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AN ANALYSIS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS OF JAMES COLEMAN

by
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RECORDED
COMMUNICATION

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The objective of this thesis is to try and locate the particular importance of the photographic image in the work of James Coleman. In trying to establish the currency of the photographic image in Coleman's work, two further questions need to be addressed. First, what are the methods or structures that are involved in the production of the work, and second, whether or not these structures connect him with other artists working with photography.

Born in Ballaghaderreen, Co. Roscommon in 1941 and following periods of study in Paris and Milan, Coleman has worked consistently. His most recent work, and the piece I will use as a starting point for my discussion, is his contribution to Documenta IX. Over his long career he has engaged with all kinetic mediums. Coleman's use of the photograph is not restricted to his recent works. However since 1989 the pieces have all remained within a similar formal framework, it is this body of work that will be discussed here. His work from 1989 onwards, I feel similar to his series of theatre pieces which were made from the late 70's till the latter half of the 80s in the sense that ideas or specific issues were elaborated over a number of works. Both involve questions of medium and its importance in the art making process.

I felt from the outset that writing this thesis on Coleman would be more about discovery. The value of this project lay more in researching the thesis than in any final statement on my findings. There was however one unavoidable problem, that of access to his work. This problem operates not on an intellectual level, but on a practical one. Coleman is an international artist and his work, particularly that of the past five years, is exhibited abroad, remaining within the international gallery circuit¹. Not being able to actually see or encounter Coleman's work here in Ireland presents anyone trying to understand the work and the artist, with grave problems. I have tried to somehow move my analysis around this problem drawing on every actual experience of particular work. However, I feel it would be foolish not to recognise this as a limitation.

Not being able to actually see work is not particular to the work of Coleman for it applies to the vast majority of contemporary artists work, although things have improved greatly with the

¹ Currently the only piece on public display is *Strongbow* (1978) which is on permanent display in I.M.M.A. However it is a compromise on the artists original intention which was to place the television screen on a 60s style tv table so as it would exist as a tv not just a monitor as is the case now.

opening of I.M.M.A. and the appointment of Declan McGonigle and Helen O'Donoghue. It remains the case that the work of most international artists reaches these shores only in the highly mediated form of books, periodicals, and art magazines. Unfortunately Coleman's work cannot be fully understood when presented in this way; the work not only takes up time and space as a theme but the pieces themselves are temporal structures.

Coleman was the only Irish artist to be selected for Documenta IX and I visited this exhibition primarily to see his contribution. It cannot be denied that part of my initial interest in the work was the fact that Coleman was Irish. However, after some research I felt that to try and connect Coleman's national culture with his work was beyond the scope of this thesis. On talking with James Coleman this was further confirmed. I am in agreement with Edward Said when he states that to call people 'Irish' or 'European' at best only serves as starting point in any understanding of the individual and at worst ignores the complexities of both society and the individual. In discussing four other artists I will look at an art culture as opposed to a national culture. Are there other artists with similar ideas, both formal and thematic, to Coleman? This will also serve to outline a possible community in which the work exists on an international level. This is not simply to isolate a uniformity amongst the work, but to posit the existence of a dialogue between his work and that of some other contemporary artists, who also work in the context of international galleries, through photography.

This thesis owes a lot to the support and generosity of James Coleman, who took the time to discuss the thesis with me. This enabled me to find a way of seeing the work which would reflect an awareness of cultural theories and ideas and subsequently their influence on Coleman's art making process and presentation.



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INTERTEXTUALITY

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'Intertextuality' as a theoretical term was initiated and defined by Julia Kristeva in *Problems de la Structuration du Texte* (1968). Broadly speaking she based the term around two points; firstly the theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a hermetic or self sufficient whole and hence cannot function as a closed system. Secondly; a text is available only through some process of reading, what is produced at the moment of reading is a result of the cross fertilisation of the particular text or textual material by all the other text that the reader or viewer brings to it. In this case when we talk of text we are referring to the visual text, the work of art.

John Frow in his essay *Intertextuality and Ontology* presents a clarification of Kristeva's theory in the form of a set of rules, or points;

'1. The concept of intertextuality requires that we understand the concept of text not as a self contained structure but as differential and historical. Texts are not shaped by an imminent time but the play of divergent temporalities.

2. Texts are therefore not structures of presence but traces and tracings of otherness. They are shaped by the repetition and the transformation of other textual structures.

3. These absent textual structures at once constrain the text and are represented by and within it; they are at once preconditions and moments of the text.

4. The form of representation of intertextual structures may be highly particular or highly general; they may be of the order of the message or the order of the code. Texts are made out of styles and idioms embedded in the language; out of connotations and collocative sets; out of clichés, formulae, or proverbs; and out of other texts.'

² Frow, 1990, p46.

Frow continues with a statement of six more points on intertextuality which focus on aspects of his particular concern, literature. The four points I have listed are I feel essential to any discussion of Coleman's work. It is important for many reasons to look at the work as a text of the visual that is given a context by the viewer. The work is activated by a process of looking and a subsequent search for meaning. Of course this could be said for all works or texts. However, what is particular to Coleman's visual endeavours is a search to create an awareness of the processes of



looking.

James Coleman's contribution to Documenta IX was titled *Somewhere, somewhere there are images ...* (1992). It was Coleman's first time to show at Documenta and he was the only Irish artist amongst the 199 international artists. The work was situated in the Orangerie, a building which faced onto the main park in Kassel. The physical arrangement of the piece was similar to previous work. The viewer entered a darkened rectangular room. Against the wall closest to the entrance stood three projectors. With the use of a dissolve machine they alternately projected slides onto the wall opposite. The projected images filled the wall. As the images appeared and disappeared a monologue was heard spoken by a female with a distinct Irish accent.

The images were of several characters in their mid or late twenties and as the images unfolded we could see the characters in a variety of positions and groupings. Both images and monologue were cyclical. As the image ran from beginning to end (which all depended on one's point of entry) the place, and hence situation, which formed the background in the work was revealed until it was clear that in fact the characters were set in a photographers studio. This set up a mirror effect in the work in the sense that the images were about the staging of a photo-session where images were taken. What is happening within the images is in part a reflection of the cyclical structure of the piece itself. What is enacted is a double cycle, a cycle within a cycle. The outer cycle being that of the projected images, reels of slides on the projectors turning and repeating the sequence. The inner cycle, which is the content or subject of the outer cycle, being that of the process of taking photographs which is what makes up the outer cycle.

Coleman has always dealt with time in his work and here we see a questioning of our notion of time that is very much connected with the problematic of the photograph. If the viewer focuses on the people depicted in the images it is hard to define any continuous logic with regard to their possible relations or connections and the reasons for depicting them within the piece. Coleman continuously places the responsibility for interpretive decisions on the viewer. The effect of the dissolve only serves to create a greater contrast between the meticulously paced flow of images and



the irregularity in relations between the young people. The unfolding of the background, where bit by bit the edges and darkness that define the studio backdrops are revealed, undermine further any initial speculation or supposed narrative within the images. At no time is the photographer seen. At one point we see two women within an image. Their facial expressions indicate anxiety. And so what is set up is an expectation that the image that will follow will clarify the one that is being looked at. At no time does this happen so any logic must be collated out of a series of images where a fiction (which depends on each viewer) is fitted into or imposed on what is seen, like filling in missing notation on a music score.

Hence we can see a logic to Frow's statements, a text or work of art is not constructed within a vacuum or imminent time, but by a 'play' of divergent temporalities. If this is so then what allows for this 'play'? In Frow's fourth point he states that texts are made out of 'cultural norms', 'conventions', 'styles' and 'idioms'. In 'somewhere, somewhere there are images', and in his other work, Coleman draws on cultural norms, idioms and styles. The piece mentioned is focused directly on 'youth' and its culture. He manages this through consistent attention to the detail of a youth culture and its expressions. Its fashions, styles and conventions. The work brings to the fore how hair and dress change and how these changes are mediated and constructed through photography. In the images one can see the variety and eclecticism of today's trends, the retro-fifties look, the suede jacket pseudo gothic hippie look, and the glam dance look. Although the style of clothing does in some way define the characters any possible closure is undermined by the background, the studio with its clothing racks. There is no certainty or sincerity in how they present themselves, there is always a sense that they are waiting until they change again into another garb. In short the characters never have the possibility of a fixed identity. The textual nature of the work allows for speculation but never for certainty and hence closure. To say a text is available through some process of reading is a rejection of objectivity and a recognition that the process of looking involves a complex textual network of interpretations. Also in questioning the objective is in turn



to question our assumptions about knowledge and truth .

³ Frow, 1990, p47

"It (intertextuality) formulated the codedness or textuality of what has previously been thought of in non-semiotic terms (consciousness, experience, wisdom, story, gender, culture and so on)."³

This project of questioning has developed in complexity throughout Coleman's work and forms the link in a chain of concerns, such as time, death, identity and history all of which are particular to any debate within our own culture here in Ireland and in turn a western culture which looms even larger in its construction of a common universal identity. *Somewhere, somewhere there are images* poses a dilemma; can we recognise or take cognisance of the difference between reality and representations of reality?, or indeed one can go further, have we lost sight of this very dilemma?

Brian Wallis in his introduction to *Art after Modernism* outlines what constitutes the heart of contemporary culture;

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⁴ Wallis, 1984, Introduction.

"representations are those constructions through which we apprehend the world ...", but, "representations are constantly posed as real facts and their misleading plenitude often obscures our apprehension of reality. Our access to reality is mediated through a gauze of representations. What is oppressive about this contract is that the representational model we employ is based on a critical selectivity - defining, naming, ordering, classifying, categorizing, cataloguing ...,"⁴

I feel that the 'oppressive contract' that Wallis speaks of sets the stage for Coleman's work in the sense that in attempting to fit his images into categories the viewer must reconsider the oppressive means of understanding. Following this reconsideration (if it takes place) the work allows for a certain distance between what is expected and what is provided, representation and

reality. In *Background* (1991) Coleman's images draw again on photographs of fashion. The people are lifeless in comparison to those presented in *Somewhere*, *somewhere there are images* and are not part of that youth culture. Instead the appearance of the people suggest a stricter form of dress and conduct. Whereas in *Somewhere*, *somewhere there are images* the people appear to be in a sort of limbo between fixity and movement in *Background* the people are as still as the skeletal displays in the background. Perhaps Coleman is optimistic as opposed to cynical in his views of youth and youth culture.

Fundamental to the images is the question of identity and its relationship to representations. In focusing on dress and image Coleman is trying to connect the interdependence of photographic representation and identity. Also to reveal the process of making and remaking that takes place in the production of representations and reality. What he sets up is a possible parallel between the textual nature of the art work, the photo image and a similar process that dictates how we construct our own identities, the cyclical structure of the pieces reflecting a continuous process of construction and reconstruction of our identity, a process which is manifest in our fashion-driven visual culture.

In an extract from a seminar on 'identity' sponsored by *October* magazine Chantal Mouffe outlined the possible mechanics of contemporary identity construction. In doing so I feel she summarises what is happening when one views *Somewhere*, *somewhere there are images*. Her thesis on how human identity behaves reflects the thematic and formal structure of Coleman's work which is engaged in a constant process of construction and deconstruction through the use of conventional imagery set in a cycle of contradiction enabling no fixity to take place. Just like the physical state of the images themselves appearing then dissolving allowing the next image to appear then disappear. The experience becomes ephemeral through the repetition of the sequence. Since there is no beginning or end a narrative framework cannot be provided. In order to be able to look and see the piece one must accept that the images have no independence and just like our identity is



(fig. 1) BACKGROUND 1991.

formed and reformed in a constant textual process of change.

"There is thus a double movement. On the one hand there is a movement of decentering that prevents the fixing of a set of positions around a preconstituted point; on the other hand, and as a result of this essential non-fixity; the institutions of nodal points, partial fixations that limit the flow of the dialectical movement is possible only because fixity is not given beforehand, because no centre of subjectivity proceeds the subjects identifications. For that reason we have to conceive the history of the subject as the history of his or her identifications, and there is no concealed identity to be rescued beyond the latter."⁴

⁵ Mouffe in October 61, p28



MEDIUM

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SHERIFF

I. Interview with Richard
Keamey in Crane Bag

"When I gradually began to lose interest in a simple retinal reality I began to sense a feeling that I needed to take cognisance of the psychological dimension. To do this I initially used film to document later as a device of expression. I realised that my medium was as much a part of things as my eye or mind was."¹

Why then does Coleman generate his images through the photographic process as opposed to any other image making process ? Why in his recent work has he also maintained a consistent format ? Coleman's interest in photography and the way in which he uses the photo image in his installations, is significant in the sense that the medium is connected with the problems that the work poses.

The format that has remained constant since 1989 could be summarised as follows: the installations are housed in darkened rooms the images being projected on to one of the walls. Multiple slide projectors are used in conjunction with a dissolve unit to aid the transition from image to image. A dissolve unit is a machine that can link up a number of slide machines so as to allow for the fading in and out of images from one projector to another. Each image remains independent for a period until it begins to fade out letting the next image fade in at the same rate, a technique similar to that used in television and cinema. The format does vary from piece to piece but overall both the slide projection and dissolve unit are the key elements in Coleman's means of presenting the photographic image.

Although a recent discovery in wider historical terms, photography is inseparable from modern history and the development of modern industrial society. In many ways they are intertwined so much so, it is sometimes hard to separate them. Today our concept of the past is mediated through a nostalgic aesthetic that forms cliché notions of history. The photograph has become like a transparent looking glass, without a development or history of its own. With the photograph the

² It is curious to note that none of the 199 artists that showed in *Documenta IX* used computer generated imagery in any obvious way

³ Sontag, 1987, p349

more it permeates our everyday lives the more oblivious we become to its existence. We are a society of images continuously creating more images so as to mediate between images. Perhaps this is where popular culture lost the ability to maintain a critical understanding of the difference between representation and reality. Photography has a power that no other medium has; for the first time the representation possesses as much, if not more, potency than the reality it depicted.

Although many of the theoretical debates about photography precede the recent advance of computer generated imagery ² (the possibility of virtual reality, the manipulation of new video and photographic processes etc.) most of the texts still raise questions that are pertinent to the present day use of the photograph.

Susan Sontag in her essay 'The Image World' elucidates on the history of a society where photography is both present and absent as a cultural entity. In her discussion of Feuerbach and his writings she deduces from his statements what could be said to define modern society;

"That society becomes 'modern' when one of its chief activities is the production and consumption of images".³

The postmodern could be seen to be the next step in the development of a culture of the image. Photographs of everything have been acquired and disseminated through the media channels leaving no alternative but to make images from images. We revisit the past but not the reality because the reality is memory which is not material. Instead it is revisited through its representation, photographs. We are in the era of the remake in cinema we see what Jameson called 'nostalgia' where cinema desperately digs into its own pocket for raw material television talks to cinema and vice versa until ultimately television talks to itself (the *Simpson's* being television about television).

Since the mid-sixties artists have tried to address the power of the photographic image in the media and in popular culture. This was achieved through a subverting of the media's particular

visual language in order to expose the inner workings, the subtext. A similar aim preoccupied cultural theory of that time where a deconstruction of language (visual, oral, literary) was used to expose its part in a manipulative conservative culture. This activity, although ideologically motivated, influenced a generation of artists who began to see photography as the centre point of a larger cultural debate. That of empirical meaning as opposed to speculation, textual as opposed to hermetic. These artists departed from the deconstructivists, no longer satisfied in simply disorienting the viewer, a reconstruction or repositioning of the viewer was the aim of the work, allowing a critical discourse to take place.

"This is not simply 'deconstruction' but rather a process of 're-production' which involves a disorientation and reorientation of the spectator in which new signifieds are superimposed on the memories / anticipations of old pre-suppositions".⁴

⁴ Wollen, 1982, p188

Coleman's use of photography attempts to employ this tactic, to use memories and anticipations in a process of reorientation. Coleman uses memories and anticipations in two ways. First the images draw on images from our popular culture and how they play on our anticipations of the commercial and/or fictional use of photographic images in our everyday lives. Secondly memory is used in trying to find possible meaning in the relations between the images in the art work, in order to do this one must try to retain and recall the images that pass by. The photographic installations are mostly about a very immediate memory as opposed to a work like *Strongbow* (1978) which evokes memory in broader terms, of a historical narrative, the story of Strongbow.

⁵ One of the images used in the series was an image by Edourd Boubet. It is a coincidence that in 'Charon' Coleman uses a similar photograph and I wonder did he see the Varda programs back in the sixties

Rosalind Krauss in her essay *A note on Photography and the Simulacral* (1982) describes a programme conceived for French television by Agnes Varda. The programme was titled *Une minute pour une image, (one minute for one image)*⁵. Each week a photograph was shown for one minute. Viewers were then asked to contribute their opinions as to its possible meaning to the image.

Subsequently a variety of reactions from a broad section of the community was collected. Krauss notes that all the opinions were similar in one respect, all speculation took place around a narrative framework. Krauss then goes on to state why she feels there was such a similar process of interpretation amongst all the replies to Varda's experiment.

5 Krauss, 1990, p18

"...photographic discourse can never be properly aesthetic, that is, can have no aesthetic criteria proper to itself, and that, in fact, the most common photographic judgement being a judgement that reads things generically" ⁵

This reading through the generic is something that figures strongly in Coleman's photographic images and was also important in his theatre pieces. The people and the roles they play are as one dimensional as the images that represent them. The images created in both the theatre and photographic works mimic the fiction that is involved in the creation of these representations in our culture,

⁶ p22 Fowler, *Circa* no 17.

"The models developed are fictions on fictions, and it is in these ways that Coleman's theatre operates." ⁶

Why has photography maintained a position of a 'natural' as opposed to a 'cultural' product?. Barthes in *Camera Lucida* says of the photograph;

7. Barthes, 1967, p4

"The first thing I found was this. What the photograph reproduces to infinity has only occurred once the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." ⁷

Camera Lucida is a search for that property in the photograph which is more than just an exact representation created through chemicals and focused light. Barthes seeks out that which reinforces



the photographs 'natural' quality and the book can be seen as public record of an intensely personal journey. By contrast Sontag sees the underlying reason behind the use of the photograph its ability to control.

⁸ Sontag, 1987, p351

"... but a photograph is not only like its subject. it is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it " ⁸

Sontag continues with an elaboration on several forms of 'photographic acquisition'; it initially provides a 'surrogate possession' of the desired object also it provides the viewer or 'spectator' with a relation to an event or events. Photography can provide us with knowledge without experience (this being the most 'inclusive' form of acquisition according to Sontag). Photography provides for our desire to classify, redefining reality as a item for exhibition or surveillance (the home video camera being the latest development on this form). Finally Sontag concludes that all of these forms of acquisition are manifestations of a deep need to control and photography's gratification of this need, a

⁹ Sontag, 1987, p351

"control that could never be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information; writing"⁹

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In the context of Coleman's work I would argue that control has less to do with an empowering of the self, which I think is the thrust of Sontag's thesis, but rather a stabilizing of one's logic within a fixed framework. What I mean by fixed framework is those relatively enduring cultural structures that define our ways of seeing and reading. For example we read the written word from left to right and this informs us on an unconscious level that this is how information should be read (as opposed to Hebrew or Arabic which is read in the reverse direction). This applies also to our common sense of story or narrative. Coleman, through a particular format of presentation, suggests but never provides this narrative structure. Most important in the reasons behind Coleman's choice of photography is its use as a means of classification and hence clarification. There is a good reason why the development of modern propaganda runs hand in hand with the technical developments within pho-



(fig.2) CHARON 1989.



(fig. 3) CHARON 1989.

tographic processes. This power is still intact. There has however been recent legal decisions in America rejecting photography as conclusive evidence in a court of law. This could be seen as a sign of a growing consciousness, outside the realms of art practice and cultural theory, of the photograph as 'cultural' not 'natural' and a greater awareness of it's ability to deceive.

¹⁰ De Bruyn, p47, 1992

"As slides slowly fade in and out of view, sometimes superimposing images on top of each other our common sense notion of linear succession is shattered".¹⁰

Eric De Bruyn in his article on 'Charon' (1989) points to the shattering of a linear succession through the dissolve technique, while I would agree that there is a rejection of a linear succession of time, I do not see the dissolve as serving this purpose. The point of this technical device is, as I have previously mentioned, to carry the viewer through the images with a flowing visual surface. The dissolve eases the transition from image to image on the eye but this only serves to heighten the contrast between the flowing external structure and the 'shattered' internal narrative structure. Coleman's use of the projection avoids any sudden movement as the images pass and it works on a more subtle and complex level than De Bruyn gives credit for. The technique is also suggestive of that used in advertising and documentaries using historical paintings. Where the camera dissolves from one area of the painting to another, voice and sound animate what is in fact a static motionless picture.

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In *line of faith* (1991) a work made by Coleman for a site specific exhibition in Charleston, South Carolina, a notorious 'Ives and Currier' print is used as a starting point for the work. The print depicts a battle from the American civil war, the 'Battle of Bull Run'. Using local re-enactors he restaged the scene depicted in the print which is known for its creativity and licence with historical facts. It is the presentation rather than the subject matter that is of concern. When photographing the re-enactment of the print, Coleman made two photographs of the scene. Both were



(fig. 4) LINE OF FAITH 1991.

different in one way. The background remained the same however the foreground did not. Coleman, when photographing the enactment, moved the angle of the camera a fraction between shots. The result was that when the images were projected the background aligned perfectly and so was not in anyway disruptive to the eye but the foreground was not exactly registered, creating a disruption similar to that produced by an image out of focus. In presenting a representation of a representation (from an etched print to a photographic print in a possible lineage of representational methods) the work seeks to reorientate the viewer not to proclaim a truth or new objectivity but to further observe the representation as it has obscures the history of its own making. Coleman is engaged in a review, visually, historically and socially, of the way in which we perceive representations of reality. The title of the piece serves to point out how it adopts oblique perspectives (literally), in a comment on the 'blind' faith that historically has been placed on the western system of linear monocular perspective.

The slide projection of the photograph serves to avoid any problems with the materiality of the printed photograph -the paper, frame, glass etc. Also paramount to his use of the projection is the ability to have complete control over the time and order of viewing of the images. In works like *Charon* and *Somewhere, somewhere there are images* no one image can contain the intention of the work, rather it is the play of the images, a montage. The slide projection also suggests the possibility of motion. De Bruyn points out in his essay the very cinematic effect that the slide projection and dissolve creates. Again Coleman plays on the viewers expectations of the medium. One could be seeing stilted episodes of a feature film.

Coleman has placed the work at a junction between the photograph and the film, still and motion, suggesting both but neither. In doing this he avoids some of the problems with both forms. With the printed photograph Coleman avoids its commonality and hence the momentary gaze which is often all that is given by the viewer. With the slide and dissolve Coleman avoids the seduction of the motion picture. Coleman's aims fall very closely to those of a Godardian cinema. He shares an involvement;

¹¹ Cooke, p41, 1991

"... with the means by which film and its representational apparatus, the projector and or camera, construct the subject with the specific form of subjectivity constructed and hence with the structure of voyeurism in film as well as with an interrogation of the modalities of filmic representation"¹¹

There is a paradox within Coleman's use of the photographic. Although the medium is mechanically reproducible, Coleman maintains very strict control over his images and their reproduction. It is rare that an image will be printed outside the context of the piece it is a part of, especially before the piece has been exhibited. He succeeds in preserving his images as unique events and in a strange way has preserved the 'aura' of the art work even though it is made from a process that is often seen to destroy that same aura.

¹² Benjamin 1969, p221

"Even the most perfect reproduction for a work of art is lacking in one element its presence in time and space, its unique existence where it happens to be"¹²

Ironically this is confirmed by the work of Coleman which throws new light on another of Benjamin's definitive that the presence of the original is the prerequisite of authenticity. Coleman in placing his work at the midpoint between forms and avoiding definition not only reorientates on a visual and cognitive level but on a philosophical level too. The works question previously held ideas about photography and in doing so allows for a flux on a multiplicity of levels. Medium forms not just a channel or a means of expression but creates a continuous discourse within the work.

A COMMUNITY

The work of Coleman exists within a number of contexts and discourses. Firstly the work engages in a dialogue with the viewer when it is exhibited. But alongside this dialogue is an interaction with a broader visual culture or art community. And in turn within this art community are smaller communities, a series of artists that share similar formal solutions to similar concerns. In researching Coleman's work and relevant issues there where a number of other artists that were discussed in the same critical context as Coleman. The artists that I am referring to are, Dan Graham, Thomas Struth, Hirsch Perlman and Craigie Horsfield. All these artists share things in common, primarily the use of photography as their principle medium. It is and is not simply that all of the artists have exhibited together, are involved in collaborations or have professional and/or personal relationships. One could however map out a community of artists using photography for similar reasons and find that the strongest link was in fact curation. All the artists were connected through a curator or curators. In this case primarily through the curation of Jean-Francois Chevrier and James Lingwood. Obviously this is not particular or confined to Chevrier and those artists that work with and interest him, Jan Hoet and other Belgian curators (that contributed to the success of Ghent) have been accused of an emphasis on 'promotion' as opposed to 'curation' in their directing of Documenta IX however both Chevrier and Lingwood have formed a community, through exhibitions such as *A dialogue about recent american and European photography* (held in M.O.C.A. in 1991) and *de Apstand* (held in the Witte de Witt Centre for contemporary culture in Rotterdam in 1990) and I am interested whether Coleman is or is not a part of this community? On speaking with him he did agree that he shared common concerns and interest with these artists, (Struth and Graham in particular). But what is this common ground?

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Another Objectivity was an exhibition held in the Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris in 1989 curated by Chevrier and Lingwood. The work in the show is primarily about photography, through photography. Armon Barzel in a short introduction to the exhibition points to what it is

and is not;

¹Barzel, 1991, p7

"Another objectivity strives to point out artistic approaches to the concept of the image as object and as a picture while accepting the complexity of the visible. It is far from the concerns of Feuerbach (1843) about the preference of society for appearance over being, and Walter Benjamin's preoccupation with the loss of the aura of the work of art which is photographed and reproduced."¹

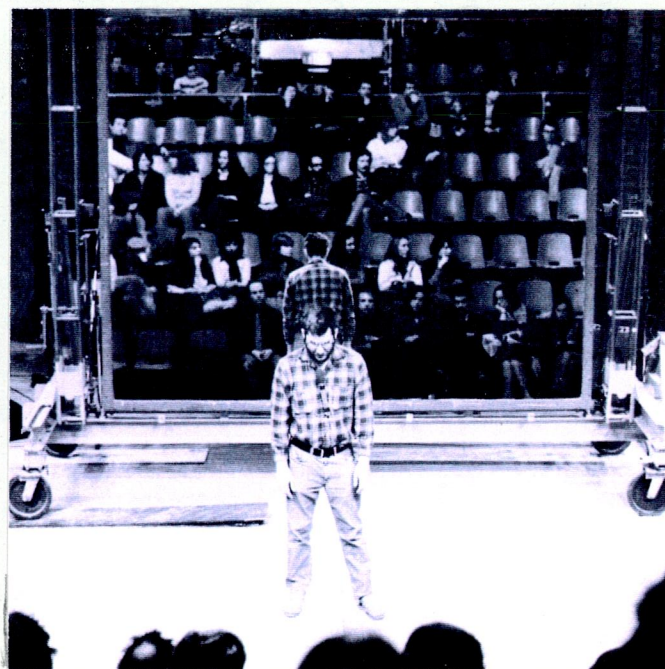
As I have previously stated all these artists utilise the photographic image in different ways and to varying degrees, throughout their artistic careers. If we consider what has been discussed, the principle of intertextuality and its connection to the problems of photography, representation and identity, we can begin look at the possible connections.

Dan Graham is an American artist who of all the artists mentioned, has the strongest connection to Coleman. They have worked together on more than one collaboration. Graham has designed sets for Coleman's stage works *Guaire* (1986) and is, I feel, clearly influenced by Coleman's work, particularly his earlier work. This influence can be seen in such works as *Performer / audience / mirror* (1979) where we see Graham analysing the viewing process through a performance in which he explains what is being seen in objective or factual terms. It is very similar to Coleman's *Slide piece* (1973) or *Installation made for Location* (1974) where a similar process of visual unearthing takes place. Throughout all their work both artists concentrate on the process of seeing in an attempt to reorientate the viewer so as to highlight the subjective look and create the possibility of an critical way of perceiving. Where Graham and Coleman part is in their focus on what is the most vital subject to look at anew. For Graham it was architecture and its forms, for Coleman it was a more personal architecture, that of dress, hair and outward appearances.

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In Homes for America (1966) Graham used a magazine to stage the piece. The work was a factual, clinical look at post-war urban architecture. Through diagrams and photographs he was able to

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(fig. 5) PERFORMER / AUDIENCE / MIRROR 1979



(fig. 6) HOMES FOR AMERICA 1966.

describe the process of construction and planning involved in the production of the urban environment he photographed. How each house was planned in specific units, each being made up of so many pieces of material of a particular size (wood lengths, glass piping etc.). In constructing the houses all these individual pieces that made a singular house were simply multiplied. They were then brought to the site and assembled. In a similar way to Coleman, Graham's titles tend to reveal rather than obscure. The piece documents the transition from material fragments to constructed houses and from houses to homes. House as an object in contrast to a home which is both object and something other than object. The photographs then become representations of the houses but also representations of homes. *Homes for America* sets up a duality between house-home and object-representation in the hope that this would also lend to a questioning of the way we see objects through photographic representations.

Thomas Struth, a German artist whose work features consistently in shows curated by Chevrier, adopts similar terms of reference to Graham. He sees architecture, represented through photography, as presenting the best focus for a new way of looking. Struth, a student of Richter at Dusseldorf University, also exists within a German tradition of photography most strongly informed by Hilda and Bernd Becher's photographs of industrial machines. Similar to the Becher's work Struth's photographs depend on a 'tableau', a series of images. Struth's images consist almost entirely of two subjects, the city (architecture) and portraits (families). He began simply to take photographs of city architecture in his native Germany and then all over the western world. In these images people are almost always excluded or else scale leaves people impotent within the image. Like Graham's *Homes for America* Struth's images transform the condition of the public space, over a tableau of images, into something that can be read by those who occupy these spaces and yet are excluded from the photographic representation. The aim of providing this visual text is to create a possibility of a critical analysis of those structures that form houses, homes, factories etc. His photos of families, or related groups of people, act in a similar way. Struth's interest in both a public and personal architecture is a bridge between Graham and Coleman. All Struth's images

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(fig. 7) Tour Mirabeau, Beaugrenelle, Paris 1980



(fig. 8) HORSFIELD FAMILY 1989.

maintain a common perspective and angle with which they are taken allowing the images to be read as a series as opposed to Coleman's use of the slide and dissolve. They draw on but yet never become family photos just as his images of buildings play on a postcard view. The images, "The Horsfield Family (1989) the Shimada Family (1988) and *The Restorers* (1988) strive to point out the complexity of the images as a representation and as object. They act as an architypal document of 'the city' or 'the family' yet create connotations for the viewer who lives within and is part of those places and groups that the photographic representations depict.

For me Struth's images and intentions lie close to those of Coleman. Both try to reduce, as much as possible, the hand of the artist in the image production in an attempt to render the images as 'objective' or neutral as possible. Unlike Craigie Horsfield whose images are emotive. Struth in his piece *Skulpture Projekte* (1988) merged his methods with Coleman's, by projecting images of architecture onto buildings in the city. In doing this he was able to highlight aspects of both real and representation and facilitate his ongoing interest in an ethnology of looking.

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² Struth, 1991 p194.

"I rather think that sometimes, they [his images] can be taken as symbols in the sense that they show examples of certain models of living or certain structures which can, at the same time be particular and general".²

The photographs of Craigie Horsfield are to look at the most problematic and the most beautiful. Beauty is an aspect of the images that I feel estrange Horsfield from the other artists and most definitely Coleman. I would like to look at Horsfield's work because in the context of a community his images rest uneasily alongside Struth, Graham and Perlman.

Horsfield, born and educated in England, spent many years living and working in Poland. In fact he had not shown his work until and moved quickly into a centre stage position, helped by Chevrier's interest and support for his work. In order to see the difference between Horsfield and

Coleman I must return to the defining statements made by Barzel about *Another Objectivity*. Do Horsfield's images in any way strive to point out the concept of image as object as he says? In his exhibition in I.M.M.A. (1992) Horsfield presented a fair body of work. In an introductory text one was provided with a crucial piece of information. Two dates were given with each picture one provided the year in which the photograph was taken, the other that in which the print was made. This I feel tried to prevent what otherwise would have been a closure in the work but it failed. To contemplate the time in which a photo is taken and then printed is a interesting but obscure idea. The images themselves are smothered in a Horsfield style that allows for very little emotional distance. Where as Coleman tries to reorientate the viewer Horsfield's images seek only to present Horsfield himself. There is no questions of the representational only a contemplation of the idea and sublime nature of time that can be represented through human and architectural forms (and animal forms, for example his picture *ZOO* is an awesomely beautiful image). The grain and texture of the paper printed on, the size and arrangement lend to a subjective gestural series of images that, I feel, fail to be consistent with the objectives that Lingwood and Chevrier have set as the objective of the work exhibited there in. Saying this is not to say that the work fails, they do not fail as expressionistic images but Chevrier has placed the work and all the other artists work in a certain context (and this is where I have many problems with the growing influence of curation and the thematic exhibition, the recent *Post-Human*(1992) show is a good example.) a context that I feel Coleman's work exists within. In framing the work, and the artists allowing there work to be framed by curation, it must fit within those objectives set out . So the question must be asked who's interest does it really serve to create a possible community of artists in the contemporary art world? Coleman has not shown in any of these exhibitions and on a political level I would say that Coleman's wish to be as detached as possible is a principle that has a continuity in his entire art practice. .

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Hirsch Perlman (who was also not a part of the exhibition previously mentioned) creates



(fig. 9) Kingshold Estate, East London, January 1990, 1991



(fig. 10) ZOO, Oxford, January 1990,1990

work which questions the very existence of objectivity and returns to the textual nature of meaning. The work questions also the authority of language verbal and visual. Perlman's recent works are titled *Accidence*(1990). This refers to a phenomena in language where the misspelling or/and misreading of a word leads to a logical but different reading for example the word *accidence* itself is like an inflection of *accidents*. Through focusing attention and importance on the inflection or *accidence* Perlman tries to undermine the meaning and authority of language. He uses quotes from Gertrude Stein's *How to Write* as part of the work , for example; 'A sentence can easily make a mistake'. In quoting Stein he pokes at views about the written word that were previously thought of as definitive.

In his work he focuses specifically on legal syntax. It is particularly interesting to see *accidence* within language used in law where justice depends on clarity and where this clarity can be literally a matter of life and death. We in Ireland will have very little problem in understanding the instability of language having major problems with our own constitution, supposedly the very bedrock of our society. Perlman is the youngest of the artists chosen here. He lives and works in Boston and in recent years has received alot of attention. His early work was similar to and very conscious of Graham and Struth however with *Accidence* Perlman has taken on similar concerns in a very distinctive manner.

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"Meaning is usually though of as a fixed understanding that one aspires to, or builds upon but if the meaning is continually perverted by sense unravelling into nonsense, or inflecting a documentary vocabulary into mistakes or accidents then reading becomes a closely experience and meaning becomes unstable."³

³ Perlman, 1991, p115,

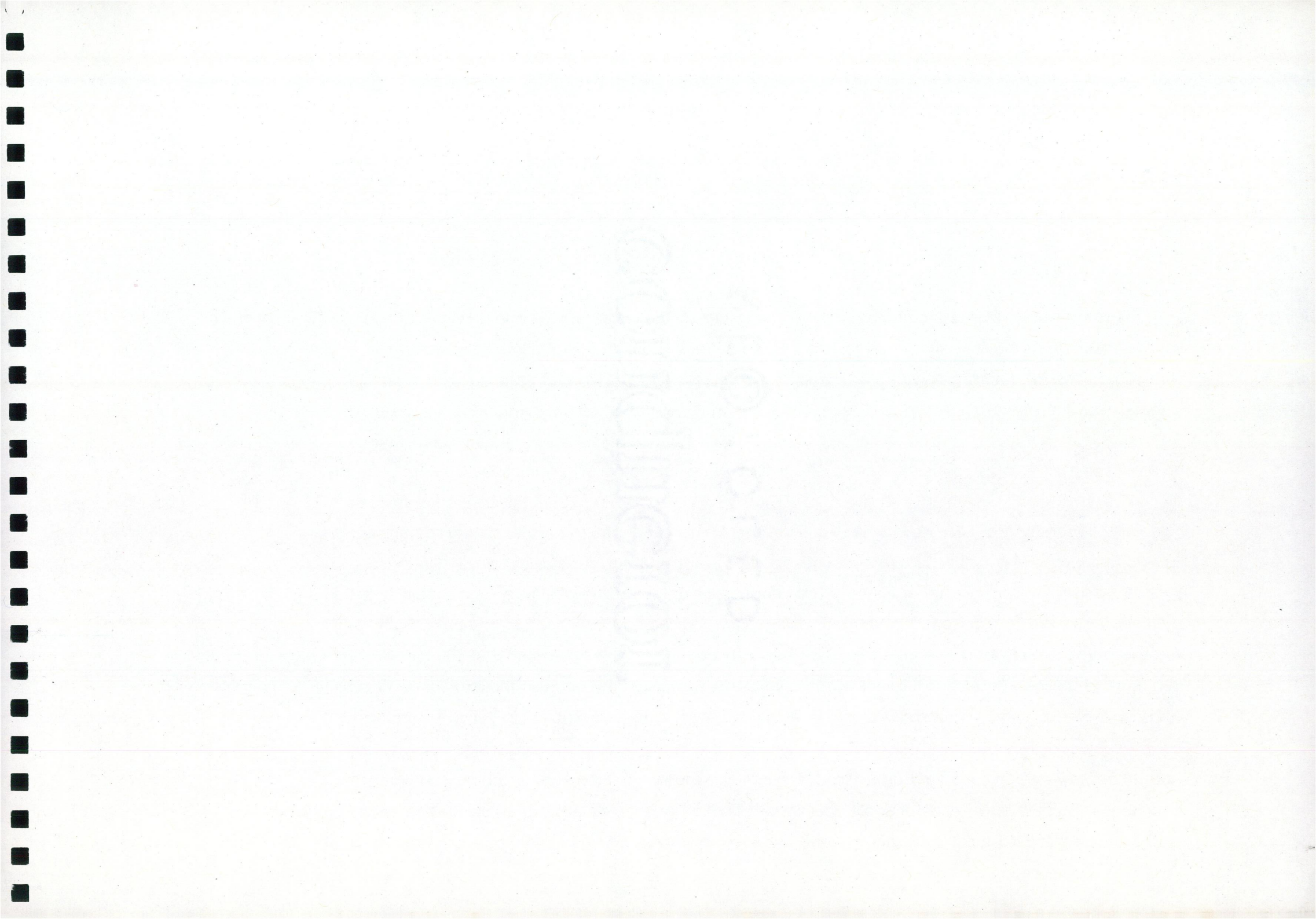
Perlman achieves this unravelling in a very complex way. *Accidence* is an installation made up of architypal furniture (tables and chairs rendered in raw m.d.f.). These are exhibits for the viewers of the 'cases' presented in the piece. The 'cases' which refer to legal trials are written as



(fig. 11) ACCIDENCE 1990.

transcripts and mounted on a Gallery walls (they are actual transcripts from real cases but all personal references are blotted out). The floor in the Gallery are marked to illustrate the section of a fictional courtroom the positions of witnesses, judiciary, prosecution, defence and jury. Video monitors sit on tables marked exhibit A,B,C, etc. on which witnesses make verbal depositions. Also mounted on the wall are photographs that depict an actual courtroom. Within the written transcript and spoke depositions the work tries to reposition the viewer, unravel the notion of an empirical meaning and truth in language. The courtroom is an allegory for the photograph. One is holding up a facade of civil truth and objectivity the other of natural as opposed to representational and visual objectivity. Coleman, Struth, Graham and Perlman are clearly engaged in a similar process of questioning. What Perlman terms inflection or accidence and its consequences is connected with the subjective nature of reading the visual and literal text what is presented is an antiphon for look , think and look again.

I would conclude that Coleman, although sharing common ground, is not a part of the community that Chevrier and Lingwood have defined through their curation. I feel Colemans struggle to maintain a neutrality or detachment between the art work and the artist also extends beyond his work into his art practice. This would, in part, explain why he is hesitant to give interviews. The bottom line being that the most important dialogue or interaction takes place between the work and its audience, the interjections of artists and curators being peripheral to this dialogue.





CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to assess what I have gained from Coleman's work. The questions that the work presents are very pertinent to my practice as an artists and as a consumer in this, a visual society. Medium has always been an element of art practice that interests me. I have had problems with year after year of fine art students using photography as a means to make art not understanding the medium on a technical or intellectual level. Often I see people use it because in a image driven culture it is a language that is assumed to be accessible , both practically and creatively. Coleman's use of the medium is specific and purposeful. Coleman has not simply used photography without imposing onto the process a method of presentation that is as important as the use of the medium itself. In using photography as ones medium it is, I believe, impossible to ignore its history and position in our culture. His attention to detail and the technical complexity of the work creates a body of work that stands independently amongst a generation of Coleman's contemporaries. His work has in the last three to six years increased in its popularity amongst art critics and curators. also I have found that more and more art students are beginning to take notice of his work and his influence amongst other international artists that ironically are known of more then Coleman himself. here in Ireland.

Coleman's work does present difficulties because it is uncompromising and may not be of interest to the vast majority of people, but popular interest is not the best aim of art works and with Coleman it would never allow for a freedom to subvert. the popular held belief that there is such a thing as objectivity. Through researching and talking with Coleman I was both challenged and informed. What I have found about his work is that always the viewer is required to be active and take responsibility with regard to any interpretative decisions. *Somewhere, somewhere there are images* is not just about the images that Coleman has created for us, but those that we have created from the work.. Those images that we take into the work and then take away.

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