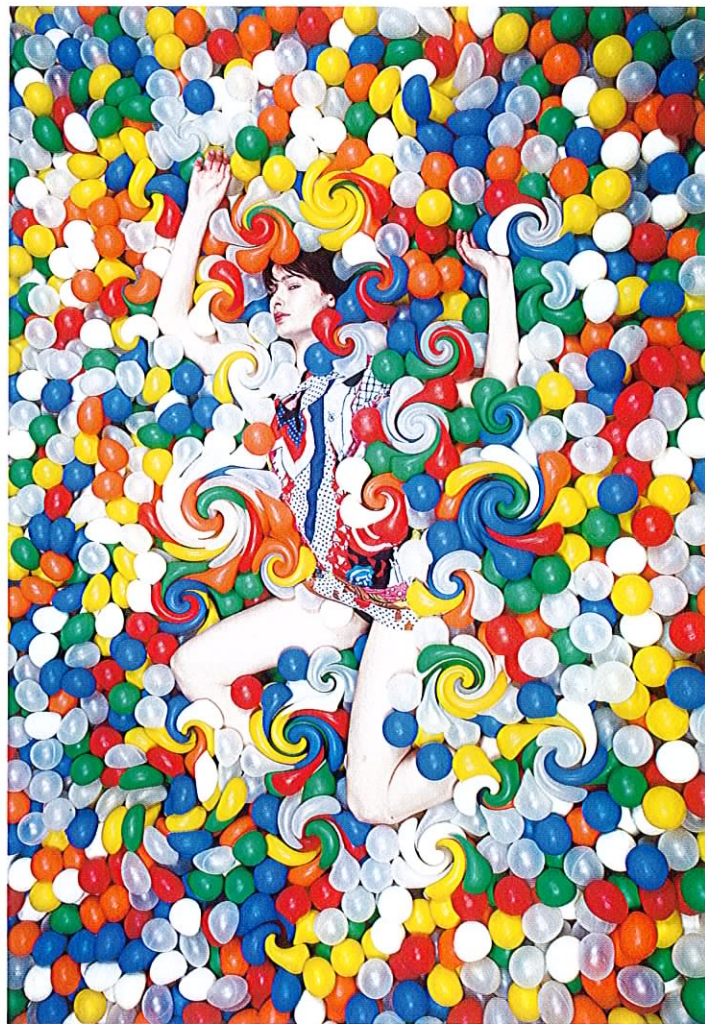


THE ARTIST FORMERLY KNOWN AS FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY

BY JASON EVANS

It might seem glib to assert that fashion photography is changing: surely that is the nature, and indeed the point, of the beast it serves. But there is a difference between a pantomimed aesthetic change and an evolutionary change of cultural and commercial conditions—quite a difference. I would say that a subtle, but evolutionary, change is afoot.

Fashion photographs are situated in a peculiar place between illustration and fetish. In the early twentieth century, they were made to show an expanding, dispersing middle-class consumer base “developments abroad” and what members of the upper classes were wearing. Such images had to perform their function clearly, while instilling a sense of desire. As the editorial market for fashion expanded, a broader range of aspirations came into play, and by the 1950s rigorous borrowed stylistic agendas and formulae were commonplace. In the late 1960s the roles of model and stylist were reinvented to complement the new phenomenon of the “photographer-personality,” and to reflect society’s changing attitudes toward gender, sex, and lifestyle choices. Sociopolitical ideas were spun out and reflected in the “fashion editorial,” a feature designed to let us know who we might be, who we want to be, and who *they* want us to be. These investigations laid the foundations for issue-based and “documentary-style” fashion features, which emerged in London in the early 1990s. Today, many of these efforts—not all of which were successful, or even



considerate of their context—have been assimilated and disarmed through overuse, aesthetic colonization, spiritual materialism, or economic compromise.

The past twenty years have brought significant reorganization to the infrastructure of the fashion industry. The big fish ate the little ones, creating omnipotent luxury-brand conglomerates with unanticipated economic and taste-making powers. Simultaneously, fresh critical thinking emerged about the images spawned by the fashion industry (curators Charlotte Cotton and Val Williams are pioneers in this). Inevitably, a new breed of trans-genre photographer is emerging, one for whom *making images* is a primary concern, regardless of ostensible context, and the potential new applications for those images are ripe for interpretation. We find makers dipping in and out of concerns and styles with an ease not seen on this



scale since the experimental early years of the modernist era. Photography itself has been accepted into the art world on trust, and to cap it all, is undergoing a profound digital revolution, the dust from which won't settle for some time to come.

How these various conditions play out in editorial fashion photography can be examined through the work of a group of very diverse image-makers (among whom I like to count myself—which, I hope, places me in a position to introduce this debate). Crucial in the advocacy and dissemination of the work of these photographers is a proliferation of independent magazines, the future of which looks uncertain in the current financial climate. They have provided visibility and distribution—though not much in the way of remuneration (editorial photographers are notoriously badly paid, particularly in Europe). But even without magazines, these new practitioners may still flourish online, on the wide-open platform of the Web.

Typically, a fashion photograph depicts a person wearing some clothes. It's that simple. But of course "simple" photographs are the hardest to make. And because of this, it's easy to understand why the seemingly endless manifestations of this formula consistently replay something that references little more than itself. Pick up any issue of a cool fashion magazine from the last couple of years and you are likely to see more than a few homages to Bruce Weber. Weber weaves together an intelligent, informed blend of historical photographic touchstones throughout his work. His pictures are as much about the sense of *yearning* that photography can convey as they are about the products they seductively swathe about a constructed era that never quite was. But without Weber's historical and contextual knowledge, his impersonators erode what they emulate. A key to understanding why Weber is so imitated lies also in the polysexual aura of his work. He practically invented something that's been a staple in fashion advertising since those loaded Calvin Klein briefs first upset middle America in the early 1990s. Everyone is attracted to everyone in Bruce's garden of delights (sex, after all, is all that's left on the lazy ad man's palette in this time of accelerated everything). But do we really all want to be young, fey, rich airheads staring blankly into an uncertain middle distance? If advertising is the reflective mirror held up to society's desire, then maybe we do. Still, there are, I am happy to report, more engaging scenes on the horizon.

A key to understanding the neo-conservatism of much recent editorial fashion imagery is the imbalanced symbiosis between fashion editorial teams and high-maintenance advertisers. The spending power of the newly mighty megabrands is now "cross-



PAGE 48: Anne de Vries, *Swirl Girl*, 2007; **PAGE 49:** Anne de Vries, *Wall flower*, for Artez spring/summer 2007; **RIGHT:** Tim Walker, *Devon Dream*, Haldon Hills, Devon, England, 2007.

De Vries: courtesy the artist; Walker: © the artist

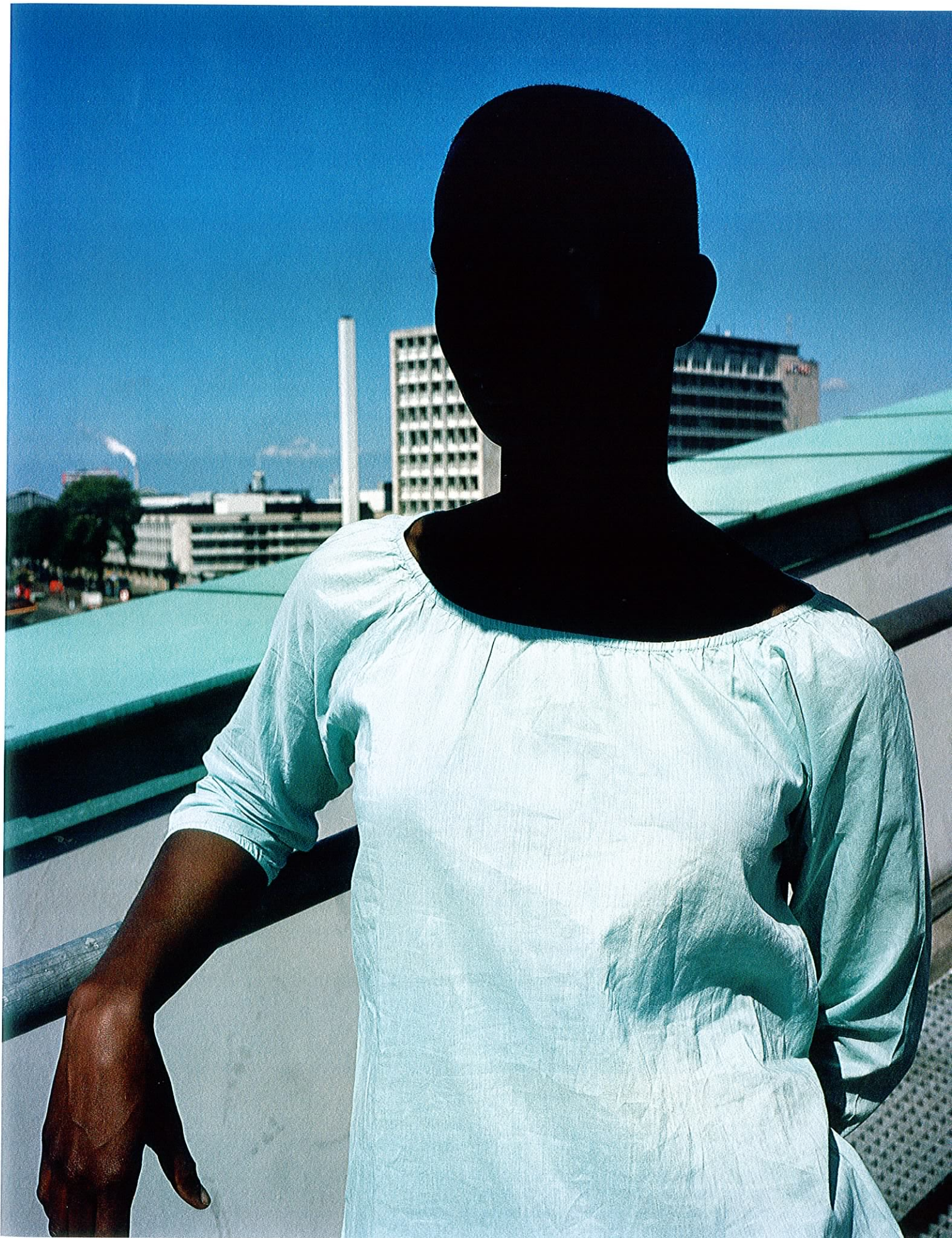




E, TOP:
Nocito,
, 2006;
OTTOM:
Walker,
el Cats,
am Hall,
berland,
, 2000;
POSITE:
Sassen,
, 2001.



and Sassen:
y the artists;
© the artist





posted” (that is, a dollar for brand X is, by inference, also a buck for sister brands Y and Z). It ensues that an advertisement requires a reciprocal *endorsement* from the magazine for a placement in its pages. There are currently “point-scoring” agencies, which grade editorial content in order to make a comparison against the publication’s received advertising expenditure. Thus at many magazines, editorial discussions—which once began with a dialogue about concepts and themes—now start off with a list of advertisers, both actual and desired, in order to ensure an even return of back-scratching. The fashion stylist’s selection of objects to feature is compromised before the story is even proposed, and his or her position is often devalued to one of wardrobe manager.

These conditions could make for gloomy reading and gloomier photographs, signaling the commercialized demise of independent thought in the fashion industry. But in fact, recent years have also brought some positive changes.

First, there are still “traditional” fashion photographers who sidestep the visual homogenization of recent times. The work of

British photographer Tim Walker is a veritable jamboree of visual play that draws from a rich tradition of English camp—yet is entirely devoid of cynicism. At turns wholesome and earthy, dreamy and decadent, the work reflects a luscious love of loveliness. Few contemporary practitioners seem to invest this much of their original selves into their work: personality is so often replaced with dull aspiration. (There is so little that is interesting about exclusivity when it is solely determined by wealth rather than experience or knowledge.) Walker has taste in buckets. His extraordinary “interior design” images for *Casa Vogue* have brought new wit to an exhausted format without pandering to any clichés. At a time when most fashion photographers are under pressure to pump up the shoes and the handbag *just* a little more, somehow Walker stays true to his personal vision.

Alongside fashion-specific practitioners like Walker, there is a new group of pragmatic cross-pollinators who have little in common aesthetically but together could be seen to represent a fresh approach to the idea of fashion photography in its broadest sense. They are able to move seamlessly in and out of process-driven image-making; it is merely an extension of their vocabulary. Their articulate work speculates on aesthetics, on gender, on body language and proximity, and above all manages to avoid trite hang-ups about “meaning” that dog some art photographers. Representation processes are rewarding for the self-aware, but a drag for the self-conscious.

The work represented in these pages is, generally, atypical of these photographers’ overall *œuvre*, which is very much the point. They are not one-trick ponies, and are not afraid to take chances and experiment, and to make innovative use of the tool of photo-sequencing (which has recently been losing traction, it seems, in the realm of art photography). In a world and an era when a fixed and prescribed “style” is easy to distribute/circulate/recognize through the image-friendly, image-hungry media, this willingness to change indicates a remarkable tenacity.

Viviane Sassen’s output is characterized by a frank delivery, as deceptively descriptive as the perpendicular equatorial light that defines many of the subjects in her quietly apoplectic *Flamboyance* project. She takes a similarly directional attitude with her studio lighting, and applies it also to her chosen themes of human proximity and physical limit. Sassen’s visual proposals range from bizarre to sensual to comic, but they seldom lack a particularly generous engagement with her human subjects. People seem to hover in her photographs, as well they ought. Luxury appears as mere surface in her work, while value is intrinsic.

THIS PAGE: Walter Pfeiffer, from *i-D* magazine, August 2008; **OPPOSITE:** Collier Schorr, *Opium*, 2005.

Pfeiffer: courtesy the artist; Schorr: courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

The work of Anne de Vries is often playful, and often marked with ennui. Much of his work might be described as “fashion-related” rather than fashion per se. The scenarios are dry, the models are with us, in on the joke, which they deliver with aplomb. We are rewarded with complicity. The line between de Vries’s genres is faint, effervescent like the work itself. Some of the reflexive visual devices in the photographs call into question just why it is we are looking. The answer is usually self-evident. The work seems inflected with a love of Olaf Breuning and Erwin Wurm—with perhaps a little Sigurdur Gudmundsson tossed in for good measure.

Furthering the cause of pranksterism are Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs, who work together as sculptors and installation artists as well as photographers. In fine Swiss tradition, they employ simple measures and even simpler materials to explore complicated sensations, often having to do with a notion of perceived space. They know no bounds and manage to carry out commissioned work in their unique conceptual-mechanical style. Their deceptively casual intuitiveness meets its match in German fashion-designer extraordinaire Bernhard Willhelm, who designed an entire collection around one gay male porn star, François Sagat, whom Onorato and Krebs in turn photographed with flowers sprouting from his derrière.

Not one to be erotically timid either is fellow Swiss Walter Pfeiffer, who is currently undergoing something of a fashion moment, having been championed by progressive magazine art directors Jop von Bennekom at *Butt* and Dean Langley at *i-D*. Indeed, at the comparatively advanced age of sixty-two, Pfeiffer recently had a retrospective at Winterthur, and is making some of the most engaging, vivacious images of his career. His work, which first began to be published in 1980, seems a precursor to that of Wolfgang Tillmans, but with bells and ribbons and more pretty boys than you can shake a stick at. But rather than fixing us with that recent tedious, sultry expression, these lads hop and skip and, goddamit, even *smile* on occasion—with, instead of for, the camera. Fun is something that has been missing from fashion photography in the past decade; it’s now apparently cool to goof again.

The boys in Collier Schorr’s pictures are not always boys—at least not before or after the shutter’s release. Schorr pits her assured, subjective fantasies into a wild mix of positions about gender and identity. The fashion media has recently become a useful place to explore such issues, and this potential is not wasted on Schorr (though Schorr may be wasted on it). Her subtlety—both in minutely observed gesture, conveyed through sequence, and in presentation of specific detail—has yet to truly translate into Schorr’s commissioned work (her photograph here is from a personal project). What is interesting is her observation that the fashion-editorial format and context are worthy of consideration.

Another American practitioner whose images evince a tangible lust for life is Jason Nocito. His affirmative work carries a torch

for the documentary-style techniques and aesthetics of the early 1990s: the so-called grunge/heroin-chic era. But Nocito manages to make something tender out of something tough and brings a sensitivity to bear both under the duress of commission as well as in his self-initiated projects.

Nocito is one of many young guns to be found on Tim Barbo’s extraordinary website www.tinyvices.com. The site supports a mind-boggling array of image-makers who are turning their everyday work into a mesh of shared photographic experience (and the site also features some graphic work as well). There is a gamut of images here, much of it swimming in the wake of the informal documentary style of the likes of Terry Richardson, Wolfgang Tillmans, and LaToya Clark. The life and look under scrutiny range from subculture to pop culture with a healthy dose of sex, drugs, and self-consciousness, and the documentation of it all goes beyond fashion into style and sometimes back again.

It is not possible to discuss an exhaustive range of photographers here, but perhaps this selection may function as a case for a positive and thoughtful response to the Artist Formerly Known as Fashion Photography. The stakes of the fashion-photography business got too high and the cyclical tradition of the industry became a self-devouring serpent, taking its entourage with it. In the void have stepped a range of multifaceted photographers more than capable of seeing what never was for what it could be. ▀



Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs,
from the Bernhard Willhelm "Lookbook," 2005.

Courtesy the artists





WHY PHOTOGRAPHY MATTERS AS ART AS NEVER BEFORE

MICHAEL FRIED IN CONVERSATION WITH JAMES WELLING



Renowned art critic and art historian Michael Fried's first book on photography, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, was recently published by Yale University Press. In this book, Fried returns to the notions of theatricality, literalness, and objecthood that he introduced in his influential 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," and the origins of which he went on to explore in his trilogy *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980); *Courbet's Realism* (1990); and *Manet's Modernism: The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (1996). Aperture recently asked photographer James Welling to speak with Fried about his new book and what makes photography interesting to him.

JAMES WELLING: How did you become interested in photography?

MICHAEL FRIED: In stages. I actually bought a Berenice Abbott print of an Atget bedroom at some point in the first half of the 1970s. From early on I was friends with Joel Snyder, who showed me original negatives and from whom I learned a lot. No doubt encouraged by Joel, I saw the Timothy O'Sullivan show at the Corcoran years ago and was totally swept away. O'Sullivan became a passion with me, and if I could ever think of some way to write about him meaningfully, I would do so.

I was very slow to pick up on what you would call the "new art photography." First I met you, then Jeff Wall, and around 1995 or 1996 I started to pay attention to what was happening.

JW: What do you think was in the air that caused practitioners like Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, and Andreas Gursky to reject the canon of street photography and work with very large-scale images?

MF: For me, by far the most enlightening essay about the period that leads up to this (and one of the strongest essays on photography I have ever read) is Jeff Wall's "Marks of

Indifference" [1995]. It's a very dialectical essay, about how one thing leads to something else that wasn't foreseen, and so on. By the time you get to the end of that trajectory, the desire for some kind of re-skilling, or the "re-aestheticization" of photography, is firmly in place.

There is something mysterious about what happened in the late '70s. For me, the proof positive is Jean-Marc Bustamante, who used to be William Klein's assistant. One day Bustamante took an 8-by-10 view camera and began to drive around southern France and northern Spain, choosing very particular motifs—all of them distinctly un-photogenic in the sense of refusing to give the viewer imaginative access to the depicted scene. In other words, Bustamante pioneered an aesthetic that, in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, I end up calling "exclusion." But the photographs he produced are immensely compelling. He went on to print them as large as he could, I think in editions of one, and called them "tableaux." One might have thought: where on earth is this coming from?

With the Germans, Ruff is probably the key early figure among the Becher students. You can imagine a trajectory that takes you from what Bernd and Hilla Becher were doing to early Ruff, Struth, Gursky, and Candida Höfer.

JW: In English, "tableau" means a kind of silent staging of something, among other things. What does "tableau" mean to you?

MF: "Tableau" is a term that arises with French art theory and criticism. It figures very importantly in *Absorption and Theatricality*. It has connotations, in the French original usage, of something like an achieved unity. We don't have any concept like that in English. When we translate "tableau," we end up with something like "picture," which isn't the same thing.

JW: In Bustamante's case, the frame is so important. Almost all the people that you've written about—their work is framed. But Bustamante was one of the first to make the frame extremely visible with his use of mahogany frames in his *Tableaux* pictures. For this reason I have always associated "tableau" with "frame," which may not be quite accurate.

MF: It's easy to fall into traps and say: "Well it's a conception of photography that's sort of like painting." It is, but it's also deeply photographic, so that doesn't seem like a helpful way to

THIS PAGE: Thomas Demand, *Poll*, 2001; OPPOSITE: Thomas Struth, *Art Institute of Chicago 2*, 1990.

Demand: © the artist, VG Bild Kunst, Bonn, Germany. ARS, New York. Struth: © the artist, 2008.

approach it. It's not just that photographs started to be made larger. They began to be made *for the wall*, as Jean-François Chevrier was the first to write. That's the crucial issue. And the frame signifies "for the wall." That's what it means: the photograph doesn't go back into a box. The moment photographs are made for the wall and have that built into their ontology, whether any photographer intends it consciously or not, he/she is dealing with the issue of the relation of this artifact hanging on the wall to the viewer standing in front of it. Photography, before that moment, never had to deal with that issue. The viewer didn't stand in that relation to a photograph. You could take a small photograph and mat it and hang it on a wall, but the viewer still stood at close range and looked into it. Whereas with these larger photographs—framed, made for the wall from the start—the issue of the relation of what was hanging on the wall to the viewer standing before it suddenly became absolutely crucial—even primary. The book is really about all the different responses to that on the part of fifteen or sixteen important photographers. It's not the only issue I deal with, but it's a big, big one.

JW: I think the issues that on-the-wallness brings up for you—beholding and the issue of theatricality—are found in work of Walker Evans and Paul Strand: in Evans with his subway pictures, or in Strand with the portraits made using a prism.

MF: But with Strand and Evans, what matters is the relation of the subject of the photograph *to the photographer*. The limit case of that is Diane Arbus. That's where you get into all the issues about voyeurism; that's where you get Susan Sontag worrying about whether Arbus's practice is morally ethical, legitimate, and so on.



SELECTED BOOKS

EXCERPTS



I am drawn to the images featuring exposed Polaroid or Polaroid film boxes. This reference to the process, whether intentional or not, seems to add an important element to the series. Just a moment these small details allow you to jump out of the tone of the pictures and come up for air, helped by this hiccup at the picture-making process before once again being swept along by the flow of the work.

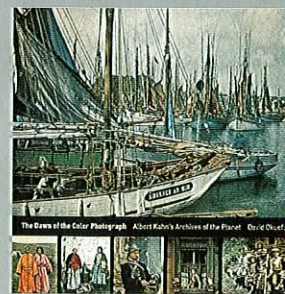
—from Stephen Gill's

Andrey Tarkovsky BRIGHT, BRIGHT DAY

London: White Space Gallery Ltd.,
2007

Going through the images for selection in this book made me reflect yet again on a photograph's extraordinary capacity to convey emotion and not just depict. The images seem to dance between the reality, the very being of their subject, and the photographer's feeling for them. These still images are descriptive documents, but they also speak for themselves, conveying something of Tarkovsky's emotions.

Tarkovsky's photographs are wonderfully measured; his feet seem to be firmly on the ground, and yet he leaves space for his subjects to breathe, so he does not mute the essence.



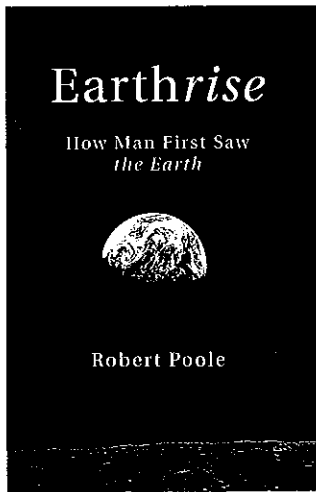
David Okuefuna THE DAWN OF THE COLOR PHOTOGRAPH: ALBERT KAHN'S ARCHIVES OF THE PLANET

Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press

Kahn used his private fortune to recruit professional photographers, supply them with trunk-loads of autochrome plates (and often ciné film cans as well) and dispatch them all over the world. During these journeys—undertaken before the creation of the long-haul transport systems we take for granted today—Kahn's photographs recorded in intimate detail lived experiences and cultural

continued on page 8

... of thousands of
 ... people from across
 ... globe. . . .
 ... throughout the 1920s,
 ... photographers watched
 ... peoples of Asia and the
 ... the East as they strode
 ... toward self-determination.
 ... a period that saw the
 ... of the Arab world
 ... shaped by the discovery of
 ... oilfields—a factor that
 ... transformed the economic and
 ... strategic position of the region
 ... overnight. . . . Further east,
 ... cameras recorded
 ... mourning the loss
 ... of Emperor In Japan; and
 ... exuberant spectacle of a
 ... emperor's jubilee in India.
 ... Asia, many of the
 ... scenes captured by Kahn's
 ... photographers document a
 ... disappearing world. Across the
 ... world, cultures and traditions
 ... are being erased by the
 ... relentless encroachment of
 ... Western influence. In Africa,
 ... the Middle East and Asia,
 ... ways of life were undergoing
 ... wholesale homogenisation, as
 ... languages, religious practices
 ... and dress conventions
 ... succumbed to the imposed
 ... cultural supremacy of the
 ... colonial powers. Remarkably,
 ... more than half a century
 ... before the term was invented,
 ... Kahn was fully aware of
 ... the destructive potential
 ... of what we would now call
 ... "cultural homogenisation": at least part
 ... of his intention was to record
 ... the vital, distinctive aspects of
 ... the world's vulnerable cultures
 ... before they would vanish
 ... forever.



essay "Riders on the Earth." "For the first time in all of time," he wrote, "men have seen the Earth: seen it not as continents or oceans from the little distance of a hundred miles or two or three, but seen it from the depths of space; seen it whole and round and beautiful and small." This view, he prophesied, would remake mankind's image of itself. "To see the Earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the Earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold—brothers who know that they are truly brothers." MacLeish's words . . . [were] the single most widely admired evocation of the spirit of Apollo 8.

. . . Almost exactly four years after Apollo 8, the last of the Apollo missions brought back a still more famous photograph, the "Blue marble" shot of the full Earth. It was, wrote the ecologist Donald Worster, "a stunning revelation. . . . Its thin film of life . . . was far thinner and far more vulnerable than anyone had ever imagined." Suddenly the image of the Earth was everywhere; it seemed to come to mark "a new phase of civilisation," the beginning of the "age of ecology." It has been called "the most influential environmental photograph ever taken."

With the new art photography, though, the crucial question shifts to the relation of work to the viewer. I don't think that has ever been decisive before.

JW: Much of the work you write about deals with the idea of public space as opposed to something more subjective. It starts with the Bechers moving away from "subjective photography," in the 1950s. They set up the camera at a considerable distance from the subject. They work like surveyors.

MF: That's absolutely right. And yet more than that is at stake in the bodies of work I examine. All my art-historical writings engage with aspects of the great tradition of figure painting, which is to say with what I take to have been the crucial issues involved in that tradition from the mid-eighteenth century on. And it has been fascinating to see, through the work of artists like Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, Rineke Dijkstra, Beat Streuli, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Patrick Faigenbaum, Luc Delahaye, and others, how those issues have moved to the center of photographic practice. It is absolutely the case that photography migrated into my territory, my backyard, so to speak. I felt I could speak to this body of work, in part because it evolved dialectically toward a set of concerns that I was, because of my own history, especially equipped to deal with.

That's also why, in *Why Photography Matters*, the chapter on the Bechers matters to me so much. As you know, I save it for the end. To try to say something new and, if possible, important and right and deep about the Bechers seemed to me to raise the stakes of the project very high. Placing it last in the book also dramatizes the fact that I'm not trying to give a historical account of a defined period.

JW: In the book, you briefly touch on what digital technology will mean for photography. Most people have no idea where it's going to take us.

MF: I certainly don't. But I will say this: Gursky's last exhibition in Basel included his big racing-car photos and other recent works. For me, most of these cross a line. That's just my intuitive judgment standing in front of them. I'm not saying that it's possible to say beforehand where that line lies or even what it consists in. But in front of the pictures, I felt they had lost contact with something to anchor them, call it reality, and that they were simply, as it were, too large, too reconstructed, too tweaked, too black-white—may I say too theatrical?—to be really compelling.

OPPOSITE. TOP: Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, transparency in lightbox, 1999; BOTTOM: Jean-Marc Bustamante, *Tableau no. 17*, 1979.



JW: The next generation will grapple with this question. And wouldn't it be interesting if in the future digital era, the idea of photography being an "index" or a trace of light turned out to not be such a big thing?

MF: It would be interesting. But what isn't clear is what the very concept of photography and the photographic might mean under those conditions. It might be the evolution of a set of technological procedures for producing large, flat, "depictive" artifacts to look at. But would viewers come to feel that those artifacts weren't photographs anymore, and if not would that matter to them? I have no idea.

JW: The question goes back to what is photography? Is it a set of initial moves played out in the early part of the nineteenth century? Or does photography have fewer anchors than we think? I always find it surprising when new photographers show me different but essential things about the medium.

MF: I know what you mean. That, I think, is just what the structure of the dialectic is—something that one couldn't have imagined happens, and it's new, but then it turns out that part of its validity as a new and revolutionary move is that it activates or resonates with something that was there before. After all, no one in 1959–60 could have imagined how productive it would turn out to be for a young German couple to start making thousands of documentary-style photographs of industrial structures in Germany and then elsewhere.

JW: I met Hilla Becher when she gave a talk at CalArts in 1973. She said that she thought of herself as a classifier—like Linnaeus—and that really impressed me, the idea that photography could function as a classification system.

MF: Yes, the Bechers are remarkable. When I was in Germany last year, I had the great experience of giving a lecture on the Bechers in Düsseldorf. Hilla Becher was in the audience, and we had dinner afterwards. As we were saying goodnight, she said she had one question. I said: "What is it?" She said: "Is objecthood like motherhood?" I said: "I have to think about this." 🍷

