



Photography and Urban Experience

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Repopulating the Street: Contemporary Photography and Urban Experience

Contemporary art photography most often shows the city as curiously empty and still. In this way it works against the more familiar image of a densely peopled and dynamic city that excited early Modernist photographers and that has informed the genre of street photography ever since. Today, much of the world has achieved the population density, structure and organisation that was in fact rare when Modernists advertised the vibrancy of urban experience. Yet, over the last thirty years, the city as represented by art photography and most recently by prominent photographers such as Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Greg Girard, Gabriel Orozco, Laurenz Berges—the list is long and yet reductive—is shown as progressively alienated, without the drama or excitement of so many nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs.

No doubt there are multiple influences, many external to photography, that have led to what I describe. One could learn much from studying the actual process of urbanisation to understand the relations played out through this photographic trope. Nevertheless, in the scope of this short paper I can only make a simpler argument – that the numbing emptiness of the city as found in so many contemporary photographs can in part be understood as a symptom of disciplinary relations internal to photography as an art form and a popular cultural practice. That is, as a result of art photography distancing itself from vernacular representations of the city at a time when the vernacular has thoroughly absorbed the language of art photography. The aesthetic of the everyday, celebrating the work-a-day yet dramatic, busy and characterful city, as it does particularly in street photography, has been so successful, so widely embraced and repeated, as to become at best generic and vernacular and at worst clichéd. Photography that claims the status of

art does so partly in its opposition to the vernacular, avoiding its now widely recognised formulas, through what might be understood as a more acute and aesthetically challenging form of the everyday. I refer to this amplification of the everyday as ‘the banal’ but my use of the word ‘banal’ is not pejorative. Rather it is an attempt to locate an extreme form of what is called ‘the everyday’ in photographic discourse: a profound literalness or facticity that contemporary art photography seems to pursue. To explore these issues is to understand why the city as subject for photography has become emptier and enervated while our cities are increasingly populated, chaotic and in many ways, more enabling than ever before. In this way, these images and their relations tell us something of the discipline of photography at the same time that they tell us about modes of experience and relations with the world as represented in photography. Therefore, the emptiness identified in the photography of urban banality is both a literal and a figural emptiness. It applies to both the city that is represented and the photograph as emptied of style.

In this paper, I will put some evidence to this claim through a loosely historical case study of the photographic representation of the city that shows how our experience and understanding of the urban environment has undergone this strange inversion. I will then look to photography by Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Melanie Manchot that suggests new ways to encounter and interpret the city through photography and importantly, a way out of the impasse that the banal can only become.

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