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7 April –  
19 June  
2009

The Stanley  
& Audrey  
Burton Gallery

# The Object of Photography

Ignaz Cassar  
Hondartza Fraga  
Joe Mawson  
Andrew Warstat

First published in 2009 to coincide with the exhibition *The Object of Photography*, 7 April – 19 June 2009

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The Object of Photography

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(Cover)  
Ignaz Cassar  
*Field #3* (detail)  
2006  
Black and white  
negative with contact  
print  
1835x2168mm



# The Whereabouts of the Work

Eve Kalyva



## *Opening Act: Signalling Signification*

However one treats its position between contemporary practice and the historical importance it has acquired, conceptual art marked a turning point in the articulation of visual culture. By restating the object/subject binary within self-referring operational systems, conceptual art dislocated the dialectic of reading/viewing regimes. Notwithstanding the comfort of ready-made solutions, the shift of attention from the artwork to the process of production and consumption of art within a critical framework became the legacy of conceptual art through which contemporary art establishes its relation to discourse as a form of legitimation.<sup>1</sup>

A self-reflective operation would mark the difference between illustrating reference by stating the obvious in different modes of representation (an articulation that only confirms signification), and preconditioning the very possibility(ies) of representation which is the work's own condition.<sup>2</sup> This is so because the material thing is constantly being referred to, caught in a process of doubling signification, being both the object in question and the referent that shifts attention to something else that it then becomes. This

dialectical process underlines what we come to understand as the viewed object and our reading of it. Here, framing (mis)representations negotiates the material and intellectual labour of making and reading art within the capitalist system at a material as much as a social cognitive level.

Between conceptualisation and objectification, the modalities of the material object, the work put into the work and a phenomenology of observations shift and strive for space. Expectations and situations can relatively easily fill the gaps, but by initiating critical tension the work can attempt a material and conceptual negation of its presence everywhere where signification, documentation, framed matter and reading regimes are made to stick in practice, scholarship and spectatorial and curatorial affairs. This discursive resistance means that the work cannot become anything just because someone wishes it to be – not owing to any predominant idea pertinent to conceptual art, since every art has an idea before it and an object after it, but because the work is always a something.

## *Main act: archives, frames and reading regimes*

Given adequate ideological and discursive constructs, documentation manipulates viewing and standardises a reading regime of what there is to be seen by initiating the attribution of essence (if not already evaluating preservation-worthy qualities). Archives' pre-selected patterns of action



Ignaz Cassar  
444 Archives (detail)  
2008  
Installation: ready-made archival boxes, steel shelving units, gelatin silver paper, archival masking tape, photo corners, self-adhesive archival labels  
1000x2500x400mm

in time and space are summed, when read, as the progression of creation, moving and stopping, signifying and conveying traces of *arche* that must be lost for the archive to be able to recall them – well, almost. The archive, whose presence lures one into reading it, prompts one to destabilise, question and take apart its surface to reach for otherwise carefully nominated truth signs.

The archive is thus of an interim order: there is no purpose in an archive that does not function as the archive of something else. For what the archive is lacking and can never attain if it is to remain an archive, is totality. Origin and final product must always remain outside the archive for the archive to constitute their traceable development; and to be able to account for what is to be seen, one must already know where to look, if not already having formulated an idea of what one is looking for and at.

Trouble begins when the work acts as

an archive to itself, calling attention to that which it may not be and defining its presence in various self-referential modes and relational operations within formed semiotic systems that remain incomplete and unstable and mis-conclude any linear narratives.

If the designated entry point is a self-destructive, forbidding peak that would only ruin everything, then the modality of the archive's own existence is undermined. Not only because there can be no archive, since no-one can follow its prescribed activities of tracing and preserving (in this case other archives), but because its function is reversed, at least 444 times. Indexing its own presence here and now rather than some external origin of sorts, the exposure of which would permanently halt the process of looking into more places and even more boxes, the binding condition of the archive becomes apparent in its demise – that one cannot document something without fear of loss.

Photographs already bear the weight of industrial, pre-fabricated products. While matter and labour may correlate individually framed takes, once presented as exhibits, it is spatio-temporal proximity that lends an inconspicuous framework: the visual arrangement of things on walls that designates reading patterns of what now becomes a 'serial' work. We view as we read, compelled and controlled by given objectives, whether that would be an ethical stance towards obscured truthfulness, an aesthetically pleasing curiosity of viewing disappearances or a visual reminder to the conceptualisation of structuring and damaging images.

Yet darkness, like fear, comes into play gradually, allowing grain density to reflect visionary outlines of what once was, both here and out there. It is a curious fact that when a black-and-white photograph is superimposed with its filmic negative, the image is obliterated into darkness. But just as the viewer is deprived of a window to the world, and each frame can be taken

Ignaz Cassar  
444 Archives (detail)  
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1. See Peter Osborne, *Healthy Alienation: Conceptualism and the New British Art*, conference organised by the Tate and Camerawork, held at the Tate, 13 June 1997. Among other subjects, the conference re-addresses the relation of conceptual art to Marcel Duchamp and the tradition of the readymade. (Audio recording available from the Tate Library, TAV 1781A.)  
2. Compare for example Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) to Victor Burgin's *Photopath* (1967) and Mel Ramsden's *100% Abstract* (1968).



down and apart, negation negated and order restored without destroying either the image or its negative, our reading, linking wholes and combining definite descriptions, is only a make-believe.

This particular reading mode is operated by the work, giving a certain moulded and indicated chain of signification that puns upon its own process of production and consumption. Joining the dots towards a hidden truth offers nothing more than a combination of plausible causal links that relate to spatio-temporal, social, politico-economical and discursive instances that construe the reversal of the creative practice – an action that only proves our own laborious process of reading that conjures the work and constitutes its ruling principles (of weight and sight).

For whatever is performed, entertaining our reason or believing the work, is already set in the context of a myriad unobtrusive things that, without drawing attention to themselves as nominative singular entries, unify the background of thought and can never quite reach the finishing line less some force is applied. This context is also the work's and here, rather than calling for a relative and magnificent resolving figure to monopolise the spotlight of attention, and by a certain improvised twist of causality, the work manipulates and negotiates our actions, forcing our spectatorial attitude to follow its internal logic, its own process of material production through a riot of unruly, sticky constituent parts, framed, enclosed and yet transparent where there is no deeper secret to be uncovered other than paper, photographic film, metal frames and a few nails on the wall.

#### *Closing act: open-ended documentation*

The order of things can tolerate a multiple narrative, but it also states the need to defend the above position as a valid point of critical departure from subjective praxis, a

binary foundation already buried to allow its articulation. If darkness shrouds the work, light created it but will also permanently destroy it in a process of negation that will leave us with nothing but loaned theorisations of absent matter. Where is the work then?

Reflecting on nothing and how it comes into being is an enabling question, for nothing can be conjured up *ex nihilo*, even though any system of guarded homogeneity creates surplus signification aligned to the charms of the fundamental capitalist function of creating something out of nothing, albeit within critical tension. But what dialectically interrelates referents with objects, discourse with matter, in and out of semiotic systems that are always semantically related in context, is proposed by the work itself at the cost of its own stability, material as much as conceptual. Unstable and underdeveloped, no final product as the object of art or a reading conclusion can become fully exposed or offer the pleasure of resolution. Here lies a critical resistance to the economy of the market as much as academia amidst the creation of frameworks and proliferation of intellectual labour, relying, referring and creating a legitimising pre-history that accumulates surplus value and can thus invest in its own future.

*Sticking* together is inherent in the identification process of each sign as forming part of the chain of signification where it acquires a positive value in negation. Even if in macrospective, and within a self-referring operational system, it is reduced to nothing, that nothing, the individual sign, is still a tangible something, part of a semiotic process of signification, here materialised in the archive, there given as a negational representation of itself – set, in other words, in the context of the work.

Between 'stating' and 'being', the object and the referent of practice have been compromised; the critical difference lies in the possibility of a sustainable discursive

narrative that can stick with the work. If much of the contemporary art after the sensational commercialisation of art production in Britain is able to at best entertain us, it will not be able to stick, certainly not critically, if unwilling to revise its postmodernist confusion of reiterating the obvious. Things cannot get away by simply *being* (or not being) something; they must also *do*. One way is to pay attention to what they do, and how, in a critical deferral of their (our) action.

Eve Kalyva is currently doing a PhD at the University of Leeds on the visual and textual juxtapositions in conceptual art.



Ignaz Cassar  
*Field #2*  
2006  
Black and white  
negative with contact  
print  
254x304mm