The Photogenic Image: Anne Zahalka's *Leisureland*

Blair French

In his catalogue introduction to *How You Look at It: Photographs of the Twentieth Century* at the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, Germany (2000) co-curator Heinz Liesbrock, claims that the exhibition "takes the strand of photography predicated on visible reality to be the mainstream of the medium and the heart of its contribution to the history of art in this century."[1] Photography here is thought of as a fundamentally realist art. This is a position typical of much critical reflection upon photography in those last few years of the twentieth century. Furthermore, it is one posed not just in the midst of – indeed perhaps *at* the heart of – a proliferation of digital imaging technologies that have served to elide indexicality as a defining condition of the photographic, but also in the wake of a particular form of postmodernism that treated photography not only as the medium but the very *act* of image transmission. Within this form of postmoderism defined by quotational acts of appropriation, photography was seen to constitute a network of transactional languages or codes. So this particular manifestation of a realist position follows in the wake of, and incorporates, the idea that photography offers a unique means by which to access, intervene in, manipulate (even fabricate), and to emit and exchange as visual information the very fabric of material and social life. Thus, although texts of the character of Liesbrock's essay would tend to deny it, realist configurations of material culture and the conditions of social life need no longer preclude an ever-proliferating, inter-textual conception of the sign (particularly in the realm – the *culture* – of the photographic).[2]

In formal or structural terms there are a number of trajectories in contemporary photographic art practice intersecting in different manners with this drive towards, and of, the real. In this paper I deal with work that may be framed within one in particular – that tendency towards colour, large (often mural-scale) images sourced in part in various modernist histories of view photography and factographic photography, in part in conceptualism, in part in the work of 1970s New Topographic photography, and in part also in the work of the so-called Düsseldorf School. Of course such work also draws upon various representational tropes traditionally associated with other artistic genres such as painting and cinema as well as forms and strategies associated with commercial art and advertising.

Almost all of the current trajectories alluded to above participate in one way or another with what might be figured as an often emphatic reassertion of the photographic image – both as a component of, but perhaps more crucially also as means to visual re-organisation of, the lived world. Such images appear to resist or mute the photograph's invasion by or status as text via an insistent

photographic visuality presenced in a variety of fundamentally mimetic, transcriptive or realist guises. Witness the popularity internationally of the work of Andreas Gursky or others of the Düsseldorf School (Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, et al); of the work of Jeff Wall or Gregory Crewdson to name just a few; or more locally the popularity of the work of Anne Zahalka, Rosemary Laing, or younger emerging artists such as Darren Sylvester. And witness concurrent with this also a revisionist project in the critical and curatorial re-staging internationally of the importance to contemporary art practice of figures from the history of photography as diverse as August Sander, Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Larry Clark, William Eggleston and Stephen Shore.

With this in mind, let me risk a generalisation. In the work of a number of the most prominent international photo-artists of the past decade we have seen an apparent shift of emphasis away from a deployment of photographic images as constituent discursive components within the artwork towards the presentation of the singular photographic image *as* artwork itself. Crucially, what follows is a shift whereby the image (in material form) becomes the total arena in which the conditions, as well as the perceptual and cognitive actions, of art are staged or pictured. (This holds even when individual images are organised within sequences or series.) Furthermore, such images frequently seem contrived so as to appear seamless, unified, not made up of disparate components whose intersections and exchanges are themselves visual subjects, but rather constructed in order to visually suppress this structure in favour of a hermetic realm of the image. Of course digital technologies facilitate this in new ways, and so we have this situation whereby the image is perhaps most formerly resolved when most clearly composed as a network of visual data.[3] Appearance, then, is crucial in much contemporary photographic work, far more so than any overt referencing of the actual means or strategy of image construction. We are witness to a re-emphasis upon surface, upon spatial arrangement and composition as the organisation of visual units of information; upon, in short, the integrity of the exemplary image form, even when incorporating otherwise disruptive, performative gestures. All this is interwoven with another almost contradictory development or shift: one away from an emphasis upon pre-existing images as subject matter – that is, away from an appropriationist standpoint in which photography is deployed to quote, re-present or reiterate its own existing product – and towards the presentation of new, more immediate relations of image to world. This might involve the presencing of an apparently more direct, less mediated relation of image to world, to an idea of the photographic image being of, or at least deriving from, a scene or object in the anterior world. Or it might involve that continuing visual organisation of the world so as to conform to the imperatives of the photogenic – to live up to its desired status as image. Either way, what is particularly unique about our present situation is the potential manifest in digital imaging technologies to discriminate each image ever so slightly from every other, in order that every image may be made anew. Maybe then we need to set aside a critique of the infinite reproducibility of the photographic in favour of a critique of its infinite mutability, its capability to create of the world a

world anew in each and every image. Unquestionably, we need to seek means of analysis with regard to recent photographic work that resist both claims made upon apparently 'naturalistic' photographic images in contemporary art in the name of a post-appropriation, post-theoretical, post-textual visual realm and directly contradictory claims made regarding the absolute evacuation of social agency from the photographic image via both textual and digital indeterminacy (or an overwhelming relativity).[4]

Already here I have introduced one of the key relations in contemporary photographic art – that tensile relation between the hermetic image and the image as a more porous, constitutive element of the material world. This alludes to one of the most crucial questions at stake in any analysis of such strands of practice (those large-scale, colour, almost engineered images, that are so ubiquitous): how might it be possible to think of the carefully composed hermetic image as existing in a critical (that is, necessarily engaged) relation to material and social life?

As I want to set out here, a possible response is to treat the apparent disconnection of image from world as a relationship of spacing, a casting in relief by each other of image and world. Such a conception has, of course, a grounding in Derridean post-structuralism, but also within Platonic image theory. Neither of these genealogies, however, is my explicit concern here. What is important is an acknowledgment of how such a conception differs from a Baudrillardian notion of the material (and social) world's absolute displacement by the image realm so influential within certain modes of postmodern photographic criticism and practice. Furthermore, awareness of the overt relation between this conception of an image/world relation and a late twentieth-century critical predilection for modes of, or appeals to, realism is equally important. This is despite the fact that much of the work we might deal with within such a framework also departs from long and dearly held conceptions of photographic realism. (In fact, in the eyes of some of its most vehement critics such work denies or even corrupts photography's realist character.)[5]

In pursuing this realist angle we must shift our emphasis a little from a positivist conception of realism, to one of a 'critical realism' akin to that which John Roberts seeks throughout his book *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, where he describes Jeff Wall's large-scale colour scenes in terms of "a 'realism' of the cinema, of the advertising hoarding and corporate photograph."[6] This is a realism that seeks to understand the manner in which the visual image both emanates from and feeds back into an active, critical relation to the social forces about it, so resisting capitulation to, and reinforcement of, a culture of consumption and commodification. Such an understanding of realism allows for the possibility of the work we are looking at to evidence a criticality beyond a pretended reconciliation of advertising culture and history painting; that allows for the possibility of its integration of advertising culture, cinema and history to stand as a

visualisation of the social conditions of contemporary spectacle culture. And so the real visualised in such a realism is, in one sense, simply the network of coded relations of our viewing bodies to those visual networks enmeshing contemporary society – the visual presencing of advertising, television, cinema, video, computer graphics, publishing and so on. This is also a mode of realism in which an action of visualising photographically takes place within contemporary practice in a dynamic, mutually constitutive (and semiotically generative and discursive) relationship with social and material life: that is, one which rejects a passivity of visual relation to the conditions of social and material life; which rejects a linear model of photographic description or transcription whereby the real precedes and determines the form and affect of representation, thus prescribing a circular re-intervention of the latter into the former.

Roberts argument in general is compelling. But in considering much contemporary practice perhaps it would be more appropriate to shift our focus even further, to move away from a framework of realism *per se* to one of photographic visuality: to an insistent *depictiveness* within which traditional conceptions of photographic realism are subsumed, to an idea of the photogenic picture which depends upon the look, the *apparentness* of the photographic rather more than its pure operation.[7]

Let me return now to my conception of an image/world spacing and pose some further questions that arise, particularly when thinking of two assumptions or premises that have tended to hold as critical orthodoxy in photo-theory and history since at least the publication of Susan Sontag's *On Photography* a quarter of a century ago (that is, prior to, throughout and subsequent to the most overt manifestations of photographic postmodernism). One: we consume photographic images as never before. Two: they are the commodity form *par-excellence* of contemporary culture. Now, if, indeed, the image realm has become the surest mode or standard of social and material reality (of experience and knowledge) then how is it possible, if at all, to maintain some critical space between the image and the world as pictured within the arena of the photographic image itself? For might not this supposed domination of the world by the image also demand a loss of the agency of the photographic, a loss of the critical distance between object (world) and representation, the space in which thought and action, manifested in and provoked by the photographic image might take place? How do new modes of realism, or the staging of realist effects based on tradition and convention, engage or re-engage such a critical space, if at all? Is it possible to stage a critical relation to a culture of the photographic within the field of the image that both entirely encircles and is in turn co-opted into the determining conditions of that culture?

To pursue these questions involves a questioning of the relation between visual knowledge and expectation. In such a visually coded, conditioned and literate world, is it possible for singular photographic images to resist immediate absorption within the conventions of such, to exceed or

disrupt, or, in a Benjaminian sense, shock or jolt, cultural expectation of the image's agency (or lack-thereof)? Does a general (social) level of visual sophistication erode the singular image's potential to challenge the assumptions and conventions from which stem this sophistication? Can the photograph ever again visualise for us a way of looking, of thinking, of understanding that is not immediately re-absorbed back into our photo-obsessed culture? For so flooded with photographic imagery has contemporary culture become that it (culture) itself might best be described as fundamentally photogenic, where all cultural manifestations, all representations, all commodities aspire to, or more so nowadays actively partake in, the look of the photographic. What is the effect of such a culture upon our perceiving, cognitive selves? Can the photographic image be recuperated from its incessant reiteration of what Victor Burgin refers to as a society "saturated with hallucinatory imagery", a society of, and as, the "phantasmagoric"?[8] Or does the photographic image, even within a search for, or a staging of, the real, bind each viewing occasion into an experience of the further loss of the real?

There are many critics who lament this condition of cultural photogenia, this apparent colonisation of social space by the image, and claim that it can only be further enforced by work such as that discussed below. In his essay 'Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity',[9] Fredric Jameson claims that aesthetic experience is everywhere, saturating every aspect of social life, and in doing so making the very notion of the work of art problematic and "the premise of aesthetic judgement something of a misnomer."[10] If this is so, is it possible for not simply a work of art, but further a photographic image presented as a work of art, to differentiate itself from all the other like representations circulating throughout and as culture other than via requisite institutional and economic framing?[11] That is, is it only the action of the art institution or transaction that marks the replication of industrial or commercial modes of image production (the construction of large 'stage-sets', the utilisation of billboard scale printing, etc.) as signifying the possibility of a critical relation to the operations of corporate and financial power? Are these photographic stagings of the mass mechanics of corporate cinematic culture therefore prey to co-option by, and reiteration of, existing structures of social, financial and representational power? Or do they resist such co-option via a staging within their very image forms (that is prior to cultural framing or transaction) of those very cultural conditions of their formation? Furthermore, since much of the work adopts a look of photographic naturalism, or the look of the Western picture – complete, intact, sealed against the world – does it simply betray a nostalgia for a time when the picture was considered as truth, as source of empirical knowledge of the world? Are we simply looking at photographic stereotypes? Are some of these images but tired rehearsals of more complex, insightful models of the photographic image developed throughout modernity?

It is hard to look beyond this Jamesonian pessimism, but still important to do so; not just in order to attempt some identification of an active, critical component *within* the very form and presence of

contemporary photographic images, but also, as a viewing subject, to resist an alienating seduction by the seamless world of the photographic. All this requires that we question whether or not the images we are concerned with exist simultaneously within, and at reflective distance from, the culture which they epitomise. If they do then we might begin to perceive of ways in which the colonisation of social space by the photographic may in fact be best critically addressed from within the arena of the photographic image itself.[12] Such a project requires that social agency and criticality be sought as *not just* latent presence but partial subject *and manifest form of the work*.

In an article on the work of Andreas Gursky in *art/text* Norman Bryson locates Gursky's work within a German photographic lineage arcing back through the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher to that of August Sander.[13] Bryson identifies a number of fundamental contradictions, double relations or folds in Gursky's work. There is a tension, he claims, between the impulse in Gursky's images towards a Frankfurt School-like mode of cultural critique, and an impulse towards the picturesque. There is a strain placed upon indexicality by the poetic exaggeration of Gursky's images. Gursky has, of course, utilised digital composition technologies in his images over the last decade to, as he himself claims, highlight his artistic concept of the picture, to weave together countless interrelated micro and macrostructures in accordance with an overall organisational principle.[14] For Bryson, this exaggeration is not necessarily a problem – he identifies physiognomic exaggeration at the heart of the analogue or indexical images of Sander and the Bechers also. What is an issue for Bryson is Gursky's lack of pretence to naturalism, his making visible the seams of his work. This would appear to contradict some of our opening thoughts. However, this very visible hyper-reality of Gursky's work is directed not towards a discursive analysis of the modes of image construction – an analysis of representation as language – but towards a saturation of visual hyperbole that itself constitutes a key aspect of contemporary social experience. For if we live in a photogenic culture, then rather than an oppositional denial of such a condition it may take the deliberate engorgement upon the photogenic to spark some critical spasm at its affective place in our lives; to displace our visual complacency, to lift the image from its consumptive banality.

According to Bryson, Gursky's images resonate with all the various modern means of understanding the macro conditions of life – the quasi-sciences – which, like Gursky's images, deploy totalising frameworks or panoramas. As exercises in the mapping of social relations, Gursky's images attempt a picturing of the interconnectivity of all sectors and experiences simultaneously, within individual images. But they sit at this fold between criticality (or the social) and the picturesque (or the aesthetic), and so for Bryson the key question is whether this contradiction, this double trajectory, damages the work, or "express[es] – deliberately or symptomatically – a wider uncertainty about the intelligibility of the social as such."[15] Bryson's question is, then, very similar to that being posed here. His conclusion, however, is similar to, if less strident than, the position of Jameson, or even

elsewhere Benjamin Buchloh, regarding cultural aesthetisation, or what we might prefer to think of as a culture of the photogenic.[16] "The aesthetic field", Bryson concludes of Gursky's work, "seems to swallow the rest of the social field."[17] So if Gursky's work sits within a lineage of German photography concerned with social mapping, what happens, Bryson asks, if it indicates, after all, that such maps are "only certain kinds of pictures?"[18] What happens indeed? And what is already assumed in that pejorative phrase, '*only* pictures'?

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Now there is no great value here in pursuing a comparative mode of analysis with the work of Andreas Gursky as a means of undertaking a critique of Anne Zahalka's recent *Leisureland* work (1998–2001). Whilst they share certain formative histories, conceptual concerns and pictorial structures, they are produced within different cultural contexts and sites and to vastly contrasting financial imperatives. This stated, Zahalka's images, picturing public spaces of Australian leisure, might benefit from discussion on terms similar to those proposed by Norman Bryson in relation to Gursky's work. Zahalka's images deploy conventions of photographic realism (for example the panoramic form and documentary connotations of record) in tandem with contemporary technologies that facilitate a precision of colour and detail, an organisation of pictorial surface, and a scale hitherto associated with either traditional history painting or the advertising billboard.[19] These technologies allow a totality of visuality, an intermeshing of minute detail and totality of social (and compositional) organization; or, as Gursky states, an intermeshing of the micro and the macro unavailable to human vision. Furthermore, Zahalka's images assume a mantle similar to that taken on by the work of Gursky or indeed that of Jeff Wall – a 'picturing of modern (or contemporary) life' that evidences both fascination for, and alienation from, corporately determined public space. As with Gursky's work, Zahalka's *Leisureland* photographs deal with public sectors or domains – some exceptions notwithstanding there is little sense of individuated experience portrayed throughout the series. In working through these photographs we are reminded of the sorts of spaces characterised by French anthropologist Marc Augé as the 'non-places' of 'supermodernity': spaces created for the processing of information, goods and human bodies in which all subjects are cast as identical data units (here, in the main, as consumers or spectators), all individuals contracted within specific transactions. Augé's non-places are marked by an absence of identity, relations, history or organic society.[20] However, Zahalka's overall project is not dogmatic in this regard. In fact, in many respects the diversity of both Zahalka's chosen subjects and her pictorial structures underlines the caveat in Augé's own argument that aspects of these non-places and of more conventional anthropological places characterised by social organisation always inhabit the other, each the active potential for the other. Zahalka's overall project, then, does manifest some potential for a certain resistance to, or a critical distancing upon, a double relation of social alienation from, but fascination for, these images

as sites of contemporary culture. Like the cultural sites and scenes that they depict, Zahalka's works are organised in obedience to the imperatives of photogenia. There is a fine and fluid line that Zahalka's images straddle between a critical realism employed in the picturing of the conditions and imperatives of social organisation, and a reiteration of, or co-option to, the seduction of the photogenic or the look of the photographic image. Treating them as the former recalls Roberts' position on the work of Jeff Wall. Taking the latter line echoes Jameson's complaint that the photographic image, in depicting a depthless experience of social inaction, merely compounds a culture of consumption, staging the consumption of our own acts of visual consumption, locating us, as viewers, as host to the photograph's parasite. The implication of this seemingly impossible bind is exactly that possibility Bryson leaves hanging at the end of his text – perhaps any mapping of social experience itself may now by necessity have to resort to the form of the image or the picture, may have to conform to the imperative of photogenia.

Derrida Lecture (1999) and *Open Air Cinema* (1999) provide useful entry points to *Leisureland*. Both are panoramic images and both picture audiences as if from (or near) the back row of the 'theatre'. The audience in each is viewing a screen, which occupies the centre (or near centre) of the image. In the first this is the image of philosopher Jacques Derrida in conversation on stage at the Sydney Town Hall. In the second the audience are at the open-air (outdoor) cinema at the Sydney Royal Botanic Gardens looking out at a blank projection screen protruding from the harbour waters. In *Derrida Lecture* Zahalka deploys a conventional formal arrangement. The flanking pillar forms of the Town Hall – in fact the whole architectural site – provide an utterly rigid sense of perspectival recession and space, as does the concentration of the pictured viewers upon a central viewpoint. In terms of spatial organization, then, the image draws upon both painterly and photographic conventions. Furthermore, the social organisation of leisure is pictured as a gathering of individuals focussed upon visual consumption (and thus as viewers we of course mimic their subject positions, or they ours). The relations between pictured individuals are unimportant, in fact non-existent. Each spectator merely shares with the other the condition of spectator, consumer of the same scene, or event as scene. And of course, it is event as scene or spectacle, the image of Derrida as (slightly displaced) point of visual concentration rather than his tiny body on stage.

Open Air Cinema pictures a similar stripping out of social interaction. But the spatial organisation is different. Here is an outdoor site that is pure picture, a layering of backdrop planes (harbour surface, illuminated city skyline, opera house, harbour bridge), rather than a space of graduated recession. The focal point sits forward of the pictorial space, operating in a classic Lacanian sense of a screen through which consciousness and world mediate each other. Whereas in *Derrida Lecture* the confined, enclosed space and event are pictured as conforming to the photogenic, here it is the broader cultural site – Sydney as tourist brochure backdrop, as photogenic beyond PhotoShop's

wildest dreams – that so conforms. Thus, in *Derrida Lecture* the spectators are incorporated within the spectacle, but in the image of the cinema, thanks to the disruption of perspectival recession, they sit separated from the photogenic scene: they consume it for sure, but are not so consumed within it. Indeed, as viewer of the image we inhabit their space this time, or they ours. (Whereas the viewing position structured into *Derrida Lecture* is slightly beyond and above the seated audience.) And of course Zahalka's decision to picture the projection screen as a blank or empty silver space makes of it both structural marker and signification of a certain resistance to a form of mass consumptive immersion (these figures are not, in fact, consuming anything other than what they choose to project upon or through the empty surface or pictorial frame of the screen.)

Two images of gambling spaces, *Penrith Panthers (Poker Machines)* (1998) and *Star City Casino (Oasis)* (1998), deploy less controlled, less apparently rigid structures. The former makes use of that high viewpoint (much favoured by Gursky) which appears to 'tip' the scene up parallel to (or as) the surface plain. Although in this image such a tilting of the plane is only partial, the effect of depth giving way to surface organisation is intensified by the network of poker machine lights, carpet patterning, and illuminated signage all organised within interlocking grid arrangements, mapping the coordinates of depth across the massive poker machine room, and of height up the wall to further mezzanine levels. The dominant position of the neon text 'interactive' across the picture surface appeals to both the subjective social documentary constructions (of, say, Walker Evans) and the overt textuality of 1980s appropriation art. But even more importantly, it further signifies a collapsing of distinctions between architectural, pictorial and textual space in the image.

Star City Casino (Oasis) also figures space as a sort of notational field in which the illusion of depth gives way to the visual insistence of a surface field in which all elements are equally available and absolutely interconnected. Here the interior space of the casino plays a sort of double game with the image. The room itself is an almost hallucinatory space with its elaborate nightsky ceiling and lack of spatial definition (in terms of subverted delineations between walls and ceiling for example). But this is no *trompe l'oeil* illusion of either exteriority or 'natural' space. Nor, however, should it be treated as a hyper-real or hybrid space informed by the rhetorics associated with digital or virtual architecture (that is, by the assertion of a final collapse into each other of natural and built environments and their distinct experiences of spatial and temporal coordinates).[21] Rather, this is in a sense architectural space designed to the imperatives of photogenia – as photographically pictorial prior to any individual occasion of its picturing. Thus, basic pictorial form and photographic appearance as content of Zahalka's image strangely pre-exists even itself. This is a pictorial composition of a pictorial composition, or a photographic rendering of the photographic, which is

not to say that Zahalka's image marks a mere reiteration of or loss within the picturesque. For a comparative look at *Penrith Panthers (Poker Machines)* and *Star City Casino (Oasis)* indicates how crucial the divergence of viewpoint is between them, and thus some indication of a potential avenue down which to pursue a critical visuality. The viewpoint of the former confers with that omnipresent, all-seeing 'eye-of-Hegel' position described by Bryson.[22] The latter, however, deploys a less elevated, less detached viewpoint, almost down at floor level, and perhaps not coincidentally depicts a recognisable, active subject at work – a labouring subject – in the form of a casino staff member (a cleaner) wheeling a trolley through the space. So, whilst in *Penrith Panthers (Poker Machines)* all subject individuality gives way to the notational depiction of leisure as financial and visual consumption – at best distracting from the social, at worst alienating – in *Star City Casino (Oasis)* cogent labour has not entirely given way to consumption. All of which is structurally reinforced by the pictorial organisation of the image.

Another *Leisureland* image featuring a space of gambling, *Bingo* (1998), presents an interior and acculturated (although relatively sparse) space of leisure – again an image of leisure as a relatively passive form of financial transaction. But this work images an altogether different set of social relations than those noted above. As with *Derrida Lecture* there is a rather classically constructed, enclosed (and enclosing), seamless pictorial space in the form of a large room or hall, pictured from one end at floor level. Rows of elderly people are pictured side-on, facing each other across long tables, except that they are not interacting with one another but are rather bent over, focussed on their bingo cards. This is a space that we as viewers effectively share with the subjects, except that in contrast to *Derrida Lecture* or *Open Air Cinema* we no longer share their spectorial condition. While immersed in individual concentration, they are spatially organised so as to suggest community, social interaction and subjective interdependency. Unlike the barely visible gamblers in *Penrith Panthers*, these subjects manifest individual characteristics; they are not consuming a visible spectacle as such, and the potential, in fact inevitability, of their eventual communicability is conveyed simply by their spatial organisation. This is, in fact, a very different social space – an anthropologically constituted place – than that pictured at *Penrith Panthers (Poker Machines)* or *Star City Casino (Oasis)*, and crucially it is staged pictorially as such by Zahalka. In short, the photogenia of the image is in its structural organisation rather than any pre-existing pictoriality of its subject. Indeed, it is a far more intimate photograph than many in the overall series.

So far I have concentrated upon two inter-related categories of images within *Leisureland*: those imaging leisure as itself a spectorial experience (whether concentrated or diverting), and those where leisure involves relatively passive processes of consumption. There are other works that also fall within these frames: of visitors to Oceanworld, of spectators at Royal Easter Show events and of an audience at an Imax cinema. But there are other strands to the series also, images that depict leisure

as activity: blurred figures driving golfballs out into a boy of water at night, others negotiating an indoor climbing wall, more still at the gym or swimming centre. This is not to suggest a kind of dichotomy cutting across the series, for it is not just their presentation in Zahalka's photographic images that makes these events or activities photogenic – that presents them as spectacle. Rather, their photogenic quality is actually a constitutive element of their very being, and it is this condition that is in fact both revealed and reiterated by each image. Therefore, in a number of these works Zahalka concentrates upon spaces that have been constructed to facilitate, even reconstitute, certain modes of human activity within heightened or concentrated schema – schema which appeal, which promote the virtues of the activity they enable, and in promoting themselves successfully must necessarily cohere to a photogenic conception of experience.

Take the mass of swimmers filling Bondi Beach in *Cole Classic* (1998), for example. This is an Australian scene *par-excellence*. It is also the photogenic ideal of the Australian scene. And it is also a concentration of the sociality of communal activity played out as both event and image. All of which may be to say the same thing. Whilst it is by no means the only outdoor image, it is apparently different from others in *Leisureland* for not depicting the outdoors as an enclosed stage setting (such as the 'theatre-in-the-round' structure of the Royal Easter Show works), or an illuminated (even projected) backdrop (such as in *Open Air Cinema*). This is Bondi Beach during the day. This is 'nature' – although how many sites in Australia could be more subject to cultural formation and signification than Bondi Beach? And so, in fact, as with *Open Air Cinema*, or *Bridge Climb* (2000) – featuring climbers at the top of Sydney Harbour Bridge by day with the city in the background – this is Sydney as a photographically constituted entity, a complete submission to the imperatives, increasingly commercial, of a photogenic self-conception. Whilst we have activity rendered at a distance, a horizon line, and recession finally marked via the faint mark of a headland, the scene is fundamentally flattened, reduced perhaps to two sections (foreground bodies and nature backdrop), or perhaps even more to one intermeshed photographic surface. The water is blue, the sky clear, the sand golden and the bodies if not photogenically perfect then certainly self-consciously bronzed and open to visual consumption. Most significantly of course, the various registers of matching bathing caps on the figures serve to cohere the parts into a visually pleasing whole.

I have considered just a small selection of Zahalka's images, but enough to emphasise the need for a mode of formal analysis to be embedded within any analysis of the ostensible subjects of Zahalka's images if we are to even approach an understanding of how such images might not simply picture a photogenic culture of image consumption, or social experience as spectacle, but might do so critically rather than merely reiteratively. Whilst tempting, it is just a little too easy to simply consign this work to the depiction (as pre-existing social condition) of a draining of sociality in contemporary culture, or a displacement of active subjects into the position of passive, fundamentally isolated

consumers of spectacle and distraction. Such an ascription would lead towards a critique of the photographer as a moralising social documentor, whether we view such a position in supportive or pejorative terms. But as soon as we begin to comprehend the ultimately simple fact that these images are themselves stagings of the spectacular, as well as images of the staging of the spectacular, then we must recognise the need for more detailed readings of the staging of the image both as and within the lived world.

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[1] Heinz Liesbrock, 'The Barely Visible Visible Perspectives on Reality in Photography and Painting', trans. Hugh Rorrison, in Liesbrock and Thomas Weski (eds), *How You Look at It: Photographs of the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000) 42.

[2] See, for example, Elisabeth Sussman, 'The Invisible Pencil of Queen Mab', in Lynne Cooke (ed.), *Jurassic Technologies Revenant: 10th Biennale of Sydney* (exh. cat.) (Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 1996) 27–32.

[3] For example, this is the case with aspects of the work of Andreas Gursky where images so seamlessly resolved that they betray their digital organization remain, nevertheless, convincing pictorial representations of the material world. See below.

[4] We need to avoid, I am claiming, the treatment of work such as that of Anne Zahalka as either the complete refutation of the significatory actions of photography or the embodiment of an ideology of the purely visual. See John X. Berger and Oliver Richon, 'Introduction', in *Other than Itself: Writing Photography* (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1989) n.p.

[5] Such a line of criticism runs through the essays in *How You Look at It*. Thomas Wagner, for example, writes of the denial of representational tradition in such "high-gloss pictures that hover between the aesthetics of advertising and overblown documentation, with [their] occasional forays into the gigantic inflation of trivia." Thomas

Wagner, 'Where the Rabbit Warms its Belly: On the Relationship Between Photography and Painting in the Digital Age', in Liesbrock and Weski (eds.), *How You Look at It*, 93.

[6] John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 187.

[7] Heinz Liesbrock touches on this in discussing the work of the Düsseldorf School: "They rely on the power", he writes, "of the visible while simultaneously questioning it … The ability to appear sensual while actually undermining the immediacy of the picture or its reliability as representation seems to lie at the heart of the appeal of these pictures today." Liesbrock, 'The Barely Visible', 40.

[8] Victor Burgin, 'The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Postmodernism', in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1986) 37.

[9] Published in his *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, (London and New York: Verso, 1998), the cover of which appropriately features Andreas Gursky's *Hong Kong Shanghai Bank*, 1997.

[10] Jameson, 'Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity', in *The Cultural Turn*, 93–135; 100.

[11] Furthermore, can the image ever again be province of the avant-garde? Jameson's answer to this is no. For Jameson, even the potential for a critical realist practice (as understood in Marxist terms) has been vacuated by the commodity status of the image. Jameson, 'Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity', 100.

[12] Scott McQuire, for one, takes such a position: "If the image-world has today swallowed the 'real world' to produce a mutant state of being which is neither real, nor yet simply imaginary (at least as those terms have been customarily understood), it is naive to envisage a political critique which could be located entirely outside the world of images". McQuire, *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Memory, Time and Space in the Age of the Camera* (London: Sage, 1998) 101.

[13] Norman Bryson, 'The Family Firm: Andreas Gursky and German Photography', *art/text* 67 (1999–2000) 76–81.

[14] Cited in Lynne Cooke, 'Andreas Gursky: Visionary (Per) Visions', in Marie Luise Syring (ed.), *Andreas Gursky: Photographs from 1984 to the Present* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1998) 14.

[15] Bryson, 'The Family Firm', 81

[16] See the Introduction to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000).

[17] Bryson, 'The Family Firm', 81.

[18] Bryson, 'The Family Firm', 81.

[19] I refer not just to technologies of camera, film and digital composition but also to printing and presentation technologies.

[20] See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

[21] This is even more pronounced in another work, *Star City Casino* (1998), where a room, pictured from above, recedes pictorially within its own mirror-wall reflection.

[22] See Bryson, 'The Family Firm'