

Kennedy Bradshaw



Vernacular
Photography
and Realism

Having built his own photographic record
of Vancouver on the stylistic
foundations of Atget and Walker Evans,
makes a case for the
resurrected work of a Yukon photographer

Ken Bradshaw at kitchen table; self-portrait ca. 1955

All photographs are 40.6 x 50.8 cm colour prints made from the
10.2 x 12.7 cm inter negatives of the original Kodachrome transparencies.
Images courtesy Keno City Mining Museum



Overview of Keno City ca. 1955

Kennedy Bradshaw was a mechanic from Cornwall, England. He moved to Keno City, a silver-mining community in the Yukon, in 1952. Bradshaw was also an amateur photographer who conscientiously depicted the everyday life of his small isolated community. When he died in 1981 he left several hundred 35-mm Kodachrome slides and a few black and white negatives. Recently, curator Robin Armour edited these slides and had sixty images printed for exhibition at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver. While many of the pictures could be dismissed as well-made snapshots, there are many more that demand the respect we usually reserve for artworks. The very fact that the exhibition was presented in an art gallery instead of a historical museum promoted a reception of the photos as aesthetic rather than documentary objects.

This recontextualization appears justified—for while Bradshaw described himself as a hobbyist, his photographs eschew the ritualistic motive of family photos. Bradshaw's interests were often closer to an anthropologist's; he took care to include important environmental information in his portraits and often focused on the place itself, in all of its quotidian particularity. This literary purpose was also combined with a formal awareness, which reveals Bradshaw's artistic intentions. Although his achievement can't be placed on the same qualitative level as the work of Eugene Atget, it can be placed categorically beside it. Neither photographer promoted their work as art—yet the artworld has claimed them. The re-categorization is not a horizontal process but a vertical one. Art crowns the hierarchy of photography's possible applications.

In fact, I found that as much as I admired Bradshaw's pictures, and wanted others to join in this admiration, it was this process of elevation that I more urgently wanted to explore. I would like to discuss the how and why of this elevation of vernacular photography to art status—how it could be connected to the historical development of Realism as a photographic practice.

This process has been going on at least since the discovery of Atget and has accelerated since the nineteen-seventies. Most notably, it has been critiqued by writer Douglas Crimp as a shifting of categorization from subject to author. Some have also seen it as a ploy to create new commodities for the art market, an argument that carries some weight with respect to fashion photography. Yet for this phenomenon to be so pervasive and

long-lasting it would seem that there must be more important and legitimate purpose behind it. This re-categorization has almost always been applied to photos which might loosely be termed documentary. It has never been a question with photographs which outrightly declared themselves as art through commonly accepted art codes.

Indeed, the source of much of the confusion around photography's status as art stems from the binary opposition of art vs. document, which formed almost immediately after the medium's invention. It was the instrumental potential of photography that was perceived as a threat to its candidacy as an art medium. In order to make the case for photography as art, the early pictorialists insisted on pictures which either mimicked academic painting or frustrated the documentary capacity of the photograph with stylistic techniques such as blurring. The resultant images could not be considered documents and must consequently be art, or so the argument went. This illusion was destined to fade, and even Stieglitz, the champion of pictorialism, eventually came to regard the movement as a failure.

Today the photos that have the most credibility as art are those which set out to depict the world in the manner for which the camera was designed. The camera is itself the fruit of centuries of experiment in paint, pen and pencil, with the laws of perspective and other problems of representation. There is nothing natural about the unmanipulated photograph, it is a highly evolved artificial construction. In the binarism of art vs. document that was born out of the neuroses of the pictorialists, a limiting and false structure was erected which has not adequately served art photography. Something has been missing from the discourse of photography as art. That something is what I would like to refer to as Realism. Here, I do not mean a merely realistic art but a Realist one—rooted in the aesthetic practice of nineteenth-century artists and writers such as Courbet and Flaubert.

It is necessary to distinguish the difference between the documentary and the Realist photograph. The term documentary has been used to describe the work of photographers as different as Ansel Adams and Walker Evans. Anything that wasn't arty was usually consigned to the documentary category. This despite the fact that the sentimental rhetoric of a photographer like Adams, W. Eugene Smith or Sebastião Salgado appears to derive more from a pompier painter like Bouguereau or a Neo-classicist like David.

Walker Evans, for one, saw himself as a realist artist after his hero Flaubert, despite the fact that he sometimes let his work be cast as documentary. Evans referred to his approach as "documentary style," with the emphasis on *style*. Just as an artist today is often drawn to the directness of a documentary photograph, Evans took the cue for his abandonment of pictorialism from documentary or photojournalistic photos. The German photographer August Sander also followed this route.

Clearly, few photos worth looking at twice are *merely* documents. A true document would only accidentally transcend its instrumental purpose. While a photographic document can be seen as a Realist picture, so can a staged photo by artists like Jeff Wall or Cindy Sherman. However, a staged photo is never documentary—unless we accept it as a document of the staging. Categorically, the document has no style, whereas Realism is



Three kitchen workers sitting at a table in a camp cookhouse ca. 1955

“There is **nothing** natural about the **unmanipulated** photograph”



Portrait of a man in jacket and tie ca. 1955

a style. With a photographic document, style is irrelevant; only the photograph's truth value as an actual physical trace or index of what is depicted is important. Although it may play with it, Realism is not reliant on this indexical truth of the document. In Realist photography it is the style and not the index that guarantees the truth of the picture.

There has been no sustained usage of the terms Realist or Realism to describe a photographic tradition which nonetheless exists and has been articulated through exhibitions and texts by various artists, curators and historians of photography. John Szarkowski, at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, and the French curator and critic Jean-François Chevrier have both done work on which a theory of Realist photography would have to build, but both stopped short of promoting the term itself. John Roberts has recently published a historical view of photography as a Realist art titled *The Art of Interruption*, and is the first to my knowledge to embrace the term. This long reluctance to employ the "R" word must surely be a testament to the staying power of the old binarism of art vs. document.

Art photography has historically sought to define itself as an immaculately conceived child. It wanted little association with the traditions of painted representation that preceded it. Photography was also not generally taught in art schools until the nineteen-sixties; before then it was seen as a commercial venture, not worthy of academic legitimation. Consequently, the notion of adapting a traditional notion of Realism to photographic practice was shunned. For the most part, recent attempts to define a Realist photo-art have continued to avoid the term and instead recall the new objectivity or factography of the twenties and thirties. Contemporary German photography continues to trace its genealogy to the *Neue sachlichkeit*. But this lineage proves inadequate to the artists' intentions when Thomas Struth makes lyrical, soft-focus flower photos or Thomas Ruff digitizes and alters his "objective" pictures of houses. It was only through the theory of the cinema, and especially the new-realist cinema of the post-Second World War period, that a language emerged which could adequately deal with these problems of photographic representation. The advent of conceptual art and feminist critiques of representation further developed our understanding of the continuity that runs through the traditions of representation.

This project of articulating a Realist photographic tradition is ever more complicated by the fact that the discoveries of expressive vocabulary in vernacular photography and the on-going proliferation of cinematic models, and avant-garde developments such as surrealism, have also all been absorbed into our understanding of what Realist art might be today. It is impossible here to explore this expanded contemporary Realism, but it is necessary to at least acknowledge the overwhelming dominance of the motion picture. The cinema has emerged as a meta-medium that can absorb almost any representational possibility. Realism may have died as a force in painting but it has triumphed through cinema.

In their essay "Realism and the Avant-Garde," Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner assert that it is easier to say what realism is not than what it is. They name the sentimental, the picturesque and

the anecdotal as the "three pitfalls" that historic Realism sought to avoid. Hollywood has largely taken over the job of indulging in these pitfalls in the way that was once the responsibility of academic painters. Neo-realist cinema sought to counter Hollywood in much the same way that Courbet countered the academy. The tradition of Realist photographs is likewise an important antidote to the falsity of images produced by the culture industry.

The notion of the vernacular has long been employed to refer to those photographs that, while not *intended* as artworks, are worthy of our attention. This category does not specify an exact aesthetic purpose. It simply allows for exceptional cases. However, I think an unconscious need to articulate a Realist tradition has been the motivation for most of these exceptional cases. Moreover, I cannot believe it is a matter of photographers like Atget or Bradshaw not seeing their work as art so much as there not being a context for their contemporaries to understand it as such. Consequently these photographers did not dare to imagine themselves as artists for reasons that may be strictly social.

I don't intend to make a developed argument for Bradshaw's work as art, but I will point to some of the more obvious indicators. His choice of a Leica camera and Kodachrome film point to technical prowess but don't guarantee much else. It is his literary and quasi-anthropological vision and his formal awareness that distinguish him. His view of the worker's kitchen is more than a snapshot—which would have centered on the dining men. Instead, we are shown the cooking facilities as being as important and telling as the people who use them. Bradshaw isn't just recording faces for sentimental reasons, he's telling us a story about life in the Yukon in the nineteen-fifties. The quotidian is his subject as he takes us from work to recreation to home. Bradshaw also finds pleasure in the act of description itself, his portrait of a friend seems driven by a fascination with the mildly comical shape of the man's nose. The attention to detail in his photograph of a picnic laid out by his wife documents things of historic value—namely, what did these people eat?—but it does so within a composition that is too sophisticated in pictorial terms to be dismissed as just a document.

The amateur takes pictures of things and understands the pictures as transparent representations. Bradshaw sometimes does this but, at his best, he constructs pictures; he is conscious of the frame and plays with it. This results in photographs that acknowledge the coexistence of the two-dimensional support and the three-dimensional illusion and is equivalent to the painterly devices used by Courbet and Manet to distinguish their vision from the transparency of academic painting.

The recuperation of mis-categorized or under-appreciated bodies of work is an on-going part of defining a Realist tradition in photography, of picking up the threads that tie artists as diverse in style and distant in time and place as Richard Billingham, Edward Hopper, Helen Levitt, Pasolini and Courbet. Bradshaw does what Realists do, he gives the consideration and weight to everyday life that used to be reserved for events of great social and historical significance. He reminds us that one of the greatest feats can be to imagine the real. ■

