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**Publication Date**

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Performing Documentation: Four Projects

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Justin Lubliner

August 2013

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2013

The Thesis of Justin Lubliner is approved:

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## One

If a performance is fiction, the documentation of a performance is the fact of a fiction. The structural inversion then, the performance of documentation, is the fiction of a documented fact. I imagine that my work exists somewhere between the documentation of performance and the performance of documentation within an exploration of the reflexive relationship between the environment I photograph and myself as photographer.

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This is a society of amateur photographers. An enormous percentage of the population carries a camera in their pocket at all times. Over 40 million photographs are uploaded every day using the photo-sharing application Instagram alone by the company's own account. Obviously, then, the act of photographing is ubiquitous: The world is saturated not only with images, but also with image-makers.

A question, and an important one to me, is how the photographing, this kind of mediated looking, determines the ways in which we interact with and understand the external world. While it is important to examine the codes and uses of images as the world becomes more and more photographed, I am interested in examining the ways in which images are made: Not just how the world looks in photographs, but how we look when we make photographs.

By examining the *act* of photography – the postures, the apparatuses, the methods, and the limitations – what can I learn anything about the nature of photographic inquiry and, further, the creation of meaning through photographing?

What are the aesthetics of photographic looking, and what questions can I raise by simply looking at myself looking?

## Two

*895 Marlborough Avenue* is centered, quite literally, around a light industrial building in Riverside, California. The piece is a photographic record of my walk around the building's perimeter, and the appearance of my reflection in its tinted windows. Though I photographed nearly all of the windows, the piece is only very loosely systematic. I consider it to be more akin to a travelogue than the enactment of a predetermined procedure.

The subject of these photographs is purposefully slippery. It is ostensibly a document of this building, of a particular kind of architecture in a particular place. However, because of the reflectivity of the windows, the plants around the building, the other buildings in the park, the landscape the building is situated in, and the camera operator all become equally weighted. I am reminded of Robert Smithson's mirror displacements and the way they disrupt and collapse the image of the landscape. In Smithson's works, his deliberate placement and arrangement of mirrors are part of the meaning of the work. However, the mirror structure I came upon like some alien vessel is the product of a system of global capital.

What I am deliberately placing and arranging in these images is my body, the camera, and my gaze: a process of self-portraiture. I had been looking at Lee Friedlander's early self-portraits, and was taken by the way he was able to interrogate the photographic action by asserting his own presence as image-maker in the world he photographed. Where his images are varied and novel, I wanted to push this self-implication by making the gesture reductive, repetitive, and blunt.



The repetition of my reflection throughout the series becomes a game of finding the photographer/photographic apparatus in the photograph. This search for the author points to the performative aspect of the work, but also, because of its bluntness and playfulness, becomes a source of humor.

The surfaces oscillate between being mirrors and windows. The interplay between interiority and exteriority, between observation and being observed, are central to the project. As I observe my reflection as I walk around the building, so too can any inside observer watch me through those same windows while being invisible to me; all I am able to see of the buildings interior are the vinyl vertical blinds and, in one image, a florescent light. In one way, this observer and I would be engaged in the same activity: we would both be watching me photograph the building.

This diptych can be considered a key to the project. In each of the two images, there are three iterations of my self: two imaged reflections, and one implied physical self (the reflections are not pressing the button). As a diptych, my doubled reflection is quadrupled, while my implied physical self, the operator of the camera, is doubled *in time*: that is, the two separate exposures, separated by time, imply a doubling of the behind-the-camera self: a doubling of the photographic action.



1. Diptych From the Series *895 Marlboro Avenue*, 2011

Through this doubling, I am able to literally look at looking at myself photographing. I can acknowledge explicitly the reflexivity of the photographic act. I image myself as both photographing agent and as photographic subject: my self as inextricable from the world I image, and the action of photographing as inextricable from the photograph itself. If the structure is alien to me, than so am I to myself, and so is the world that contains us both.



2. From the Series *895 Marlboro Avenue*, 2011





3. From the Series *895 Marlboro Avenue*, 2011



4. From the Series *895 Marlboro Avenue*, 2011





5. From the Series *895 Marlboro Avenue*, 2011



6. From the Series *895 Marlboro Avenue*, 2011



### Three

Whereas in the walk around 895 Marlborough Avenue the investigation into the act of photographing was filtered through a document of a specific kind of architecture and a certain kind of explicit self-portraiture, I wanted to see if I could make a piece where there was no ostensible subject other than the action of photographing itself. It seemed that a viable solution would be a completely symmetrical performance in which the documentation of the performance was the performance itself. Toward this end, I filmed myself attempting to photograph the entirety of a vacant lot within the field of view of a video camera.

The technical aspects of the piece are almost humorously simple, if difficult to describe elegantly. I set up a video camera at the center of one end of a vacant lot. I carefully mapped out the camera's field of view as it extended to the opposite edge of the lot. Walking back and forth perpendicularly to the camera, I took still flash photographs of the entirety of the lot within the video cameras view: a process akin to scanning, or large-scale composite imaging. The video camera's field of view determined the parameters of the action, and thus the number of photographs that were made, while the length of the video was determined by the time it took the operator/the embodied still camera to make those photographs.

The video is completely black except for the few periodic frames in which the flash from the still camera illuminates the ground in front of my feet. What is

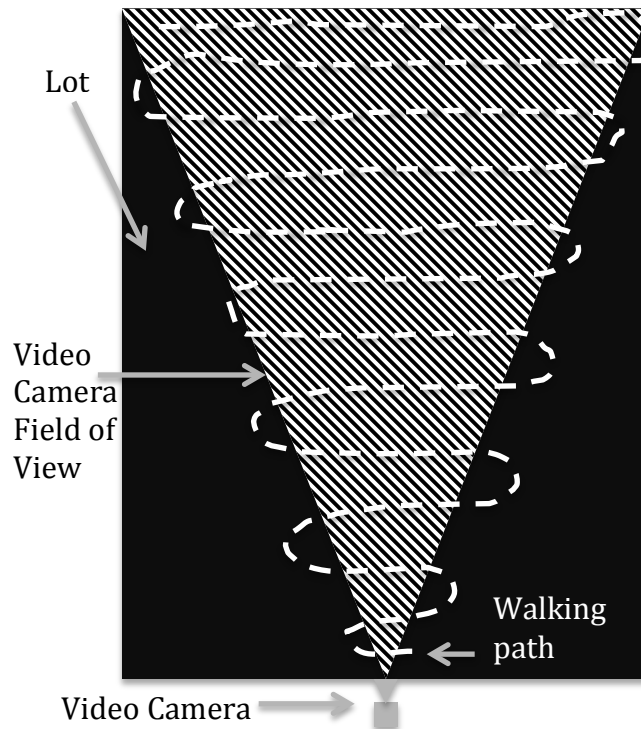
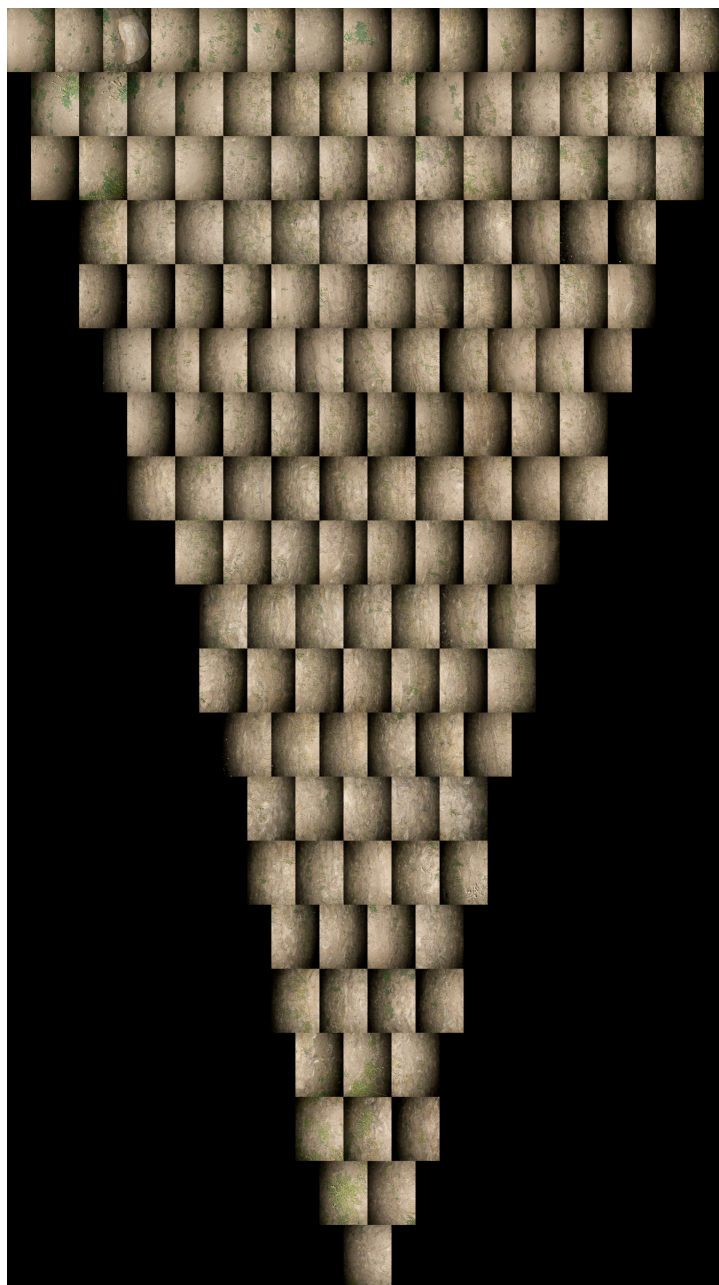


Diagram for *Zig Zag Wanderer*

recorded by the video camera is not the field, but a document of my photographing the field. As I get farther away, the flashes become smaller, and more are required to get from one edge of the video camera's frame to the other. The entirety of the lot is revealed over the duration of the video, but it is only able to be seen one flash of light at a time.

It took 143 pictures to photograph the entirety of the lot within the field of view of the video camera. Those pictures were arranged in a triangular grid to reflect the order in which they were taken, the direction of my movement, and my distance from the video camera. The video and the grid of photographs together make up the final form of this piece.

Both the photographs and the video are abstracted representations of the lot and my movement through it over time. Taken together, they illustrate the gaps between these two forms of documentary representation. The brief instant required to make a photograph is juxtaposed directly with the permanent duration of the fixed image, while the temporal, filmic rendition of the Lot is juxtaposed with the gestalt of the photographic grid. By examining explicitly the functions and limitations of these two photographic apparatuses, and the human operator as part of those apparatuses, I hoped to foreground the actions and aesthetics of photographic inquiry itself: what, if anything, images of image making could reveal about the nature of photographic engagement with the world.



*7. Zig Zag Wanderer (photographs) , 2011*



8. Video Stills from *Zig Zag Wanderer (video)*, 2011

## Four

The next project I want to write about came after a summer and fall quarter of fits, starts, and dead ends. The tight loop of structural self-reference that made Zig Zag Wanderer successful to me was suffocating my efforts to move forward. I decided that I wanted to let photographic subject matter back in as way to open up and complicate the blunt, reductive, systematic ambitions my work had taken on.

Returning to themes of reflection and exclusion explored in the walk around Marlboro Ave, I began photographing the interiors of cars parked at night in various locations throughout Riverside. All of the images are shot from the passenger side window with the only light coming from the on-camera flash. Depending on the curvature and cleanliness of the window, the light of the flash is reflected back toward the camera to a lesser or greater extent, creating a paper-white rupture in the center of each picture.

The photographs themselves oscillate between a kind of social document in the history of the photographic typology, and a self-implicating performance document akin to Vito Acconci's *Following Piece*. Like any typology, each photograph is taken from the same vantage point, with the same lighting conditions. However, I would like to think that the presence of the reflection of the flash in the image complicates the notion. The flash both reveals and obscures the contents of the car interiors: literally getting in the way of the typological, pseudo-sociological endeavor, and making explicit the intrusive, often violent act of information gathering itself.

While the ultimately banal act of looking into people's cars at night does not actually break any laws or harm any property, my voyeurism and the pointed ambiguity of my intentions make the act feel very much like a violation. Social convention would stipulate that car windows are one-way mirrors: to be looked out of, not into. Further, the reality of theft colors the shining of light into the interior of parked cars at night, however briefly, as a kind of casing for robbery.

In a certain sense, casing is exactly the point. What become most interesting are the possessions and accessories that each car contains. While each interior and the arrangement of objects within it give an individual character to the possible owner of the vehicle (a new Land Rover with an iPod cord versus an old Volvo with fast food wrappers) the repeating themes of Starbucks cups, phone chargers, or shopping bags begin to create a portrait of consumption in a particular time and place.



9. From the Series *Autoportrait* (4/27/2012), 2012





10. From the Series *Autoportrait (4/27/2012)*, 2012



11. From the Series *Autoportrait* (4/27/2012), 2012





12. From the Series *Autoportrait (4/27/2012)*, 2012



13. From the Series *Autoportrait (4/27/2012)*, 2012





14. From the Series *Autoportrait* (4/27/2012), 2012

## Five

In my most recent body of work, entitled *Orange Prince, Orchard Queen*, I was interested in pushing the work toward a more intuitive engagement with photographic subject. I wanted to nearly erase the systematic aspects of the work, while still maintaining a commitment to serial, structural investigation.

This work takes the marginal, vacant space of an unmaintained Riverside orange grove as its ostensible subject. As a landscape, the orange grove has been of fundamental importance to the development of Riverside and is central to the iconography of Southern California. The massive irrigation project required for citrus production in Riverside literally shaped the ecology of the region. The University of California, Riverside, itself was originally founded as a UC Citrus Experiment Station.

The orange grove occupies a space both mysterious and banal in the Riverside imagination. It is at once a ubiquitous, bland commercial landscape, and a site of body dumps, hauntings, and transgressions. This particular orange grove is the only remaining acre of what used to be sprawling citrus fields. Past commercial usefulness, the grove is all but abandoned. The majority of the trees are dying. As the only semi wooded area for miles, the grove becomes a catchall for illicit or taboo activity.

I substituted systematic movement and reflection for the simple, blunt photographic interventions of a sheet and a flash: a backdrop and a light source. As a surrogate for my own image, the sheet implicates my role in the creation of the

images and thus reflects subject back behind the camera. It's a simple idea: my presence and my documentation of the orange grove change the orange grove. Through the use of the simple photographic interventions, I am trying to implicate myself in this exchange.

The images are stark. They are all made from a similar distance from the subject, referencing a kind of repetitive clinical description and giving the series a claustrophobic quality. The sheet effaces any possible orienting background. Where the sheet ends, the limitations of the flash prevent a wider view. The aesthetic of the flash places the images in relation to forensic photography and to amateur point and shoot photography.

The images at once reference histories and tropes of both still life and landscape imagery. In the first case, I am photographing citrus fruits on a white backdrop. In the second, the location of the abandoned orange grove can be considered in relationship to iconic 1970's photography of marginal space, dystopia, and banality. Lewis Baltz's *San Quentin Point* and John Gossage's *The Pond* for example, stand out as influences. I would like to think that in using and conflating the history and maneuvers of both documentary photography and studio photography, by creating a photographic space that wobbles on and trips over the line between 'objective' photographic reportage and photographic artifice, between staged and found, I can examine the limitations and the *act* of photography itself and ultimately what is achievable from a photographic engagement with the world.

My hope, too, is that a kind of strange humor is able to come through in the

work. I find an idiotic charm in the flat-footed construction of my 'sets' and the blunt use of flash lighting. The subjects themselves are similarly bizarre and deadpan. The way a single orange grows from an otherwise dead tree, a trash bag hung on a branch, what looks like a potato and a stick falling from one frame to the next in an obvious one-two that undercuts the mystery of their floating: the directness and playful idiocy with which these odd, though seemingly familiar objects are addressed undercuts and complicates the otherwise unnerving and 'creepy' quality of the images.





15. From the Series *Orange Prince, Orchard Queen*, 2013



16. From the Series *Orange Prince, Orchard Queen*, 2013



17. From the Series *Orange Prince, Orchard Queen*, 2013



18. From the Series *Orange Prince, Orchard Queen*, 2013



19. From the Series *Orange Prince, Orchard Queen*, 2013



20. From the Series *Orange Prince, Orchard Queen*, 2013





21. From the Series *Orange Prince, Orchard Queen*, 2013



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