Assignment 5: Urban Artists at Work

Introduction

As I have worked though the Advanced course my thinking on how to progress my future assignments has developed. I have become very interested in the strategies that photographers deploy to limit conscious self-presentation or theatrical posing by their subjects. Barthes refers to self-representation by a portrait subject as the image repertoire of 'the one I want others to think I am' (Barthes, pp 13). This will be the subject for my Critical Review Text, which I will submit as part of assignment 5.

Two of my previous assignments have investigated such strategies:

- In assignment one, *Museum,* I made a series of candid portraits where the subject was unaware that I was photographing them. In my Critical Review text I will consider this type of approach under the heading '**The Unseen Photographer**', a term I have borrowed from the 2010 Tate Modern Exhibition *Exposed* (Phillips, pp 18). As I indicated in the notes for this assignment, there is a long tradition of work in this vein, including series by photographers such as Walker Evans, Harry Callaghan, Luc Delahaye and Philip-Lorca DiCorcia.
- In my *I am an Ironman* self-portrait series for assignment three I made a series of self portraits with each portrait being taken immediately after a training workout. The idea was to try to catch myself unawares when I was tired and distracted. This type of strategy has been used by a number of photographers amongst them are Bettina Von Zwehl, Elina Brotherus, Rineke Dijkstra. In my Critical Review I will refer to this approach as '**The Distracted Subject**'.

For this assignment I have explored another approach. This is the situation where the subject is aware of the photographer but is so absorbed in another activity that they ignore him/her. I will refer to this type of approach as **'The Absorbed Subject'**.

My subjects were a group of 'urban' or 'street' artists. My initial contact with this group was through my nephew who is a graphic/urban artist based in Bristol. Over the last few months I have made portraits of artists at four major events three in Bristol and one in Folkestone.

'Urban' artists work under the gaze of the public, painting and drawing in public spaces. Their art is often monumental, filling walls, even buildings. They seldom have more than a day to complete a particular work or commission so they work under significant time pressure. They are strongly influenced by popular culture and their work is usually very colourful and graphic in nature. The genre has become popularised and 'legitimised' by the work of well-known artists such as Banksy.

Intention and process

My original idea was to produce a portrait series in a reportage style chronicling the work of the small group of artists called 'The Cretin Collective'. However, as my involvement with the artists progressed I found that I was getting much more interesting and natural portraits by photographing them whilst they were working. The concept of exploring artists absorbed in their work also fitted better with the nature of my broader enquiry into portraiture and the pose as it had begun to emerge. As a result, I redirected my work towards capturing portraits of artists at work.

I have made portraits of over 50 artists. Some I have photographed on several occasions. Out of this I have selected 36 portraits to submit for this assignment. My intention is to explore the relationship between the artists and their work. More specifically, I wanted to show how they become immersed in the process of making their art.

Urban art is colourful as are the artists themselves. Their modes of dress, hairstyles etc tend towards the exotic. I wanted to reveal this in my work, so most of the portraits, whilst focusing on their facial expressions, also reveal something of the artwork and the clothing of the artists.

The artists are pictured concentrating on their work. They do not address the camera/viewer directly. This de-personalises the portraits, and objectifies the subjects. The interest for viewers lies in our inherent human curiosity about and preoccupation with reading the faces and body language of other people. Viewers may also identify with the subjects – the idea of the 'artist' is a romantic one that may appeal to the self-image of many people. Indeed a particular question which arises from these portraits is "what makes an artist 'artistic'?"

Influences

My research has indentified several photographers who have produced series of portraits in which their subjects are absorbed in particular activities. My key influences in this regard have been Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *Trust* (Broomberg), Lee Friedlander's *At Work* (Friedlander) and Paul Graham's *Television Portraits* (Graham).

Trust by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

Trust presents a series of portraits of subjects who are absorbed in different activities. The portraits are frontal headshots with no context whatsoever. The use of flash against dark backgrounds further isolates the subjects. We are aware that they are pictured engaged in different activities: in an amusement arcade; at the gym; at the dentists; at a beauty parlour; watching TV; under hypnosis; in the operating theatre etc. However, we are not told the situation for particular photographs. We have to read into the expressions what we think is going on. All of the subjects agreed to be photographed and were aware of the photographer but this is not apparent from the portraits themselves. As Val Williams in her introductory essay to the book puts it: *the fact that they have agreed to be photographed but then are unable to compose themselves for the camera indicates the level of absence, the loss of self control, the vulnerability of the subject* (Broomberg (2000), introductory essay by Val Williams). I have posted a more detailed review of their work on my blog. (Greenough K. (2012) *Broomberg and Chanarin – Trust)*

Friedlander's *At Work* is a compilation of six separate projects completed over a 17-year period, between 1979 and 1995. The projects were all commissioned work, some at the behest of gallery curators, others directly for the companies involved. All the photographs are in black and white.

The book seems to trace the economic development of the USA over this period. The early photographs are of heavy and light industries. The people and the equipment look worn and tired, serving as metaphor for the state of heavy industry in the USA at that time. The series undertaken for Cray Computers and MIT in the mid 80s present a new face – the face of technology, albeit in its infancy. The two final series were captured in office environments. The first at Dreyfus shows people crouched over desks almost drowning in paperwork. The telemarketing series made in 1995 differs from the rest as the photographs show just the heads of the telemarketers as they talk to clients.

Lee Friedlander: Boston, Mass, 1986

Looking at Friedlander's photographs, I was left wondering why these people appear so absorbed in their work, as they don't seem very happy. Rod Slemmons, Director of the Chicago Museum of

Contemporary Photography speculates that *it is tempting to wonder how many intrusive exposures it took before these people dropped their guard and returned to the alert, Zen-like state of labor developed long ago to transcend poisonous repetition.* (Slemmons). As with Broomberg and Chanarin's *Trust* I have posted a more detailed review on my blog. (Greenough K (2012) Lee Friedlander – At Work)

The third influence on my work has been Paul Graham through his *Television Portraits* series. Graham's work is an open-ended series of portraits of friends watching television. They are aware of Graham's presence with his camera yet are fully absorbed in watching the TV. In an interview with Gillian Wearing (Graham, pp 30) he explains that ...*I was with my flat mate watching television, and I just took this picture, Cathy, and realised how beautiful it was.*

Paul Graham Television Portraits

The portraits do not conform to a rigid structure. Some are full length some half-length. Most are a three quarter view. What they do all share is the inclusion of the environment; generally this is a comfortable space into which the subject seems to sink. The subjects appear relaxed and have adopted a range of different gestures and postures. I share Graham's view that the photographs are beautiful. This is a cohesive element within the series. In my view the beauty stems from the light, which is subdued but with the presence of the directional light from the TV, and the warmth of the colours. The photographs feel comfortable and inviting. Again I have posted to my blog a more detailed review of Graham's work (Greenough (2012) *Paul Graham – Television Portraits).*

Presentation

I have produced 36 portraits that are all in square format. Each portrait is of a single artist. I have envisioned this work from the outset as being shown in two forms – a gallery display and a book.

Fiona Tan *Vox Populi Switzerland*, 2010 Installation with 254 photographs

First I see the work in a gallery exhibition as a grid of 12x12 inch prints, each full bleed with no border. This would result in a display 9 feet wide by six feet high. The idea here is that by showing the work in such a way that the form of presentation references the nature of the subject. Put simply this would be a wall full of portraits of artists who are painting on walls. This idea may be a little trite, but as a display I think it would work very well.

In considering this idea I have looked at the way in which Fiona Tan displays her work in her *Vox Populi* installations (Tan). I recently visited the Photographer's Gallery in London where some of her work was on show.

When looking at Tan's installation, which is made up of found images from the location she is documenting, I found myself both standing back to look at the scene as a whole and then moving in to explore the photographs in more detail. This is exactly how I want viewers to engage with my portraits of urban artists. I want people to consider them as a whole and also as individuals portraits.

The idea of the book is intended as a means of broadening the audience for my work. The concept is to self publish a book using Blurb, keeping the price down by publishing in a small size and soft cover. For the artists who have given me lots of their time I would send them a free-copy. I would also approach several galleries in Bristol with the idea of trying to get them to promote the book at the major urban art festivals in 2013. This will also provide me with a means of engaging with these galleries about the possibility of mounting a show of the photographs themselves.

The book has been given the title *feat. urban artists at work*. This is a direct reference to the artist's use of social network sites for publicising their work. The term '*feat.*' is an abbreviation for 'featuring', which is used by the artists when explaining who made an artwork (some artworks are collaborative) or who is participating in a particular show or event.

For the purposes of this assignment I have included jpeg copies of each of the portrait photographs, a mock up of a gallery installation and a mock up in the form of a pdf file of the book.

References

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