

Bernard Walsh's: World Series

I often tell my students, now I teach Art at Goldsmiths, that being *selfish* is better than trying to rely on a version of *empathy* to extend the sense of what 'you' are 'yourself' experiencing; some *thing* in relation to something else, whatever that might be; a view, a gesture, a pleasure, a pain, a smell, a sound or a line of text that seems to speak to 'you', but 'you' don't know why, or what that is; something that is already 'vaguely' familiar. And almost straightaway it seems 'you' want to share this, whatever it is called, that 'you' are 'yourself' experiencing; something that 'you' cannot otherwise put into words, with someone, who 'you' may, or may not even know.

But why I wonder do I, or does anyone ever want to try to share their own experience – this transient moment – with anyone else?

Wouldn't it be better just to stay in the moment that 'you' are in for as long as 'you' can, and be, for want of a better word, *selfish* about it, and then have done with it; with that moment, and move on? There will be other moments I am sure, as the situation of all 'our' lives keeps turning: 'culture' from a Latin word '*cultura*', means to till, or to lift the soil. 'You' may want to share this moment to try and dispel the frustration of not being able to say what it is that 'you' are 'yourself' experiencing? And 'you' think by telling someone else about it or by showing 'them' something – 'they' will be able to tell 'you' what it is.

This is what I might call a '*Proustian moment*'; when someone has a sensation or an emotion, or whatever else this 'feeling' might be called; an experience that cannot otherwise put into words. And so rather like the character '*Marcel*', Proust writes about in his novel '*Swann's Way*'¹, who imbibes the taste of a Madeleine dipped into a cup of warm lime tea, which reminds him of something, but he is not sure what that is, I try to repeat the same 'experience'; I take a photograph. But each time I do the vague recollection of what I am trying to 'recapture' becomes dimmer, or it becomes something else.

I also tell my students that it is my *belief*, and only my belief, which I know is a dodgy basis from which to speak about anything, because

¹ Proust's *Swann's Way*, Volume 1 of: *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*

it is inevitably going to sound like a proclamation; that this is what an artist must endure; to not always know what 'he' or 'she' is going to say about what 'they' have made.

Sure! I can write something on a label and put it alongside the work, whenever I have an opportunity to exhibit my work, that will explain; this is a photograph, or a watercolour, or an acrylic or an oil painting, and its' dimensions are, whatever the dimensions of the piece of paper, or the linen, or cotton duck canvass are. Or that this is a mixed media installation, or an immaterial conceptual artwork that only exists through rumour.

But what does that explain, other than to restate what is already apparent or in the case of an immaterial conceptual artwork is not already apparent. Or I might sometimes accept an invitation to talk about my work, which enables me to gather an audience response to what I have made, or to what I am saying about what I have made, for the audience to be able to share their own thoughts. This is how empathy is supposed to occur. But what about the confusion of not being able to say what this is?

What are 'we' going to say about that, or do 'we' just ignore what is otherwise unspeakable?

Or what about when someone expresses a point of view that does not correspond with 'your' own sense of what this is? 'We' are not bound to agree with one another. This is how disagreements occur. I have my own sense, 'you', I am sure, have 'your own' sense, and 'he', 'she', or 'it' might also have 'their own' sense. 'We' can speak about that; about our different points of view, to try to disrupt the security of what 'we' already know. We can speak about that.

I teach *Fine Art* at *Goldsmiths* where *Studio Practice* is taught through conversation about the work each of 'us' make. This might involve any sort of material or subject matter, within the bounds of what health and safety regulation, and any other sort of legal requirement allows.

But I must not distract myself at this point.

It would be too easy to use the opportunity to write about my own work to write about general issues of what art is, or is not something that is already 'understood'. I think art is better than anything that explains that this is what 'it' is, or that this is what 'it' is supposed to do.

I don't know why I do what I do. I just do what I can when I am on my own, and I am able to concentrate on thinking about something that gradually, sometimes, becomes a script that I can imagine myself reading out-loud, or at other times I make an object, or an image, or a series of objects or images, which is now what I want to write about.

The title of the series of photographs I am going to show 'you' is: *Bernard Walsh's World Series*.

I realize there is an amount of conceit in me using this title.

Who am I to claim a World title?

Over recent years I have travelled to a number of cities around the World, to places I never expected to visit. I am usually there, wherever I am, for reasons to do with my work as a lecturer, or as an artist; otherwise I am not sure I ever would travel very much. I am not a great traveller. I don't worship the Sun. I don't speak any other language, besides English, maybe a little French. And I don't have a longing to visit "ancient buildings" or "beautiful places"².

I find the situation of being 'abroad', disconcerting. I am not sure what I am supposed to do with the experience, besides doing what I came to do, what I was supposed to do.

There are of course always things I can look at.

² Swann's Way



[See figure 1: two men smoking in a bar in Tokyo]

More often than not I find myself sitting somewhere, outside, if it is warm, or inside, if it is cold, and I do, what I imagine most people do when they are in a situation like this, I practice what the chapter in my phrase book entitled '*eating out*' enables me to do; I order something to eat and drink in a foreign language. But this doesn't work, not on this occasion, so I point at something that looks nice, and say:

"Can I have some of that please?"

When the food arrives it does look nice, and tastes delicious. After a while the waitress comes back over to my table. She has found a copy of the menu that has been translated into English, and points to what I assume I have just eaten: *a plate of chicken vaginas in a rich tomato sauce*. After I finish my glass of red wine I go away, and start to wander around – this is perhaps the only time I ever use a camera. It is as though the camera becomes an excuse for me to be able to wander around without knowing what I want to see, or what I want to 'capture'; an image of something that will seem typical, or something that will seem odd? I must realize this moment is going to pass, (well that isn't rocket science), and the photograph will enable me to look back at this situation whenever I want to, which might be as soon as I get back to my hotel, and start to download the images onto my laptop.

I am often surprised by what I see.



[See figure 2: an image of a house in Seoul]

I don't always notice the things that subsequently intrigue me.

Whoever painted that green patch to look like, what I assume it was meant to represent, a lawn, must have wiped their brush across the concrete paving stones. Now the smudges of green paint look like odd clumps of grass growing wild.

I decided to show the World Series against a specific backdrop, of what I wanted it to look like - a repeat-pattern wallpaper, to create an impression of this being a domestic interior. But this isn't a repeat-

pattern, and the wallpaper has never been used to decorate a domestic interior. Each strip of wallpaper was individually made using the same motif; a photograph of me with three of my sisters posing for a school photograph. I photocopied the image lots of times, and put it through a number of processes; different methods of mechanical reproduction, because I wanted to suggest a continuous mass production, a de-generation, and subsequent regeneration of the same image. Gradually the composition moved away from being what it was; a figurative representation of a specific occasion, to become something more 'abstract'. I wanted it to look like the representation of a 'memory' that was being remembered too many times.

I didn't want the *World Series* to be seen against a neutral background. I don't think there is such a thing as a neutral background. I wanted the viewer to have to read around, as well as through the individual images, to realize the significance of the images in relation to one another set against a specific background.

There is a moment in Proust's *Swann's Way* where the mother wants to buy photographs of "ancient buildings" or of "beautiful places" to decorate her son's bedroom. This moment creates a dilemma for the mother.

Proust writes:

"But at the moment of buying them, and for all the subject of the picture had an aesthetic value of its own, she would find vulgarity and utility had too prominent a part (to play) in them through the mechanical nature of their reproduction"³.

I share the Mother's concern; her dilemma. I am not sure what I think about photography; I mean I am not sure to what extent a photographic image can ever represent the sense of reality I already have in mind.

³ Swann's Way



[See figure 3: an image of a house in Tokyo]

The photographic image is inevitably stuck in being what it is; a representation of a specific moment that has been ‘captured’ and separated away from other moments that might have made it, the individual moment, make sense when the photograph was originally taken. Now I am more interested in the ‘formal’ arrangement of elements operating within each composition; how this or that colour seems to work with this or that other colour, or how a particular shape seems to balance another shape, or how each image fits into a specific frame.

There is also undoubtedly a pleasure for me, in being able to look back at what I imagine I once saw. Although if truth be known, I hardly ever remember being there, wherever I was when the original photograph was taken.



[See figure 4: an image of a house in Istanbul]

I can't remember if this photograph is of a house in Seoul or Istanbul.

Eventually the sense of different place merges in my mind.

There are often similarities between the places I visit, or perhaps I only notice those things that interest me; the more familiar aspects of daily life in a modern city, that also incorporate aspects of what I perceive to be the remnants of an old city; electric street lamps, traffic signals, telephone wires, electric cables, satellite dishes, bill boards, advertising posters, and a variety of street signs.

I don't always know what I want to say about an image. This is what I like about Art; that I am not sure about its purpose, which is a delightful and at times an excruciating preoccupation that many of 'us' seem to share.



[See figure 5: an image of Taksim Square in Istanbul]

Now I think I have established a degree of separation from the work. I am able to look at the images for being what they are, rather than for what they were once meant to be; a reminder of somewhere where I once was, but I am no longer there. The images look strange and vaguely familiar. I want them to go beyond the regular sense of being what I, or what anyone else, might have already come to expect an image of the rest of the World to look like.

Most images of the rest of the World are made to represent specific landmarks such as Mount Fuji, the Eiffel Tower, the Rialto Bridge, the Pyramids, or the Empire State Building. Iconic places that visitors are encouraged to visit through illustrations in guide books, picture postcards, in-flight magazines and Internet websites. I am interested in these stereotypical images. But that isn't what my work is about.

The images in my World Series are of places where some ‘one’ (unknown to me), has taken it upon ‘themselves’ to transform the sense of space in front of ‘their’ own home, shop, café or adjacent passageway, by modifying the arrangement of building works or street furniture. I am interested in the politics of eccentricity where a subjective sense is played out by someone who is making an effort.



[See figure 6: an image of flowers painted on steps in Seoul]

The flowers in this image are out of scale, they don't look like ‘nature’ ever intended them to look like ‘this’. But then what is ‘nature’; an occasional apparition – that does not always make sense?

Proust's 'mother' found the photographic images *vulgar*. Proust continues to write about the mother's response to what she saw:

*"She attempted by a subterfuge, if not to eliminate altogether their commercial banality at least to minimize it, to substitute for the bulk of it what was art still, to introduce as it might be, several 'thicknesses' of art; instead of photographs of Chartres Cathedral, of the Fountains of Saint-Cloud, or Vesuvius, she would enquire of Monsieur Swann whether some great painter had not made pictures of them, and preferred to give me photographs of 'Chartres Cathedral' after Corot, of the 'Fountains of Saint-Cloud' after Hubert Robert, and of 'Vesuvius' after Turner, which were a stage higher in the scale of art ..."*⁴



[See figure 7: an image of L.A. Jesus]

This notion of there being such a thing as a *scale of art* is something Proust introduces 'us' to, as readers, in order to disclose what is going on in his mother's mind. Through his writing 'we' imagine what

⁴ Swann's Way

she perceives, and immediately assume her prejudice that a photographic image is inherently inferior to a painting, because of the obvious 'nature' of its mechanical reproduction. And that there might be such a thing as *several 'thicknesses' of art* is a troubling concept as it suggests additional layers, not as another substance, but as an illusion.



[See figure 8: an image of wig shop in L.A.]

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While Proust was writing about photography, Eugene Atget was photographing Paris going through the final stages of a massive urban redevelopment that was begun during the reign of Emperor Louis Napoleon III. The Emperor wanted to be rebuild Paris, to turn it into an international showcase; the most modern, hygienic and 'beautiful' city in the World. To fulfill his ambition whole swathes of the ancient medieval city were being cleared away to make way for the

construction of new boulevards⁵. Atget wanted to ‘capture’ an impression of the city before it was dismantled or destroyed. He was particularly interested in recording the evidence of the decorative arts and architecture of pre-Revolutionary Paris. And also in recording the lives of ordinary men and women going about their daily business before those lives might be forever transformed through development of the Emperor’s vision.

During the thirty years he worked as a commercial photographer Atget amassed a vast photographic archive of over 10,000 negatives, which he advertised as being “documents for artists”⁶. He worked on his own and rarely accepted private commissions. But in 1921 he did accept a commission to photograph the interiors of Parisian brothels for André Dignimont an illustrator and collector of photographs. These images might have been Proust’s ‘mother’s’ worst nightmare; to imagine that her son would ever be brought into such an immediate and intimate correspondence with the interior of a brothel.

Throughout the end of the nineteenth century, and into the early part of the twentieth century, photographic images became an increasingly common commodity accessible to most ordinary people. This was during a period of great social upheaval and unrest as families and communities were being up-rooted and divided from one another, as people moved all around the World to become the workforce that fed the needs of rapidly expanding urban conurbations. While the spread of railways and construction of vast ocean liners enabled mass-immigration to take place photographic images became an inexpensive way for people to be able to represent their arrival into new foreign lands.

During the 1880s an employee of the Swiss company *Orell Gessner Füssli* Hans Jakob Schmid invented a process known as *photochrom*, where black and white photographic negatives were directly transferred onto stone lithographic plates to make prints that were subsequently coloured in using other, separate, lithographic stones. This process was also licensed by other companies including the *Detroit Photographic Company* in the US, and *Photochrom Company of London* who used the process to manufacture millions of picture

⁵ The construction of the boulevards was carried out under the supervision of Baron Georges Haussmann.

⁶ This description was printed on Atget’s business card.

postcard images that were mainly of well-known personalities, famous 'landmarks', beauty spots and 'typical scenes' of 'everyday' life. These were the images that were sent 'home', back and forth between families and friends who were living in different parts of the World to represent a sense of what the rest of the World looked like.

Many of these postcards survive, having been tucked away for years into suitcases, or drawers, or other places around the home, until one day someone decides to get rid of them. Then they are bundled up, or shuffled into boxes besides other postcards to be sold in charity shops, antique shops, or on-line through Ebay or other specialist websites. Their value is no longer based on the details of a specific correspondence, but is more likely going to be based on a general, rather than a specific aesthetic concern; that this view of somewhere happens to be worth more than another view of somewhere else. The images tell us something (but I am not sure what that is) about the way the rest of the World used to look, and about the way other people used to live their lives.

But where are 'they' now, I wonder, all of those people 'we' never really knew, but still want to imagine 'ourselves' belonging to 'them' and to 'their' situations. In some ways I think 'they' are still with 'us', as a part of the way 'we' continue to live 'our' lives. So many of the places where 'they' used to work rest and pray are being redeveloped; mosques that were once synagogues, that were once churches, are all being converted into lottery funded heritage centres. And within the physical reconstruction of these buildings rooms are being redesigned, and other rooms are being added on to existing structures, in order to accommodate 'new' media facilities. In each of these rooms there are vast quantities of archival material already waiting to be recollected, reorganized and gradually restored through the application of what 'we' still call the 'latest' digital technology, which is supposed to enhance 'our' viewing and listening experience; so that all of a sudden 'we' might find 'ourselves' being confronted by a life-like, and sometimes beyond life-size reproduction of a something 'we' might otherwise never have known, as the pictorial representation of 'our' history becomes a rapidly expanding global phenomena.

The culture industry reinvents 'our' memories. And somehow though all the paraphernalia in the rooms filled with black and white photographs, audio sound recordings, and moving images, 'our' minds are turned around, until 'we' can no longer think straight. But 'we' can still imagine 'ourselves' being transported back-in-time; just before I turn left into a sun-lit atrium, which leads a way through a small courtyard into a newly refurbished cafeteria where I stop and ask the waitress behind the counter:

Could I have a Caesar salad, a skinny latte, and a glass of tap water please?

It is already there in my mind now; an 'authentic' version of what it must have been like to have been one of those passengers being packed into the steerage accommodation of a vast ocean liner. If only the waitress would turn the music off. It is playing softly, too softly, in the distance, drifting through my mind; the theme song from the movie Titanic⁷.

I get it. But it makes no sense.

Celine⁸ insists that:

*Every night in my dreams
I see you, I feel you.*

I find myself hanging on her every word, as the waitress sprinkles powdered chocolate over my latte. But I didn't want any chocolate sprinkled over my latte. I thought they only ever did that over a cappuccino.

*Near, far, wherever you are
I believe that the heart does go on and on ...*

She does. But I am not sure where I am. There's an image playing in my mind now as the camera swirls around a young Leonardo di

⁷ The soundtrack to the film Titanic was composed, orchestrated and conducted by James Homer, was released by Sony Classical in 1997, it became one of the best selling albums of all time, and the highest-selling primarily orchestral soundtrack ever.

⁸ Celine Dion is a singer who was born in Canada. Both her parents were born in Canada.

Caprio⁹ who is standing behind an even younger Kate Winslett¹⁰. His arms wrapped around her waist. She turns to see him. But the wind blows her hair back across her face. She cannot see him, so she turns around to look at, what I assume is meant to be a metaphor for their future – a way ahead, their life together. They are both looking straight to camera; although of course I have forgotten all about the camera. Now they are both looking straight ahead at me, as Leonardo lifts Kate up into the air. She raises her arms, and stretches them out wide, so that she can fly like a bird.

*Love can touch us one time
And last for a lifetime
And never let go till we're gone.*

I can't find the sugar. The waitress knows this without me having to ask and points me toward an assortment of different coloured sachets.

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⁹ Leonardo diCaprio is an actor who was born in Los Angeles, California. His mother was born in Germany and his father is a fourth generation American of half Italian, half German descent.

¹⁰ Kate Winslett is an actress who was born in England. Both her parents were born in England.