

From presence to the performative:  
rethinking photographic indexicality  
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Undoubtedly one of the most important issues in discussions about photography in the past decade has been concerned with the implications of electronic and digital technologies for traditional chemically-based photographic practices. Beginning in the late 1980s and gathering momentum with the increasing availability of these new technologies, the force of critical opinion has lain largely with those who – believing that the medium's privileged status as an arbiter of truth and measure of reality had been fatally undermined by computerised imaging processes – have sought to reconcile us to the 'death of photography'. Yet, paradoxically, during this same period we have also witnessed a fascination amongst a younger generation of photographers with precisely those qualities and values associated with the medium that have been deemed most at risk and which has led to the attempt to recuperate that particular engagement with reality that photography seems to offer. Both of these phenomena are, of course, related to each other. They each pose a set of problems around how we construe photography's relationship to the real, and about the relationship between our reading of the photographic image and our understanding of the technologies that helped to produce that image. At the heart of these issues lies the question of the photograph's indexicality.

In any discussion about indexicality and photography the impact of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* cannot be underestimated. Yet the influence of this text has had, we would argue, a subtly distorting effect on our understanding of the nature of photographic indexicality. Centred on a reading of a photograph of the writer's dead mother it has led, inevitably, to a preoccupation with the origins of the photographic image in a chemical trace, to its relationship with time and absence, and to the complexity of our affective response when we encounter this evidence of a moment that has passed. As a result discussions about the index seem to have gained particular significance because of the way in which they have contributed to a wider set of cultural discourses concerning the relationships between photography, memory, death and mourning.

However, we want to argue here that the concept of the photograph as a trace of a past event does not exhaust our understanding of its indexical

properties. Indeed, it was C.S. Peirce – to whom we owe the earliest and still most thorough analysis of indexicality – who demonstrated that the indexical sign was less to do with its causal origins and more to do with the way in which it pointed to the event of its own inscription. Photographs, therefore, are not just indexical because light happened to be recorded in an instant on a piece of photosensitive film, but because, first and foremost, they were taken. The very act of photography, as a kind of performative gesture which points to an event in the world, as a form of designation that draws reality into the image field, is thus itself a form of indexicality.

These two forms of indexicality, the one existing as a physical trace of an event, the other as performative gesture that points towards it, both invoke a relationship to the real that seems to be specific to the photographic image. In this essay we would like to look more closely at the relationship between these two aspects of the photographic for it seems to us that, while each of them promises a kind of security in their relationship to the real, they also simultaneously subvert that security and challenge our commitment to it.

Amongst the first to draw attention to these issues were not photographic theorists but those artists engaged in conceptual practices in the later 1960s and early 1970s for whom photography played a key role in articulating a range of questions about the nature of the work of art and the status of its documentation. In his essay "*Marks Of Indifference*": *Aspects Of Photography In, Or As, Conceptual Art*, Jeff Wall argues that conceptual art's turn to photography represents a curious pursuit of a modernist ideal of the self-reflexivity of the medium in the attempt to locate its defining characteristics.<sup>1</sup> For photography this inevitably meant observance of its recording and evidential functions, its innate capacity for the depiction of things. Thus it is, Wall argues, that conceptual art comes to engage with a photojournalistic tradition of photography as reportage. The immediate precedent for this use by artists of photography-as-documentation would appear to lie with Ed Ruscha's series of photo-books beginning in 1963 with *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (Figure 8). Like the self-explanatory *Every Building on Sunset Strip, Los Angeles* (1966), this collection of photographs of every gasoline station along the route taken by the artist between Los Angeles and his parent's home in Oklahoma, is the result of a systematic process of visual documentation, decided in advance and seemingly executed without regard to artistic considerations. Whilst Ruscha's choice of subject matter relates closely to the contemporary interests of Pop artists in the vernacular and the everyday, his decision to present the work as straight photographic reproductions locates it as seminal in the pre-history of conceptual art. However, as Wall makes clear, what seems to have been made possible by Ruscha's example was less to do

<sup>1</sup> Jeff Wall in Ann Goldstein and Anne Rasmussen (eds), *Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965-1975*. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and MIT Press, Mass., 1996

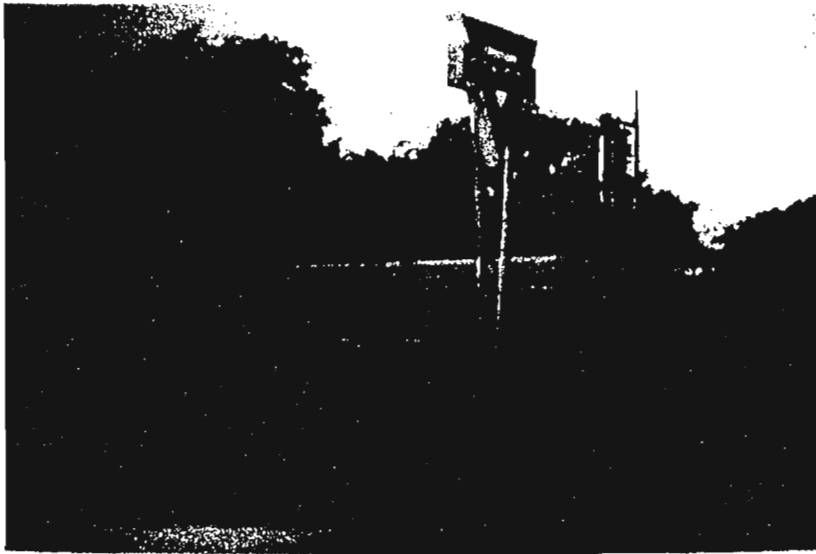


Figure 8. Ed Ruscha, 'Conoco, Saurg, Oklahoma' from *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, 1963.

with presenting photographic documentation as art and more to do with a self-conscious 'parody' of the photograph's use as record.

Indeed the full implications of conceptual art's use of photography have nearly always been obscured, and its value underestimated, by positioning it firmly and simply in the realm of documentation. It is clear, however, that conceptual artists, rather than blithely accepting the notion of documentation, subjected it to either a kind of playful critique or to forms of wholesale deconstruction. In the case of the former, artists such as Douglas Heubler used photography within a normative system for structuring and ordering information but undermined its function as documentation by simply applying it to phenomena of the utmost triviality. As regards the latter – in the early works of John Hilliard and Jan Dibbets, for example – strategies involving the systematic investigation of the technical parameters of the medium exposed the tenuous hold that the photograph has over the real and the instability inscribed in the very notion of the photograph as an objective record. In more general terms it can be seen that, if photography played a key role in conceptualism's aim of problematising dominant notions of art and the art object, it did not simply provide a means by which this process was to be 'documented' but actually provided the actual arena in which it was to be acted out. Furthermore, the photographs themselves were not merely the residue of that process but constituted its actual realisation. In pointing to this complex interdependency

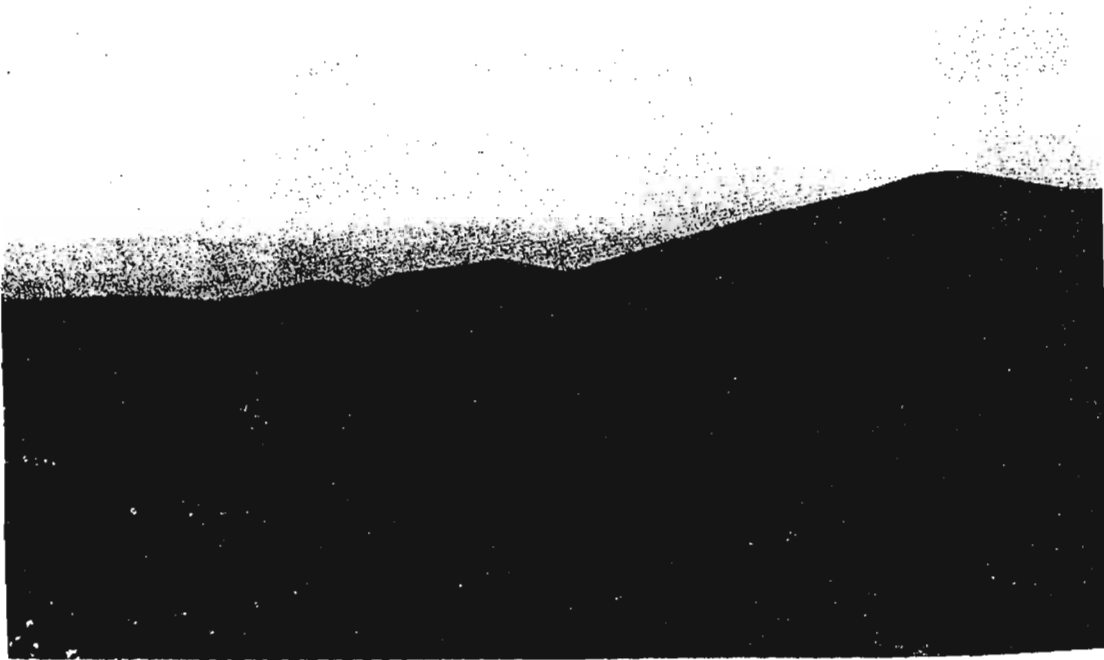


Figure 9. Robert Barry, *Inert Gas Series: Helium*. On the morning of March 6, 1969, somewhere in the Mojava Desert in California, 2 cubic feet of helium were returned to the atmosphere. 1969.

between an event and its record, conceptual artists drew attention to the twinned aspects of indexicality that are fundamental to photography itself.

Nowhere is this point made more clearly than in a series of photographs made by Robert Barry in 1969 entitled the *Inert Gas Series* (Figure 9). This consists of a number of photographs and accompanying text which detail the artist's actions of releasing various invisible gases in specific locations around Los Angeles. The photographs purport to show these events but, of course, nothing can be seen other than the actual settings – a barren patch of desert, an isolated beach, a empty park and so on – to verify the claims made on behalf of the image by the accompanying text. Barry's production of a photographic record of these non-visible works of art might seem consciously futile and absurd yet these images may be significant for our understanding of the limitations of a particular form of indexical inscription. If at one level these images are displayed as documentary evidence denoting a state of affairs, what is also clear is that they are carefully designed to be at the limit point of photography's documentary capacity. While providing us with the indexical trace of the moment of the gas's release they also gesture towards the impossibility of recording it, and our attention shifts instead towards the act of photography itself as the moment of authentication. Thus the photograph is not intended

so much to denote the inert gas that cannot be seen as to point us towards it, and in that process of pointing to declare its existence. The intended effect of the photographic statement is to produce our belief in the existence of this invisible phenomenon, rather than simply to witness it being there. However, in order for such an act to be effective, certain conditions have to have been fulfilled – the photograph has to be taken by or authenticated by the artist, the date and time have to have been recorded, its passage into the public domain has to be controlled by the artist and it has to be displayed in a particular way. If these social and discursive conditions are not in place then we may good reason to doubt the sincerity of what we are being presented with; hence the matter-of-fact rhetoric that accompanies the photograph as its extended title, such as: 'Krypton, from a measured volume to indefinite expansion. On March 3, 1969 in Beverly Hills, California, one litre of Krypton was returned to the atmosphere.'

One consequence of Barry's work is the way in which it directs us towards a problem in photography's relationship to the visual. There is an obvious discrepancy in the *Inert Gas Series* between that which is actually recorded in the photograph – the landscape settings in which the events took place – and that which is supposedly denoted by it – the release of the inert gas. The visual – what is actually recorded – is in an interesting way in excess of the intended significance of the photograph: it has, what we might call a 'supplementary' role in relationship to it. At the level of signification the visual is suppressed and yet it necessarily returns as a presence that – to quote Barthes – 'fills the field with force'. If at one level Barry's images can be seen as an ironic negation of modernism's insistence that works of art existed as things primarily to be looked at – in Michael Fried's terms, to be 'accessible to eyesight alone' – what is ultimately at stake in this work is that it poses the problem of visuality in a genuinely deconstructive manner. In particular, what the *Inert Gas Series* highlights for us is the inadequacy of the conventional theoretical frameworks that attempt to account for the operations of the photographic sign, primarily or exclusively, in terms of the image as an indexical trace, a residual presence of that which 'has been'. Instead what we recognise as important here is the photographic act itself and to understand this we need to think about how artists such as Barry were using photography 'performatively'.

The concept of the performative that we are drawing on here is one derived from speech act theory as it was developed by J.L. Austin in a series of lectures given in the mid 1950s and published in 1962 as *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin was preoccupied with certain aspects of language which he felt could not be accounted for by conventional philosophical theories of language which tended to focus in their analysis upon certain types of sentence known as

'constatives' – sentences which seemed to describe an event or matter of fact. The meaning of these statements was dependent upon their implicit denotative relationship to the real world and thereby to an implicit set of assumptions as to their truth-value. (We need only note here that there are obvious parallels between the way in which we think about these kinds of constative statements and the ways in which we commonly think about the photograph – as a special kind of sign that seems to picture or denote an event – and which is similarly embedded in a set of powerful ideas about its relationship to truth and the real). Austin, at first, contrasted constatives with a type of linguistic phenomenon whose meaning was not determined by this sense of a denotative relationship to the real world but which seemed instead to act upon the world, producing it, changing it. These linguistic phenomena, which Austin termed 'performatives' could best be interpreted as actions rather than being decoded as meanings. Beyond, therefore, the ways in which we make use of language to communicate information or make some statement about the world, we also use it to do things with: to ask questions, give orders, make promises, offer apologies and so on. The basic idea of what Austin termed 'speech acts' is that the act of saying something is at the same time doing what one says. A simple example would be that in saying 'I promise .... x, y, or z', the speaker is actually making a promise.

One significant aspect of Austin's exploration of the performative that we need to note for our purposes here is that, while his analysis begins with the very special cases of performatives in language, distinguishing them from constatives, he gradually begins to extend his analysis to include constatives themselves as very special cases of performatives – for example the statement 'the tree is in the garden' which might be assumed to be a constative describing a state of affairs is in fact, at a deeper level, a sort of truncated version of the performative declaration that 'there is a tree in the garden'. Thus Austin extends his analysis of these examples of a peculiar, particular, overlooked category of linguistic phenomena so that they come to tell us something profound about the nature of language itself. In this move he established in effect a whole shift in the debate around the ontology of language that was to have profound impact on both linguistics and philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, locating language firmly in the social.<sup>2</sup> In conjunction with the later work of Wittgenstein who had similarly abandoned the attempt to discover truth through the analysis of linguistic statements and had encouraged us instead to look at the ways in which language was used by us to make things happen, Austin provided a radical means of deconstructing our assumptions about the relationship between the language and truth. For truth, from the perspective of speech act theory, would always ultimately be

<sup>2</sup> This is not to ignore the seminal work of much earlier writers such as those associated with the Bakhtin school but the impact of that body of linguistic theory was only to be felt much later.

embedded within a set of social relationships, a type of contract entered into by language users.

Conceptual art in the late 1960s was influenced in a variety of ways by Anglo-American analytical philosophy – eclectically incorporating into its fold a range of different philosophical positions, ranging from logical positivism to ordinary language philosophy, from early to late Wittgenstein, and incorporating also discussions about speech act theory and performativity. The influence of Wittgenstein's writings, for example, were paramount in pre and early Art and Language work which, in the words of Terry Atkinson, was concerned with 'the business of pushing the idea of Duchamp's readymade to a point of cognitive exhaustion' by the use of a 'declarative strategy' that was usually textually based, whilst Joseph Kosuth had independently reached a similar position via a logical positivist theory of language which boiled down to his assertion that 'works of art are analytical propositions', to which he went to add in more prosaic terms that 'this is what [Donald] Judd means when he states "if someone says his work is art, it's art"'. Indeed in the period between about 1966 and 1970 it became a common concern to explore what possibilities existed in the idea of declaring, nominating, announcing, stating, claiming, identifying, reporting, that such and such a thing was a work of art. In retrospect it seems clear that whether that thing was a material object or whether it was merely an idea expressed in the form of a textual proposition was less important than the actual act of declaring, nominating, announcing, etc. In other words one of the most important strategies adopted by conceptual artists can be thought of as a form of speech act. (Whether that act carried what Austin called 'perlocutionary force' – that is whether anyone actually believed what they were saying – is, of course, another matter entirely.)

One artist who did draw directly on Austin's writings was Keith Arnatt. Undoubtedly the best known of Arnatt's early works – one might call it for obvious reasons his signature work – is *Trouser-Word Piece* which derives its title indirectly from the quotation from Austin's essay *Sense and Sensibilia* (Figure 10).<sup>3</sup> Arnatt had come across Austin's writings and those of other speech act theorists in the early 1960s and what he took from that experience was the notion that art could essentially be seen as a kind of action, or more specifically, as an act of utterance. More than that, however, what Arnatt seized upon were the consequences of art-making as a performative utterance in shifting the notion of what an artist was and what he does. Put simply, the direct corollary of the conceptualist strategy of the declaration or nomination of any given material (or putatively immaterial) object as a work of art was that the status of artist assumed a different kind of institutional and discursive positionality. The identity of the artist, like the identity of the art object,

3 It is interesting to note that the photograph of Arnatt holding up a placard upon which he announces 'I'M A REAL ARTIST' has been often reproduced without the panel of text bearing the Austin quote that is meant to accompany it.

**Keith Arnatt**

**TROUSER - WORD PIECE**

'It is usually thought, and I dare say usually rightly thought, that what one might call the affirmative use of a term is basic - that, to understand 'x', we need to know what it is to be x, or to be an x, and that knowing this apprises us of what it is **not** to be x, not to be an x. But with 'real' . . . it is the **negative** use that wears the trousers. That is, a definite sense attaches to the assertion that something is real, a real such-and-such, only in the light of a specific way in which it might be, or might have been, **not** real. 'A real duck' differs from the simple 'a duck' only in that it is used to exclude various ways of being not a real duck - but a dummy, a toy, a picture, a decoy, &c.; and moreover I don't know **just** how to take the assertion that it's a real duck unless I know **just** what, on that particular occasion, the speaker had it in mind to exclude . . . (The) function of 'real' is not to contribute positively to the characterisation of anything, but to exclude possible ways of being **not** real - and these ways are both numerous for particular kinds of things, and liable to be quite different for things of different kinds. It is this identity of general function combined with immense diversity in specific applications which gives to the word 'real' the, at first sight, baffling feature of having neither one single 'meaning,' nor yet ambiguity, a number of different meanings.'

John Austin, 'Sense and Sensibilia.'

Figure 10. Keith Arnatt,  
*Trouser-Word Piece*, 1972.



becomes, in more senses than one, entirely nominal. This is nowhere more clearly registered than in another of Arnatt's pieces from this time, *Art and Egocentricity – A Perlocutionary Act?* (1972), which consists of a wall inscription that announces that 'KEITH ARNATT IS AN ARTIST' accompanied by a lengthy essay that sets out to analyse that declarative statement by means of speech act theory. What Arnatt sets out to do in that essay is to examine the notion of art as a presentation of the artist's intention and his right to nomination. Arnatt's reading of Austin, Searle and others allows him to recognise that saying something is a work of art, or saying that you are an artist, takes place within the complexity of the social contracts within which meaning and truth are formed.

It hardly needs pointing out that these two works by Arnatt function as performatives – although performatives disguised, as it were, as constatives – in the realm of language (entirely so in one case, partially so in the other). And it might be argued that, in the example of Robert Barry's work also, the declarative act is one embedded in the textual statement that accompanies the photographs, lending a kind of performativity to the role of anchorage that Barthes once identified as the structural relationship existing between the photograph and its accompanying caption.<sup>4</sup> However, we would argue that in an important sense these photographs *in themselves* resemble the structure of a speech act and that they do so precisely in terms of the complex interdependency between performatives and constatives, between socially defined utterances and truth statements, that Austin's work, almost despite himself, revealed. What we are therefore presented with in *Trouser-Word Piece* is not simply a photograph of Keith Arnatt but an image that is located within the genre of self-portraiture in which the role of the artist is performatively acted out. And, in a way that mirrors the convergence of the constative with the performative that Austin had once identified, we are faced in the *Inert Gas Series* with two forms of indexicality, coexisting within the same image: the first is that which presents itself as 'pure denotation', the trace of the scene of an event; the second is that of a gesture, an indicator that declares that the event is taking place.

An important consequence that flows from rethinking photographic indexicality in these terms is indicated in the uneasy juxtaposition of the two temporalities contained in the preceding sentence. We noted at the beginning event is taking place.

An important consequence that flows from rethinking photographic indexicality in these terms is indicated in the uneasy juxtaposition of the two temporalities contained in the preceding sentence. We noted at the beginning of this essay that much of the discussion of photography's indexicality has been one that has been dominated by the gravitational force of Roland Barthes' seminal essay *Camera Lucida* in which – as Geoffrey Batchen observes elsewhere in this volume – the photograph seemingly becomes closely intertwined with a generalised sense of mourning, melancholia and loss. Yet, as anyone familiar

<sup>4</sup> See Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image' in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. S. Heath, Fontana, 1977.

with that essay – and more so with Barthes' earlier essays on photography – will know, this is a rather a crude and very partial characterization of his argument. For whilst, Barthes might stress an essential anteriority inscribed within the photograph, the overriding experience of the 'what has been', there is also the countervailing force that we see is also irrefutably and immediately 'present'. Whilst Barthes dealt with this fundamental paradox that the photograph presents us with in rather different ways, in essays written well over two decades apart, there is nonetheless an essential continuity to be observed here. For Barthes the enigma (or the magic) of the photograph lay within our experience of it as existing within two irreconcilable temporal frames that, as Ann Banfield has observed, confounded any attempt to find an equivalent in ordinary language. Banfield argues that the impossibility that Barthes faced in attempting to bring together what he described as 'an illogical conjuncture between the *here-now* and the *there-then*' might better be reformulated as: 'This was now here'.<sup>5</sup>

It would seem to us that this might be an appropriate way in which to describe the two kinds of indexicality that we have attempted to describe above as coexisting within the photograph: the one bound into the an ever receding past, the other occupying the horizon of a continual present. However, if the photograph can never escape its inevitable passage into history, marking as it does the irreversible flow of the present moment into the past, what we want to focus upon here is that equally insistent experiential factor of the photograph, which is that of the 'here and now'.

It was Peirce himself who noted that: 'The index has the being of present experience'<sup>6</sup>, and ever since then it has fallen to both philosophers and linguistic theorists to dwell upon the ramifications of what he identified as one of the main classes of indices that he termed 'designators', those signs that only operate by reference to an object or event in the immediate spatio-temporal field. Whilst the terminology to describe such phenomena may vary – designation, ostention, indication are the most common forms of expression to be found – they are ultimately concerned with the same thing. This is what, (to settle on one term), linguists often refer to as *deixis*.<sup>7</sup> By this, is meant the form of everyday language behaviour in which meaning is inseparable from the physical context of the speaker's utterance. The most common type of deictics are those demonstrative, relative and personal pronouns (here, now, this, that, I, you, we, them) that only acquire meaning by being anchored in the specifics of time and space.

It will be obvious that our extension of the notion of the performative statement to include the photographic act is intended to foreground the idea of a gesture, a matter of pointing to something, that is similarly grounded in

5 Ann Banfield, 'L'imparfait de l'Objectif: the Imperfect of the Object Class', *Camera Obscura*, 24, 1990, pp. 65-87. For a not dissimilar attempt to explore the irresolvable conjuncture of the past and the present within the photographic image with regard to Jan Dibbet's 'Perspective Correction' series see David Green, 'Between Object and Image', in *Creative Camera: 30 Years of Writing*, ed. D. Brittain, Manchester University Press, 1999, pp. 261-268.

6 *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and Arthur W. Burks, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1935-1966. Vol. 4, p. 447.

7 Because of the overall drift of Barthes argument in *Camera Lucida*, it is easy to overlook the importance that he attaches to precisely this aspect of the photograph at the very beginning of his essay: 'Show your photographs to someone – he will immediately show you his: "Look," this is my brother; this is me as a child," etc.; the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of "Look," "See," "Here it is"; it points a finger at certain vis-a-vis, and cannot escape this pure deictic language.' Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. R. Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981, p. 3.

the specificity of a particular time and place. Yet, what is important here is that in formulating the issue in these terms, we must avoid the trap of inadvertently reinstating the idea of the photographic document, that is as the truthful record of something that has happened. As we have tried to show in our brief discussion of conceptual art's use of photography, the intent seems to have been not to confirm but to ironise the documentary status of photography and what this involved was employing the photograph performatively to designate the real, rather than to represent it. Performativity, we are arguing, was central to the use made of photography by conceptual artists not so much for the fact that it provided the spectator with an indexical trace of the real through the recording of the event, but because it deictically invoked the real through 'pointing to' the event and, in effect, declaring it to be the case. The indeterminacy between these two forms of indexicality, far from confirming the status of the visible world, subtly puts it into question and draws our attention to the ways in which notions of the real are discursively produced.

As John Roberts has inferred – significantly for our purposes, within a discussion of conceptual art's use of photography – 'photography's powers of ostension' have often been overlooked; but also, and more importantly, that the importance of this property of the medium lies not so much with the mere fact of nomination but with what he calls its 'inferential complexity', which we take to mean its claim upon description rather than just designation.<sup>8</sup> And this is precisely where contemporary photographers' preoccupations with the indexical nature of the photographic image seem to be relevant. There has been, in the last decade, a resurgence of interest in the use of photography to testify to our sense of the real. Perhaps the most insistent, or more self-conscious, trend has been towards configuring the 'real' in terms of the anti-social, even dystopic, character of various sub-cultural lifestyles. In the work of photographers such as Nan Goldin, Jack Pierson, Corinne Day, Jurgen Teller and Wolfgang Tillmans, the historically familiar tropes of realism – the everyday, the low and the mundane – are reworked through an iconography of the abject squalor and detritus of contemporary existence lived in a state of social and psychic restlessness. Seemingly consistent with this imagery is the language of rough-edged snapshot photography with all the signs of 'bad' photographic technique and deliberately displaying a form of amateurism that differs markedly from an early kind of 'anti-aesthetic' deployed by someone like Ruscha. Whilst this styleless-style might not be particularly original, its studied casualness befits the subjective, autobiographical and diaristic nature of such a practice, not least by the fact that it foregrounds the notion of personal testimony in the evidence of an embodied vision. Indeed it seems to us that what these often blurred, badly focused and ill-composed images seek to do above all is to

<sup>8</sup> John Roberts, 'Photography, Iconophobia and the Ruins of Conceptual Art', in *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976*, Camerawords, London, 1977.



Figure 11.  
Jean-Marc Bustamante.  
From the series *Something  
is Missing*, 1997 - present.

declare the bodily presence of the photographer within a sensory field and to anchor a reading of the image in terms of an utterance designated by a first person pronoun, or, to use Bertrand Russell's more apt and telling phrase, by an 'egocentric particular', of which the word 'I' is the most prevalent form. Thus these forms of photographic practice, in their casual prolificness, do not so much represent the world as declare it to exist.

These types of practice, which are premised upon a presumption that the photographer is the origin of that declaration, can be contrasted with the very different kind of work produced by such photographers as Thomas Struth, Candida Hoffer and Thomas Ruff in which scrupulously neutralised forms of objectivity are striven for. Here the centre of operations is located firmly in the apparatus itself rather than in the photographer. It is the camera that points to the world and that operates as the deictic agent; it is the camera that intervenes performatively to claim the event. Yet if anything yokes these two apparently divergent types of practice together it is the way in which the prioritisation of the deictic performativity of the photograph begins to undermine conventional notions of meaning and reference.

Geoff Bennington, in an exploration of the concept of the index and its relationship to deixis, has pointed out the way in which the deictic sign stands outside the referential space of language.<sup>9</sup> Where we can identify the meaning of most words by consulting a dictionary definition, or examine, structurally, the differential value of a word in its relationship to other words, deictics can

<sup>9</sup> Geoff Bennington, 'Index  
in Legislations. *The Politics of  
Deconstruction*. Verso,  
London, 1994.

10 op.cit. p.85.

only be described grammatically in terms of their function and sphere of operations. The deictic term is always outside language, potentially subverting it and putting it into brackets; just as the performative hijacks the constative and reveals it to be provisional and contingent. The recognition of this gives new force to Barthes' prevailing intuition that the photograph ultimately preoccupies us because it lacks meaning, because, as Banfield, writing about Barthes, succinctly puts it: '...what the photograph is sensible of can be outside the ego, a thought unthought, unintended, involuntary and without meaning.'<sup>10</sup>

The work of the French artist Jean-Marc Bustamante exemplifies the problems that this raises for photography. Since the late 1990s he has produced a series of photographs called *Something is Missing*: images taken in a range of different cities such as Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Madrid, and Miami (Figure 11). The images at one level trace the familiar characteristics of non-places in the city, the arbitrary conjunctions and contingent events that conspire to construct the illegibility of the contemporary urban milieu. At one level these photographs are unremarkable, characterised by a flat banality that resists any offer of aesthetic engagement or narrative. Yet at another level it is that very emptiness that must preoccupy us, that very sense that something, indeed, is missing. There is, in these photographs, a sense of indeterminacy around the framing of the image, a sense that this frame is not so much a delimitation of a semiotic space, but more an arbitrary event, a performance, a gesture that points to the scene and in doing so points to our inability to read it. Like Barry's *Inert Gas Series* Bustamante's photographs, situated on the threshold between referentiality and legibility, point to the real while reminding us that photography can never represent it.