & Bremner 1999, Roxburgh 2006). This conception of creativity stems from “the Romantic notion of the genius” that has been a long-standing feature of art education (de Duve 1994, pp22-23). That the myth of creativity has influenced our understanding of certain design practices can be attributed to the location of many design courses in art schools. The central role that the myth of creativity has played in design is that it places undue emphasis on creative intuition and design is then understood as a largely synthetic activity with little or no analytical framework.
In Schon’s (1983) seminal case study a more complex picture of the relationship between analysis and synthesis emerges. The space that separates the reflection through observation and conversation (analysis) from drawing design possibilities (synthesis) seems non-existent and he describes them as “parallel ways of designing” (Schon 1983, p80). Despite the narrow scope of Schon’s case study – it doesn’t deal with the influence that site visits, material availability, technological innovations, etc. have on the design process – the inference is that the separation of the analytic (reflection) from the synthetic (designing) is in itself an analytical construct. It points to recognition of the dialectic that underpins design as Flusser has conceived it. Sufficient case studies exist that broaden the scope of Schon’s work and demonstrate a similar dialectical relationship between the analytic and the synthetic (see Cuff 1991; Sanoff 1991; Henderson 1995; Fleming 1998; Roxburgh 2003). Rather than seeing analysis and synthesis as truly separate activities I recognise they are different orders of related thinking and I would argue that the veneer of distance that exists between them is not a chasm but a form of critical distance to be manipulated in the productive interplay of the dialectic between imaginative and conceptual thought; between images and words.

With the shift of focus to the user in the past decade or so, ethnography has been a source of much emulation as design researchers seek to understand users and the worlds they create, inhabit, and experience. As I outlined in Chapter 1 I call this design sociology. Photo-observation has been a feature of this shift and it is commonly fixated on the analysis of the realistic content of the image. Matters relating to photographic stylistic consideration are ignored at best or rejected outright with the prevailing view that the images be as ‘natural’ as possible (Cruickshank & Mason 2003, pp6-7; Pink 2006, p68). When the relationship between photographs, their content, and the user experience of them is explored, in order to gain insight into the user’s here-and-now, the realist framework of the sociology of design seems appropriate. In an attempt to overcome this tendency of analysis, design oriented techniques of observation called cultural probes have been developed. These include but are not limited to: photo surveys requiring respondents to answer questions photographically and in written form; subject self documentation and journal writing; and photo elicited interviews using direct or self documented photographs. Such techniques are also common in ethnography but cultural probes are framed differently. They don’t necessarily require direct answers to specific questions around set topics. They are framed more like design briefs in order to elicit creative, often visual, responses to questions (see Bremner 2004). Cultural probes are used to get subjects to “talk about their dreams and wishes for the future, not their observations and irritations from the present and the past” (Keller et al, 2006, p19). This focus on future scenarios, as opposed to the here-and-now is very much about design potential for it highlights design’s concern with what-might-be. This focus also marks a move away from both the designer as creative genius model and the problem/solution paradigm that design has operated under for so long. Furthermore, it echoes social constructivism and repositions the designer as participant, with users, in a more collaborative approach to design conception. However, it still privileges realist photographic depiction of the everyday. As I outlined in the previous section, such privileging creates a situation where the mundane nature of the images become a conditioning tool more than an index of conditions.

The move towards user-centred design appears to challenge the authority and expertise of professional designers by involving non-designers in aspects of the design process. Given the parallels user-based design has with social constructivism, which entails a sense of loss of individual agency, this seems inevitable. Also, many non-designer users have access to the same means of production and distribution as professional designers, further challenging their authority. Furthermore, “it appears to be generally accepted that the new digital flows have licensed us all to be producers” and this “can be measured by the residue of images spilling over the data flows” (Bremner 2010, p48). In spite of these circumstances designers have a critical role to play in interpreting and visualising the scenarios imagined in such collaboration, and it is their ability to imagine and visualise that is crucial; but not without its challenges given the images of the everyday we are inundated with. The involvement of designers might be the point at which banality can be circumvented but only through an active program of observation that entails critical distance. Designers privilege the embodied experience of the here-and-now as a source of creative inspiration, over most other forms of
research or inspiration (Keller et al 2006, pp27-28). This embodied experience usually takes
the form of a kind of untrained ethnographic observation. Whatever the limitations this may
have as a research input for design projections, the fact that the privileging of the designer’s
experience occurs cannot be overlooked in any conception of design research, including
user-centred design. It suggests that imagining and visualising are premised on experience,
seeing, and visual memory. Keller et al (2006) demonstrate that although photographs of the
here-and-now are considered important in design conception, the photographs themselves are
less important than the tactile experience, the seeing, handling, and memory of their form and
content; this subjective experience feeds designers’ conceptual and material creativity and
their taking of photographs.

That design can be conceived as a process of synthesis while the dominant frame of realist
photo-observation is analytical, suggests a disjuncture between process and method.
This disjuncture becomes more apparent when one compares the use of drawing to the
use of photography as research and ideation tools in design. The demarcation between
the interpretive and synthetic aspects of drawing and the analytical inference of realist
photography is marked. Drawing is not seen as an analytical means of representation (yet it
may be analysed) because of its proximity to the action of design and its distance from the
real, by virtue of being hand generated. It foregrounds imaginative thought. Photography is
seen as an analytical means of representation (yet it can be a medium of synthesis) because
of its distance from the action of design, and its proximity to the real, by virtue of being
mechanically, and now digitally, generated. It foregrounds conceptual thought.

The use of realist photographic depictions of the here-and-now and the design synthesis
of future scenarios appears to preclude the interpretive dimension of a designer’s creative
subjectivity. The creative skills designers have, their insight, their ability to imagine and
image future scenarios, their very subjectivity, are too important to get lost in the move to
a more democratic configuration of design that ethnographically framed user-based design
represents. As I have already argued, the evidence is that the everyday use of photography and
the dominance of the realist frame results in the reproduction of the here-and-now as yet more
banality (Hjorth 2006, pp.6-7). The issue with the use of photo-observation in design rests
not only in its history, or its proximity to the real, but also in the space that exists between
the moment of photographing an observed situation and the subsequent moment of designing
based upon that observation. That space (time plus distance) appears to be a yawning chasm
compared to the space between drawing and designing. It is the space between the dialectic
of imaginative and conceptual thought. As we draw what we observe, or indeed imagine, we
very obviously transform and reimagine it. It is for this reason that drawing seems a synthetic
process. Despite the space that appears to exist between photographing and designing it
simultaneously collapses because the photograph appears to us to be largely the same as
what we observe, or pretty close to the preconceived ideal we wish to project of what we
observe. This spatial collapse has been further exacerbated by the capacity to view a digital
photograph almost instantaneously, a condition of the technology. The simultaneous opening
and collapsing of this space further reinforces the photograph’s analytical inference. It is
simultaneously like the reality we observe and unlike our experience of design, it is more
conceptual then imaginative.

As Schon and others have implied, however, the separation of analysis and synthesis is a
somewhat artificial construct anyway. Rather than seeing the space between analysis and
synthesis as a problem that inhibits design I see it as a space where critical distance can be
established. In this sense the notion of design as a logical progression between analysis and
synthesis can be reimagined as a configurational conversation between a range of people,
things and information where preconceptions, intuition and criticality are all part of the mix.
The notion of design as a conversation is a well-developed metaphor (see Forester 1989;
Buchanan 1995; Cuff 1996; Fleming 1996; Golsby-Smith 1996). Studies in the sociology of
technology provide strong theoretical and empirical evidence of the relationships that exist
between the ‘participants’ of these conversations (see Bijker & Law 1992; Law 1992). Such
conversations necessarily unfold through time and space and have both abstract and concrete
dimensions to them. It is because of these apparently contradictory dimensions that I have
attempted to move beyond the realist frame in my work, in an effort to avoid replicating the here-and-now as simulacra. I have premised my work not only on an awareness of the embodied experience of observing and making, but also on an awareness of the critical distance that the space between analysis and synthesis affords.

Where the art of design has led to the myth of creativity and the science of design has led to the myth of technical rationality, the sociology of design has led to what I now call the myth of proximity. In an effort to overcome the limitations of both the artistic and scientific framing of design we have turned to ethnography to understand the users of design and the experiences they have of the designed world so that we might better able give them what they want. However, as sociology is largely a discipline that communicates through words it is conditioned by conceptual thought. In getting so close to and conceiving, through ethnography, the reality that users inhabit we have lost perspective on the abstract and transformative dimensions of design. That perspective is critical distance. In other words because the epistemology and methods of inquiry of the sociology of design have an unchallenged realist framing we are more likely to replicate the seen world, through photo-observation, as it exists as yet more banality. The myth of proximity is the promise that the closer we get to the user’s reality the more likely we can give them the reality they want, when in fact what we produce are images of the world that look increasingly the same.

I have already outlined the crisis of the artificial as simply being a consequence of the challenge critical theory posed to design in the form of its ideological deconstruction. In addition I described this crisis as the challenge of finding simple and appropriate forms of representation to reveal complexity and speak to each other of our observations and experiences of it in order that we can imagine and manage the transformation of the artificial in a complex world. Managing the transformation or change of the artificial is what Design Methods was trying to do. We can add to these definitions of the crisis, the endless reproduction in the semiosphere of more or less mundane images of the everyday that all look the same. That the crisis of the artificial has persisted for so long, and can take a variety of arguably inter-related forms, is indicative that there is something larger at play than any one of these definitions suggests. Baudrillard would diagnose these definitions as being symptomatic of the state of hyper-reality emanating from the saturation of our world with media images. Setting aside my earlier criticisms of the lack of generosity towards humankind in his humourless diagnosis of the hyper-real, I concur with him. I do take issue that he offered no way out of this quandary, which to be sure was his aim anyway, and it is towards that end that my work is directed. Irrespective, what is clear in all of this is that the image is clearly implicated in the crisis of the artificial.

The Condition of the Artificial.

Flusser notes that “the question of Design” has replaced “that of the Idea”, implying that the activity and object of design (design as verb and noun) is more important than the thinking of design (1999[1993], p20). Certainly the tsunami of photographic banality is indicative that this is indeed the case, as is the explosion of do it yourself visual design in virtual space. He also contends that with design “the barrier between art and technology had been broken down” and that this opened up “a new perspective” in “which one could create more and more perfect designs, escape one’s circumstances more and more” and “live more and more artistically (beautifully)” (Flusser 1999[1993], p20). Where the activity and product of design supplants the idea behind it Flusser argues that we suffer from a “loss of truth and authenticity” (1999[1993], p20). The flurry of mechanical (and now digital) self-replication and visual design is exemplary of this. Putting aside the contentious notion of truth, the loss of authenticity that Flusser articulates is a result of the predictability and prosaic nature of the things that are self replicated or the domestic images of us that are self-predicted. Flusser contends that this is inevitable because conceptual, not imaginative, thought underpins the mechanics of the production of the images of design and photography. To paraphrase Flusser predictability is in the program of both design and photography. To accept Flusser’s premise that the program of the technical image by default conditions a sameness of imagery, as logical as it seems, would be to deny the role of human agency in this state of affairs. Flusser

3 With current advances in 3D printing it is only a matter of time before objects designed by home enthusiasts parallel what has occurred in the realm of domestic digital photography and visual communication.
himself recognises this oversight. However I contend that these circumstances are not just the result of a conceptual or technical program, but also a result of the failings of the project of mass creativity in the form of participatory culture. The point I wish to make here is that although participatory culture enables human agency - for all get to ‘speak’ – not everyone has something interesting to say; or in the words of TISM “Andy Warhol got it right / everybody gets the limelight / Andy Warhol got it wrong, fifteen minutes is too long” (TISM 1995). That so much banal imagery clogs the semiosphere tells us that, creatively speaking, we are not all created equal. Blaming technology allows us to duck the issue of expertise and ability but more importantly it means we do not have to take responsibility for maintaining an attitude of critical distance. Critical distance is not a certainty even if human agency, in whatever circumscribed form it may be, is present.

The loss of critical distance that seems to be a feature of the program of technical images in an era of so called mass creativity indicates a different kind of project for photography has emerged. The potential of this project has been explored at times, as we have seen in the prescient work of August Sander, as well as the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and the UK social research project Mass Observation. This project has recently been fully realised both in the digitisation of photography and the mass participation in it. This is the project of photography as archive. Philosophically speaking, most photographers are no longer producing or creating images. They are however manufacturing without idea because they are caught in an endless cycle of self-prediction and replication. The endless stream of images they produce is not an act of production in a constructive sense; nor is it an act of consumption, although it is evidence of being consumed with (by?) the self. Instead, what we are witnessing seems to be a form of erasur, for all the imagery that circulates in the semiosphere is an archive of the perpetual same that rubs out the imaginary. Banality then is no longer common place but a form of addiction. Like all addictions only the addict can decide when to break the addiction. Breaking the addiction to the banal, the prosaic, requires the will to traverse the space that is critical distance and question the nature of the images that dominate our world and condition the landscape of the imaginary.
In professional photographic and design circles we are used to the critical perspective, the criticism of our addiction, to come from theorists and philosophers. Like adolescents we regard them as nagging parents because they just don’t understand us, even if we suspect they might be right to a degree. We are right, but also only to a degree, to say they don’t understand us if they haven’t shared our experiences of our addictions. We have reached an impasse, a stand off. It is for this reason that the space of practice currently appears to be the most viable route of theorising photography and the images of design and responding to the crisis of the artificial. Flusser himself argues much the same for he believes it is experimental photographers who are “conscious that image, apparatus, program and information are the basic problems they have to come to terms with”; who consciously attempt “to create unpredictable information, i.e. to release themselves from the camera, and to place within the image something that is not in its program” (2007[1983], p81). He goes on to argue that “a philosophy of photography is necessary for raising photographic practice to the level of consciousness” that “gives rise to a model of freedom in the post-industrial context in general” (Flusser 2007[1983], p81).

Although, I do not disagree with the pieces of his premise, as a result of my research, I would shape them differently. I contend that a philosophy of photography will only be raised to a level of consciousness through a form of critical (but not dull conceptual) photography that not only speaks of these issues, but also speaks of the magic and beauty of images and the world they inhabit, and more importantly the world that they could inhabit. Perhaps through this we may escape the tyranny of the mundane and mechanical aspects of the artificial.

Flusser himself suggests as much for he regards the task of a philosophy of photography to be to “reveal the fact that there is no place for human freedom within the area of automated, programmed and programming apparatuses, in order to finally show a way in which it is nevertheless possible to open up a space for freedom” (2007[1983], p82). Photography is ground zero in a world where the production of imagery is increasingly automated and where the processes of automation are increasingly invisible. Photography is therefore emblematic of automation, and the potential diminution of human agency that this might entail. It is
Chapter 6: Shaping Abstraction

An Abstract in Experience

In Chapter 4 I discussed a growing interest in the idea of experience that was emerging in photographic discourse and practice, most particularly in the realm of photographic abstraction. I also identified that the spatial dimensions of photography were under theorised. At the outset of Chapter 5 I noted that these threads signalled a turn towards phenomenology as a way of theorising photography, however I constrained my discussion in that chapter to exploring the idea of space as ‘critical distance’. This idea has a phenomenological dimension for the critical distance I was discussing was that exercised, or not, by photographers. The endless discussion about photographic truth and reality, the index, and the location of perpetually postponed photographic meaning has sidelined photographic practice and intent in theorising photography. On top of which the recent tsunami of photographic banality speaks of a moribund territory, in a theoretical and creative sense, and the loss of an authorial voice, or critical distance. The rhetoric of the immaterial, as I characterise the radical constructivist position, creates uncertainty that the material products of our creative efforts actually exist; they might not be real in a concrete sense, and if this is so why bother investing time in producing them? These circumstances seem to conspire against photography as a viable and worthwhile creative practice yet it persists, and I persist with it too. I have responded to the intellectual impasse posed to me by these circumstances through a number of strategies including:

• embracing the embodied experience of photographic materials and processes and at the same time embracing the apparent immaterial aspects of digital photography;
• exploring the evocation, as opposed to the depiction, of a sense place and space of scenes being photographed;
• exploring the concept of distance literally, through the mechanics of the camera itself, and metaphorically through the idea of critical distance;
• designing fictitious image scenarios from my images of the abstracted world.

In short, my response has been to explore a practical and theoretical framework that encompasses abstraction and existential phenomenology. In this chapter I will turn my attention to articulating what a phenomenological approach to theorising photography may bring to it. I will draw upon my own practice as central to this interpretivist process of theorising for such “theories must reflect the cultural/historical context within which the research takes place and be shaped by the personal values and experiences of the researcher” (Denscombe 2010, p236). In doing this I will firstly provide an overview of the emerging literature that theorises photography from a phenomenological perspective before delving into a more theoretically explicit discussion of the specific creative work generated through my research.

Theorising Practice

As I outlined in Chapter 5, when one looks at the empirical research it becomes apparent that the contradictions critical theorists so gleefully point out about photography are of little or no concern to how most people understand and use it. It would be fair to say that the people busy populating the internet with their camera phone snapshots of the world are clearly impervious to the concerns of critical photographic theory. The ongoing reliance on a seemingly old-fashioned photo realist framework speaks of the enduring power of the medium as a form of self and social validation, a performance of normalcy. Many of these participants in the archival project of photography are aware of the inherent contradictions of photographic truth and reality: they are aware that they are using mutable digital media to participate in this project but are largely unconcerned by that. As Lefebvre (2007) has pointed out, this is not dissimilar to the situation with analogue photography almost a century ago. It is surprising that critical theory has not acknowledged the lack of concern that many photographers have about photographic truth. Critical theory appears stuck in a cul-de-sac of the indexical that renders its critique of photography as banal as the object it critiques and as banal the images of the everyday filling up the semiosphere.

Flusser (2007[1983]) regards the manner in which photography is used is a consequence of the programmatic nature of the technical image, and the constraints that places upon human agency. Underlying these constraints is the nature of conceptual thought, with all of
its analytical inclinations and its historic link to the written word in the form of the linear
sentence. Based as it is on a borrowed form of critical literary theory that privileges the linear
sentence, photographic theory is also stuck in a rut because it is similarly conditioned by the
constraints of conceptual thought and is divorced from the imaginative space of practice.
Critical theory deconstructs the photographic image using intellectual (conceptual) logic in
the form of the linear sentence. It challenges the logic of the technological image on its own
ground by using the language of logic to attack phenomena, the photographic image, that
appears to be logical. Because the technological image is in the form of a photograph and
the critique is in the form of words a kind of critical distance does emerge. Critical distance
results because critical theory comes from a different paradigm to the practice – photography
- it critiques. However, it might also simultaneously disappear because of its proximity to the
conceptual thought that underpins the program of the technical image.

Flusser himself argues “critical thinking results from the praxis of linear writing” and
through it “we have developed the capacity to divide, to separate, and to break down into
dot elements all the phenomena of the external and internal world” (2002[1984], pp42-43).
He goes on to argue that because photography and other types of technical images are made
by apparatus that are the products of science and technology - and are “themselves based
on critical thinking” - then any critique of technological images “is therefor essentially a
critique of critical thinking” (Flusser 2002[1984], p43). Such programs of critique result
in critical thinking turning against itself and, so Flusser argues, critical thinking is in crisis
“because it does not possess the appropriate criteria allowing it to critique its own products”
(2002[1984], p43). Given this, Flusser concludes that the task of critiquing or challenging the
constraining program of photography will only come from a particular form of photographic
practice (2002[1984], p49). Flusser, and Benjamin before him, contend that it is experimental
photographers that are best placed to disrupt the program of the technical image. If we accept
their premise that photographic images constrain human agency and must be disrupted
(Flusser), or the true reality behind them must be revealed (Benjamin), then we can begin
to understand why the position of concrete photographers such as Jäger are so doctrinaire1.

Where Benjamin’s position is more politically conspiratorial, Flusser’s is more about the
inevitability of the logic of conceptual thought played out through an apparatus and resulting
in a constrained vision of the world. I do not subscribe to Benjamin’s conspiratorial view,
although I do agree with him on the net effect that photography has on how we see the
world, which is to reduce the everyday to a fashionable surface appearance. Flusser’s work is
more pertinent to my research, in part because he reaches a similar conclusion to Benjamin
on the effect of photography on the appearance of the world. More importantly I share
Flusser’s belief that this is a function of the conceptual thought embedded in the technology
of the camera and not a conspiracy. Regardless of their differing emphases both Benjamin
and Flusser propose a program of critique developed from practice that must inevitably be
phenomenological. It is to that end that the projects I have undertaken through my research, as
I will explain in due course, have been directed although this was not so clear at their outset.

Stimson (2008) is critical of the state of photographic theory, framed as it is by critical theory,
although he himself necessarily draws upon aspects of critical theory to mount his argument.
He traces two different lines of critical theory, French and German, which have shaped our
thinking about our relation to the world. The French line is characterised by deconstructive
“differential approaches that measured critical incisiveness locally and in micropolitical
dimensions” (Stimson 2008, p110). The German line adopted Hegel’s “principle of totality”
and held “on to the old promise of synthesis, assuming that criticality could only find
leverage by taking on ontological mass” (Stimson 2008, p110). Stimson acknowledges the
contributions of the French line in theorising photography (eg Barthes) yet critiques it because
it attempts to find “the local ‘decisive moment’ … to find the meaning of photography in
one exemplary photograph that pierces to the core with its punctum … and then extend that
experience to all of photography as a new universal studium” (2008, p111).

Stimson’s stated interest in gathering “the experience of each and every photograph into a
common understanding” is a task without end, yet despite this, it is motivated by a desire to
comprehend photography’s complexity in a way that the deconstructive attitude of French

1 It is worth noting that Flusser presented his paper Criteria-Crisis-Criticism at the Bielefeld Symposium
on Photography in 1984. These long running symposia are the very same that Jäger himself presents at.
critical theory is not capable of (2008, p111). The reason he is drawn to the German tradition of critical theory is “to look for ways in which meaning accumulates as general historical consequence on the level of subjective affect” (Stimson 2008, p111). In other words how do we experience photography, more generally and in a common sense, as a diverse and widespread phenomena, rather than extrapolating it’s meaning from the particularity of one image. This bares some resemblance to the concept of collateral knowledge that is conceived as the widespread, common experience and understanding we have of phenomena. However it is Stimson’s interest in the role that the embodied experience of taking photographs plays in that understanding which extends the idea of collateral knowledge. In doing so he avoids the problem, which Flusser articulated, of using conceptual thought alone (in this case critical theory) to critique conceptual thought. Central to Stimson’s interest in embodied experience is the role of abstraction as a process through which we make sense, as idea or concept, of our embodied experiences of the world in order to explain then engage with that world. Stimson refers to his approach as a “process of corporeal induction” that involves the “affective movement from particular to universal and back again” and describes it as a “gesture of abstraction” to distinguish it from “associations with disembodiment or the ideological overinvestment in an idea” (Stimson 2008, p105). Stimson’s proposition then is to theorise from both a critical and bodily perspective rather than a purely intellectual one. Stimson goes on to outline two broad approaches to phenomenology and although he does not use the terms he articulates the distinctive differences between eidetic and existential phenomenology. Eidetic phenomenology is a process of intellectual abstraction that holds the mind as supreme, whereas existential phenomenology takes the position that the mind and our body cannot be so simplistically separated. It is clear that in outlining differing phenomenological approaches, Stimson’s work fits within the existential frame for he is articulating the concept of embodied criticality.

Stimson’s interest in abstraction is not about a style of photography, or photography as representation or brute fact, but “photography as idea” as it is experienced collectively, “experienced as a nation unto itself” (2008, p107). As a way of explaining this he examines the work of a number of significant figures in photography, most particularly Robert Frank and Henri Cartier-Bresson, as exemplifying what he calls “a critical gesture” (Stimson 2008, p113). Such gesture is “a specific form of embodiment, a manner of moving through the world that comports itself variously with and against established conventions of looking and, in this sense, carries meaning” (Stimson 2008, p113). Merleau-Ponty refers to something similar that he calls “the structure of the world outlined by gesture” (2006[1962], p186). Where previously I have touched upon the space that is critical distance as being a kind of conceptual space, we can see that it is through critical gesture that critical distance is then located in the space of the material world through its embodiment in a certain type of practice. Stimson describes critical gesture as “the intersection of objective understanding and subjective experience” and notes that Cartier-Bresson himself said that “we always want to work with our brains” but that we must also “be available to and let our sensitivity direct us” (2008, p113). What emerges in Stimson’s discussion of the work of Cartier-Bresson and in particular Frank, is the manner in which their approaches to photography clearly manifest an awareness of an embodied criticality towards seeing the world photographically that is both intellectual and intuitive, a form of critically aware embodied seeing. It is worth pointing out that despite Stimson’s interest in gathering “the experience of each and every photograph into a common understanding” what he outlines is an exploration of the embodied experience of taking photographs. And although these tasks share the common attribute of being tasks without end they are quite different objects of study and will likely yield quite different insights.

Fisher (2008) addresses the question of the proper object of study of a phenomenology of photography, however he provides no answer to it other than arguing for a particular phenomenological approach. Like Stimson, Fisher is also critical of the state of photographic theory arguing “one can find virtually no substantial theoretical text that explicitly addresses photography in formal phenomenological terms” (2008, p20). Where Stimson is not so explicit about the kind of phenomenological framework he is using, Fisher is. He starts by calling phenomenology the “science of appearances” that on face value would have little in common with the idea of embodied experience (Fisher 2008, p19). However, rather than
being a science of how things appear to us: in an optical / physiological sense; or through differing forms of media; or in a formal visual aesthetic sense; what is inferred is how do things (concepts) come to us (appear) through our experience of the world. This is similar to Stimson’s interest in the process of abstraction as a form of “corporeal induction”; how we make sense of phenomena through embodied perception.

Where Stimson argues for a phenomenological theory of photography that explores each and every experience of each and every photograph (be it the experience of viewing or taking), Fisher problematises the object of a phenomenology of photography. He implicitly recognises the futility of exploring all photographic images given the “infinite field” they constitute and recognises that if the purpose “of such analysis is to extrapolate general insights about photography” then these will inevitably be skewed by the more or less arbitrary choices one would have to make for the task to be manageable (Fisher 2008, p19). Similarly if such a study focused on “the ways in which different arrays of photographic equipment structure experience by defining the possibilities of image production” then it is probable that the study of each different technology will result in different insights and a unified theory will be unachievable (Fisher 2008, p20). Likewise a study that looked at the experiences of photographic taking would be skewed. It is with this in mind that I recognise my research as being conjectural rather than conclusive and universal.

Notwithstanding that the choice of the object of study skews the insights derived from it, I would argue that phenomenological inquiries of the type Fisher problematises are useful, even if they cannot produce a unified set of insights on photography as a coherent whole. Such inquiries have the potential to offer general insights into genre’s or types of photographs, technologies of photographic production, or approaches to practice as they emerge and evolve. These insights will not be fixed but will emerge and evolve because our embodied experience of each set of phenomena also emerges and evolves. Studies of this kind can never be definitive as emergence and evolution are not static. Furthermore, although I have been critical of photographic theory taking the literary turn, and theorising by ‘reading’ figurative and realist photographs - and as a consequence framing our understanding of photography to be pre-occupied with reality, the index and meaning – it has still produced insights. In this sense the literary theorising of photography is also one kind of experience of photography amongst many which is reflective of the complexity of the field and the recognition within existential phenomenology of the unstable and ever changing nature of the world.

Fisher argues that prior to the 1970s, “connoisseurial and politically suspect discourses of perception and sentiment” informed “many discussions of visual art and photography” (2008, p20). This, coupled with phenomenology’s problem of choosing the proper object of its study, led to a reaction against phenomenology as a basis of theorising photography and a move towards “Marxist, feminist, semiotic and psychoanalytical – theorisations” of photography (Fisher 2008, p20). Purcell notes that the key reason for this reaction was the perceived tendencies of phenomenology to produce essentialist accounts of phenomena that actively suffocated diversity, whereas critical theory was actively trying to enable diversity (2010, pp13-14). It is somewhat ironic then to realise that the seminal figure for the semiotic study of photography, Roland Barthes, engaged “in an obscured and highly eccentric form” of phenomenology in Camera Lucida in which he aimed “to grasp the essence of photography” (Fisher 2008, p20). Fisher points out that Barthes ostensibly uses an eidetic phenomenology because he was concerned with the essence of photography. Eidetic phenomenology was “conceived as the universal science of transcendental appearances” along Husserl’s line and different to Heidegger’s phenomenology that is existential in nature and concerned with embodied experience (Fisher 2008, p20). It is eidetic phenomenology that Purcell notes is resisted by “feminists, and race and queer theorists” because of its universalising claims (2010, p13). However, Fisher claims that Barthes touches upon the existential dimensions of photography in “the way photography appears for us within media saturated landscapes” but that he doesn’t develop it “other than negatively” (2008, p21). Fisher argues that despite the promise of phenomenology in theorising photography and in spite of “photography’s dominance as a cultural form throughout the 20th century, existential phenomenology has tended to summarily reject it, ignore it, or reduce it to the
umbrella of a wider critique of modern technology” (2008, pp20-21). He states that eidetic phenomenology’s “priority is to conceive the ideality of essence – that is, the manner in which it stands prior to and independent of the existence of particular objects” whereas existential phenomenology broadly speaking “prioritises the inverse, as in Sartre’s slogan: ‘existence precedes essence’” (2008, p27). In other words eidetic phenomenology conceives an ideal world where concepts can be generated – in the mind – separate to objects in the world, whereas existential phenomenology assumes that objects and ideas cannot be separated other than as an artificial construct or analytic. The eidetic approach strives for some ideal of analytical and theoretical purity that is in contrast to the messy heterogeneous nature of human thought, life and experience.

Fisher argues that Barthes’ use of the eidetic method is eccentric because his “fictionalising of an eidetic account of photography orients him to an existential analysis of reified cultural experience, but it remains limited, holding at a distance those material, historical, technical and cultural questions that are not congruent with the focus on singularity and specificity” (2008, p27). It is Fisher’s contention that Barthes simultaneously acknowledges the affective dimension of photography’s contingencies at the same time as he fictionalises them. He notes that Barthes himself acknowledged that his approach “was a vague, casual, even cynical phenomenology” (Barthes in Fisher 2008, p22). Purcell rejects Fisher’s view that Barthes de-facto assumed an existential position, claiming instead that Camera Lucida is an amplitive phenomenology (2010, p35). Purcell argues that Barthes’ “aim of pursuing an eidetic phenomenology” was never fulfilled and sets out, with qualification, to do so himself (2010, p12). In anticipation of any claim that he is embarking on an essentialist journey Purcell clearly distinguishes his approach from Husserl’s “original aim of executing a rigorous science” by adopting a “Derridian spirit, as a way to destabilise consensus” (2010, p13). As a consequence he seeks to transform the manner in which the eidetic is imagined and used. He rejects the conventional understanding of eidos (the distinctive characteristic of a thing) as being “equivalent to the Kantian a priori” and takes up Husserl’s original position that they “are formed through repeated psychological association” (Purcell 2010, p15). In this regard the eidetic features of photography are not foundational in the Cartesian sense (Purcell 2010, p33). Instead they are “amplitive”, or invariant, as opposed to “universal and necessary” (Purcell 2010, p15). Rather than dismissing the notion of the eidetic outright, Purcell seeks to re-imagine it because he believes “there is a relation of supervenience of the amplitive on the eidetic” (Purcell 2010, p18). He argues that such re-imagining is possible given the generally agreed “inscriptive character of photographic phenomena” (Purcell 2010, p18). Despite Purcell’s rehabilitation of the eidetic framework by shifting it away from essentialism, and recognising the contingent nature of the amplitive features of photographs (and indeed any insights derived from them), his work is more concerned with the experience of encountering photographs and is less concerned with the experience of making them.

Regardless of the eccentric nature of Barthes use of phenomenology, Purcell’s characterisation of it as amplitive does point to Barthes’ essentialist foci and suggests an eidetic logic. It is worth speculating that the eidetic has been the main form of phenomenology that has been used in theorising photography because in its ideal state it seems more capable of creating a general and coherent theory of the field. Existential phenomenology is more likely to produce a variety of fractured generalisations lacking an apparent overarching theoretical coherence, as Fisher in effect points out. I would also contend that an eidetic approach is very much in keeping with the prevailing modernist logic that underpins the photographic practices that I have reviewed in previous chapters. Eidetic phenomenology is generally concerned with identifying the essential characteristic of phenomena in order to develop universal theory. The majority of the photographic practices I have reviewed, and most especially artistic practices, have been concerned with revealing either the true reality that lies behind appearances or discovering the essential characteristics of true photography. This points to the investigative aspect of photography that Rexer argues is a consequence of its scientific, positivist roots, and is intrinsic to its relation to modernity (2009, p11).

Petterson writes that “theories of the experience of photography, or in other words, theories of its distinctive phenomenology” are uncommon (2011, p185). To some degree Petterson
follows a similar path to Purcell in moving from an eidetic starting point through to an existential explanation. He states that the distinctive phenomenon of photography “has often been pointed out and described, but explanations of the phenomenological characteristics of photography are rare” (Pettersson 2011, p185). He argues that descriptive phenomenology of this sort is “Husserlian” whereas he has set out to understand “why photographs differ phenomenologically from other images” (Pettersson 2011, p185). He does so by outlining three distinctive elements of photographs that define them as a unique form of image. In summary, he regards the unique quality of the photograph as being its status as a depictive trace that: allows the viewer a sense of closeness, or “proximity”, to the subject – even though we know it is not the actual subject; enables “greater epistemic access” to the subject compared to other image forms and that we believe they do so; and finally that “photographs typically depict what they are of” and that we experience them as doing so (Pettersson 2011, pp191-192). What shifts Petterson’s analysis into an existential inquiry is his exploration of the affective impetus of these features, how we encounter and experience them, how we make sense of them.

Petterson, like Purcell, confines his analysis to the experience of viewing photographs but where he outlines three defining features that are derived from an analysis of realist photographs, Purcell defines eight. In summary these are: image inscription; the frame; spatiality and colour; temporality; intention; context; technology; and the visual field (Purcell 2010, pp18-28). Without going into any detail about the particulars of each of these features it is apparent that Purcell outlines a more comprehensive field for interrogating the photograph phenomenologically than does Petterson. Where Petterson’s program is precise to the degree that it seems to hold the photograph in a kind of hypothetical space for interrogation, Purcell attempts to locate the photograph in its ‘proper’, albeit enormous, context. Each approach has its own obvious advantages and disadvantages, depth versus breadth. Setting these aside what they are both concerned with is our experience of viewing photographs, not making them. Despite their focus on viewing photographs, Purcell and Petterson’s frameworks are relevant given that our experience of making photographs is in part shaped by our experience of encountering them, and thus the two experiences can only ever be separated analytically.

THE INEVITABILITY OF THE ARTIFICIAL

Picking up on the idea that our experience of making photographs is partly shaped by our experience of encountering them, and vice-versa, I would now like to turn my attention to an elaboration of the idea of embodied perception and the role of images in that for this has implications for how and what we imagine and design. Merleau-Ponty critiques the tendency of classical analysis to regard the “perceived world” as the “sum of objects” and the consequent premise “that our relation to the world” is “that of a thinker to an object of thought” (1964, p12). Following from this he argues that “we cannot apply the classical distinction of form and matter to perception, nor can we conceive the perceiving subject as a consciousness which ‘interprets’, ‘deciphers’, or ‘orders’ a sensible matter according to an ideal law which it possesses” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p12). He claims, instead, “matter is ‘pregnant’ with its form” that “every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the ‘world’” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p12). Thus the ground is set for the articulation of perception as embodied and in the world where “we experience a perception and its horizon ‘in action’ … rather than by ‘posing’ them or explicitly ‘knowing’ them” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p12). The idea of perception being embodied signals a move away from what Merleau-Ponty sees as the classical distinction between object and subject and suggests a somewhat paradoxical co-dependency. Following Merleau-Ponty’s logic then, classical analysis frames perception as something that is independent of the things (objects) we (subjects) observe. Alternatively, therefore, the things (objects) we (subjects) observe can exist independent of our (subjective) observations of them. Contrary to these distinctions Merleau-Ponty argues that the objects we observe cannot exist independent of our observations and experience of them for the perceived thing “exists only in so far as someone can perceive it” (1964, p16). Their existence for us is entirely dependent on our perception and as such they are not stable entities in the way analysis would see them, rather they constantly change as the circumstances of our perception change. As such, perception does not reveal “truths like geometry but presences” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p14).

Cazeaux makes it clear that Merleau-Ponty regards the body as the locus of experience but “for there to be experience, there has to be both the sense of subjective awareness that
experience is being had and the ‘counterpressure’ sense of ‘something other’ that is being encountered” (2002, p9). The body in this sense “is not an empirical object, one thing among others in the world, but an ontological condition... a framework of intentionality whereby consciousness and the world are opened up for each other” (Cazeaux 2002, p9). According to Merleau-Ponty the revelation of presences, and not truths, which “constitutes the unity of perceived objects” does not occur as a form of intellectual synthesis (1964, p15). Rather we are engaged in what he calls “perceptual synthesis” for when we perceive an object we firstly “delimit certain perspectival aspects” of it then go beyond these; that is we see what is visible of an object and imagine what is not visible of it (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p16). Therefore, the object we perceive to be a static unchanging thing is actually an ever-changing thing based on our experience of it within its changing horizons or contexts. These horizons and contexts include our multi-sensory engagement and previous experiences of similar objects. Merleau-Ponty further extends the idea of perceiving what is not visible to highlight the role that imagination plays in perception and its paradoxical nature by contending that even if we imagine a place we have never been to the fact that we can imagine it makes us present at that place (1964, p16). The image in this regard is a part of the imaginary that is in turn a part of the horizon of our perception and such an image may be separate from any form of visible manifestation. Human perception then is not simply a function of physiology, nor an intellectual exercise, but it is an imaginative and creative act in which the non-visible image is central.

The idea of perceptual synthesis has an abstract dimension to it. Certain things we perceive may only exist in the imaginary, as an abstraction, the non-visible image. Such images may or may not be real in a concrete sense, yet they are real to us nonetheless. These abstractions form part of how we perceive the world for they too are part of the horizon of our perception. And this understanding of perception has strong parallels with the understanding of design that I have already outlined: that design is concerned with visualising that which cannot be seen, or imaging what-might-be. In discussing the images of design I noted that such images are conjectural, an abstraction of sorts, yet are premised on our experience of the seen world. This points to the transformative nature not only of design but also of perception itself. I would also go further and say that it points to a process of mutual transformation between our perception of the world and our design of it that I will come to shortly. The point I wish to make here is that in characterising perception as an embodied creative and imaginative act Merleau-Ponty releases it from the normal constraints of analysis, with its tendency to break things down into little bits, and implies for me its centrality in design, with its ability to imagine the transformation of the world through the image. The purpose of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is not to reduce “human knowledge to sensation” but to assist in the birth of knowledge, “to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality” (1964, p25). In other words such a philosophy does not treat rationality as natural or self-evident but regards it as a human construct.

Where the problem-solving model of design implies that design solutions are a logical inevitability, Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology indicates that such a model is also a human construct. My critique of the privileging of conceptual thought and logic underpinning Design Methods, whilst recognising it as a necessary reaction to ‘design as art’, is similarly a critique of its constraints in seeing the design process, and by implication the world, in fairly mechanical terms. However Design Methods did highlight the central role design plays in shaping the world, for where critical theory deconstructs (analyses) using intellectual logic, design methodology at least then (re)constructs (synthesises) albeit using an instrumental logic. Where critical theory uses the language of logic to attack phenomena that appears logical, the technical images of photography and design, design methodologists use the technical images of design to create phenomena, the artificial world, that appears inevitable. Despite much of the Design Methods agenda being regarded as a relic of an earlier era in the evolution of the field of design, its legacy continues in the form of more recent ideas such as: design thinking; creative industries; the knowledge economy; and the persistence of the design problem solving paradigm. This persistence points to a program to manage design with an instrumental logic but it also points to the loss, if there ever was one, of critical distance in design practice. All of these circumstances suggest to
me that to challenge the logic of the technical images of photography and design, and the instrumental logic of much design methodology - to bring a little magic back in to them – the space of critical distance in practice is a fruitful place to explore. Necessarily the use of logic and realism will apply but by opening this space up to embrace the embodied experience of the practitioner, rather than pretend such subjectivity can or should be eliminated, we turn also to the ‘illogic’ as a mode of thinking and abstraction as a mode of being. This in effect re-establishes the dialectic of conceptual and imaginative thought that I outlined in relation to Flusser in the previous chapter. Such a move is the framing of what I call the aesthetics of research; the embodied, experiential, subjective and at times irrational practice of creative research. It is on the basis of such an understanding of aesthetics that I have conducted my research. The concept of the aesthetics of research also encompasses what I call the design imperative, which to learn how to see before we act. These ideas signify the development of a theory from practice framed by existential phenomenology. I will outline these concepts in more detail shortly.

Rather than designing to solve problems I contend that we design as a matter of perceptual course. We design simply because we can perceive the world being different. Or to put it another way, because we imagine change, change will take place. Merleau-Ponty articulates something similar in talking about artistic vision. The painter, he argues, “sees the world and sees what inadequacies (manqué) keep the world from being a painting” and thus sets out to rectify these inadequacies through a painting (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p165). In the case of design this suggests that no designed thing is a logical inevitability. Rather, design itself is a transformative, creative, and imaginative inevitability for it is bound up in our perceptual synthesis. I am suggesting here that whilst the process of imaginative transformation is inevitable the form that any designed outcome takes is not. In seeing design activity as a perceptual inevitability the image is positioned as key to both design and perceptual transformation. This highlights in particular the centrality of the non-visible image, the imaginary, (perhaps the purest form of visual abstraction) to both design and perceptual transformation. Merleau-Ponty argues, “the word ‘image’ is in bad repute because we have thoughtlessly believed that a design was a tracing, a copy, a second thing, and that the mental image was such a design, belonging among our private bric-a-brac” (1964, p164). On the contrary, for mental images “are the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside” and help us to “understand the quasi presence and imminent visibility that make up the whole problem of the imaginary” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p164). Conversely the visible image – as design or painting – is neither a copy nor representation of the world. Nor is the visible image a thing separate to our perception of the world. It is part of the world we perceive and not simply a mechanism for showing us commonplace things that are absent from our field of view (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p164). This mutually constitutive relationship, between the visible images of the world we see and the abstract images we have of the world we imagine, Merleau-Ponty calls the image sensitising itself. It is how we transform “the lived world” and “is not an extraordinary event” (Diprose 2010, p33). For Merleau-Ponty what one sees (sight) and makes seen (visible images) is vision itself (1964, p188). The manner in which this vision plays out through our embodied experience of the image, both visible and imaginative, is what I previously described as embodied seeing.

If we regard both perceptual and design transformation as being an imaginative inevitability as opposed to a logical one then we cannot escape the question of morals or ethics. I say this because we absolve ourselves of a certain degree of ownership over the logically inevitable because it appears objective. Merleau-Ponty critiques the tendency, prevalent in the form of scientific thinking, to seeing the world as an object of study that leads to a view of the world in which we are determined by things other than ourselves. He argues that such a science “manipulates things and gives up living in them” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p159). The imaginatively inevitable cannot be divorced so easily, on the other hand, from an experiencing human subject. This has implications for how we might understand the images of design and the technical images of photography. Although Merleau-Ponty does not deal with the ethics of the images of design or technical images of photography he does address the moral dimensions of his philosophy. He argues, “if we admit that our life is inherent to the perceived world and the human world, even while it re-creates it and contributes to
its making, then morality cannot consist in the private adherence to a system of values” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p25). Necessarily then our morals, or “system of values”, are part of the horizon of our perception and as such are “put into practice” through our perception and “animate our relations with others” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p25). I would add to this however that not only do they animate our relation to others through perception but animate and orientate our relation to the world as we perceive it and as we transform it. In this regard “perception anticipates, goes ahead of itself” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p36).

Highlighting the creative role of embodied perception Merleau-Ponty argues that “by lending his body to the world the artist changes the world into paintings” (1964, p162). Furthermore, all potential changes to place are “recorded on the map of the visible” and everything seen is within reach and “marked up on the map of I can” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p162). If we take the map of the visible to be what we ‘see’ and the map of I can being human agency the point where they intersect is the point of transformation of perception, it is the imaginary. I have depicted this in diagrammatic form. For design it is the point where we transform the world through embodied perception. Therefore vision is not an operation of thought that sets before the mind a representation of the world. Rather, we are immersed in the visible by our bodies. We do not appropriate what we see, we approach it; we open ourselves to the world. Our body is a self, caught up in things (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p162). Therefore design also goes ahead by anticipating, through the image, what-might-be and has a moral dimension. The role of the image - visible and imaginative, concrete and abstract – in our perception of the world is central to the ‘problem of the imaginary’. This is the nub of artistic, and I would argue design, creation and it is why Merleau-Ponty turns to art to interrogate the problem. He does so because artistic vision is not simply a given, it is “earned by exercise”; it is learned by seeing and learns from itself (1964, p165). In exploring artistic vision as an embodied process of learning to see Merleau-Ponty refers mainly to painting and rarely discusses one of the most dominant image types of the 20th century, the photograph. When he does touch upon it, it is in negative terms and he claims that it is not capable of the type of perceptual transformation involved in traditional forms of image making. He argues
that the instantaneous glimpses afforded by the photograph petrify movement, whereas in painting movement is implied by capturing an object at different instances and vantage points to replicate an instant never really held. This imposes a fictive link between the parts of a painting and implies transition and duration in a way that a single photograph cannot. Photographs destroy this overlapping and overtaking (Merleau-Ponty 1964, pp185-186). Furthermore, not only does the photograph visually petrify movement it does so conceptually for, as I have argued, we see the endless reproduction of reality as banality that is stuck in circular time. Where Flusser argues that different kinds of images, traditional versus technical, are different orders of abstraction from the real world, Merleau-Ponty makes no such distinction. Instead he simply dismisses photography as incapable of engendering perceptual transformation. It is clear that Merleau-Ponty is referring to realist photography in his critique. This is hardly surprising given that it is the dominant framework associated with the media, both in its commercial and consumer settings. Yet his critique overlooks the rich, albeit arguably marginal, practices of abstract photography that have clearly set out to disrupt the ‘program of realism’ and explore, indeed challenge and transform, notions of perception and reality. It is for this reason that Flusser’s philosophy of photography is important for rather than dismissing photography as being capable or not of perceptual transformation, he argues that it conditions it in a particular way.

Diprose (2010) explores Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the image sensitising itself directly in relation to my abstract photography but also in regards to my critique of the transformative potential of realist photography. She argues that even realist photographs can “have a transformative impact on the viewer” because “contingency in experience is not something that can be controlled” (Diprose 2010, p38). Necessarily, if we follow Merleau-Ponty’s logic then, such photographs do transform the world because our perception of the world is transformed by encountering the photographs of it. However she does concede that not all art or photography enables “equally creative expressions of a world” and that “perspectival painting and realist photography express their worlds by lifting the viewer above the lived world to the position that tends to sediment the significance of relations between things and the possible paths for living these relations allow” (Diprose 2010, pp37-38). This, she argues, limits the creative expression of the world. I would also argue that she clearly implies that it limits the possibilities of relations with the world and each other. Diprose’s awareness of these limits is similar to the concerns Flusser articulated in relation to the conditioning dimension of photography. Diprose goes on to argue, in effect, that creative expression that is less tied to realist depiction allows “the landscape of the visible to continue to reverberate through the vision as the imaginary lives on in the real” (Diprose 2010, p38). By manipulating the photograph we intervene in the program of the camera apparatus and open up sensitising possibilities and hence world making possibilities. This is in essence the challenge Flusser has set.

Diprose’s interest in the image sensitising itself is oriented towards the philosophical and ethical dimensions of the concept. Although the philosophical and ethical also feature in my research the implications of this concept for design are far more pragmatic given design works with an instrumental logic. In drawing our attention to the parallels between the imaginative and transformative dimensions of both embodied perception and design, and by signalling the centrality of the non-visible image –the imaginary- in both, I seek to highlight the implications for how we imagine our world if such transformation is then played out through the technical images of photography and design, as it so often is. As these technical images are constrained by the programs inscribed in the apparatus that produce them, notwithstanding the varying degrees of human agency that may be exercised within these conditions, then the implications are that our perception of the world as transformed and the actual images of transformation we produce (design) are themselves constrained. If perceptual synthesis is common to all humans yet the visible images of transformation that we produce are so constrained then we appear to run the risk of imagining, and indeed designing, an increasingly derivative world. It is for this reason that theorising and critiquing photography, and design, from the perspective of practice, as opposed the perspective of critical theory alone, is now so crucial. Perceptual synthesis played out through embodied
experience in the form of the critical gesture, and occupying the space of critical distance, may enable us to conceive of change that is more imaginative and less imagistic.

Following from Merleau-Ponty’s point that artistic vision is earned by exercise, and given the ubiquity of the technical images of design and photography as they are played out in the guise of mass creativity, then there is an imperative to learn how to see all over again. Learning how to see all over again is in essence what my projects have been about for they have explored a trajectory from the photographic real, through evocative photography, to the constructed photograph and finally, in my last body of work, back to the apparently photographic real. These projects have been geared towards exploring the territory that lies between the analytic and synthetic. Through them I have re-engaged with photography of the seen world, a largely descriptive and analytical approach, to then explore against that a more abstract and interpretive, or synthetic, approach. The shift to an interpretative approach is more in keeping with the synthetic nature of design and the resultant photographic techniques may be better suited to picturing the reality we imagine of what-might-be. From the interpretative realm, I progressed to developing a series of images constructed from these pictorial evocations. The arc of my photographic work has progressed from the ‘real’ to the ‘abstract’ to the ‘constructed’. These projects have run parallel to, been informed by, and informed the more conventional method of research I have used, that being reviewing literature. At the outset I had no clear idea of how my photographic work would inform the theory I was developing or how the theory would inform the photographic work I was making. However, I instinctively knew that as a creative practitioner my practice was central to asking questions I was concerned with. What became apparent reasonably early on was that my photographic explorations were dealing with the idea of distance and notions of perception and reality. My photography became a way of asking questions about the nature of perception as it related to notions of reality. My initial interest in the literature covered realist photo-observation, abstract photographic practice, and the nature of ethnographic and design knowledge, however I was not focused on the idea of distance or perception in the

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2 I derive the term imagistic from Imagism, an early 20th century poetry movement that favoured the use of clear concrete images to get to the essence of the thing written about.
literature, although notions of reality were central. It was my experiences of engaging in my photographic practice and reflecting upon that which alerted me to the concept of critical distance that in turn shifted my understanding of the literature I was reading. In turn the literature influenced my understanding of various characterisations of reality and enabled me to see parallels in my work. Each aspect of my research has been an embodied and critically aware exploration in seeing, imagining and transforming the world through the image.

**THE AESTHETICS OF RESEARCH AND THE DESIGN IMPERATIVE**

The ethnographic turn in design and its dependency on the realist frame, when using photo-observation methods, suggests an emerging polemic. Glanville (2005) argues that theory imported into a field without a test of its appropriateness is polemic and that the field becomes confined to what is already understood, making growth beyond these confines unlikely. “In fields such as design, where emphasis on creativity and the novel is central, such constraints are especially limiting and undesirable” (Glanville 2005, p8). It is here that I call for design’s attention to turn to what I call the aesthetics of research to resist this polemic. This should not be confused with research on aesthetics. The aesthetics of research is an engagement with the embodied sensory aspects, and creative and interpretive potential of the framing, deployment and reading of design research methods, that go beyond the realist frame. By moving away from photographic realism towards abstraction, in my research, I have begun to explore a more interpretive mode of photo-observation that draws upon the idea of embodied seeing that I have developed. Through this work I have challenged the idea that the end result of our transformations of the world are inevitable, irrespective of the philosophical framework these transformations derive from, although the process of transformation or change is. By understanding change in this way, then our conjectures of what-might-be can be kept open to imagining a less determined sense of the future than the more predictive, and predictable, sense that instrumental logic appears to deliver.

Second order cybernetics highlights the role of observation in action and experience but does not locate the observer outside the system being observed, as positivism does; rather the observer is part of the system. In observed systems, the system is seen as mechanical and externally imposed limits as moral. In design terms, the problem/solution paradigm that has dominated is a manifestation of this view. In observing systems, where the observer is within the system, options, rather than limits, are internally generated and correlate to ethics (Glanville 2004, pp2-3). In some respects my projects are emblematic of this. I have been conscious from the outset of my own observing within the system I have been working in. Each new body of photographs act as a series of questions about what I observe and how I observe, as I will explain shortly. The answers to the questions I have asked about the nature of the relationship between observing, photography, design, and reality are this thesis and the sets of images I have produced through the arc of my work. This arc has led me to formulate what I call the design imperative.

Glanville outlines von Foerster’s two key imperatives for second order cybernetics, these being the ethical imperative and aesthetical imperative. As cybernetics is interested in the desired goals of a system, hence its interest to design theorists, the ethical imperative is “to act so as to increase the number of choices” as opposed to setting limits (von Foerster in Glanville 2004, p12). Cazeaux argues that the Platonic ideal of morality is based on the ability to balance the three universal essences “which make up the human being” (2003, p4). Morality conceived in this way precludes change, other than to change in order to conform to a predetermined set of values. This is antithetical to the ideal of choice of the ethical imperative. Nietzsche on the other hand saw ethics as drawing “attention to the responsibilities we have for determining what we might be and how we might act” which is in contrast “to the traditional view whereby we adhere to existing concepts” (Cazeaux 2003, p4). Nietzsche’s concept of ethics implies human agency and change, for it is “a theory of becoming in which we seek to be and act in between concepts, in other words, we look to possibilities which lie in conceptual transition” (Cazeaux 2003, p4). The idea of having choice in how to be is ethical. How we act in response to these choices and the effect they have on us, what we conventionally see as causality, is key to von Foerster’s aesthetical imperative which is “if you desire to see, learn how to act” (von Foerster’s in Glanville 2004, p12). The underlying
inference here being that by taking responsibility for our actions (or reactions) we develop understanding and where the ethical imperative is to an extent quantitative, the aesthetical imperative is qualitative and experiential. The role of observation in design research, and a photographic practice based upon it that persistently adheres to a realist frame, which in turn implies a form of positivism, needs to be questioned from an ethical standpoint. Ironically, although the photographic reproduction of the banal seems to provide us with a seemingly endless set of depictions of the here-and-now to choose design cues from, adherence to such a singular framework is a limit and antithetical to the ethical imperative. The volume of choice of endlessly similar images is no choice at all.

Seeing, literally and metaphorically, plus action, are fundamental to design as they predicate intended change: imagining what-might-be. Responsibility for our actions as designers, if not historically a new idea, has really only gathered momentum in the past couple of decades as we have become aware of the consequences of our actions upon both the bio and semiospheres. We have seen design, the realm of the artificial, in mechanical terms resulting in us identifying problems that need externally imposed solutions (limits). We have been blind to seeing the artificial in ecological terms, the idea that we are part of and not separate to the systems we think we act upon, the world we are immersed in. This in turn suggests that we are blind to seeing the ecological in artificial terms that implies that through the imaginative inevitability of design, the world is becoming increasingly artificial, human made. The move towards an aesthetics of research in this context suggests what I call the design imperative; that is if you desire to act (design) then learn how to see (aesthetically).

The design imperative requires the establishment of critical distance, through practice, in an increasingly artificial and conditioned world by taking responsibility for our embodied perception of the world (the aesthetic and embodied seeing I am refereeing to) to open possibilities rather than close them. This kind of seeing is not concerned with observing phenomena in order to document, catalogue, or critique, but is focused on the idea of deploying the idea of the critical gesture through embodied perception. It is "a manner
of moving through the world that comports itself variously with and against established conventions of looking” (Stimson 2008, p113). This concept of embodied seeing is concerned with being aware that our perception is transformative of the world and taking responsibility for, and perhaps intervening in, the imaginative inevitability of it. In the context of my research the established convention of looking I am working against is photo-realism. It is my argument that our dependency on photo-realism limits our capacity to learn how to see because it encourages us to see in a particular way that in turn impedes our ability to act, or act in anything other than a highly conditioned and reductive manner. The experimentation with interpretive and non-realist frameworks in photo-based design research methods, that is the substance of my thesis, is an attempt to learn how to see in this way. It is an attempt to establish critical distance in a media that is conditioned to thwart the critical through the program of its apparatus.

The projects that form part of this research began in mid 2004 with the purchase of my first digital camera. As a way of learning how to use it I decided to take realist photographs of the domestic scenes I was embedded in. I explored mundane subject matter in my photographs of the seen world, adopting a formal modernist visual aesthetic as a way of familiarising myself with this territory. I was primarily concerned with the visual translation of three-dimensional space into the two-dimensional plane of the photograph. This involved; consideration and manipulation of the aperture settings in the camera, as they control the perception of depth through rendering focus; compositional arrangements within the frame; and the play of light and shade across the objects photographed for, in photographic terms, these help to describe the sense of form and shape. In essence I was engaged in the fairly conventional pre-occupation with form, typical of the depictive photography that Szarkowski championed in the latter part of the 20th century. What I learned directly through this practice is that typically photographs only ever depict the visible traces of phenomena, events or things that are in front of the camera when an exposure is made. How they depict these traces can be manipulated through a combination of the technical features of the camera and editorial choice prior to, during and after taking the photo. The combination of these features is what makes up
a photographer’s vision, their unique way of ‘seeing the world’. Superficially at least this confirmed Merleau-Ponty’s dismissal of photography’s role in perceptual transformation but my experience in adopting a form of ‘realist abstraction’ bore out Flusser’s idea that the camera and the photography condition such transformation in a very constrained way. The fact that my work looked ‘different’ from the observed world yet similar to countless formalist abstract photographers before me led me to understand the constraints of realist photography upon my apprehension and indeed imagination of the world.

Although vision is a central feature of how we apprehend the world, experience is embodied and dependent on all available senses, not just vision; it is aesthetic in the truest sense. Experience occurs in time and space and not just in the fraction of a second it takes to make an exposure. As such a photograph can never depict experience, it may try to visually interpret it but it can only document and depict the visible traces of things that we have experiences of. The photograph of such things becomes an object itself and we can have experiences of it; we can experience the photograph as a thing but cannot experience the thing it depicts. We may have had experiences, embodied and occurring in time and space, which resemble or are analogous to experiences associated with the visible traces depicted in the photograph. It is through resemblance, analogy and metaphor that we imagine experiences in the photograph and through this we see photos as analogous to reality. Realist photography depicts things, not experience, and we only glimpse the sense of experience associated with those depictions through resemblance, and visual metaphor and analogy. In photographic terms I see analogy as being where we can infer an understanding of what is depicted, but we are unfamiliar with, through our understanding of other things that we have seen or experienced that share similar features. This also entails the identification of dissimilar or distinguishing features of the things being compared. In this vein I see metaphor as being the juxtaposition or substitution of seemingly incongruous or unrelated visual features that infers a meaning that is different from the juxtaposed parts. Embodied experience of the material world is fundamentally individual in nature and our ability to communicate it, to develop some sense of common experience can only occur through the use of analogy and metaphor.
Cazeaux is interested in the relationship between literal and metaphorical language and the history of the classification of the senses. He makes the argument that we understand sensory experience (and hence our engagement with the world) through metaphor. He critiques Locke’s empiricist philosophy “which argues for the importance of literal language and the discrete nature of the senses” by contrasting it with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology “which emphasizes the positive role played by metaphor in cognition and asserts that the senses are interrelated aspects of human bodily engagement with the world” (Cazeaux 2002, p3).

He critiques empiricism as being unable to provide an adequate account of the relations between objects, and more significantly between objects and subjects. The implication of Cazeaux’s critique is that because empiricism regards “truth as a one to one correspondence between categories and things in themselves”, that it resides in the thing, then we are simply passive receptors of truth and have no agency in the construction of knowledge (2002, p4).

Cazeaux goes on to argue that Kant, and later Merleau-Ponty, emphasised “the creative and transformative nature of experience” on our categorisation of things and sensations, and in this way conceived experience as not simply “the passive and partial reception of essences” (2002, p4). Cazeaux argues that more recent phenomenological theory is redefining the aesthetic (experiential aesthetics as opposed to visual aesthetics) as an important region of experience and that metaphor is crucial to how aesthetic sensory experience is understood.

This highlights for me the significance embodied sensory experience has in relation to the design imperative and the aesthetics of research for they are enacted by embodied beings.

The empiricist critique of metaphor is that it is regarded as getting in the way of “the true and proper application of concepts”, presumably because metaphors depict a concept not as it is (if indeed that were possible) but by means of another concept (Cazeaux 2002, p6).

For empiricists, metaphor works “against the promotion of essential uniformity” (Cazeaux 2002, p7). This may be so but metaphor enables transformation. Using metaphor is a creative and transformative act, although it can also degenerate to cliché. The true essence of the thing, essential uniformity, precludes such transformation. Cazeaux argues that metaphor is fundamental to experience because perception is an interaction of the senses within the world and not a series of discrete sensory experiences (based upon the notion of five independent, essential and unrelated senses). He argues that as sensory experience moves across boundaries so to does metaphor, thus it’s appropriateness for understanding the world (Cazeaux 2002, p11). Although Cazeaux concedes that Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly deal with metaphor, he argues that it is implied because Merleau-Ponty believed our sensation of the world is “the condition of intersensory co-ordination through which the body schema orients us” (Cazeaux 2002, p15). As a consequence, Cazeaux contends that we are therefore confronted in a fundamental way with an active conceptual cross-referencing at the sensory level in how we apprehend the world. From this he argues that metaphor is therefore useful because our encounters with the world are a kind of sensory metaphorical experience and the metaphors we use to describe it fit that schema. Our aesthetic sensibility is then an important feature of our sensory engagement with the world for “reconfiguring aesthetic experience in such a way that it ceases to be the mere having of a world and instead becomes a state of responsible, perceptual immersion in a world” (Cazeaux 2002, p15). Being responsible and open in such a way is the foundation of an ethical engagement with the world. My photographic work is not in any way an explicit exploration of ethics, rather it is a conscious exploration of perceptual immersion, in the form of embodied seeing, with a view to trying to understand why the world we design looks the way it does and is the way it is. More significantly my work is trying to understand why the world we design looks the way it looks, what it might look like, and how to imagine and create an image of that.

It may well be that Merleau-Ponty’s dismissal of the possibility of photography enabling a transformation of perception is based in his critique of empiricism. As I have previously argued because of photography’s positivist and scientific roots and its ability to accurately document what appears before the camera it provides a pictorial equivalent of the empiricist notion of a one to one correspondence. However Merleau-Ponty ignores any engagement with the extensive practices of abstract photography, outlined in earlier chapters, that have indeed transformed our perception of the world, and that Flusser would argue are part of the enterprise of disrupting the program of the camera. In Chapter 4 I noted that de Duve regarded
realistic snapshots as being located on the “referential series” and being “syntagmatic”.

Such photographs are emblematic of the idea of a one to one correspondence between the appearance of what is photographed and the appearance of the photograph. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms this would preclude the photograph from enabling perceptual transformation but in Flusser’s term it would indicate that transformation of perception occurs, but is constrained and conditioned by the program of the camera. However, as I also noted in Chapter 4, de Duve argued that the time exposure, in essence blurred photographs capturing the trace of movement yet still maintaining a sense of a referential tie to the appearance of the world photographed, were part of the “superficial series” and “paradigmatic”. Such photographs are both visually abstract and create “a semiotic object abstracted from reality” (de Duve 2007, p111).

I had my first inklings of the constraints of the snapshot’s realist frame when in Germany, in early 2005. I was on a fast train trip to Bremen when I attempted to photograph the beautiful landscape zooming by so that I could have a record of my trip through it. I was playing the role of tourist. Such was the speed of the train that I could not find a fast enough shutter speed to take a clear photo without motion blur. Recalling my 1995 experiments in landscape I decided to work the other way and began shooting out the window with increasingly slower shutter speeds, working with the movement rather than against it. As I shot, I viewed the resulting images on the screen on the back of my camera and felt that they were more interesting than any sharply focused happy snap might be because they evoked a sense of the experience I was having of travelling through a misty landscape at high speed. It soon became apparent that this happenstance moment became an exploration in blurring the boundary between photographic legibility and arbitrary abstraction. I was playing across the superficial and referential series. I had little control over the formal characteristics of the shots, these being determined by the relatively random confluence of triggering the shutter and scenery whizzing by. This was my first insight into a strategy to resist the constraints of photographic realism and make images that were evocative of my experience of being in a particular place at a particular time, my aesthetic experience, rather than simply photographically describing what I had seen.
Cazeaux argues that for Merleau-Ponty aesthetic experience is not about “reducing the significance of the world to a collection of bodily senses” nor to eliminate the significance of language, rather it is to restore the balance between language and the body and to position language as “one of the behaviour patterns through which we can be at home in the world” (2002, p17). This balance echoes Flusser’s belief in the way design has restored the balance and dialectic of conceptual and imaginative thought. Cazeaux argues that descriptive, “literal language gives us the world as we are used to finding it” and like a well-used joint it is where we are most flexible (2002, p18). Metaphor, on the other hand, brings “words together that are normally kept apart” and that doing so is “comparable to flexing a joint that has never been exercised before” and this makes “a new realm of experience available” (Cazeaux 2002, p18). Cazeaux’s characterisation of metaphor points to the idea that the world is not a given but is engaged with and constituted through embodied aesthetic experience. That we understand our experience of the world through metaphor implies the possibility of change and this is significant for design. If the world existed independently of us and its nature was in a sense pre-determined then, conceptually at least, human enacted change is impossible. If on the other hand the world is constituted through human experience then the possibility of human enacted change is inevitable, as I have already argued. From a photographic perspective, realist photographs can be conceived as the well-used joint. Our reading of them as a literal description of reality is conditioned by the program of the camera and by the conceptual thought that underlies them no matter that, as I have argued in Chapter 3, we know that they are a form of abstraction. Abstract photographs, on the other hand, function metaphorically because the literal is kept at a distance. Abstractions conceived thus are the dots that our experience connects in developing new understandings and therefor transformations of our reality. This is very much the case that Diprose argues in claiming that creative expression that is less depictive of ‘reality’ opens up space for the imaginary to live on in the real (Diprose 2010, p38).

For design the idea of metaphor, and by association visual abstraction, is useful not only because of its conceptual accordance with sensory perception but because its apparent
artificialness parallels what design is concerned with, the creation of the artificial. In this sense design conceived is metaphor conceived or articulated and design enacted is metaphor embodied. Metaphor is about moving from “one realm to another”, it is “an invitation to consider another perspective or move to another horizon” (Cazeaux 2002, p16). Like metaphor, design is about moving from this world to that, from an existing state to a preferred one, and such movement has ethical consequences. Design, like metaphor, is not a corruption of the original, as empiricists would argue, but the forging of relations to make “new experiences possible” because the “metaphorical cross-referral between concepts etches out new lines of association for us to pursue” (Cazeaux 2002, pp16-17). The roles of metaphor and phenomenology are towards developing “an aesthetic attitude to the world that is central to self-nurturance, the nurturance of others, and to the nurturance of the world itself” (Cazeaux 2002, p22). The development of an aesthetic attitude articulates a clear relationship between aesthetics and ethics, the former being integral to design whilst the latter is generally regarded as optional. Design could learn much from this attitude for when design engages in the imagination of change, by necessity, it has to ask itself what kind of world it wants. This is fundamentally an ethical question.

Upon returning to Australia from my trip in Germany I re-engaged with landscape photography picking up where I had left off in 1995. Initially I took a somewhat Pictorialist approach but I gradually applied the lessons learned on that train in Germany. At first my approach was very measured. I shot on a square format camera using film. My key concern was with taking the compositional preciseness that I had refined in my more figurative abstractions and seeing what happened when I disrupted that pattern by setting the lens out of focus to varying degrees. This work was not dissimilar, conceptually at least, to the work of Emerson over a century ago. Emerson shot with a single point of focus because he rejected the mathematical preciseness of the camera, as he believed it gave “a false impression of our experience of nature” (Nickel 2008, p64). Emerson’s work is prescient in attempting to disrupt the program of the camera.
Apart from discovering that the neo-Pictorialist photos I produced were quite beautiful, I learned that a lack of any focal point in the image obliterated the sense of depth. The image was reduced to its utter two-dimensionality without the pretext of spatial depth that focal point, when combined with the play of light on form, creates in a photograph. On a practical level I was engaged with a conscious use of the mechanics of the camera, its program, to create truly abstract images by exploring the conceptual limits of de Duve’s superficial series and denying the photographs “referential ties” (de Duve 2007, p117). This exploration of visual abstraction revealed the world to me in ways that I had not expected but could only guess at and upon reflection points to the limits of Merleau-Ponty’s dismissiveness of photography for the world was transformed, as I was, through this experience. At the time of making these images I felt fully immersed in the beauty of the landscapes I was photographing and abstracting and I realised that what was occurring was that I was ‘seeing’ the landscape anew and asking different questions of it through this embodied form of engagement. Rather taking photographs that in effect said ‘this is that’ I was asking, through the photographs, ‘can what I experience become a picture?’ and from this ‘what could it (the landscape) become?’ This idea of ‘embodied seeing’ dawned on me through the unfolding engagement with my research. It did not happen overnight. Nor did this insight arrive through either reading or doing, but through the dialogue that emerged across the space, a form of critical distance, that apparently separates the two. Embodied seeing enabled me to firstly identify that space as critical distance but then it also allowed me to manipulate that space through that dialogue, working across the dialectic of conceptual and imaginative thought.

Although my work at this stage was working at the very limits of de Duve’s superficial series there was enough figurative detail in the photographs for them to still be analogous to varying degrees to the world as seen. However, overlapping this work, and eventually overtaking it, was a series of images exploring a far less measured approach to the composition and photographic depiction of the everyday. This involved a number of devices such as: rendering the images out of focus through the lens; the use of extremely slow shutter speeds coupled with hand held photography; moving the camera rapidly whilst making exposures; and not
looking through the viewfinder to compose shots. My aim was to produce images that were increasingly abstract and evocative, as opposed to descriptive, of places, spaces and moods; as a result my work became increasingly non-figurative. This seemed a logical progression in asking ‘what it (the landscape) could become?’ when photographed in this manner.

In hindsight I recognise that such arbitrary abstraction is a device that creates a type of distance between the subjects I photographed and myself. The distance that I created through the comparative experience of taking essentially banal realistic images versus the arbitrary approaches to abstraction I was developing enabled me to look at both sets of images afresh and ask different questions of them and our relationship to reality - from ‘this is that’ to ‘what is it?’ to ‘what could it become?’ In this sense the more I pushed the image out of focus and flattened the perception of space within it, the more the space of critical distance came into focus. I was no longer focusing on the seen world through the camera. Instead I was focusing on my relation to the camera, the photographic image, and the world I was immersed in. I was exploring issues of the judgement I was exercising, or not, in making these images but it was judgement based upon a ‘critical gesture’, upon learning how to see because what I was engaged in was learning how to use the camera to see the world transformed not to see it as it appeared in front of the camera. From this I would conclude that it is the embodied space of critical distance through which we can “open up a space for freedom… in a world dominated by apparatuses” (Flusser 2007[1983], pp81-82). My projects are an interrogation of both ‘physical’ and ‘conceptual’ space through an embodied practice that has been framed both intellectually and intuitively aimed at exploring that space.

In all of this the rapidly growing number of digital photographs that I was accumulating also highlighted the problem of exercising a level of judgement on the relative merits of the images themselves. The critical space that came into focus through my comparative experience was at risk of disappearing in the sheer volume of images I was beginning to generate. Notwithstanding that I was producing a mini tsunami of evocative abstract digital photographs of my impressions of the world I was experiencing, the techniques I was employing were an
attempt to overcome the programmatic logic of the camera and try and reintegrate an element of anticipation into the process as I could not anticipate what the photographs would like. I achieved this in the first instance by working with film, where anticipation is created because of the delays in seeing your images. In the second instance this was achieved by working digitally in a consciously unstructured manner, thus being unable to predict what the resulting images would look like, even though I could view them almost instantaneously. By working against the conventions of realist photography and the program of the camera I was once again experiencing the sense of anticipation of how the images might turn out.

By late 2006 I had approximately one thousand digital and two hundred analogue photographs. Ordinarily viewing and comprehending so many photographs would be a daunting prospect. As luck would have it when I embarked upon this project I had begun uploading or scanning each new batch of photographs onto my computer and running them as my screen saver. I did so for no other reason than it being the easiest way to display and view my work on an ongoing basis. Each time my computer switched to screen saver mode a sequence of images dissolved slowly on my screen. I quickly realised that I could casually edit each batch of images down to the ones I liked over a period of weeks or months until the next batch of images was ready to be uploaded. I was aware that the pace of editing in this way was slow and almost semi-conscious. I would catch images out of the corner of my eye, or notice one image dissolving into another, as I was going about my daily office duties. The slow pace of editing seemed to reintroduce a sense of serendipity as well as a semi-casual critical distance, a space that had comparatively shrunk by the almost instantaneous viewing of digital photographs. In this way I was using a technology - emblematic of conceptual thought - and turning its logic of speed, efficiency, and quantity against itself by deliberately working slowly. This slow pace enabled me to see my images afresh and it was through this form of viewing and culling that I recognised the semi realist nature of my work in the early stages which in turn pushed me further into visually abstract image making. This demonstrates to me clearly that photographs transform perception, as I outlined in relation to Purcell and Petterson earlier, in contradiction to Merleau-Ponty’s view.
Needing to step back and reflect upon what these images could tell me about my research I held an exhibition called Light Relief (Part 1) in mid 2007. My criteria for selecting images was based simply on how beautiful they looked on screen, how well they related to each other in the screen saver sequence, and how much they evoked the sense of the place in which I had originally taken the photographs. So having used a serendipitous process of editing for a couple of years I was able to quite quickly further cull the possible images for exhibition down to two hundred and forty six for final consideration. This was still a daunting number to select from and it was partly with this in mind then that I decided to ask others to select the final images for display in the exhibition. I distributed proof shoots of the culled images, via the internet, to seventy colleagues in my faculty with the simple instructions that they were required to select an ordered sequence of no more than twenty six images. Thirty colleagues responded. I turned each sequence into a computer screen saver and all screen savers were displayed both in the exhibition space and distributed throughout the faculty for display on faculty computers.

The involvement of others in a curatorial role established another form of critical distance for the participants re-presented my work to me in different configurations, thus transforming the work itself and my understanding of it. This approach was not undertaken as an empirical experiment to determine image preferences; rather it was a way of involving others in a creative dialogue by drawing upon their critical judgement. However, it became apparent that the majority of participants preferred images that were neither excessively visually abstract, where subject matter was completely indeterminate, or concretely realistic, where subject matter was obvious. Through conversation with the participants it became clear that they selected images that reminded them of some prior experience in certain landscapes. In this way it would seem that my photographs transformed their perception of the world, for in Merleau-Ponty’s terms it made them present in a landscape they were not currently physically experiencing.

As a consequence of these insights I decided to push further into the realm of abstraction, eschewing the photograph’s ability to describe in favour of evocation, toying with the
invisible boundary between the two. The next series of photographs (Slow Moving Landscapes) were like the out of focus backgrounds we often see in movies, minus the actors; fuzzy landscapes awaiting the viewer to project their own story onto. If semiotics has taught us anything it is that as viewers we try to make sense of the images we see by reading meaning in to them. This is a fairly normal response to realist photographs that we have no immediate connection to. We automatically try to make sense of them, to imagine the stories behind what we see. We do so by drawing upon, as much as we can, experiences that we have had or things that we have seen that are analogous to the ones we see depicted in such photos. In my most extreme efforts of abstraction, where the connection to the real has largely been disconnected, we are not afforded the comfort of drawing on our experiential analogies - unless perhaps that experience includes abstract art. Instead we are required to exercise our imaginations a little bit harder for we lack the anchor of the real. Despite all of the photographs in this body of work being causally connected back to the seen world the sense of an indexical anchor is sometimes rent asunder.

In Light Relief (Part 1) my photographs existed only on a set of computer screens. In Slow Moving Landscapes I decided to produce large-scale high quality inkjet prints to exhibit. My decision for doing this was that I simply wanted to have a more material experience of my images than was possible with images on a screen. In essence my screen-based work drew upon the radical constructivist position by enabling a critical distance from the material, tactile photographic image. In this second body of work I wanted to engage with my embodied experience of the material dimensions of my creative practice. These choices about the materials that I use and how I work with them are not simply intellectual but are based upon the sense I have of them through my embodied tactile and visual engagement; how they look to the eye and how they feel to touch. As the subject matter in my photographs appeared to de-materialise, the photographic image as an object now had a tactile and material dimension. Theoretically speaking where the work in Light Relief (Part 1) charted the shift from realist images to abstract images, Slow Moving Landscapes signalled the reintegration of the abstract into the real. For me, this experience and insight challenges Merleau-Ponty’s...
dismissal of the transformative potential of photography but simultaneously points to its limits for I had to push beyond the norms of photo-realism to disrupt the conditioning affect of the technical image.

The next arc of my photographic work - The (F)utility of Design: Vision and the Crisis of The Artificial - explored the logic that underpins the relationship between imagination and perception I outlined earlier. The scenic possibilities of the imaginary became the subject of a new body of work that involved the creation of a series of dioramas based upon the previous set of evocative images that I had produced. As already mentioned I regarded my evocative photos like the out of focus backgrounds we often see in movies. Because I had a sense of these photographs as backgrounds I wanted to treat them as such and use them to construct photographic tableaux of places that did not exist other than in my imagination. I was motivated in part by an interest in seeing what would happen if I attempted to imbue my earlier photographs with a sense of the physical space that had been stripped out of them by eliminating all focus. In short I was attempting to make out of focus photographs take on a sense of focus, juxtaposing two contradictory photographic principals and embodying them in image form. Once again I was also motivated by a desire to have a tactile, embodied engagement with the materials I elected to use.

After constructing the dioramas I then used these as backdrops for a further series of photographs. I set them up in the studio and lit them as little landscapes in front of which I placed objects to create further tableaux that were then re-photographed using the Pictorialist approach I had developed in the earlier stages of this research. Here I was interested in seeing how these little landscapes I had created, out of soft focus photographs, could be transformed using soft focus photography. Once again playing along the photograph’s ‘superficial series’ and manipulating the spatial dimensions of the ‘real’ world through the flattening of that by the camera. From this work it was apparent that I could indeed transform the world through photography, albeit using techniques that went against the conventions of photography and the program inscribed in the camera.
Coincidentally the work I produced in The (F)utility of Design harked back to similar constructions I had made in an early professional incarnation as a commercial image-maker where collage, montage, and image construction were techniques I commonly used. In this way my contemporary motivation and my prior photographic experience formed part of the horizon of my perception in which the projects in my research unfolded. These projects illustrate for me both the validity and limits of Merleau-Ponty’s dismissal of photography as transformative. Through them I have traced an arc that moves from the real, the abstract, to the constructed - and when these constructions were re-photographed - once again to the abstract. That I had to so radically intervene in the images themselves to create something new, rather than depict what was in front of the camera, highlights the transformative constraints of conventional photographic practice. But that I had done so using a variety of experimental techniques, usually juxtaposition through collage, does indicate a way of transcending those constraints. It is also worth pointing out that the practices of collage and montage, using juxtaposition as they do, function metaphorically for - to paraphrase Cazeaux (2002, p18) - they bring images together that are normally kept apart. Photographic collage and montage flex a joint that rarely gets exercised and because the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images make new realms of experience possible.

It is important to note that the production of my dioramas was not undertaken to illustrate this philosophical position for they were produced before I had uncovered this aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s writing. However, my embodied experience of making them, and my subsequent reflection on their relationship to the previous series of images I had produced, attuned me to this dimension of his work. The resonance between my practice and Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetic phenomenology demonstrates to me the manner in which the theory has enabled me to see my practice from a different perspective than if I was simply making stuff and it has enabled me to see the theory in a different light than if I was just reading stuff. The insights that have flowed from the dialogue that has occurred across practice and theory (the dialectic of imaginative and conceptual thought) has enabled me to understand that the making of photographic images is essentially a perceptual activity. In my case this perceptual activity has
been world-making in a philosophical and intellectual sense but also in a pragmatic creative sense. In an intellectual sense how I see the world has changed because of the work that I have made and in a pragmatic sense I was bringing little worlds into being – a god of a tiny universe in Flusser’s sense perhaps!

**The Re-Presentation of the Image**

When we depict the here-and-now the realist frame will generally suffice, but when we try to depict what-might-be the banality of the realist frame is a limitation. As design is about what-might-be I would argue that an aesthetic approach to research has its place in design. Photography so conceived must then shake loose the powerful grip of realist depiction and also embrace an abstract and interpretive frame where the creative expression of visual analogy and metaphor might thrive; for how else can we picture that which we can imagine but does not yet exist? Given designers’ growing interest in ethnographic methods and their tendency to privilege embodied experience as an important aspect of the creative process, these methods need to be translated in such a way as to accommodate that tendency. It is my contention that an interpretive aesthetic frame, as opposed to a realist one, is one way forward in this act of translation and it is to this end that my photographic work has been focused.

Originally conceived photo-documentation was a kind of visual positivism and through it we thought we could know all that there was to see. Although positivism is out of favour its legacy still underpins much of our reading of photographs, why else would realistic photographic depiction persist. As I mentioned earlier the modernist reading of photographs revealing a truer reality is the visual equivalent of eidetic phenomenology. Such readings project what the real world is really like. Pask argues, “we do not make a prediction of the real world… which is unknowable in detail. Rather we make predictions about some simplified abstraction from the real world – some incomplete image” (1961, p19). Setting aside any contention about the notion of ‘the real world’ the idea of the prediction of it is, in an instrumental sense, an act of design for design is in many respects a prediction of what-might-be; it is conjectural as I have argued. The notion of a prediction however, has within it a
hint of positivist certainty about it and I would prefer to think in terms of projections of what-might-be. However, if we cannot either know, or not know, if there is such a thing as a mind independent reality of the world, as radical constructivists insist, then realistic photographic depictions of it are an abstraction anyway; we just mistake them for the real thing. Given this, if we can only know the real world through our experience of it, if our projections of it are a simplified abstraction, and if the communication of experience and projection occurs through analogy and metaphor, then the creative use of more abstract and interpretive methods for design research would open up the toolkit for representation of future scenarios beyond the reproduction, or derivation, of the here-and-now.

The phenomenal amount of essentially prosaic photographic depictions of everyday reality is symptomatic of what Manzini (1992) would call an overcrowded or polluted semiosphere. It is also interesting that issues of quantity are at the centre of our experience in the post-industrial world (e.g. quantity of choice, messages, experiences, goods, lifestyles, media exposure, etc). The pre-occupation with quantity, in which design is implicated, is perplexing given that experience is a fundamentally qualitative not quantitative phenomena. But issues of quantity inevitably come to the fore if we adhere to the programmatic logic implied by conceptual thought. The mantra of unlimited choice is a kind of tyranny in which the exercise of judgement is suspended as we become overwhelmed by that choice and the messages associated with the things we choose. Our naturalistic reading of photographs and an unwillingness to consciously intervene in what we believe to be real is typical of this suspension of judgement; for how can we change reality if we regard it as a given concrete thing and its apparent concrete nature is perpetually reinforced in the tsunami of realist digital photographs of it?

Part of the problem for design relying on realist photography as a basis for projecting possible future scenarios is that both the quantity and banality of such imagery makes it difficult to exercise any judgement; choice fatigue as it were. The difficulty in exercising judgement is exacerbated by the loss anticipation that I outlined in Chapter 5. That is, as a consequence of our ability to shoot and view an endless stream of images on our digital cameras almost instantly, we rely less on our capacity to anticipate how an image might turn out, and more...
on the program built into the camera to shoot, display and store this stream in the hope we get the right shot. The price we pay in working in such a manner is that we wade through a flood of images that are nuanced variations of the here-and-now. This digital phenomenon, overwhelmingly reliant as it is on a realist framework, is incapable of projecting images of the reality we might imagine because it is tied to depicting the reality we have. We are endlessly reproducing a virtual version of the world we already inhabit. In contrast methods of photographic research and representation that are more in keeping with design’s synthetic nature, that utilise interpretive rather than descriptive frames, may be better aligned with design’s capacity to project possible future scenarios.

Rexer ponders why there has been an increased interest in abstract photography when we are now inundated with photographs “that disclose so much, and when surely nothing is now left unseen or unknown” (2009, p9). I would suggest he has answered his own question in that we are now so inured, or bored, with the mundane photographs of the everyday that we are seeking images that cause us to rethink what we know, or think we know, of photography and the world it shows us. To paraphrase Ranciere we are seeking to rediscover the hidden pleasures of the poetics of the image that we have lost in the tsunami of prosaic images. Irrespective of the apparent trend to abstraction that he articulates, Rexer notes that “every photographic image arrives now with a set of quotation marks, of cliché or of caution, and those artists who choose to withhold the view insist on an engagement with the principles and premise of photography” (2009, p181). Such an insistence typically comes in the form of a question, or questions: What is it?; Is it real?; How did they do that?; What does it mean?; or even Why did they bother? This insistence and such questions are a form of critical distance. They cause us to question our assumptions about photography and perhaps even reality. Rexer recognises this for he claims “abstraction operates as a constant comment on other modalities. It is a distancing device that challenges us to always to be aware of artifactness” (2009, p183). The idea of artifactness resonates with the idea of design for it relates directly to how we imagine and transform the world through images, both the non-visible image of the imaginary and the visible images we see and make. The distance that the device of abstraction enables us
to establish and manipulate plays across the real of the imagination and the instrumentally real world we imagine we change.

The distinction between the idea of an instrumentally real world and a real beyond that, the real of the imagination, seems on one level an abstraction itself. But as Weising argues “anything that can be and should be differentiated in conceptions, is in reality often inseparably interfused, and it is not unusual that this very quality of being interfused is a welcome attraction in its own right… yet the reluctance of reality… to clear labelling does not belie the necessity to differentiate exactly the possibilities of conceptions – it just speaks in favour of art” (2002, p96). Rexer argues that photography has now “become a synonym for the concept art” and that it “provides a baseline aesthetic and cognitive experience” (2009, pp194-195). Since everyone with a camera phone is now a photographer and with the rise of photography as an art form in the 20th century, then arguably everyone with a camera phone is also an artist, or perhaps a designer. Even if everyone with a camera phone is an artist not everyone is aware of the conditioning program of the camera and the realist photograph. Most people lack critical distance because they conflate their pictures of the real with their everyday experience, even though they recognise they are not the same thing. The distinction Weising noted between an instrumentally real world and a reality beyond that, as artificial as this may seem, is crucial and points to the situation we are currently mired in with the tsunami of banal photographs of the everyday – we have lost the ability to imagine such a distinction possible. Instead “our imagination is the sum of the digital images of everywhere” that circulate in “virtual non-space” (Bremner 2010, p48). As a consequence everything looks the same. All of these circumstances outlined here are emblematic of the failed project of mass creativity that Bremner touched upon.

Witkovsky points out that abstraction “is not photography’s secret common denominator” or the “antidote to traditional photography”, nor is it more relevant “because it offers awareness of photography’s passing” because of digitisation (2010, p214). The relevance of abstraction lies in its provocations concerning the “link between the image and its object” (Witkovsky
This is, as Rexer rightly claims the sense that “photography is simultaneously an investigation of reality and the means of investigating that reality” this is not “photography looking at or looking through” but photography “looking with”, what he calls “novel seeing” (2009, p137). If nothing else abstraction is an exercise on all levels of thinking things through. In working with abstract images it is simply an exercise in thinking things through an indeterminate image. In working with abstract theory it is simply an exercise in thinking things through an indeterminate concept. Both of these are real enough to me in my embodied experience of the world. It is possible that we could do the same with a realistic image. In thinking things through the determinate image we could ask a different set of questions than we have habitually done, but only if we stop asking what they mean and start asking how do we experience them. However my research demonstrates that this kind of shift comes more easily with the indeterminate image because it breaks the habits of a lifetime, and the lifetime of realist photography, and readily establishes the critical distance crucial to imaginative and conceptual thought. For design, abstraction is another way of thinking through the image and it is, in the end, possibly irrelevant what form that image takes. Rather it is a case of recognising that the act of thinking through the photographic image is just that, an act, one that we can manipulate through critical distance, but only if we can establish it and only if we can overcome our pre-occupation with what the photograph means. Theories of photographic abstraction, such as they are, have historically been made in terms of the abstract photographic image – what they may reveal or withhold, and what they might ultimately mean. Abstraction as a way of thinking through the image, as I have described it here, is casting theories of abstraction in terms of the photographer.

I have argued, with reference to Merleau-Ponty, that the interplay of the visible and the imaginary is part of the horizon of our perception that we apprehend through our embodied immersion in the world in a process he calls “perceptual synthesis” (1964, p16). I also noted that the visible image is very much a part of the visible world we perceive and not separate to it, it too is part of the horizon of our perception. Furthermore, I have argued that not only is perception a creative and transformative act but that it is an inevitable condition of being
human. From this I have then argued that we design as a matter of perceptual course, quite simply because we can perceive and imagine the world being different. As such the act of design can be conceived as a transformative, creative and imaginative inevitability bound up in perceptual synthesis. Although I have argued that the act of design is inevitable I have also argued that the things that we design are not, although the visible form they take will be conditioned by the horizon of our perception, which includes visible images. Once we perceived the world as being different through traditional images that are underpinned by imaginative thought. Increasingly we have turned to technical images to do so in the form of the images of design or photography, which are underpinned by conceptual thought.

The understanding of the relationship between images, perceptual synthesis, and design transformation that I have articulated enables us to comprehend the consequence of imagining change through a visible image that is as constrained by the dictates of conceptual thought as the technical image is. As the visible image is part of our horizon of perception and these images are increasingly technical and prosaic our imagination has a constrained horizon to draw upon. This results in the transformation of the world to appear evermore the same, prosaic. The explosion of technical images that has flooded the semiosphere is evidence that the technical images of design and photography are erasing the imaginary. I have argued that with analogue photography there was at least a sense of anticipation and serendipity that existed in the space between the moment of taking a photograph and the moment of viewing it and that this provided a modicum of critical distance. I also argued that the advent of digital photography has collapsed that space and critical distance has largely been erased. As such I contend that the shift from a form of mechanical photographic seeing to a form digital photographic seeing has hastened the erasure of the imaginary. The erasure of the imaginary by so many technical images of the everyday is a crisis for design; it is the crisis of the artificial.

Critical theory was where the world took the textual turn, and more recently was said to have taken the pictorial turn. In both instances the use of conceptual thought to critique the technical image has reached an impasse and it is why I am advocating the turn to aesthetics...
because the embodied manner in which we perceive and experience the world is aesthetic in the broadest possible sense. Aesthetics in this guise is not concerned with how things look but is the multisensory manner in which we open ourselves to the world and this is after all an imaginative and creative act. It is my contention then that a theory that will challenge the banality of the technical image and its conditioning of the artificial world as prosaic, needs to be derived from the perspective of a critically imaginative and embodied practice in the form of what I have called embodied seeing. This notion of embodied seeing is central to the concept of the design imperative that I have outlined. The design imperative is that if you intend to act, and for design the act is imagining change, then learn how to see. Although Merleau-Ponty conceives perception as being a multisensory embodied experience he does privilege the visual in doing so. I have no doubt further privileged the visual because where he talks about embodied perception I have deliberately reframed this to be embodied seeing. I have done so because of the dominance of the visual image in the form of the realist photograph in our world, and because of the long history of the idea of photographic seeing that has evolved with it. I have also done so because the visual is a central feature of the nature of the artificial world that we create.

Because of the mechanical nature of the photographic image, indexicality has largely been discussed and critiqued in relation to the cause and effect of the subject and the photograph. This is the concept of casual indexicality. I have argued that the pre-occupation with this form of indexicality has become a cul-de-sac that sidelines the role of human agency in making and taking photographs. The consequence of this is that we see the photograph as a kind of unchanging inevitability. This is not overly surprising because, as Flusser argued, this is the program of the apparatus of the camera, underpinned as it is by conceptual thought. However, by remaining in this cul-de-sac we absolve ourselves of any responsibility to how we imagine the world, the camera will determine that for us. Through my research into the nature of the questions one can ask through or of a photograph and by questioning the instrumental logic that underpins much design I have redefined the idea of design thinking to a theory of the design imperative. In articulating this I have argued that we can establish and manipulate...
critical distance through an awareness of our embodied seeing. In doing this I have pointed to the existential indexical dimension of photography. I characterised existential indexicality as pointing to the human dimension of the index, the index as pointing to the intentions we have when we make and take photographs.

When all is said and done my work is simply about seeing if I could see and imagine the artificial world being different if I could see and imagine it through different kinds of photographs. My work then has not been in any way concerned with representation but rather re-presentation; transformation not depiction. It is fundamentally concerned with developing a practice of critical embodied seeing. In my work I have used abstraction as a conceptual construct in imagining the theories I have brought to my practice and the theories I have derived from it. I have also used abstraction in these forms, and literally in my images, to question and comment on the designed world - the artificial- and more particularly the images of the artificial. These questions and exploration have helped me “mediate a poetic response to the world, a response that acknowledges the real beyond mere instrumentalities” (Rexer 2009, p192). In other words my research has helped me rediscover the pleasures of making poetic images that I had lost, in part, because I could no longer see the point in photography, I no longer knew what it meant as all meaning had been exhausted from it. In doing so I have explored the space and slippage between the conceptual and the imaginative, the analytic aspects of looking and the synthetic aspects of making. In ethnographic terms I have made knowledge of things and in design terms I have made things of knowledge.