



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2010

## Review: of Emergence: Contemporary Photography in Canada

Morrell, Amish

---

### Suggested citation:

Morrell, Amish (2010) Review: of Emergence: Contemporary Photography in Canada. C Magazine (107). p. 58. ISSN 1193-8625 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1460/>

COPYRIGHT 2010 C The Visual Arts Foundation

*Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.*

*The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at [repository@ocadu.ca](mailto:repository@ocadu.ca).*



**Trash**  
Jon Davies, Arsenal  
Pulp Press, 2009

Jon Davies' book *Trash* demonstrates the very argument it constructs: that a deep love for a seemingly "trashy" object enacts a form of redemption, which serves the subject as much as it illuminates that object. As a result, the book

stands as much more than just a critical and historical study of Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's 1970 film of the same name: it is a rigorously researched portrait of a cultural era that demonstrates the author's passionate engagement with his object of inquiry.

Davies sees *Trash* as illustrative of the contradictory categories through which bodies circulated in the queer, campy, post-'60s Factory-era scene: spectacular yet discardable, ordinary yet distinct, real yet artificial. The film stars former "nobodies" Joe Dallesandro (the hunky and quiet street criminal) and Holly Woodlawn (the outspoken and ostentatious drag queen). Joe's heroin addiction has left him impotent and apathetic, while Holly cobbles together a high-camp version of the American dream by salvaging objects from other people's garbage. Davies' book focuses as much on the film's fiction as on the reality that underpins it (though, in true Warholian style, the line between them is hopelessly indiscernible). In both cases, Davies suggests the central figures demonstrate a proudly defiant mythology of self-fashioning, which transforms them from "trash" into desirable commodities. Is it advisable, though, to become a glossy, briefly valued object in exchange for an escape from a forgotten pile of refuse? While Davies is careful not to immediately praise nor censure this move, he ultimately shows that the fleeting fame offered by Warhol's Factory was preferable to obscurity.

The first half of the book focuses largely on Morrissey's relation to the Warholian aesthetic: "real" people, meagre scripts, cheap production values and lax shooting schedules. Davies argues against the common perception that Morrissey's influence made Warhol's films more digestible by employing classical filmmaking techniques. In fact, Davies asserts that the relative success of *Trash* is due more to its narrative-based, character-driven structure and less to any kind of conventional visual style.

Davies goes on to interrogate Morrissey's condescending and derisive stance toward his performers and milieu (he hated artists, liberals, intellectuals and bohemians as much as "trash" like drug addicts and hustlers). Given the choice of aligning with Morrissey's disapproving stance, or empathizing with the film's characters, Davies picks the latter. While viewers might be tempted to say that the film's emotional climax re-establishes the humanity of the otherwise depraved characters, Davies, however, astutely warns that such a reading only mimics Morrissey's condescending attitude. Rather than a forced reversal where "trash" becomes valuably reaffirmed, what Davies champions is a more empathetic stance towards all the "trash" around us: the discarded objects and people that expose what our culture so discriminately and unforgettingly values.

In the last of three essay-length chapters, Davies explores what he calls the "existential artifice" of Pop art: the "effeminate" love of consumption, objects, mass culture, surfaces, spectacles and star bodies, not to mention infantile, non-discerning gluttony, passivity, "low" pleasures, transience and temporariness. All, not coincidentally, threaten the "masculine" conception of art as a beacon of semantic wealth from a wise, unique and autonomous authorial source. Davies concludes by valorizing the strangely "authentic" flavour of the Factory era's self-fashioned Superstars, arguing that nowadays such self-fashioning is *de rigueur*: pop art's "existential artifice" intended to subvert the normative order of depth and identity, whereas today's banal artifice has, for Davies, no such important or altruistic sentiments. This last point—contrasting the Warhol era's "authentic" artifice with today's artificial artifice—is perhaps a bit of an indulgent romanticization of a long-gone era, though it can be attributed to Davies' obviously personal engagement with the film, a sentiment with which, I think, any cultural critic or historian can sympathize.

At times, the book reads a bit like a compendium of observations and gossip about the film from various sources, but that is unavoidable when one is tackling a seminal cultural era about which so much has already been said and written. Still, Davies' writing is a fine balance of creative theorization, thought-provoking textual analysis and charming personal reflection—all of which prompt a rewarding re-viewing of *Trash* through his eyes.

—Jovana Jankovic



**Emergence: Contemporary Photography in Canada**  
Gallery TPW and Ryerson University, 2009  
Edited by Sarah Parsons with essays by  
Matthew Brower, Liz Park, Gabrielle Moser,  
Marie Fraser and Katy McCormick.

Making sense of contemporary photo-based art can be especially difficult for those viewers unfamiliar with many of the ideas that infuse contemporary art practices. And it is no less challenging for students trained in the history of photography, who often encounter work when visiting galleries that bears little resemblance to what they have seen in their textbooks. However, an understanding of contemporary Canadian photography can be aided by several important critical texts: most notably, Penny Cousineau-Levine's *Faking Death* (McGill-Queens, 2003), and also *Image and Inscription*, edited by Robert Bean (Gallery 44 and YZ Books, 2004)—though neither of these books on its own sufficiently captures the breadth of Canadian photographic practice. Even so, viewers and students alike are often confined by their limited knowledge of contemporary art and what they can glean from the curators' essays that supplement most exhibitions of photography.

It is for this reason that *Emergence: Contemporary Photography in Canada* is an important contribution to an understanding of Canadian photography. *Emergence* is smartly structured around a series of essays in which each author writes about three contemporary photo-based artists in relation to the idea of "emergence." In a brief section that follows each essay, the three artists discussed each contribute a short statement about another artist. In total, four essays survey the work of twelve artists, and these twelve artists, in turn, introduce the work of another twelve artists. In these four essays, the authors present an interpretation of the idea of "emergence," developing a succinct analysis of a set of photographic practices that share a number of common ideas, and which, one assumes, can be described as "emergent." A final, additional essay by Katy McCormick deviates from this model, looking at the work of six former students of photography from Ryerson University, who are represented by a series of small portfolios that appear at the end of the book. In her essay, McCormick focuses on the roles various institutions have had in shaping these artists' work and careers. However, this piece makes it appear that the volume is exclusively about Ryerson alumni. (Indeed, Ryerson graduates are represented to a disproportionate degree in a book that purports to be about contemporary photography in Canada.)

That said, the essayists situate each artist's work within contemporary social, aesthetic and political concerns, and relate their work to ideas and movements from art history. Liz Park, for instance, looks at photographers whose work is concerned with the presentation of the private self in public places. This includes images that Daniel Ehrenworth has collected—ones taken by people's webcams and then posted online—which help us to understand the relationship between imaging practices and the production of social space, as do projects by Katja Høst and Nathalie Latham. Even more poignantly, Gabrielle Moser examines the work of Vid Inglevics, Lorna Brown and Larry Glawson vis-à-vis Ann Cvetkovich's notion of "archives of feelings," looking at how they bring into the present a forgotten or obscured time and place through an alternative series of aesthetic associations. In her essay on "expanded photography," Marie Fraser looks at how the practices of Eve K. Tremblay, Althea Thauberger and Romeo Gongora engage the formal properties of cinema. And Matthew Brower connects the work of Suzy Lake, Diana Thorncroft and Sorel Cohen to the work of 19th-century photographers Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey. Exploring the notion of emergence through Walter Benjamin's idea of the optical unconscious, Brower's essay helps the reader to link contemporary photographic practices with ideas that are deeply rooted in the history of photography.

Thoughtfully edited, with many beautiful reproductions, this book provides illuminating and valuable discussions of many photo-based artists working in Canada. Though far from being a comprehensive survey, it will still be a useful resource for artists, writers, historians and students of photography.

—Amish Morrell