

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
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Art, Commerce, and the Working Photographer

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by

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## Table of Contents

Signature Page .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Window Shopping .....	2
Reproduction and Distribution .....	4
An Unexpected Vantage Point .....	7
The Labor of Interpretation .....	9
Momentary Escapism .....	12
Bibliography .....	14

## Introduction

The work in my thesis is part of a larger exploration of my placement within and relationship to the long history of photographers whose work extends beyond the walls of a gallery or museum. So often, while pursuing my BFA in photography, conversations around specific images would reach points of confusion as to whether or not the image or the photographer could be categorized as “commercial” or “art”. In no other medium, besides that of video, has there been so much muddy water between the two sides, a confusion that can be traced to photography’s beginnings. It is from this confusion that my own practice emerges. Through my active resistance to the commercial/fine art dichotomy, I hope to make work that expands conversations about both and opens the latter to a broader public. My intention behind this text is therefore not to lay out any clear definition of this tension, but rather to bear witness to its existence while discussing some historical and theoretical works that have influenced my own. If one of photography’s powers is in its ambiguity, then I hope that this thesis asks more questions than it gives answers.

The basic structure of this series of short essays is inspired by Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), which I was prompted to read by Susan Laxton. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, particularly the chapter “Media as Mass Deception,” helped me make sense of the first-hand experiences that have shaped my work and gave me the ability to articulate much of what you read from here. It is through

Professor Laxton that I was re-introduced to Victor Burgin's work and writing, which cemented my previously held feelings about the history of theory writing on photography. I am eternally grateful to her for these influential texts and the prompts that led to the following essays.

### Window Shopping

Photography is a speculative tool used by commercial entities to publicly project potential futures, futures that lead to the accumulation of capital by those entities. The experience of walking down an urban street often includes being bombarded by a multitude of images that are starving for attention to relay the specific futures they depict. In doing so, corporations hope that the spectators incorporate the advertised future into how they imagine their own. We are often so inundated with advertisements that we lose sight of this absurdity. While attending UC Riverside, I have noticed the proliferation of these images in public spaces, specifically downtown, where my thesis was ultimately installed.

While researching at the California Museum of Photography, I became interested in the building in which it is housed, the Barbara and Culver Center of the Arts, and its historical significance and connection to commerce. The Culver was originally constructed as the Rouse Department Store. In conversation with that past, the commercial nature of the images in the archive at the CMP made me want to further

explore the ways in which temporal and economical shifts in context change our interaction with a space despite it remaining physically the same. By placing images of commerce back on the windows, especially the cubes in front which were for display, I wanted to reference the space's original form while speaking to the building's cultural and historical significance.

My use of vinyl to convey that significance further points to the building's commercial history. I recently began working with window vinyl to both attain greater site-specificity in my work and potentially attract a larger audience, one that extends beyond those who are comfortable in galleries and museums. The desire to reach those outside of the artworld comes from my own experiences growing up in Riverside. Art felt inaccessible, like walking through the threshold of a museum was only for a select few and not for me. Commercial art, however, has what fine art often does not: it is built for a wide audience. Window vinyl is a commercial medium, legible to and understood by many. Through its use, I sought to collapse the distinction between fine and commercial art, putting on a show that anyone could see at any time, hopefully prompting them to feel included in a larger conversation about art and photography.

The COVID-19 pandemic has furthered my interest in the use of vinyl and windows; the spaces in which people feel comfortable has altered dramatically. Engagement with public space is necessary when gathering inside is dangerous.

## Reproduction and Distribution

Photography is a medium that is particularly adept to democratizing fine art, as discussed by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

Benjamin describes the role photography plays in the reproduction of other artworks and the photographic image itself. A photograph allows its subject to leave the gallery. It can be reproduced at high volume, therefore reaching more people than any other form of art. While Benjamin understands this as a positive feature of mechanical reproduction, he argues that the subject of a photo can never *truly* be experienced as such because photographs cannot transmit an object's aura, which is "bound to [its] presence in the here and now" (112).

The proliferation of mechanical reproductions has led to a situation in which "every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image" (Benjamin 105). Despite never seeing a certain work of art in front of us, we come to know it through its mechanical representations. Reproductions have become so important to the experience of an artwork that its documentation is now an important step in production. It is not complete until it is documented. This has created tension between the actual object and the documentation of the object, resulting in many conversations around authorship and authenticity.

Instead of reproducing an object as it is found, commercial photography documents scenes invented for the sole purpose of selling goods. Despite its basis in lies, however, commercial photography feels just as real as mechanical reproductions of subjects like mountains, sculptures, or someone on family vacation. This is often achieved through use of images that appear to be of someone's everyday life, using professional and amateur images and actors that together start to blend and fold in on themselves. This push and pull have created a hybrid reality that rests somewhere between the two, shifting what we know to be true and how we perform for the camera.

Despite popular conversations around the unrealistic goals set by advertisements, they become even more effective when they appear on our phones or laptops, in intimate spaces whose images often address us specifically and therefore feel more real and attainable than something we might see on a billboard. Social media provides a platform where we do more than just view products reproduced for their consumption; we too become advertised products, who, like artwork, do not really exist until we share our documentation. We live in a spectacle that is, as described by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (2). We perform for cameras in such a way that our friends, family, and followers believe that we are living an idealized narrative, actively negating or ignoring our truths even to those closest to us.

The realization of this process and the various roles I play in it has had a significant effect on my work. On my social media platforms, I used to spend a significant amount of time constructing new narratives about my commercial practice before posting. To reinforce those narratives, I shared posts from art directors and other creatives who I worked with on various projects. We interwove our narratives and exchanged images of our best work life via tags, comments, and other means. For a long time, I found myself joyfully playing along until I realized that my immediate friends and family were being negatively affected by this, consuming the narrative I was putting forth a little too well. I began to stop sharing this material, even when that proved to be to my own professional detriment. From these uncertainties grew new work that unpacks the roll of social media in the creative process. I am both critical of it and dependent upon it; if I completely extract myself from social media, I, quite frankly, won't be able to pay my bills. I am critical of yet still in cooperation with commerce. My social media has become an intersection of two spectacles, one that I live in and the other that I more actively construct.

Once I really noticed this cycle, I found myself much more present at my shoots and aware of what was occurring within them – who was involved, which objects were brought on set, colors used, lighting and vantage points suggested, what was foregrounded and backgrounded, language used on set, relationships to scale and to the camera, the amount of abstraction in an image. I began to see these elements as tell tail signs of present and future aesthetic languages of the cultural moment in which each image was being constructed. I found a certain freedom after this, in feeling like one part

of a spectacle rather than an individual spectacle on my own. Relinquishing the perceived power of working as an individual who is completely independent from others allowed me to shift my focus to finding power in small details, in subtleties and banality that most don't see, and using those to imbed subtle critiques within images, leaving Easter eggs for future viewers to catch and reflect on.

My work is about being part of larger systems and networks. Active consideration of that allows me to make work for the various communities that I am a part of beyond the art world. *They* are the target demographic for much of the work that I make, and the knowledge learned within these communities gives me access to a world and a way of thinking that continually compliments my work. Which means, of course, that I monetize that knowledge and allow it to be exploited by my clients.

### An Unexpected Vantage Point

I can't help but respond to power of recent images depicting the murders of Black people by police and the 2020 protests in response to the murder of George Floyd. While these images can be seen via multiple channels, many have begun on and remain most accessible through social media. In real time, I am watching images from various sources – major news organizations, friends, and strangers. Never has the connectivity provided to us by social media been clearer, but alongside that comes an awareness of the negative effects of “a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (Debord, 2).

Videos of protestors being pelted by rubber bullets and tear gassed are shown alongside or sandwiched between advertisements. I watch as influencers and corporations (many of my clients) try to co-opt the situation so that eyes don't divert from them. As people watch events on social media and those who are often not in the limelight take center stage, those with brands to maintain feel a need to be a part of it, positioning themselves within a popular conversation without any actual participation. A need to retain relevancy through images, even when those images are of such extreme pain, suffering, and violence, sullies the concept of "sharing" anything at all.

And yet the most universal gesture I see while watching live videos of protests is people taking pictures. Photos and videos are indeed the media through which so much change has occurred. Everyone has become a part of the media apparatus. These images are created during split second decisions and depict the split-second decisions of others. Whether they are of a member of the NYPD throwing up a white-power hand gesture or of countless protestors being peaceful and calm while the media only shows looting and "violent acts," these amateur videos show the complexity of truth – how one might co-exist simultaneously with another truth or how those in power attempt to erase or dramatically alter the narrative around what truthfully occurred.

In order to document these truths, it is important for the photographer to place themselves above an action just long enough to share a vantage point that no one expected. This is how Vilém Flusser describes the role of the photographer in his *Towards a Philosophy of*

*Photography* (1983). Even from my couch, through the bird's eye view of a news helicopter, it is clear that this is exactly what the many photographers on the street are doing. They position themselves in poses that are sometimes silly, and sometime quite dangerous, especially when up against a police force that feels no shame in assaulting them, a reality we witnessed repeatedly in 2020. Each day, when I wake up and look at the news on my phone, I see a new moment captured by those on the street, taking images from unexpected vantage points, which is often that someone is taking an image at all.

### The Labor of Interpretation

The more seriously art takes its opposition to existence, the more it resembles the seriousness of existence, its antithesis: the more it labors to develop strictly according to its own formal laws, the more labor it requires to be understood, whereas its goal had been precisely to neglect the burden of labor. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 113)

So, there is a tricky little window that an artwork must pass through for it to be both engaging and not so labored that its interpretation becomes a burden. Despite this, cultural production that takes more labor to understand, especially when that labor is based in specialized knowledge, it exalted above other artwork as what Adorno and Horkheimer call "high art," a category posited as distinct from pop culture and therefore

one whose understanding necessarily excludes the working class. I strive to make work that can be interacted with as both high and low art. Due to its simultaneous use in multiple fields and social spheres, photography is the medium with which I have found the most success in pursuing this end. A photograph, because of its combination of denotative and indexical meanings, contains multiple levels of entry for the viewer, both emotionally and intellectually. Photographs are approachable. My goal is to make work that uses commercial signifiers that are legible to many while at the same time providing a critical undertone that the audience can engage with. I want the work to be neither too shallow nor so deep that the viewer can't see the bottom of it. The viewer can explore the piece and make sense of it for themselves without having to do too much work.

I further emphasize the accessibility of my work through my use of humor. Many of my images are entertaining and fun. They are light, and this lightness mitigates the burdens of interpretation for those often excluded from the production of contemporary art.

Adorno and Horkheimer continue their discussion of the differences between “high” and “low” art through lightness:

"Light" art as such, entertainment, is not a form of decadence. Those who deplore it as a betrayal of the ideal of pure expression harbor illusions about society. The purity of bourgeois art, hypostatized as a realm of freedom contrasting to material praxis, was bought from the outset with the exclusion of the lower class [...]

Serious art has denied itself to those for whom the hardship and oppression of life

make a mockery of seriousness and who must be glad to use the time not spent at the production line in being simply carried along. Light art has accompanied autonomous art as its shadow. It is the social bad conscience of serious art. (107)

Ultimately, high and low art aren't as distinct from one another as one might think. They are in fact dependent upon each other, and the maintenance of their dichotomy only serves to enrich those in power. "Light" art has never been and will never be excessive; it is only described as such to make its opposite seem more refined. Both types of art are commodities, but "pure works of art" are only seen as such because the economies in which they circulate are often obfuscated. In fact, the same people who proliferate "low art" *publicly* for their own profit also accrue capital through their *personal* collections of "high art." A great example of this is the Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas. Described on its website as housing "a world-class collection of American art," it was created and is run by Alice Walker, an heiress to the Walmart fortune. Walker thus profits from "low art" while maintaining her status above the masses with her collection of "high art." I'm going to awkwardly laugh now to keep from crying...

While my work oscillates between "light" and, shall I say, "heavy" art, I am currently in conflict with ideas around these categorizations and how they lend themselves to ease of interpretation. I find myself at an apex of many conversations surrounding these issues. I love my job as a commercial photographer; knowing that I have the power to affect the world through media is incredibly exciting. The knowledge that I have acquired while at

UC Riverside has allowed for more complex and engaging conversations with clients about *why* they want images made. During these conversations, and during the creation of all of my work, I ask both myself and my clients: How are we all implemented in this game? What makes us uncomfortable with our reality? What aspects are we willing to change to become more or less comfortable? How might those changes affect the world?

### Momentary Escapism

My decision to become a photographer started as an escape from being a housepainter, a job that felt like little more than being a cog in a capitalist economy that provides little to no advancement or security for manual laborers. I was constantly looking for means of escape, yet the entertainment that I was drawn to reflected my own reality back to me. For leisure, I often sought out movies about lives that were similar to mine. I hung out with friends in similar lines of work, our shared misery allowing me to feel okay about getting up and going to work the next day. My rebellious acts, like doing drugs, going out all night, or spending far too much money, were done with co-workers. Escape from the uncomfortable feeling of being overwhelmed by one's situation is necessary, but the escape remains close by, with those who are escaping from the same thing you are.

Adorno and Horkheimer further delve into "light" art by discussing fun as "a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness" (112). As my grandfather would often say when I

described joking on a construction site, “You got to laugh to keep from crying.” The sense of fun I once used as a coping mechanism, escape achieved through laughter, has found its way into my current work – both in images and during their production. My shoots are usually light-hearted, a bit silly even. This creates a comradery between everyone on set, including the clients. While Adorno and Horkheimer explain the ways in which laughter is used by the entertainment industry to negatively affect the working class, genuine joy can also occur in those moments. Sometimes I don’t mind being manipulated a bit, however. I don’t mind giving into what I am told to want or feel. The more I embrace the inevitable the more I am aware of what I actually *can* change. As per the punk band Refused’s 1998 single, “New Noise,” “How do we expect anyone to listen if we keep using the same old voice?” Throughout my time at UC Riverside, I have studied many texts that negatively critique popular culture and the culture industries as a whole. While they are necessary and far from the only academic opinions on media out there, turning that voice off and just having some sort of stupid fun, letting myself escape, can feel like a new voice. So, I now often find myself surrounded by happy colors, flowers, and lots of alcohol. I create escapes, for myself, for my clients and audiences, through heightened realities that are removed just enough to turn images of ordinary objects into dreams of a better life, even if they just exist for a moment.

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