Modernism, Postmodernism and Gleam:
On the Photorealist Work Ethic
– Dieter Roelstraete

Dieter Roelstraete finds in the Photorealist's fetish for surface and gleam a reflection of the movement's investment in craft, on the one hand, and a historical reflection of the transformation during the 1960s and 70s to an immaterial economy, on the other.

It is the mark of all labouring that it leaves nothing behind.
– Hannah Arendt[1]

1. THE SHINING

Photorealism has long been, is and will probably always remain something of a guilty pleasure, and any and every consideration (such as, precisely, the present one) of that peculiar moment in North American art in the 1960 and 70s will forever come swathed in apology. It must always answer the same questions – why photorealism *now*, why photorealism *at all*?[2]

Not that it is in any way the sole standard against which all art-historical thinking and writing should henceforth be measured (though it certainly, if only by virtue of its size and agenda, aspires to that claim), but in the whole of the *October* team's formidable, 700-page-plus *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (2004), for instance, I did not find a single reference to the entire Photo- or hyperrealist phenomenon.[3] The tome in question features plenty of Sur-realism, of course, some Socialist Realism, and even the odd nod to the non-extant movement of Capitalist Realism, but not the slightest trace of that all-American art movement Photorealism – even though it clearly was a sufficiently defining feature of late 1960s and early 70s art to warrant its inclusion in Harald Szeemann's landmark documenta 5 exhibition in 1972. This exhibition, titled 'Questioning Reality – Pictorial Worlds' (this is all too often forgotten), was particularly important for its championing of a wide range of conceptually inflected art practices as belonging to the most vibrant, influential art 'movement' of the day, and we can assume Szeemann likewise understood the Photorealist program of Richard Estes, Ralph Goings et al. to be somehow aligned with the great wealth of radical questionings that informed forward-looking art practice in general at the time. It is clear, however, that this sympathetic view of the movement didn't age very well, and as Photorealism went on to become a dependable source of income for a limited number of industrious US painters, it was gradually omitted from art-historical orthodoxy, and later also from art-historical heterodoxy – in short, from art history as a whole. Some 37 years on – the genre was the subject of a modest survey show organised at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2009, and seeing that retrospective exhibition is what sparked most of my thinking on the topic[4] – Photorealism has been whittled down to something akin to proletarian 1970s folk art,

1 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.87. This quote is taken from the book's chapter on labour; a little bit further, another remark worth keeping in mind when reading this essay: '[T]he artist [...] is the only "worker" left in a labouring society.' Ibid., p.127.

2 Already here I must warn the reader that we shall be looking at Photorealism first and foremost as a North American phenomenon. Hyperrealist painting techniques obviously also existed in art that was being made elsewhere around the same time (the Swiss Franz Gertsch and Germans Gerhard Richter and Werner Tübke come to mind), but nowhere did these scattered practices coalesce into a movement, complete with an actual manifesto, as was the case with American Photorealism.

3 On the whole, the authors of the book, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, do not appear to deem the various offshoots of the grand tradition of realism worthy of more than just the most fleeting and perfunctory of mentions: in their view, all realisms clearly and essentially belong to the domain of 'art before 1900'. In this sense, their critical project appears to confirm the master narrative of twentieth-century art as the history of the progressive marginalisation of both realism and the idea of realism.

from AFTERALL Summer 2010, issue 24

Alan Michael
'Cars and Houses', 2008
oil on canvas,
101.7 x 152.5cm.
Courtesy collection
Gaby and Wilhelm
Schurmann,
Herzogenrath

from AFTERALL, summer 2010, issue 24

Pere Borrell del Caso, *Escapando de la crítica* (*Escaping Criticism*), 1874, oil on canvas, 66 x 63cm. Collection of the Bank of Spain, Madrid

When I saw Courbet's work assembled in two massive retrospective exhibitions held in Paris and New York two years ago, the greatest surprise came in the guise of the artist's late still-lifes, which I had never really paid much attention to: magnificent stacks of apples, painted while he was imprisoned, late in life, for his role in toppling the Napoleonic column on the Place Vendôme during the heady days of the Paris Commune, and three mid-size paintings of gleaming trout. As Laurence Des Cars put it in the accompanying catalogue, 'these canvases, which belong among the most poignant experiences of the real formulated by Courbet, allow painting itself its full metaphorical power'.[16] Could this metaphorical power not be located precisely in the dark gloss of the meticulously applied varnish that envelops Courbet's trout, caught as they are in the agony of their last gasps for air – life's very own tantalising gleam?

5. AFTERWORD, AFTER-IMAGE

What about Photorealism today? Most of the protagonists from the early 1970s are still painting and exhibiting, occasionally, at Louis K. Meisel's gallery in SoHo. No doubt there is a crisis-proof market for this kind of work – and as we already heard from Meisel himself, the artists in his stable lead lives of a type that will probably see them continuing to ply their trade for some time to come. In Britain, I have come across the

from AFTERALL, summer 2010, issue 24

work of Alan Michael, who has painted both the shiny, undulating body of a Mini Cooper (*Cars and Houses*, 2008) and the harsh gleam of freshly polished shoes (*Untitled (Shoes)*, 2005): it is hard not to look at the latter without thinking back to Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980–81) series, which, along with the Wells Fargo Center, figure so prominently in Fredric Jameson's passionate critique of our postmodern simulacracy.[15] An exhibition I saw of the work of Thomas Demand in Berlin just recently also reminded me of the fact that our deeply seated suspicion (if not outright hostility) towards hyperrealisms of all kinds is ultimately rooted in the low esteem that such fancies as the technique of trompe-l'œil painting have been held in historically – a residual trace of the original Platonic indictment of all mimesis, perhaps.[17]

What ultimately matters most in any current consideration of Photorealism (or of the currency of Photorealism as such), however, is its relation to the tradition of realism more generally: perhaps the 'problem' of Photorealism is not so much situated in its retrograde dependence upon the largely discredited truth-claims of photography, but in its realist pedigree instead – and for much of the past century, pictorial realism has mainly been the object of scorn and condescension, or of pity at best. Indeed, aside from their fascination with the decidedly unsexy topic of work (and, just as importantly, the classes who perform this work), is it not simply their unflinching attachment to an unashamedly 'realist' agenda, as much as their industrial-like production that has ensured the systematic art-historical marginalisation of both Socialist Realism *and* Photorealism, as evinced by so many authoritative histories of twentieth-century art?[18] Some have been rescued since, so there may be hope for the critical plight of the Photorealists; their contribution to the intellectual history of realism, which I have attempted to locate in the historical relationship of their work to the transformation of the workplace, will turn up at the forefront of this eventual reappraisal.

In the meantime, a new, post-Photorealist realism may well be readying itself to dominate the art scene in the decade to come – for crises truly breed realisms, and 'crisis' has been the unofficial name of our time for a little while now. Realism proper (that of the original nineteenth-century variety); Socialist Realism; Walker Evans's, Dorothea Lange's and Diego Rivera's realism; Capitalist Realism; Critical Realism; and, most topically, Photorealism: they all belong to defining moments of economic, political, social and cultural crisis – the last, as we have seen, to a crisis that concerned the world of work in particular, resulting, precisely, in depictions and descriptions of its gradual dismantling. The fact that the glory years of Photorealism were also marked by an economic downturn (hence its sensitivity to issues surrounding labour, and its nostalgia-laden espousal of a good old-fashioned work ethic) is not without importance when considering this particular realism's afterlife in the current era – one sorely in need of financial realism, and of a return to (rather than of) the real as in 'real work'.

---

16 That is to say, it is hard not to look at Alan Michael's painting of shoes without thinking back to the debate sparked by Jameson's reading of Warhol's shoes: Jameson famously discusses Warhol's well-publicised shoe fetish in relation to an early icon of artistic modernity, Vincent Van Gogh's *Paar Bauernschuhe* (*Pair of Boots*, 1883). In the former, he identifies 'the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all postmodernisms. [...] Then we must certainly come to terms with the role of photography and the photographic negative in contemporary art of this kind; and it is this, indeed, which confers its deathly quality to the Warhol image.' F. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, op. cit., p.9. It is interesting to contrast Warhol's morbid glaze with the heroic depiction of death in Courbet's paintings of trout.

17 Thomas Demand, 'Nationalgalerie', September 2009—January 2010, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. The 'problem' (if we want to call it that) of Demand's work and working method is best explained by referring to the monumental installation *Grotto*, which was exhibited by the Fondazione Prada at the 2007 Venice Biennale — the first time, in fact, that Demand allowed the viewer to peek behind the scenes of his production process. In this exhibition, the visitor could not only admire Demand's large-scale photograph of a gloomy, cavernous interior, but could also lay eyes upon the actual model that was built for the occasion over a period of two years. The press release proudly revealed that no less than 900,000 different layers of cardboard had gone into the production of the 36-ton object, which thereby alone became the centrepiece of the exhibition. Here, Photorealism again crossed paths with the heroism of *work* — simple awe at the endless hours of monastic labour that, without a doubt, must have gone into the making of Demand's model: the best ad hoc definition of a simulacrum one could imagine.

18 See, for example, note 3. One could argue that both Socialist Realism and Photorealism have also been the victims of systematic art-historical marginalisation because much of the work produced according to its respective formulas turned out to be underwhelming or of inferior artistic quality — though this is obviously a problematic assertion to make, seeing as so many historical decisions on the contentious issue of artistic quality may in retrospect turn out to have been economically inspired only, i.e. in terms of a certain art form's relative success in the art market. Boris Groys has commented upon this troubling equation of what we regard as 'proper' ('good') art with that which is validated by the art market exclusively in the following suggestive terms: 'the official as well as unofficial art of the Soviet Union and of other former Socialist states remains almost completely out of focus for the contemporary art history and museum system. [...] The only exception is the art of Russian constructivism that was created under NEP, during the temporary reintroduction of the limited free market in Soviet Russia.' Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2008, p.5.

from AFTERALL, summer 2010, issue 24