

Passing Thoughts and Making Plans: An exhibition curated by Catherine Yass

Jerwood Space, 171 Union Street, London, SE1 0LN

4 November – 13 December 2009

*Thoughts, plans, notes, sketches, ideas, forays, hypotheses, guesses and photography*

<http://www.kultureflash.net/magazine.aspx> 27.11.09

By David Company

Of all the media available to art, photography seems to be the subversive leveler. It is the one which above all showed us that the casually observed could be every bit as profound as the thoroughly wrought; the half thought as revealing and satisfying as the fully thought; the first notation as vital as the end result; the photo picked up by chance in the street as rich and strange as anything pre-conceived.

While it is true that certain forms of photography can have the status of an initial sketch or doodle (think of the studio test-shot, for example) there is something so absolute about even the most off-hand photo that it seems final, complete almost as soon as it is begun. Ordinarily, photographs are not 'worked up' into an end form the way a sketch may become a painting, an armature may become a sculpture or a series of shots may become an edited film. One wonders if it even makes sense to talk of such a thing as an *unfinished* photograph.

Only the photograph's *meaning* seems to remain unfinished. And it is this tension between apparent finality and inscrutable open-endedness that gives photography what Walker Evans called, back in 1946, its *disreputable charm*. He suggested we have little choice but to accept this and "let the ambiguous procession of events reveal their own ambiguousness". Sixty-odd years later another Evans (Jason) averred that photography was a "Victorian parlour game that promised objectivity and delivered something else" and that "perhaps if there were any art to be had it would be in the difference between the two." Artwork and document. That stand-off between the photograph's competing allegiances was there from the start and it is not going away any time soon. So it was that photography only became 'art' in the era in which a condition of art

was to ask what art was and how it might be understood. For some this has been a bore but really it is the key to the intrigue and the endless renewal that keeps the medium vital. Photography could not help but smuggle the artless document into art and in doing so it opened a Pandora's box of anonymity, amateurism, accidents, automatism and archivalism. And that's just the 'A's.

It will always give you more than you bargained for. Take a photograph and straight away it seems to ask: Is this what you wanted? Did you *know* what you wanted? Were you guessing? Hoping? Was it *really* you who took this? Can you claim it? How much of it is actually your doing? Could you live with this? Are you responsible for it? The photographer Lee Friedlander knows all about the unpredictable photographic bounty when he shrugs "I only wanted Uncle Vern standing by his new car (a Hudson) on a clear day. I got him and the car. I also got a bit of Aunt Mary's laundry and Beau Jack, the dog, peeing on a fence, and a row of potted tuberous begonias on the porch and seventy-eight trees and a million pebbles in the driveway and more. It's a generous medium, photography." Well, it is generous in that it can turn all that stuff of the world into 'your vision'. That can make you look really good (and the world even better). But secretly photography hasn't given it to you so much as lent it, lent it as an image. And it is always winking at you, letting you know that with one false move it can claim it all back for itself. Generous, but a little sadistic too. Perhaps this is the source of its appeal. One *takes* a photograph, but one only *borrow*s the world from which it derives and to which it ultimately belongs. Appropriating an existing photograph for your own ends only extends this essential logic.

Photography has always been a loose association of technologies and applications and today it seems looser than ever. Perhaps this is why discussions about the specificity of the medium, about its definition, seem to produce more heat (and less light) than ever. But such matters are rarely resolved in advance, if at all. It is just as productive to look at what people do with it, to look at the working assumptions of those who are drawn to its possibilities. On this score the present exhibition offers us any number of openings. Let us consider just

one of them: materiality and its relation to thought and process. This is a thoughtful exhibition and a material one too. But those looking for a clear relation between these ideas might have their work cut out. How do we move from the world seen as an impromptu sculpture by Richard Wentworth's mobile phone camera to Cornelia Parker's contact sheets of silverware, all arranged for our inspection? From Jeremy Dellar's silent stills of the motion of collective music making to Sharon Lockhart's clutch of anomalous pictures gathered together like mute children at an orphanage? From the flat notation of Rachel Whiteread's photo-notes for sculptures and installations to Sarah Jones's rose bushes in shot/reverse shot and to Tacita Dean's photos of bottles in Morandi's studio? If the worlds in which these artists are interested are in limbo between something tangible and something intangible perhaps it is inevitable that photography is the conduit here, if not the means of expression. An apt way of making plans and passing thoughts. Of showing them for what they are and what they could be.