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ART OF EMPIRE: THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHIC TABLEAU

**Tableau: Tabelaux 1. A picturesque presentation 2. Tableau Vivant 3.A
dramatic or effective situation suddenly brought about 4. Tableau Curtains
Theater: a pair a curtains drawn open by a diagonal cord.**

Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary

...But M. Ballu, my dear Proust, treated me as if I were a dog about to lift his leg against a municipal wall. If the city life of Paris is to be depicted in the Paris town hall, then what we obviously need is allegory. The wines of France, for example: Burgundy wine symbolized by a brunette, Bordeaux by a redhead, Champagne by a blond. Or we could have Mercury and his magic wand and suchlike nonsense. Then the history of Paris, its ancient history of course. A kind of Old Testament. As for the new, nothing doing!

Manet Letter to Antonin Proust - 1879

The interest in the photographic tableau in fine art photography has been paramount in both galleries and museums now for the past few years. Fashion, music videos and editorial work in magazines have dutifully followed suit. The

photographic tableau seems to be everywhere at once: In Australia with Tracy Moffatt; in China with Wang Qingsong; in Guatemala with Luis Gonzalez Palma; in Russia with the AES&F Collective; in Switzerland with Beat Streuli; in Japan with Moriko Mori; in London with Tom Hunter; in Venezuela with Nelson Garrido. Its most successful practitioners in the United States are Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Annie Leibvowitz and Philip Lorca-DiCorcia.

American artists are equally immersed: Jeff Koons with his ironic faux-70's photo-realist tableaus; John Currin and his meticulous re-deployment of 19th Century academic art with gestures and looks that seamlessly blend neo-classical painting with photographic facial gestures and distortions; and Mathew Barney's aggressively physical tableaus of creaturely transformations rehashed from European Surrealism and Avant- Garde cinema of the last century.

Photographic tableaus, despite their differences in content all seem to work from a single starting point: that the tableau creates an explicitly dramatic image that is hyper-real and hyper-artificial at the same time; the tableau captures a brief moment as all photography does by default - but seems to contain more than what is shown both in terms of a before and an after, and with regard to what lies outside the boundaries of the frame making the viewer aware of a much larger reality. A narrative world-view exists explicitly or implicitly beyond the edges of the picture both in terms of time and space. The

narratives in these works are often mysterious, metaphysical, transcendent, beyond the artifice of what is depicted. The images are often very large – in Wall’s case billboard size – and they are shot on large format cameras that eliminate grain creating a heroic or cinematic analogy. The central nervous system of this space is invariably an emotionally loaded drama – a narrative that takes us from that which is depicted to that which is implied – that moves from exteriority to interiority and back. The narrative flow suggested in the tableau conjures a whole universe that is highly codified. Despite the repeated references in the defense of these works to Manet’s urban Impressionism and to the Classical Art of the distant past this code comes from two main sources: First and foremost from the work of French 19th century academic artists who took the tableau form to its most extreme limits. Their principal artists were Ernest Meissonier, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Jean-Louis Gerome and Adolph-William Bouguereau. What took these paintings beyond previous limits was the obsession with factual detail and its hyper realistic representation on canvas. That level of presumably “realistic” detail simply did not exist before - nothing like it had ever been seen – and it simply knocked people out. It is popular today with cartoonists, illustrators and filmmakers. It has also received a reprieve in museums where academic paintings that had been languishing in basements for decades are now being brought out into the light because of new a found popularity with museum goers and curators. Secondly the sources of

tableau photography are the film still. That image that can conjure the narrative strands and visual arc of a film in one image and that has become a genre and a specialized field all of its own. The film still developed alongside the studio system in Hollywood and remains today one of its principal forms of advertising as seen on public transportation, magazines and billboards.

Are photographers taking the tableau back to its former state as High-Art consciously or without regard to those European origins? Is the relationship of contemporary photo tableaux to films an ironic relation, a form of homage or a borrowing in the manner of Cindy Sherman's early work of cinematic tropes in order to create suggestive narrative worlds that might serve as a critique of "dominant culture"? When fine art photographers make images that infer these by now familiar narratives without actually setting them in motion can we speak of a narrative at all? If so what does contemporary art do with all of this narration?

In Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol Near Moqk, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)* made in 1992 (beautifully defended by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*) we have a staged tableau set in "Afghanistan". The soldiers are actors, the blood is fake and the scene is shot in a studio. The soldier pointing to his wound denotes the religious art of the past and its illustrations of the lives of saints. The Baroque Theater of Wall's tableau is ironic the rotting corpses of Russian soldiers chatting and making

gestures of adolescent rage – such as laughing in the mud or displaying their wounds with a smirk - make obvious the lie of Soviet rhetoric about “heroism”, “patriotism” and “keeping order” in a place always on the verge of anarchy. Those official pronouncements that the Soviet government used at the time to justify its involvement in Afghanistan are the familiar rhetoric of occupying forces in the middle of a quagmire. Wall's work here brilliantly makes the lie truly pathetic. The fact that it is Soviet soldiers makes the work palatable to Western audiences – if the soldiers had been Americans in Viet-Nam the result would have been perhaps unpalatable.

Wall's work very much resembles another scene shot by Larry Burroughs in Vietnam on October 3rd 1966 and published in Life Magazine. Both scenes show a shallow pit with soldiers. In Burroughs' case the soldiers are real soldiers – two of them are wounded one is on the ground and his comrade reaches out to him. Burroughs, who usually didn't title images, titles the picture *Reaching Out*. The picture depicts a wounded black American being helped forward and as he reaches out to a fallen white comrade while another white soldier wearing glasses reaches out to hold him back. The black soldier is both being pushed forward and back at the same time while the soldier on the ground clutching a nearby tree stump stares out at some indefinite space apparently lost in thought – or possibly dead. In both works everyone is covered in mud.

In Wall's picture the tableau is meant to be displayed in a 10 foot long light box in Burroughs' case the picture was never meant for the museum or the gallery it would be classified in academic and institutional circles as photojournalism, a branch of vernacular photography a form seen in the hierarchy of genres (as established by the same institutions) as second to Fine Art Photography but superior to Advertising. In short it is not seen as Art. By the time Burroughs shot *Reaching Out* he had been in Viet-Nam for four years shooting mostly color work. Many people have commented on the resemblance of the men in *Reaching Out* to classical paintings, to a staged tableau, in fact the image appeared in a book that brings together photographic depictions of "Christ on the cross" entitled *Revelations: Representations of Christ in Photography* by Nissan Perez. The fact that *Reaching Out* is an image of real people lends the picture a variety of qualities that make speaking or writing about the formal qualities of the image difficult. Other questions come up: What is the relationship of the tableau form to a picture of real people in the middle of a real drama? Is the term "drama" even appropriate? How is it related to staged tableaux? Did Larry Burroughs think of himself as an artist or did he think of his pictures as simply part of the job ob being "on assignment"?

Larry Burroughs arrived in Viet-Nam in 1962 when he was 36. He had served his apprenticeship during the 1940's in the Life magazine offices in London, the city where he was born to working class parents his father was a truck

driver his mother a housewife. In the forties and fifties he was known by the pros at Life as “our darkroom tea boy” a gofer that did the jobs in the darkroom no one wanted to do including printing thousands of pictures taken by photojournalists during World War II. In one infamous case while processing negatives from the front he accidentally burned many of Capa’s signature images from the D-Day landing. This ironically gave the images or what was left of them - a greater sense immediacy. His first assignment as a photographer was as an assistant after the war photographing great artworks in color throughout European museums for Life magazine. David Halberstam writes in the introduction to his book on Larry Burroughs: “So Vietnam as what he had long been waiting for...From the start, the best photos from Vietnam were his. He had a feel for the war and the people fighting it, for the special texture of it, and he understood well that if you were going to be a photographer for a great photo magazine, this was the ultimate assignment...” “The ultimate assignment “ a phrase out of Robert Capa who died in Vietnam in 1954 when it was still a French affair. Burroughs was a different kind of photographer from the dapper, sardonic Capa. He was serious, highly conscious of suffering, he stuttered when he spoke and wore thick glasses. In pictures he looked like an overworked professor. In 1963 Burroughs made his first photo essay about Viet-Nam appearing in Life Magazine with the title: *We Wade Deeper Into Jungle War*. When visiting the Life offices in New York in

1969 someone from behind a desk casually asked him how the war was going. Burrows replied: "Well - you American chaps have quite a problem there - thank God it isn't my war". After a pregnant pause Larry Graves, one of the editors from Life responded: "Larry, if it isn't your war, whose war is it?" That was the question of the decade. The uneasy silence that followed still reverberates like an aftershock in American culture today; in fact those shock waves are so loud that Americans seem bent on creating every conceivable sort of noise to drown it out - to little avail for the sound of that catastrophe persists. For the editors in the home office of Life in New York City in 1969 the answer to that question, "why are we in Viet-Nam?" was a mystery, but the event was the most newsworthy "story" going: It was a war that - in practical terms and seen from the vantage point of the editors - belonged to what was then known as the "press corps" which included journalists, photographers and writers (they would only all be subsumed under the general term "media" in the following decades - swallowed whole by television) and their main man in Viet-Nam was Larry Burroughs.

While French Academic artists were helping to keep Manet out of the Salon (to his obvious contempt as exemplified by the quote that opens this essay) they were rigorously deploying the conventions of the tableau form. Where did these conventions come from? When Velazquez two hundred and forty years before Bourguereau had painted *The Surrender of Breda* the fact that such a

civilized almost friendly encounter on a clear beautiful morning had in fact never actually taken place bothered no one, least of all Velazquez. Artists were interested in dramatic images that would display their virtuosity and provide a patriotic overall thematic unity that was clear, direct and powerful. This did not mean it needed to be true. Shakespeare understood this convention as well when he portrayed the French negatively in his popular history plays.

The Greeks of the Hellenic era had presumably done tableaux dealing with their wars between Alexander and the Persians although no direct proof of this was available as evidence since no painting from ancient Greece survived into the 19th Century. The Romans had made tableaux based on Greek works but their humor appeared to many in the world of the Salon to be coarse and vulgar, related to pagan rituals that were mysterious and presumably far removed from the Christian world that was to be represented. It was the Renaissance that had taken the tableau form provided by classical antiquity and made it adhere in no uncertain heroic terms - to Christian iconography and values. That became the model. The problem was that by the 19th century the situation had changed radically "history" and its heroic representation - particularly for a country that had colonial ambitions in Africa, Asia and America - was a matter of some uneasiness, some guilt as well as a sense that events were far too complex to be understood using previous methods or models either in writing or in pictorial representation. It simply did not work.

In the midst of such emotionally conflicting states there was a need emotionally as well as intellectually for an art that would provide a way out. A way to bury the problematic contradictions and provide a newly minted heroism that was both stable, clear and without moral ambiguities of any kind. In short it would remove the very doubts that were most pressing and paramount. It would be an art of reassurance but it could not be a lie that would defeat the whole purpose it had to also tell the truth. This would appear to set up a contradiction that was irreconcilable. How to solve the problem? A way had to be found to get at the essence at the underlying truth of an event that was the *core* of an event with all of the confusions and contradictions removed as if a veil was lifted from mere “reality” and one saw the real Reality underneath. To paraphrase Aby Warburg not God - but History would be found in the details, for the Truth must reside there. But did it? Was such an enterprise possible?

The partial answer was surely to be found in the accumulation of details that would bring a sense of “authenticity” and “essence” previously absent even from the highly rendered art of the Renaissance. Therein lies the obsession with detail. These paintings often took years to complete due to the excruciating attention to historically accurate surfaces: Clothing, furniture, hair styles, objects were carefully delineated across the canvas and often appreciated by connoisseurs with a magnifying glass. For example The *Battle of Friedland*

(depicting Napoleon Bonaparte's victory over the Prussians) despite its small size took ten years to complete. The production values - the labor involved - is a significant part of the work's appeal for people then and now. The extensive production also distances the image from the snapshot aesthetic of Impressionism and of a large spectrum of photography - suspect because "everyone" can do it. In the case of the tableau only a professional can do it and so it belongs to a different class of images - it is segregated from the work of amateurs in three principal ways. First through a highly elaborate craft that is brought front and center in the minutia of its details and the virtuosity of its composition and design. Secondly through the esoteric symbols relating to classical antiquity, Christian Iconography and Renaissance art that can be appreciated only by an educated elite - or those seeking to belong to that class. And finally through elaborate production costs requiring crews of people, work schedules, construction of sets, lighting and costumes that were far beyond the means of most artists. These qualities all signified the presence of *serious fine art*.

Gregory Crewdson's *Untitled* from the series *Twilight* 1998-2002 of a young woman floating in the middle of a middle class America house partially submerged in dark water has taken on an almost iconic status equivalent to Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. It's the typical house found through the Midwest and the South with the triangle roof and the small windows made of

wood. The furniture is from the mid-20th Century – the only contemporary item is a phone half submerged in water. The flooded house is a life size stage with a highly elaborate lighting set-up – reminiscent of night time shots in Hollywood films from middle of the last century. The elaborate interior design designates a “normal” American house. It's the sort of design that David Lynch might use to set the stage for what lies underneath the “normalcy” in subsequent stages of the film. Yet unlike the Baroque narratives of Lynch, Crewdson can lead the narrative only to the threshold. In a sense it is as if a narrative were put on hold the moment it began and one had to construct the rest of the film from the clues we are provided – the definition of the film still. This strategy has also been around for years in the world of illustration – but it has never been around on this scale. The melancholy lighting and the sense of floating conjure a dream – a sense of displacement from reality – but it cannot give this displacement a reason for being other than the seriousness of the intent. Lynch has the advantage that he can play with his own narrative constructions and even undermine them through ironic counter-narratives. In Crewdson's case the creaking machinery of narrative cannot go anywhere except toward some vaguely hackneyed Freudian illustration for “sleep”.

The image seems to invert the bucolic expansiveness of Norman Rockwell's celebrations in tableaus that illustrated the comforts of home-spun traditions and American values. But like many inversions it shares more with its opposite

than it would admit. The celebration at the heart of Rockwell's work has been turned to paranoid despair. With Rockwell the communal aspect – an almost religious sense of home and hearth – applied carefully to a still segregated white community – was the driving force. Where is the equivalent for the lady floating sadly in her living room? A passive flood victim? Unlikely. The dreamlike aspect and the emotion reverberate around the set and up the stairs to the pictures on the wall – carefully illuminated for us by some helpful key lights. The family pictures and the overall mood conveyed point to a narrative arc clearly established by the Hollywood films of mid-century such as those of Douglas Sirk and George Cukor. The melancholy and dream aspect of the image creates implicit narratives of a cinematic sort known as melodrama and it is this that is principally the content of the work. This melancholia combined with the self-conscious sense of Americana also reminds us of Edward Hopper's work - but Hopper has the courage to set his estranged and lonely travelers in often brightly lit contemporary settings. We see – if only in glimpses – the social reality that has created this estrangement and we are free to see the connections for what they are. In Crewdson's case the house is very carefully set in some indeterminate past and any reference to contemporary reality has been carefully excluded – except for the phone – the line linking that world to contemporary reality. The phone is in a sense the soundtrack and the pictures in the stairs are the montage that the stillness sets in motion.

Twilight works as both an image of nostalgia and melancholy removed from any social reality that might set those emotions in context. The Emotions are the thing. The fact that Crewdson would shortly after this work start to use Hollywood celebrities to take his work further into the display of feelings by an actor pretending to have them - a kind of emotional pornography - makes a great deal of sense. The payoff in using actors is that the work takes both the artificiality (they're "acting") and the narrative machinery set in motion (the actor brings with him/her the roles they have played in the past) causing narrative to multiply in a variety of different directions at once: The cliches are all in dialog with each other as Eco pointed out in his assessment of *Casablanca* in *Travels in Hyper Reality*. Crewdson's realism is essentially romantic and shallow and the use of celebrities both reduces emotions to obscene stereotypes that degrade the full spectrum of their particularities and diminishes them to the level of issues. The emotions are all on the surface - none of them are explored. He doesn't ask questions about them - not even banal ones - he merely sets them in motion and freezes them, which as we have seen, is exactly what happens in illustration and advertising.

How historically accurate were the paintings of the French academic artists of the 19th century? Did snake charmers look as they are depicted in Gerome's work? Did the age of classical Greece resemble Alma-Tadema's painting? Did Meissionier's painting *Battle of Friedland* actually capture what "life was like"

during the battle of Friedland? Certainly the effort was there – no one would question that. The lengths to which they went are legendary: Alma-Tadema’s extensive reading of history books to produce works such as *An Audience at Agrippa’s*; Jerome’s travels through the Middle East – months at a time – to familiarize himself with the fabrics and architecture of the “Orient” to produce paintings such as *Snake Charmer*; Meissonier’s hours in front of a galloping horse (seen from a moving train especially constructed on his estate) moving through a field to capture the correct leg muscles in action in *Battle of Friedland*. No one ever before or since has spent that amount of money, effort and time to get it “right”. They took it to the limit. Despite these efforts a critic, classical historian, and contemporary of Meissonier’s, Arsene Houssaye expressed doubts: “A galloping horse cannot be painted with the minute meticulousness and patience that one employs for a figure at rest...Such figures must be executed with vigorous touches, otherwise they will be frozen and immobilized in their movement”. The problem was articulated by Houssaye as one of technique but it is also one of ideas. How do you make an image that is stable and dynamic at the same time? This is the crux of the matter. The powers that be that helped to manufacture and to support a socially approved art depended on an answer. More to the point Houssaye pointed out that Meissonier’s painting depicting Napoleon reviewing his front-line of 3,500 “Cuirassiers” (front line troops on a horse) about to attack the Prussian line *had*

never taken place. This would seem to be a problem if one is in fact interested in “reality”. In real life Napoleon made his appearance after the battle. The event depicted in *The Battle of Friedland* was a fantasy.

What we see in the 19th Century tableau is the climax of a dramatic narrative that unfolds before us with a full panoply of ready-made emotions and ideas. In the case of Messioner’s painting real life had not provided an “appropriate” moment that could be turned into a meaningful historical tableau - whose conventions translate reality into a dramatically coherent spectacle that can be understood to reveal the essence of the event as an epiphany. Since facts failed to provide such a moment one was invented. One can see here that the need for highly realistic rendering is also a compensation for the missing facts. Reality would be replaced by revelation. That sense of revelation would of course illustrate positive emotions and good feelings related to patriotism, to comradeship and to social stability. In the work of 20th Century tableau artists these are replaced by negative emotions and bad feelings related to the presumed cultural construction of “patriotism”, “comradeship” and “social stability”. In Wall's case for example we have the tableau in full force but with quotes around all the feelings. The 19th Century critic Houssaye who criticized Messioner for his stiff horses (as we have seen stiff not in spite of the painstaking detail but because of it) never questioned the attempt to create “authenticity” or the “essence” of an event on canvas. The desire to re-enact

history as an image that is both accurate and understandable was seen as self-evident reason for being. It seemed quite natural that one would attempt to find the grand “Truths” of History in art – as was also being attempted in philosophy by Hegel, Marx and others. This was a defining moment. It was Nietzsche who saw the fly in the European soufflé and who responded in acerbic aphorisms full of a self-loathing that speaks to our time. Doubt and the limitations of reason can be expressed very powerfully in visual terms - think of Goya's lithographs - and the main exponent of that philosophy in 19th Century art was Edward Manet.

Manet is an artist repeatedly brought out to defend the photographers under discussion and to link those pictures to the most respected art of the past.

Manet in this view is made to be a proto-modernist who used the tableau form to attack the dominant ideology of his time: The Second Empire of Louis

Napoleon. Was in fact Manet doing what is claimed? Let's take a look. In

Manet's only attempt at historical painting (the “highest” form in the hierarchy of his time) *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* we have a contemporary

event: the ignominious end of the French Empire's attempt to establish a base in Mexico – what we would now call a “client state” - in the Western

Hemisphere. This was a direct challenge to the supremacy of the United

States in its own backyard, which is how the Monroe Doctrine specifically and

American policy generally viewed (and still views) Mexico. That dream ended

when the French Government withdrew its troops and left Maximilian the hand chosen “president” of Mexico to hang. He and his assistants were executed and his wife went mad spending the rest of her long life locked up in an asylum ranting against Napoleonic plots. The event already sounds worthy of an opera by the man who wrote *La Traviata*. Manet’s choice of subject matter was conventional the actual execution directly quoting Goya’s famous painting *The Third of May*. The sense of something conventional begins and ends there for Manet let’s the conventions of the tableau, and the juicy narrative they embody, hang out to dry and he obviously does it on purpose and to add insult to injury he obviously enjoys it. It gives him pleasure to de-dramatize the drama. He de-fangs the narrative snake set to strike. To what end? Irony? Manet is more ambitious. This is History painting. It’s a chance to play with a very long and prestigious series of conventions that were taken for gospel truth by very serious people and Manet was not squeamish about entering into the fray. *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian* shows the moment of execution but the actual literal event the bullets hitting Maximilian’s body are clouded in smoke that dissolves into the empty space of canvas; more importantly the soldiers are caught between one soldier in the foreground who absently checks his rifle and a small crowd of distracted onlookers in the background. The soldier’s “absence” - lost in thought as he looks at his gun - can’t help but suggest some sort of interior life that is

removed from the action but also completely unknowable to us; just as the onlookers in the background seem like a crowd at an auto accident - unable to look away but also lost in their own thoughts. Between these two enigmatic groupings the execution itself is both flattened out - through the use of minimal shading and evaporated by the use of smoke.

Unlike Wall's work history refuses to be fixed in any sense and unlike Crewdson's the emotions do not exist in a fixed state. What happens instead is that the awkward ambiguities of the moment dominate even the most momentous events because small events are inevitably concurrent with them and their number and complexity are overwhelming. Maximilian holds the hands of his comrades - as was reported in the newspapers of the time - but the clarifying moment of release - the sorts of moments that academic artists such as Messiaen were masters at creating refuses to coalesce. The narrative lines are deployed and left hanging in the smoke - the opera never happens. There is a strange stillness in the painting - a sense of absent-mindedness caught at the wrong moment. It is a highly sophisticated visual art that is far removed from rhetoric or discourse. History becomes an event like any other there is more drama in Manet's *Concert at the Tulleries*. The painting is about the ambiguities of human experience as they are lived in and out of History - in the individual - the lone soldier - and as social beings - in the crowd. Manet was more concerned with opening up the possibilities afforded by his sources

rather than to lock them into any expository form that might turn his painting into a rhetorical illustration. As in the work of Degas' urban family groups, the coincidental, the partial, the fragmentary are in large part the subject of the painting but such an approach was not a new idea. Diderot in his essays on painting already foresaw the fragment as a constituent element in the work of art. What was new was the fact that Manet was executing this idea while representing a contemporary historical event and then throwing into doubt the existence of any clear meaning that might be gained from it. Instead banality and drama, obscurity and clarity share the same stage without any narrative that might arrange their various parts into a coherent play. This is not the heroic war that Messiaen depicted perhaps as seen by Sir Walter Scott - but rather by Zola in *The Debacle* a novel of the Franco-Prussian war the same event depicted in *Battle of Friedland*. As seen by Zola it is an experience of bizarre, tragic, absurd and confusing occurrences whose meaning remains unclear and perhaps ultimately unknowable even to those who were there. Manet's painting explores and enumerates those contradictions rather than clarifying or resolving them - much less providing the narrative impetus for "good feelings" exemplified by Messiaen's paintings or "bad feelings" exemplified by Wall's pictures. As such *The Execution of Maximilian* is as far removed from both Manet's contemporaries in the Salon as our contemporaries in the Museum.

Lorca-Di Corcia's *New York 1993* uses actual locations and real people walking in Manhattan shot with a hidden strobe and a large format camera. The catalog essay for the exhibition of the same name states that people are “caught like deer in the headlights or actors thrust on stage, the figures appear momentarily stunned”. The strobe to illuminate the scene – pioneered by ambulance chasing photojournalists in the mid-20th century – is here used in the manner of a spotlight in a film set that points toward the central character and their accompanying thematic motif. The result is pure theater – the catalog essay itself calls the people actors. But unlike 18th century “morality plays” in the manner of Greuze that Michael Fried described so well in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, it is not the spectator that is brought into conjunction with the narrative. The narrative itself is dramatized sensationally and with an implied “unhappy” narrative in media-res. The “actors” in Lorca-Di Corcia's work are asked to play not individuals but types: “The street person”, “the alcoholic”, “the businessman”, etc. Natural light is used in a painterly way on the background characters what is called atmosphere on a set - creating a variety of intersecting literary narratives that are masterfully orchestrated by Di-Corcia. Yet the tableau form the frozen theater of ready-made types – plays out its narratives in a predictable manner: once again the machinery of melodrama sets “types” in a narrative

trajectory in which “real” people are asked to play “extras”. The arc of the narrative is more ambiguous than either Wall or Crewdson and hence has a greater expansiveness and open-endedness that might open the work beyond those simple narrative implications. But all of the narrative arrows still point in the same direction. There can be no rupture – to speak in Freudian terms – and the narrative always plays itself out in the same way. By directing his lighting and figure placement in such a mannered way there is no room for people in the pictures in De-Corcia's work to speak for themselves. They are there to illustrate an argument – the rhetorical aspect is in control. By placing himself in the conspicuously “objective” point of view, traditionally the vantage point of mainstream narrative pictures and films, he gives his images the “authenticity” and “authority” of objective truth - but we have seen this “authority” before – it is the voice of power – whether it is being employed by Spielberg to describe suffering or a Ford commercial to describe the pleasures of the open road. The tableau takes emotionally loaded characters – recognizable stereotypes – and places them center stage – and what is it that the actor does once he has that stage? Invariably it is – as in Crewdson's work – the illustration of an issue. Its often brilliant painterly surface is in contrast to the “realism” of the set, and the grand rhetorical or pedagogical elements are in contrast to the “small moment” - there is the frisson of the work and it's central nervous system.

Larry Burrough was killed in Laos when the helicopter carrying him crashed on February 10, 1971. David Halberstam: “He once talked the Vietnamese Air Force into taking doors off a fighter-bomber so he could lean out and shoot as if here virtually outside the plane. When other photographers asked for the same privilege, they were turned down. When they complained they were told by the authorities, “Mr. Burroughs’ request was granted not because he is a photographer but because he is an artist”. What Burroughs thought of himself in that regard we do not know but there is no question that, as Horst Fass so well put it, he understood what color could do. The rest was “history” in more ways than one his personal history as well as the sort of history writ large that Messinger, Alma-Tadema, Gerome and Bougeureau so badly wanted to re-create in their tableaux but never found. It was always just beyond their reach. What they created instead was a fantasy art of often brilliant technical virtuosity that illustrated European ideas regarding “The Other”, “Sexuality” and “History” but in a way they never intended for we see with hindsight not only what they put into their paintings but what they left out. In that gap we can see the tragedy not of those particular artists, who were all in fact successful businessmen who sold their work for good sums of money but of the people who could not be represented because it would have been too horrible. To make the point more literally we can ask “who in fact fought in the battle of

Friedland”)? Who were these people? We catch glimpses of them: A veteran walking away in Manet’s own *Rue Mosnier With Flags*; women sitting in café’s staring into an indeterminate space that is to put it mildly troubling in Degas’ monotypes and etchings. Yet for the most part in art they are absentees. Writers seem to have been willing to explore their own times with greater candor and we can read about them in the work of Flaubert, Zola, Dickens and in Huysmans’ *Parisian Sketches*. Contemporary writers have also put the contradictions of that century in the spotlight and cleared away many of the mystifications in works such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Eiric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Empire* and Barbara Tuchman’s *The Proud Tower*.

Does *Reaching Out* in any sense do what Manet was doing? Certainly the ambiguity of emotional interaction is present in the Burroughs as with Manet, as is the relation of exterior action helping a fallen comrade to interior action the fallen soldier lost in thought. But there are crucial differences. Manet was painting for a Salon and was directly relating his work to the history of History painting. Burroughs is taking pictures of soldiers fighting a war. There is no distance with the picture in Viet-Nam. The Flaneur sensibility of Manet is as foreign to Burroughs as wearing a suit. Yet they both wish to put the ambiguities of experience at the apex of their work and this is the measure of their sensibility as they act as witnesses. This is where their strength comes from and they know it. But Burroughs is dealing with incommensurables in a

literal sense while Manet is dealing with incommensurables as an idea and this is a crucial difference.

The two works almost meet but Manet is twice removed - first by the nature of his medium and secondly by his choice of venue. This removal is as crucial to his sensibility as his engagement with the realities of everyday life as he understood it. Burroughs is in a sense not only making a work that explicitly renounces that removal but that refutes the very notion of Art itself. There is no reconciliation - the line in the sand has been clearly drawn. The fact that to take such pictures puts one in the line of fire was something that Burroughs was intimately familiar with and the price that he was willing to pay is imbedded in his pictures - that is why it is difficult to talk about the formal aspects of the work. When a person is willing to go that distance to make pictures it seem effete or academic to speak of any formal aspects. This is because the work puts experience above all, therefore all else, including analysis, is not merely subordinate, it must in some sense be irrelevant. Burroughs has that sensibility running through his work like blood and it is bound to repel academics who have been - dare one say for obvious reasons? unwilling to deal with either the questions of race, of Viet-Nam or of imperial power that *Reaching Out* raises. That neglect is telling.

It is no coincidence that the tableau in Manet's time reached its apotheosis to his disgust - as the definition par excellence of *serious-fine-art* within the institutional framework of the Salon at the height of the French Empire at its most lavish, its most over-extended, its most obscene. The relation between the tableau form and empire is written in blood. The fact that it has resurfaced in late 20th and early 21st century Western Europe and America is because there are historical parallels between the colonial ambitions then and now. The hierarchies of the 19th century salon are not so far removed after all. They have simply shifted in tone (sentiment to irony) and medium (painting to photography and film) not in kind. To paraphrase Leopardi in his brilliant novel *The Leopard* things had to change so they could remain the same.

Witness Annie Leibovitz's re-constitution of the tableau in 2006 for Vanity Fair magazine. Missionier finds his *métier* in designer underwear. The fact that Leibovitz's picture pays direct homage to Hollywood (as she has done repeatedly for the same magazine) with its massive artificial lights (the inadequate sun has been replaced by two lights) is perhaps an unconscious celebration of Futurist faith in technology. Hollywood could not ask for a more befitting antecedent. The image is an homage to classic Hollywood films about the industry itself such as *Singing in the Rain* and an illustration of current tastes in beauty seen through the prism of George Hurrell and Ruth Harriet Louise. The placement of the individuals within the frame is banal. Leibovitz lacks

Wall's encyclopedic sense of art history, Crewdson's brilliant sense of interior design, or deCorcia's genius for playing off artificial light against natural light. Yet it is that very banality that creates a certain mood along with the elaborateness of the set and the lighting that again generates associations that are cinematic and whose narrative arc is the art of artifice itself. Like Sofia Coppola's shallow bombastic film on Marie Antoinette the plot and its historical motifs — such as they are — are there to service the glow of the surface and the pleasures to presumably be found there.

Contemporary tableau works and those of the past share a simple set of principles: that a coherent essence can be gleaned from a historical event that can then be re-constituted in an intelligible narrative form. This narrative should be clearly and rationally understood — it is there specifically to bring clarity to what was obscure. As we have seen Manet works from a contrary position — not to obfuscate — but to refute the idea of a visual work presenting a series of interrelated propositions. Rather he imposed no exclusive criteria upon his visual vocabulary and erected no systematic manner to deploy his ideas.

It was time for Fine-Art photography to catch up. The tableau has been a prominent feature in American popular art since the beginning of the last century reaching a crescendo of public approbation with Walt Disney, Busby Berkley and Cecil B. DeMille. In photography the tableau has been prominent

in the mass media since the early days of Vogue with John Rawlings and Clifford Coffin down to the contemporary work of David LaChapelle and Steven Meisel.

Those traditions were ridiculed long before by an artist in a very different context. Degas in 1885 at the height of the craze for Academic Art took a photograph and titled it *The Apotheosis of Degas*. This was a ferociously acerbic re-creation of Ingres's *The Apotheosis of Homer* (1827). Degas' photo is an unrecognized masterpiece that like Orson Welles' late work points to new possibilities that the artists' health did not permit them to explore. Werner Hofmann in his fine book on Degas calls the image "a joke with several layers of meaning which were long overlooked because Degas hid them behind his ostensible admiration for Ingres". I would put it differently. The image is the first work of photographic criticism directly aimed at the art establishment of his time. Ingres' picture shows "the great men" of various centuries and civilizations (in some kind of heaven) placing a crown of laurels on the balding head of Homer. The gestures of the participants come not from antiquity but from conventions of how antiquity was supposed to look. Everyone is in "deep thought" mode posing for the official picture that was to decorate one of the ceilings of the Louvre. The bodies in Ingres' work are, of course, perfectly sculpted, which would have surprised the family members of many of the assorted "greats". In Degas' black and white photograph close friends and their

children place some branches from nearby trees near Degas' head. Two boys half kneel and half sit by his feet. The artist in 1885 was sixty but he looks much older and worn out, sad, impenetrable and lost in thought. He is also posing with his hat upside down between his legs as if it were a basin. This image is the first visible break – at least the first one that has survived – the first opening into “reality”. Looking at this image is like seeing a whole century as if for the first time. It directly confronts the empty masks of the “great men” in Ingres' Pantheon head on. Degas is brutally direct as always, and he tells us a lot.

We can see already in this image the brilliant satires of the 20th century that was just around the corner and that would repeatedly attack what Degas himself called “the art police” – his name for the dominant art institutions of his time, including the Salon – where Manet so badly wanted to exhibit. When Chaplin makes fun of the politicians about to dedicate a Neo-Classical statue at the beginning of *City Lights*, when Groucho Marx makes fun of the herd instinct of American patriotism – and musicals - as the “president” of Freedonia in *Duck Soup*, or when Monty Python ridicules Pier Paolo Pasolini's Marxist aesthetics by having him “direct” a soccer match, Degas was there first. Unlike contemporary pastiche versions of Neo-Classical art Degas goes much further the ironic subterfuge in his picture works on all fronts because he gives us an alternative vision within the same image that critics have missed perhaps

because it is too obvious. The Degas photograph is a family picture. Put simply it is a picture of people who loved each other and liked each other's company. They are the friends and children who were as close as the shy bachelor would ever get to ever having a family and at that age he knew it. As a counter to Ingres' imperious ceiling it presents a small picture that you can hold in your hand of a family in front of their house. What he is making fun of is power, and what he is suggesting as an alternative is love not love as a concept - imagine Ingres illustrating the idea of "love"! One can already see the winged cupid, the various references to classical stories of love scattered across the canvas, the perfectly sculpted bodies going through their required poses, the narrative lines deployed like a battle plan. What Degas is after is the quotidian love that you live out in the company of friends and family on a daily basis. This cannot be extrapolated from a concept it must be physically improvised. In effect he uses his own intimacy with his friends and the medium of photography - to talk about the distance between the heroic ideals of Ingres' pictures and everyday life. He is consciously attacking not simply one artist's pompous painting but a whole tradition of art that had become not merely an empty formula but a vehicle for *fantasy* that concealed (in the details) much more than it showed.

The hierarchy that places the work of tableau photographers above that of photojournalists and which is reflected in the prices that the works demand

is as solidly in place as it was a century and a half ago between “History Painting”, “Portraiture” and “Vernacular art”. The categories as we have seen are absurd but they are not arbitrary they speak volumes about what the dominant institutions - be it The 19th Century Salon, Hollywood, Madison Avenue or MoMA - hold to be “self-evident truths” - what constitutes illustration, photojournalism and a work of *serious-fine-art* - what is “quotidian” and what is “history”, what must be said and what must remain unsaid.

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