

Contemporary Photography and the Reality Effect

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Introduction

In today's hybridized artworld, the art object known as the photograph is changing both in subject matter and the tools and techniques used in its production. The images are produced for different contexts such as documentary projects, portraiture, and fine art galleries. Photography's richest quality — the 'having-been-there' -- drives viewers' demand for images and has propelled the artform since its inception. In contemporary photography, creative visionaries like Andreas Gursky and Peter Funch use photography as a way to explore hidden themes such as chaos and order, repetition and harmony. It is the second order of reality that prompted Roland Barthes to say, "A photograph is always invisible, it is not it that we see." What we see is a reflection of ourselves, the world held still by a clicking shutter or by a multi-layered Photoshop image. The natural world reproduced via a mediated experience — the camera and print — is still the pedestal on which photography rests, but increasingly the photograph reflects a culture in which computers and technology play a central role in the art making process.

The conventional genres of photography range from a direct, almost clinical recordings of the world, to ironic, post-modern interpretations of today's materialism. As contemporary photography becomes more conceptual, its artists reveal the hidden reality behind themes like the environment, street life, loneliness, and love. A tension has arisen between photography as a form of documentation and a medium to express feelings, emotions and the artists' visions. The boundaries are blurred.

The images of [\[survivors from September 11, 2001,\]](#) taken by Peter Funch, represent an example of contemporary photography blurring traditional features of documentary and fine art production. The hyper saturated colors, close perspective, and piercing eyes are features not often employed in a documentary project, but here it serves the function to heighten the intensity behind 9-11's truths — fright, resilience, uncertainty. Placed inside the context of photojournalism, Funch asks the viewer to evoke historical background in reading the images, he places the subject inside a world fraught with emotion, history, and at the same time critiques the modern world's fascination with protectionism and survival.

The Americans Around Ground Zero is one example of photography that exposes a reality beyond its first order of denotation. Pierre Bordieu, sociologist and critical scholar, writes about the photography's multi-dimensionality. He calls it the 'reality effect.'

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Bordieu and the Reality Effect

"We are surrounded, it is argued," writes Bordeiu, "not by reality but the reality effect, the product of simulation and signs (Krauss, 63)." Photography is one object of discourse that propels the reality effect. The intrinsic access to the natural world gives a photographic an authenticity (deserved or not) into reality, while at the same time magnifying a second order of meaning through the reading of signs and symbols. The effect can be emotional, psychological, historic, ironic, etc. — the same visceral experiences one undergoes in daily life. Bordieu goes on to claim that photography is not about aesthetics, "that is, can have no aesthetic criteria proper to itself, and that, in fact, the most common photographic judgment is not about value but about identity (Krauss, 56)."

By claiming that photography moves beyond aesthetics and into a construction of identity, the discourse and creation of the images are unbounded, freed from representing the natural world and making truth claims. Donald Kuspit argues that the concept is centralized. "Now, the creation of the code -- more broadly, the concept -- becomes the primary creative act," [\[writes Donald Kuspit on Artnet,\]](#) "The image no longer exists in its own right, but now exists only to make the invisible code visible, whatever the material medium. It makes no difference to the code whether it appears as a two-dimensional or three-dimensional image."

The photograph is as much about the viewer's interpretation of the code as the artist's intentions. And by reading an image, the viewer constructs an identity, an internal discourse between the print and the self In Funch's series of 'American's Around Ground Zero' the viewer identifies with the subject being photographed but also the deeper symbolism associated with 9-11. The viewer can only intuit Funch's artistic intentions, but that is no longer the point — he has successfully used the medium of photography to construct a reality effect, an image laden with signs and symbols signifying more than its literal reference, in this case, a man wearing a mask.

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The Digital Advantage

The advent of digital photography and the manipulation of an image with post-production tools has freed the photograph from its optical limitations in the camera. Thereby it gives the artist greater power to construct art objects that have deep second order meanings. Through the use of post-production, the photograph is no longer an objective view on reality limited by optics or printing process, but a canvas upon which artistic visions can be translated. The photographic code of realism is being reinforced by artists who can seduce the viewer into identifying with a constructed reality, even if that reality is not indexical. A latent world of feelings or symbols can be expressed by artists manipulating the codes, an in particular, the use of repetition.

Kuspit argues for a space in which photographs "expand creativity by allowing for a greater exploration of chance, and thus the creation of more complex aesthetic "permutations" -- different combinations of identical elements -- than traditional art has ever created, indeed, allowed or even thought of." [\[1\]](#) In contemporary photography, the use of digital software allows photographers to combine multiple elements into one cohesive image. The result can be a dynamic, fluid photograph that steps outside the bounds of synchronicity.

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Contemporary Photography and Repetition Aesthetics



Repetition in contemporary photography is partly a product of digital techniques and subject matter, a movement that has freed photographs from the constraints of singular exposures or rudimentary darkroom techniques. If used in a way that enhances the code of realism, the art objects may emanate a profound reality effect. The signs and symbols reproduced can be derived from popular culture or a subtle play on the subject, from yawns and juveniles in Peter Funch's "Babel Tales," to the stock traders and race tracks in Andreas Gursky's large prints. In each of these cases, the repeated use of signs or symbols are the driving force behind the photographic narrative. Photography is becoming a conceptual art that blends traditional photographic techniques, the code of realism, with an elusive sense of self-reflexivity. However, not all art critics are enamored with the current forms.

Art critic JJ Chalresworth writes in [[Art Monthly](#),] "contemporary photography retains a fascination with the theater of psychological symbolism, the fragmentary narrative, the unexplained and the uncanny, as a space in which common assumptions about subjective reality can be rehearsed endlessly without ever being resolved." His characterization of photography is an accurate reflection of the sometimes vague and vapid aesthetics, but he goes further to indict photography as overly embellishing the symbolism of the modern world. He writes:

The point is not that art should expect to reproduce mechanically the appearance of the real, merely to reveal it, but that in the anyway synthetic organization of its forms it should seek to reflect and enact a similar complexity, one which nevertheless offers an intelligible experience of what may not be immediately apparent. But this relies on a conception of a real that is both multifaceted and integrated, rather than broken down and compartmentalised into so many marketable fragments. The irony of much contemporary photography is not that it presents an excess of reality, but rather that in fetishising the substance of its many discrete aspects, it hardly ever gets near [2].

How has contemporary photography started to overcome fetishizing the subject, and instead, to create art that reveals the real, as Chalresworth puts it? I would argue that digital techniques have been a central tool in this movement. By allowing photographers to manipulate signs and symbols, to repeat elements in ways that do not appear indexical in nature, the outcome has been photographs that exude a profound reality effect. The images invokes a reality that may not exist in nature by bringing together multiple exposures into one image, or by layering elements such as people or objects inside the image. How is this done? Artists like Gursky and Funch employ basic themes of visual grammar: harmony, unity, contrast, repetition [3]. The work is a blend of technology and a classic understanding of how we read photographs.

The following case studies are photographs that exemplify basic themes in visual grammar: harmony, unity, contrast and repetition. As a result, they are subjectively pleasing and profoundly 'real.' The data will be images from Andreas Gursky and Peter Funch, two contemporary photographers working with digital techniques in strikingly different ways.

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Andreas Gursky: Case Study



[[Andreas Gursky](#)] is widely recognized for his large scale, digitally stitched together prints of "macro and micro; individual and mass; photographic documentation and abstract formalism (Lippiatt, 132)." Other critics have even labeled his work bland, but with an air of optimism, even adulation. Subject matter is central to Gursky's work. From North Korean festivals, to garbage dumps in Mexico, to Toys 'R' Us stores in America, the mundane transforms into enormous prints that mimic the tension between order and chaos, self and the selfless.

His unique placement of the camera, high atop cranes, pulled far back and wide angled, or floating on a helicopter, "often entail multiple views of the same subject, different subjects seamlessly spliced together, and digital manipulation. Gursky loves ordered spaces and repeating grids. As he puts it, "My preference for clear structures is the result of my desire—perhaps illusory—to keep track of things and maintain my grip on the world." He's especially maniacal when he portrays people. "I am never interested in the individual," he coolly says, "but in the human species and its environment (Saltz)."

His style is literal, the wide angle macro shots make no judgments on the subject, but rather give the viewer a sweeping view inside forbidden or hidden places. To return to Charlesworth's claim, the work of Gursky 'reveals the real' in an unexpected way — from a collective, rather than individual perspective. The image taken inside the Kuwaiti stock exchange is a prime example. Dressed in identical turbans, the Kuwaiti traders huddle around computer terminals and speak with one another in a flurry of activity.

Bright red chairs contrast with the white clothing, punctuating the dark floor. An electronic stock ticker and world map circles the top of the frame. This is the market — a nameless, chaotic room. But from Gursky's print it appears balanced, an invisible order holding it all together.

In contrast to the Kuwaiti stock market, Gursky photographed the Arirang festival in North Korea, a spectacle in which 80,000 performers choreographed routines for a crowd of 50,000. Dressed in red and white the performers morph into a cohesive group, devoid of individuality from afar. The images look as if they were a computer image comprised of color pixels. But to achieve the 4m length digital print, Gursky stitched together two images with little digital manipulation.

"At first it looks like a piece of computer art," he said, "but once you study it closely there is real human interaction. They are supposed to be doing the same movements, but because they are people it will never be exact, it will never be computer art (McCann, 98).

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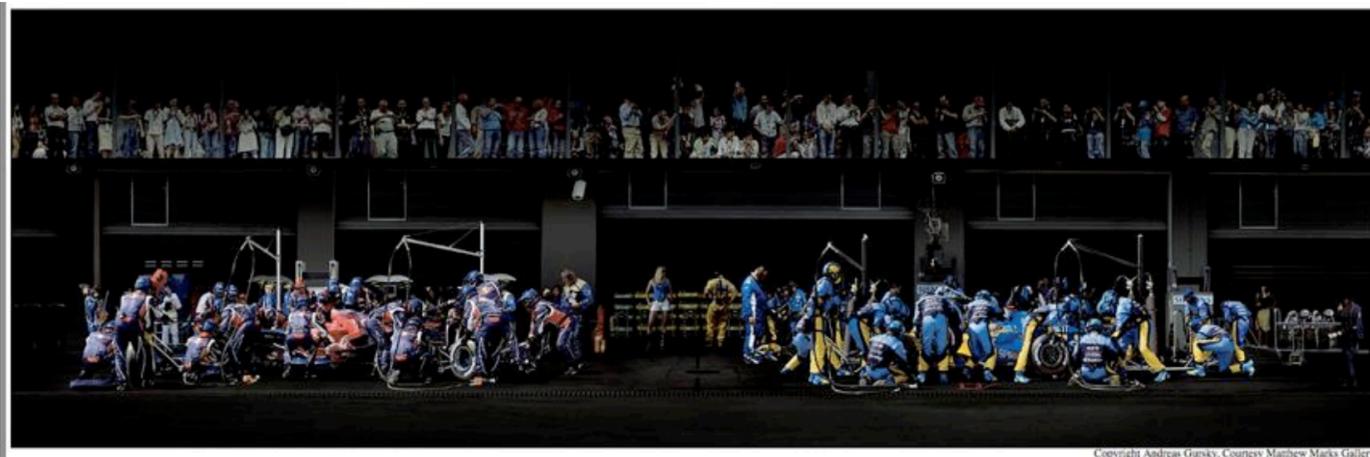
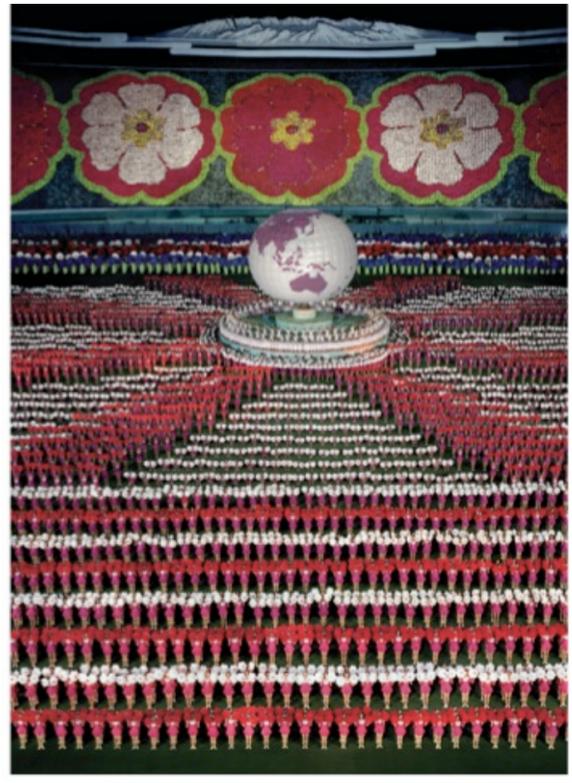
Repetition: Enhancing the Reality Effect

By photographing subjects that feature repetition as an inherent visual element, the Kuwaiti stock market and Arirang festival, Gursky constructs a narrative that convinces the viewer of a reality beyond the mere conventional. His images are art objects, they are more than just indexical representations of world environments. The repetition is hypnotic — almost dream like. A wide field-of-view and the hyper perspective achieved through the digital stitching create images that go beyond our visual expectations.

We shift, from looking closely at the people within the frame to back out again, at the broad macro views. What we see depends on the punctum (to borrow Barthe's term), and the code we expect to read. Are the images abstract or hyper real? A blend of both? "The images never entirely make the shift from simulacrum (a picture of a picture) to simulation (in which the image has no origins in the real), writes Alberro in Artforum, "and thus do not entirely cross the threshold into pure virtuality since the final results are composites of photographic documents." Gursky's genius lies in the tension between the two.

In Bordieu's terms, the images are about an identity we rarely confront — the collective, mass impact we as humans exert on this world. However, not all critics agree that Gursky's latest work is as critical as his earlier career. Jerry Saltz from New York Magazine wrote, "Gursky has digitally pieced together numerous shots from various locations, including his studio, making F1 less a photograph than an invention, and what's tedious about it is how coyly self-referential it is." He continues, "Is Gursky implying that men are drones and women are merely saints, sluts, sirens, or fodder for fashion photography, cheesecake, and pornography? Or maybe he's admitting that he's out of ideas (Saltz). Perhaps Gursky is, in Chalresworth's terms, fetishizing his subject. The lurid crowd peering down on the crew, a beautiful woman standing guard in stilettos and short shorts.

What exactly is Gursky asking of us? Perhaps the answers are less profound than the one's raised by the Kuwaiti Stock exchange or the Arirang festival, but the reality that emerges from this series are no less valid than his weightier subjects, and they do not slip into the realm of fetishism. The frenetic activity and bold colors of the car racing event are worthy of Gursky's treatment. People view the spectacle as it unfolds right before them. There is a deep connection between man and machine in F1 Boxentopp III, both a physical union between man and car, as well as the onlookers' gaze. The race becomes a symbol for speed, power, like the Italian futurists in the 1910s pushing the world forward without regard for the destruction in their paths.



In the same show he exhibits "Bahrain I." Even without human subjects in the frame, the race track slices through the white sand desert signifying the impact we have on our landscape and the values and priorities we ascribe to our collective decisions. We place great value on entertainment and showmanship. Here Gursky critiques and at the same moment reveals the beauty in the choices we collectively make, often times at the expense of the natural world. The track drips like black paint onto a pure canvas, baking hotly in the sun, waiting to serve as the hot asphalt for supercharged cars.

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Gursky as Visionary

Andreas Gursky is a world-famous and revolutionary artist. His subjects vary from stock exchanges to race tracks, but the truths behind each image are universal — behind the chaotic world rests an order, made visible by the camera and digital techniques. Repetition and harmony emerge from this dichotomy, and as a result, Gursky's work is both aesthetically pleasing and laden with symbolism and social critique. While Andreas Gursky portrays a world en masse through the use of large scale

prints and digital composites, Peter Funch focuses his work on the subtle commonalities we share. As trained documentary photographer, Funch seeks out the stories within us, combining street photography with digital montage to produce striking urban scenes set in New York City. *Babel Tales* is his latest series.

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Peter Funch and Babel Tales

[Peter Funch] is an emerging artist born in Denmark, trained at the Danish School of Journalism, who now lives in New York City [4]. His style blend traditional documentary photography with digital montage. In "Babel Tales" Funch took images on street corners and in Photoshop transformed the multiple exposures into single narratives. Funch focuses his eye on the individuals, or the small collective

that emerges from a busy corner in New York City. In “Screaming Dreamers” the figures yawn, or look as if they are screaming in unison out onto the world. Men and women of all ethnicity are pinned down by the lifestyle in New York, exhausted from work or family, perhaps both.

The light suggests late afternoon, a time when the city departs from its high-rise office spaces and returns home, to another space in which solace awaits. But together in the streets, the commute is a place to dream of another existence, a moment to escape the mundane path from point A to B. And yet it is strange, a group of people yawning together on the same street corner. The image exudes an air of unreality. Each figure blends seamlessly into the frame, the close perspective of the camera suggests to the viewer a ‘having-been-there,’ the photographic code of realism. However, a tension emerges, an ironic amusement. Did this really happen?

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Barthe's Influence

In the “Photographic Message” Roland Barthes discusses how an image like “Screaming Dreamers” may play with our senses. He writes, “The photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the ‘art’, or the treatment, or the ‘writing’, or the rhetoric, of the photograph) (Barthes, 19). Barthes suggests that the analogue leaves little room for other connotations, meaning a taxi-cab is a taxi-cab, or a yawn a yawn. But the second code, the artistic decisions made by the photographer connote a deeper, second order meaning. It is this code that resonates and provokes us. In “Screaming Dreamers” the yawning figures in one frame are made possible by digital techniques, the second code, a montage that allows the photographer to construct a narrative that does not exist in the analogue. By titling his image, “the text comes to sublimate or patheticize or rationalize the image (Barthes, 25).”



In other words, the text heightens the connotation — the yawn — and “loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination (Barthes, 26).” “Screaming Dreamers” takes on a meaning based on its title. Without the text, the viewer would construct a different interpretation. Barthes writes that the text can invent a connotation, one that goes against the denoted image, bringing on a dissonance between the two (Barthes,27).” “Screaming Dreamers” is a figurative telling of the scene, far removed from the denotation of people yawning in the street. As a result the ironic tension peaks our interest and we construct a second order meaning based on what we read and see.

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Repetition: Enhancing the Reality Effect

Throughout “Babel Tales” Funch uses the same techniques — multiple exposures, digital montage, titling — to create a world that is a “babel” or a confusing place; but like in Gursky’s large prints it is laden with order and rhythm. In “Juvenile Bliss” the children populate a street corner, walking dogs, carrying backpacks, taking notes. Like their adult counterparts, each child is isolated in his or her world, but without supervision they roam freely on the street, happy to coexist in bliss. Unlike “Screaming Dreamers” the punctum is not overt.



Perhaps it is the young girl dressed as a woman in the frame’s center that draws the eye, or the young boy reading the bus schedule. Slowly it becomes obvious — this world is full of children. The title amplifies Funch’s connotation, the young people are living in bliss without parental oversight. It makes the viewer wonder: at what point do we lose our state of bliss? Even in face of these questions, there is a harmony in this image made possible by careful composition in the shooting and editing process. It is a narrative about youth and identity, the transition from growing up as a child in New York City to adulthood, a movement that may be less dramatic than one believes or

remembers.

In “Mass Transit” the location is once again a street corner somewhere in New York City. But unlike “Screaming Dreamers” or “Juvenile Bliss” the people are obscured by carts and mats and overflowing bags. The people push their possessions, head down, dressed in warm clothing, navigating the streets anonymously. The image suggests that another world exists inside New York City, both the homeless and those in transit. An entire street is occupied by things, as if the object is master and human is slave. The homeless, like those transporting goods, are connected by a sense of motion, tied to their possessions an anxious to move on and on.

Funch calls into question this world we choose not to see or overlook. In “Mass Transit” the viewer is asked to think about this other world, a place devoid of fashion and excess, where one literally carries the world on his back. With the use of digital techniques, Funch is able to transform a fragmented world into a seamless alternate reality, one that ends up looking a lot like our own.



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Conclusion

Contemporary photography, as exhibited by Andreas Gursky and Peter Funch, can reveal the complex interplay between people and the environments in which we live. Their work challenges the viewer and asks for more than aesthetic approval. The photographs they produce can “contribute something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it,” writes Andre Bazin. Despite the world as subject, the images become worlds unto themselves. With the use of digital techniques such as montage and stitching, the

images reveal a side of reality made visible by artist and camera, laden with symbols and repetition. The viewer experiences a sense of harmony in spite of the underlying chaos denoted by their images. A narrative then emerges and the viewer is swept up by the excitement of an F1 race or the stock floor, or a mythical street in New York City . Together Andreas Gursky and Peter Funch discover beauty and self not by accident or artifice, but through artistic visions that blends the traditions of old with the tools of today.

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