



University of Bergen

The Art Academy – Department of Contemporary Art

ART250

Spring Semester 2024

Lost in our brief encounter

Mario Gabriel de la Ossa Sætre

Candidate number: 108

Index

Project description	2
The spectacular image	3
Band-aid encounter	5
Cultural tropes and the denial of the real	7
Method and collaborative practice, beyond the real	8
I see, therefore it matters	12
Literature list	13

Project description

My graduation project deals with the function of images in a visually saturated day to day life. Specifically how we subconsciously read images, and how our western tropes and symbols hold a great deal of power in how the world is portrayed to us. The photographs shown in the graduating show attempt to play with the dynamic of how we immediately expect to understand images.

The project consists of two-dimensional photographs mounted to the wall with white clips, nails and tape. The photographs shown are all made on photographic film, with both medium and large format film. They are shot on a variety of cameras. The film used are Kodak Portra 160 and 400, and Fuji PRO 400H. In this body of work there is a mix of photographs that are staged purely for, and in the mindset of the body of work itself, as well as photographs made in other contexts but pulled from my archive. Some of the photographs use artificial lighting such as ProFoto portable studio flashes and battery packs to create a certain effect on location. The work is printed on the Epson digital plotter as inkjet prints, with the Colenta RA4 colour printer as chromogenic prints and in the black and white darkroom as silver gelatin prints.

The spectacular image

In his book *The Society of Spectacle*, Guy Debord, a French Marxist theorist, writes about the image and mass media as the everyday manifestation of the capitalist driven “Spectacle”, used to distract the masses. In its time of writing the images through advertising, television and celebrity, functioned to push an endless supply of commodifiable fragments, reducing a lived reality to the yearning of a certain appearance. “Though separated from his product, man is...the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically is he cut off from that life” (Debord. 1967. 24)

The commercial image, or the publicity image like British art critic John Berger describes it, feeds off the real but will never be able to give the satisfaction of what you see in the image (Berger. 1972. 132). Berger argues that the success of the public image presents the social relation you wish to obtain, which allures to be obtained through the commodified object: attempting to substitute the object for the relation, for the real. An example of this would be a series of images I encountered at the Helmut Newton Foundation in Berlin in 2023. The five photographs seen in Figure 01 were made for a Paul Picot watches editorial in 1992, but even in the sea of commercial and fashion images (the publicity images that make up this museum), these five photographs separate themselves in how blatantly they rely on a depiction of a certain lifestyle.



Figure 01: Paul Picot, Monaco 1992, Helmut Newton Museum Berlin

We are not shown the intricate craftsmanship in Swiss luxury watches, rather we are presented with relational tensions, power dynamics, taboos and fantasies our cultured gaze has taught us to be desirable. The series alludes to an obscene lifestyle of the imagined ultra rich, where life is just one sexual tension after another, but the purchase of the watch will not provide this. As Debord observes, “The Spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” (Debord. 1967. 12)

The function of the image has not changed today, but with the growth of social media platforms, images do not find it sufficient to engineer our purchasing power - what we seek to obtain in our leisure time - it has also claimed ownership to our internal thoughts and experiences, turning our attention span into the ultimate commodity. It has become hard to distinguish the commercial image in the vastness of images; so much so that one could argue that in the general consumption of images, where intimate family photographs circulate on the same platforms as traditional commercial images, they bleed into each other, making them harder to separate, or making their function as images the same. Debord writes that “...All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (Debord. 1967. 12), and images function to perpetuate this experience, subsequently leading us to assume the importance of images solely by their very existence. The unclear distinction between images and our instilled relation to the photograph subsequently lends an unprecedented credence to the function of images.

The image and photographys' intimate relation to the spectacle are for my purpose reduced to the same thing. Instead of talking about the spectacle in terms of the market economy I write about the spectacle to explain how I make images that tamper with the reading of images, attempting to move beyond extraordinary¹ images. I believe that in the same way that new technology alters our behaviour, that today's overflow of images influence our opinions and beliefs. Not just in regards to the amount of images we consume, but rather that staying, or even becoming critical to the function of images - like source critique in literature - is something that requires training and constant attention. I will also argue why we are not able to stay critical. I am curious what task photography in the context of art has in the interaction between photographs/images and viewer/consumer.

¹ The “extraordinary images” are not in direct reference to, but in the idea of, George Perec's “Infra ordinary”: “What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist... How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs everyday: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?” (Perec, 1997)

Band-aid encounter

Late in the first semester I experimented in the photography studio. I wanted to test out a lighting technique: the strong backlit, with a flat frontal light, often associated today with the work of artists like Torbjørn Rødland. As I see it, the backlit effect which is often referred to as hair or shoulder light, gives a glow and a halo effect. The effect in many ways beautifies and glamorises, and is often used in soap operas or to exaggerate someone's perceived goodness or purity . It is used in a wide array of photographic art and movies but the eerie effect it plays on in Rødlands work, as it is juxtaposed in the not so “pure” constellations of subject matter, brings out an unfamiliar tension I find interesting. This “glamorised spotlight” can also, in the vocabulary of photography, be read as quite unforgiving, much like direct sunlight with its burning highlights and deep shadow. The commercial image often mimics this harsh light in a more controlled matter. If we assume that the commercial world is where we can successfully see the most of this type of light, we can also draw a line between an unconscious expectation of being presented a clear message when this fake sun is present. I believe there is an interesting tension in imitating and aestheticizing photographs with this light when the construction of the image does not present you with the needed context to read its purpose (further into the thesis I will elaborate on the “needed context”).

What prompted me to book the studio was an encounter I had a few weeks earlier: I was walking through downtown Bergen one morning past this young man, strongly built, his face with a rough contour yet soft in its expression, wrapped in his thick puffer jacket with a fluffy collar. He was walking intently somewhere unknown and what caught my attention was the band aid he had on his face. Maybe he was covering up a zit or a small scar, but his face was untouched otherwise. My gaze must have been noticeable as I stopped, stared, and contemplated how misplaced the bandage was on his character.

I did not photograph the man but the idea stuck. The band aid did have its place in popular culture from the early 2000s with the artist Nelly famously seen with a small white band aid on his cheek. One way to understand the band-aid on a “character” such as Nelly is where the band-aid symbolises a play on stereotypical masculinity, although not necessarily intentional. Nelly was known as an alpha male rapper and the band aid becomes the interaction with vulnerability, a sort of fake fragility. A similar look can also be found as late as in February of 2024, where rapper Playboi Carti flaunts a large band aid on his face (similar to what can be seen in the image I made, Figure 02) in the company of superstars

The Weekend and Madonna in a song ironically enough titled Popular (The Weeknd XO. 2024).



Figure 02: Band-Aid, 135x105cm archival inkjet print, 2021

Similar to what Canadian artist Jeff Wall said about his process of staging images rather than capturing a moment, in an interview with San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: “I begin by not photographing” (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. 2007), made me want to play with the idea of not photographing this band-aided man that walked past me and rather recreate it, recontextualising the memory. Instead of showing the man on the street, where one is presented the surroundings just as much as the man and his band aid, I wanted to extract a detail from this encounter because although explained here, the photograph I made, in its encounter with the viewer, is no longer about the man or the street I saw him on. I project the idea of fake fragility onto this encounter, or rather the connotations to masculinity, fragility and pop culture resurface in the encounter, yet in my re-presentation of

it the encounter no longer matters. This way of working, recontextualizing an encounter or a memory is one of several methods I use for making photographs. The result of my first attempt at controlling the “glamour-light” and recreating an encounter resulted in the photograph *Band-Aid* seen in Figure 02. The mixed reactions to the image as a big print, from both tutors and students, prompted curiosity to how differently we read images, and especially images that do not have a clear intent or context.

Cultural tropes and the denial of the real

Throughout this work, I have focused on the production of cultural tropes and questioning how they in turn affect our reading of images. With the ubiquitous nature of images and photographs in our digital world, how are we shaped by the idea that images like clear sentences are supposed to provide us with an intelligible message? Like described in Norwegian Photographer Morten Andenæss’ exhibition *I remind me of you*, I am interested in how “...representations not only describe, but also shape our image of the world” (Kunstnerne Hus. 2019). Similar to how one would try to read Andenæss’ photographs with their polished surfaces and seductive presences - yet perhaps felt as shockingly mundane in subject matter - I attempt to use the language of commercial photography while refusing to give the needed contextualisation to “understand” the images. More precisely the language of commercial photography means here the technical preparations and attention to for example lighting, colours and textures, while refusing to give the needed contextualisation to “understand” the images through familiar but odd constructions of what the subjects are doing and to why they are there, usually explained in the commercial image by the context of a logo, a certain product and the interaction with it.

Thinking about how we are denied the real like Berger argues, and on top of that how we are denied the tools to read images that in a way feel so obvious, I wonder if one of the more exciting aspects of looking at photographs is its inability to truly satisfy us. If we compare it to the moving image which is often accompanied by sound and the change of pace over a duration, in many ways making the images perform and even forcing a narrative as it unfolds with time: we are, for the sake of comparison of trying to extract meaning from the static image, not needed to strain ourselves to decipher what we are looking at in the same manner. This is not to say that like in any artwork there is not a deeper meaning hidden behind the surface, or that every film is therefore easy to understand, rather that in the still image there is nothing more than what you see then and there in its staticness. Yet unlike

other mediums where we are clearly aware of the materiality of the artwork, as for example paint on canvas or clay moulded and burnt into shape, when faced with the photographic print it is easy to overlook the transformation from a photographic negative to, in this case the paper positive, the print. So much so that through spoken words we point to a photograph and say, “this is my mother”, not “this is a photograph of my mother”, neglecting the object that is representing you the person. Although this can be argued to be an insignificant detail in communicating through images and language, I believe that such distinctions are important. Even though the photograph can be argued to be the only medium directly connected to reality through the referent, described by French critic Roland Barthes as the Spectrum of the photograph, the subject of the photograph emitting light (Barthes. 1980. 18), the photograph nonetheless becomes a barrier. The becoming of the barrier is that we will only ever see a reproduction of the photograph transformed onto another medium, like exemplified earlier on paper or whatever the photograph is printed on, but we will never see the referent and its reality. We look at the print and no matter how static, we attempt to go beyond the surface and search for the unfolding of life, like in the moving images. When the surface is forgotten and the barrier separating us from the past of the photograph is broken, the tropes - the carriers of morals and meanings - can have a tremendous impact. Because the only connection the photograph has to reality is the referent bouncing back its light, but the light

bouncing back fails to substitute what it is bouncing back from, it will never truly satisfy our longing to connect to the subject, object or situation. Then certain images, solely by being presented to the viewer, function largely on that very denial of satisfaction, which paradoxically is a satisfaction itself.



Figure 03. Categorized found material

Method and collaborative practice, beyond the real

Throughout my second year I started collecting images from Instagram, movies and magazines, through a sort of intuition for images that felt familiar or images playing on what felt like familiar symbols and relations. The images derived

from influencers, random people, accounts that existed purely to post pop cultural content, other artists, art historical paintings, etc. I did this over a period to see if there were any lines that could be drawn in what I was collecting. After a while I started categorising the different images and made up labels or themes that correlated, like for example tropes and stereotypical portrayal of masculinity seen in Figure 03. I used these images to examine the western perception of sexuality, eroticism and gender. I had the idea that I would be able to use these categories and all these images as inspiration to make images that linger in between all of these stereotypical tropes. I came to little conclusion in this method of working.

What is the gaze? male gaze? female gaze?
What is your relation to the gaze?
Is there a difference in being gazed upon by a man, woman or non-binary?

How do you identify?
Are you a feminist?
How would you summarize feminism?

How do you see yourself?
How do you think others see you?
Do you enjoy being looked at? By who?
Do you spend a lot of time worrying how you look?
How do you see women? How do you see men?

Have you been photographed before? Context?
Did you enjoy the process? why? If not, why?
What's your relation to photography?

Do you take pictures? of what? to what purpose?
If you could photograph one person, dead or alive, who and why?
Would you like to photograph me? How would you pose me?

Did the chicken or the egg come first?
Do you think pop culture has a big effect on society? or is it just a reflection of society?
How does the imagery we see affect how we perceive?
Where is our perception heading?

What is collaboration?
Do you feel like a participant, model, contributor, partner or collaborator in this work?
What would you like to be?

Do you sexualise others?
What is your relation to sex or the erotic or romance or pornography?
What is the difference between how men and women relate to erotics?
What is your first erotic story?
Have you been sexualised? Specifically or structurally?

Do you talk about sexuality with your family?
Do you conform to society's norms around sexuality?
(Do you fit the mold or does your sexual drive or fantasies stretch beyond the norms?)

While being photographed, what are your limits or boundaries?
Are they context dependent, situational?
Does it depend on who's behind the camera?
What do you think about that person being me?

What do you think of the questions?
Would you like to add some questions you wish I'd put in here? Would you remove some? (There is plenty of white space here, please add and remove)
How does it feel to open up about these topics?
Does the recorder censor you?

Figure 04: Questionnaire inspired by Paul Theks *Teaching Notes: 4-Dimensional Design*

At the same time I also unfolded these ideas through more durational forms, like interviews, writing and video, that helped inform my process of image making. In a way

looking at barriers to intimacy, like the technological space in sincere interpersonal connections; how one can connect and perhaps create different photographs through interactions and collaboration. Inspired by American artist Paul Theks' *Teaching Notes: 4-Dimensional Design*, I made my own questionnaire (Figure 04) where I added a lot of the questions that were circulating in my work. The questionnaire was meant as a starting point where the participants could add or remove questions, and where they did not really have to attend to form at all if other topics felt more pressing. The idea was to talk about these questions as well as what image I was to make of them as the subject. If possible I would also record the conversation with sound and video, thinking the recordings themselves might be more interesting than the possible photographs. The process was interesting but confusing, and very different with the various people.

The idea to work collaboratively came during the second year, where I had made a video installation, titled *I know what you're thinking*, that had two main aspects.² The first part was an AI generated text to video, prompted on sentences about riots, demonstrations and protests, as a reaction to the lack of resistance to the ever growing influence of intercontinental tech companies, and as a homage to the employees protesting project Nimbus³. The second part - as a slow paced counterpart to the seducing AI video - consisted of six screens, each presenting six unique monologues. I had made a similar framework in which I invited six individuals to freely express their ideas and responses to what "power structures" meant to them. This was my first attempt at inviting people into my projects in such a manner. In many ways I have always sought the response of others in relation to my work, sharing and asking a variety of people as a way to understand how an idea is understood. This project became a way to explore "collaboration" (in quotation marks as there were mixed responses to whether it felt like a collaboration, and what that entails) by not only seeking different responses but recording them as part of the work.

The barriers of intimacy can also be seen as the fourth dimensional wall separating us from a genuine experience with the world: with a presumed reality. In the graduating show I

² The project was titled *I know what you're thinking* and documentation can be found here <https://mariodelaossa.com/i-know-what-youre-thinking/>

³ Project Nimbus is a multibillion dollar contract supplying the state of Israel with different technology, pursued by Google and Amazon. There have been several protests from employees at both companies. On going to this day. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/12/google-amazon-workers-condemn-project-nimbus-israeli-military-contract>

am presenting a photograph titled *About last night* (Figure 05) that dwells on the idea of this wall. The photograph was made as a visualisation of a story told to me, like a folk tale.

In short, a woman and a man meet on a dating app, and they end up going on a date. They go for a few drinks and quickly end up at one of their apartments. They have sex and use a condom, and when finished the condom gets thrown onto the plate of yesterday's dinner: where it lays beside the fish cadaver.



Figure 05: About last night, 50x40cm archival inkjet print, 2023

They did not interact with “the real world” outside of the screen to meet each other; the condom became a plastic layer between their first sexual interaction; the fish was not fished by any of them. Their commonality is the barrier separating these two people from what can be argued for as genuine or real. Like purchasing flowers instead of going into nature to pick a bouquet, these imagined people are interacting with - in relation to the spectacle - a polished proxy reality. The question becomes whether this is a concern affecting generations differently, because the experience of these interactions will potentially feel more real, or already feel more real to certain generations.

Going forward, in regards to the photograph, with its and our relationship to the real, how will perceived reality be managed as generative algorithms (and their successors)

continue to distort photographs disputed connection to reality? The generated images, these directly referentless images, where the referent is in some ways still present since no image is generated from scratch but rather from datasets of millions of other photographs, have all in a way become proxy images (the images of the proxy reality). What happens to the function of the image when we previously needed “only” to dissect an image in search of its purpose, knowing at least that whatever was unfolding in the photograph was to a certain extent real.

I see, therefore it matters

Throughout this thesis we have looked at Debord’s ideas regarding “The Spectacle” and Berger’s explanation of the publicity image, and how they play a part in the continual production of images. I have laid out how I believe that the self-perpetuating function of the image, in the continued dissatisfaction we are imposed to feel from never realising these commodified desires presented to us by the very same images, is a form of power and control to be reckoned with. As Berger continues towards the end of his book: “Publicity adds up to a kind of philosophical system. It explains everything in its own terms. It interprets the world” (Berger. 1972. 149), and it seems that it fails to materialise this world and rather becomes blinders that keeps our gaze focused on the promise of a better future.

Whether my photographs in their encounter with the viewer manage to conjure up any critical thoughts regarding the issues at hand, is like with any truly objective investigation of the function of art in its encounter with the world, a mere speculation. My hope is for the images I make and present in this graduation show to stir up slight confusion and discontent in the search for the obvious meaning of the surface. Ideally this would make one question why one is faced with any image, although it is more likely to induce a fascination with a slightly different way of seeing the world.

Literature list

Barthes, Roland. 1980. *Det lyse rommet, Tanker om fotografiet*. Translated by Knut Stene-Johansen. Oslo: Pax Forlag.

Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books Ltd.

Debord, Guy. 1967. *The Society of Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books.

Kunstnernes Hus. 2019. *Morten Andenaes, I Remind Me of You*. Retrieved 24.04.2024.

<https://kunstnerneshus.no/en/program/exhibitions/morten-andenaes>.

Perec, George. 1997. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, translated by John Sturrock. London: Penguin Books

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. *Jeff Wall: I begin by not photographing*. Video. Timestamp: 00:00-00:07. 2007.

https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/Jeff_Wall/.

The Weeknd XO, Inc. *Popular*, Video. Timestamp: 02:49-02:55. 2024.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt0i6nuqNEo>.