



THE LIVING ROOM (CURTAIN) (I), 2003

# NARRATIVE

To try to follow the threads of influence that feed into contemporary art photography is an almost impossible task. It is too wide and varied, contradictory and elusive. Sucking its references from many rich springs, photography is the magpie of all artistic mediums, cherry-picking styles and theories from the other arts and turning them into something resolutely its own. These rich pickings are nowhere more apparent than in 'staged photography'. This term is the most commonly used for photography which relies on a narrative for its reading. Of all the genres featured in this book it is perhaps this that has become most synonymous with contemporary art photography.



of the most exciting moments in very recent photographic emerged with a generation of artists in the 1990s. Understanding and relishing the complexities of the medium, as outlined in various generation of theorists and photographers, these artists incorporated elements of fantasy, artifice and make-believe in their work. By scrupulously staging events and working with subject matter in a similar way to that of a film director, artists often sumptuous and seductive fictitious tableaux in which elements came to the fore. Carefully choreographed, precise and elaborately conceived, photography that deals with cinema owes much to the language and look of cinema. The term 'narrative' suggests a story, and therefore movement. It needs to progress in order to be told. At first this seems to contradict the singularity of a photographic still, but 'staged' photography distils stories into one-off images, packed full of condensed information. Such images function densely rather than chronologically, as experienced in a photo story. Although the artists featured do work in series, each of their images stands alone in the same way as a painting or a film still does. Live photography demands time from the viewer, peeling layers to get to the next instalment which might (or, more might not) fill in the blanks. The language of film and the understanding of how we engage with cinema is vital. The pauses, the mises-en-scène and the dramatic lighting all come from the filmic tradition and share the seductive qualities of the screen. Artists in the 1980s such as Laurie Simmons and Sherman employed similar strategies in their work, but referenced specific cinematic tropes in order to parody and pastiche. Cinema has influenced contemporary art in a variety of ways, seen in the work of artists such as John Divola, John Stezolas Gordon, John Baldessari, Matthew Barney and Robert Rauschenberg, to name but a few. Andy Warhol's obsessive fascination with the screen and his work in film perhaps make him

the grandfather of the cinema/photography crossover. As ways of looking, cinema and photography have much in common and it is not surprising that they influence and support one another so profoundly.

However, narrative photography relies on many other vital sources apart from cinema. Painting, fashion, theatre and literature all have equally important parts to play. Victorian photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron turned to popular poems and literature and re-enacted them photographically in elaborate 'tableaux vivants'. Surrealists such as Claude Cahun produced theatrical portraits that literally used the backdrop of the stage to exaggerate their artifice and to think about roles and performances for the camera. It could also be argued that self-consciously staged narratives have also always been commonplace in fashion photography, portraiture and in the family snapshot. Narrative is crucial to photography, as is artifice, and contemporary artists realize this and use these as strategies to tell stories. But these images often tap into wider social issues, and to see them as only functioning as fantasy is to ignore the other very real issues that lie behind this kind of work. Nor can one think about this way of working as copying. The references for each image are eclectic and cannot be traced from a particular painting or moment of cinema. The artist's hand is very much apparent in staged photography and autobiographical glimpses often add yet another layer, or story, to the final image.

For many of the artists here, it is the work of Canadian artist Jeff Wall that has been the most direct source of inspiration, and his influence cannot be overestimated. For a period of over twenty years, Wall has developed an outstanding body of work in which he places images in back-lit boxes more generally associated with the display of adverts. Through his carefully constructed work he explores a range of social and political themes. A constant dialogue with nineteenth-

century genre paintings is blended with a seemingly casual snapshot style to show moments of everyday life that may well have gone unacknowledged. At times he digitally manipulates his work to confuse the viewer further, so that they have to look harder at his work and think more deeply about the role of the photograph itself. It is the doubt about what is actually being represented, and the deconstruction of what a photograph essentially is and how it functions, that are core to his work and to the work of others of his generation. His background in art history (he studied the subject at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London) reveals a sophisticated knowledge of painting and the stylistic and compositional devices of art. Indeed his comments on art history are equally explanatory of his own practice:

'The Western Picture is, of course, a tableau, that independently beautiful depiction and composition that derives from the institutionalisation of perspective and dramatic figuration at the origins of modern Western art, with Raphael, Dürer, Bellini and the other familiar maestri. It is known as a product of divine gift, high skill, deep emotion, and crafty planning.'

The energy, time and skill needed to create such a constructed photograph is common to all the artists featured in this chapter, but they do have different approaches to narrative. The subtle mixture of the everyday and the staged in the work of Wall can also be seen in work by artists such as Sarah Jones, Hannah Starkey, Sharon Lockhart, Collier Schorr and Bill Henson. Weaving documentary issues and styles into their work, the ambiguity between what is staged and what is 'real' gives these images their power. In a careful balancing act between reality and fantasy, the viewer is unsettled and does not really know on what terms to take the photograph. Part document, part fantasy, such images produce a tension that is often echoed by their subject matter and composition. The very 'stillness' that

occurs in such constructs often has a claustrophobic or uncanny effect which is reminiscent of Victorian photography with its slow shutter speeds. The stillness creates an atmosphere of expectation. It can be seen as the pregnant pause, or in many cases the calm before the storm. By lingering on figures they become as compelling as portraits and, as when watching a film, the viewer forms allegiances with the characters involved.

This feeling of the uncanny or of impending doom can be seen acutely in much staged photography and is often extenuated by the use of children and the presence of slightly dangerous situations. The push and pull between the beautifully constructed image and the fear of something dreadful about to happen has become something of a cliché within the genre and there has been a shift recently to quieter, more ambiguous work, almost documentary in style. The predominance of female practitioners and subject matter is also changing and the genre is generally becoming more diverse.

The noticeable use of a stage set with obvious 'actors' is another common device in narrative work. Artists such as Tracey Moffatt and Wang Qingsong make no claims to be dealing in the realms of reality, although many of the themes that they touch on are grounded in the real world and have serious implications. Their playful, slightly kitsch approach makes their work accessible and then leads the viewer to think more deeply about the messages the actors are presenting. The 'over the top' costumes and 'ham acting' inject humour into a genre that is often associated with horror (even if that horror is just around the corner, unseen).

Finally, it is here that the use of the digital perhaps has the freest reign. Although artists such as AES&F deal completely in the realm of fantasy, the ramifications of human behaviour underpin their work. The complex layers built into narrative photography show the many twists and turns and variations that exist in the telling of stories. As with all photography, the deeper you delve, the more you get.