

ARCHAEOLOGY AND PHOTOGRAPHY – SPLINTERS IN THE EYE



Last Thursday I was commenting on digital manipulation [Link] This got me thinking again about two recent collections of David Carson's photography – The Book of Probes and Trek.

Superficially there is a lot of play in these on focus and resolution – abstraction in a dissolved image, recognition that there may be something in there (ghost images and the uncanny), traces, echoes, nuances, shadows, objective correlatives of dim memories (the beach last summer). He uses recombinant graphics, plays on switching and manipulating figure and ground. Many photos use disconnected bits of graphics, logos, fonts.



David Carson

There is artifice, but not photographic – none of the photos pay attention to usual paradigms (color balance, framing, composition, or indeed genre).

Trek is explicit about Carson's purpose – a visual archaeology, one that deals in a rag and bone shop, with fragments, remnants of signs, layers of cultural accretion. Border zones – slippage between between matter, text and image, between past and present and future.

Some media themes

Carson works on media matter. Media are clearly the message. *Probes* is a work on McLuhan. A probe is an instrument of testing where the content of the image is less important than its provocation, its prompt of the question – what is this about? The point of the probe is its effect, its investigation here into ways of seeing.

Probes are **visual primers**.

Barthes's *punctum* comes to mind. And Adorno – the best magnifying glass is a splinter in the eye.

Media are often conceived as as secondary acts of reproduction. The original is often preferred. Live performance is preferred over some kind of record. But the proliferation of recorded media makes the viewer/listener much more of a participant (and threat, of course), because they can choose, select, edit, experience pieces of the work in new contexts. And share stuff with friends, breaking copyright. They can manipulate photos to political ends (see the Salon.com comment on Thursday [Link]). But remember – Glenn Gould abandoned live performance.

The picture or recording placed in context of the viewer's or listener's choice takes us into the ambient and the everyday, away from the sacred and protected spaces of art – worlds of images and sounds, rather than museum and art gallery. John Cage's remediated music as sound.

Text and media are as much (ambient) material matter, freed from semantics – Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.

Like so much archaeological work, the resource worked upon is broken, half-destroyed, half decayed matter. Seeking some kind of pattern and significance in the mess and chaos. Terribly imperfect, incomplete, impermanent. (is this not an aesthetic of *wabi sabi*? – see my wiki *Traumwerk*)