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## **Fun over Function:**

### **The vernacular photographic exhibition as wishing well, ghost train and curiosity shop**

Annebella Pollen

Exhibition review: The House of Vernacular, curated by Martin Parr, Fabrica, Brighton  
2 October – 28 November 2010

Curator and photographer Martin Parr, well-known for his playful approach to popular taste, has a long-standing fascination with the excesses of mass-produced, brightly-coloured kitsch. His personal (and now published) collections, for example, include Saddam Hussein watches, trade union ceramics, and the (seemingly) most banal of picture postcards. His own photography famously, and sometimes controversially, engages with issues of class, mass-consumption, and popular aesthetics. Parr's curatorial choices for the 2010 Brighton Photo Biennial are naturally strongly shaped by his abiding interests, perhaps nowhere more prominently than in The House of Vernacular exhibition.

Structured around seven interlocking rooms, each part of this installation features a themed body of photographic work, widespread in its geographical and historical origins and social purpose. Collections range from the studio photography of infants in Amsterdam in the 1980s and images of British litter bin design in the 1950s and 1960s, through to anonymous post-war American domestic snapshots and the 1970s photographs of African dictators' private jets. The unifying characteristic of such diverse material, as explained in the exhibition's opening text panel, is its identity as 'vernacular', which encompasses, in the exhibition, photographs from the 'politically pertinent' to the 'plain weird'.

To access the exhibition, several dislocations must take place. Anyone familiar with the deconsecrated church-turned-gallery that is Fabrica will be surprised to find, when stepping in from the bustling street, not the usual (yet unusual) setting of vaulted ceilings, wood-panelling and baptismal font, but a suite of low ceilinged rooms built within its space. To explore these rooms, each visitor must pass through a Victorian-style shop front, marked as number 28 of a street that does not exist. Like the fabrication of historic interiors so beloved of local museums, the entrance area to the exhibition features domestic display cabinets filled with an eclectic mix of tea cosies, cups and saucers and outmoded technology, setting up an atmosphere of cosiness and kitsch. From here, the visitor is moved through time and space, from interior to exterior settings, humble to ostentatious, familiar to exotic, via reconstructions of pueblo housing, urban streets complete with fallen leaves, suburban living rooms and strip-lit photographic studios: a theatrical stage set of imagined pasts and fantasy locations.

Clearly, none of the settings are to be taken at face value. Nobody is expected to be convinced by the authenticity of instant adobe-type walls that form the backdrop for the Brazilian painted photo portraits. The curving walls of a narrow, orange carpeted space, featuring cloud-effect wallpaper, approximate the cabin of Nick Gleis's luxury jet photographs only symbolically. The addition of props, such as a sooty chimney piece in the former, and the emergency procedure instructions in the latter, adds to the playfulness. On the final day of the exhibition, for a community event related to the photographs of 'Men in Hats' from the 1960s streets of Bogota, gallery staff are also wearing striped towels and rugs as impromptu ponchos. There is a sense of fancy dress party throughout the exhibition, and the dominant mood of the visitors is amusement. Laughter rings out in the rooms; the reflective pool that reflects the slideshow of images of West Germany in the cold-war era has, by the end of the exhibition, been filled with coins as if as a wishing well; comments in the visitor's book praise the show as 'entertaining' and 'like the end-of-the-pier ghost train'. All in all, then: good, clean fun.

But what is function of the 'fun' in this show? In every case it is an act of 'laughing at' rather than a 'laughing with', from babies and infants caught at their least flattering in photographs from the commercial studio of Lee To Sang, to the naiveté of dated technological aspiration

in the politically-commissioned images of Josef Heinrich Darchinger. The trade in greetings cards featuring amateur photographs has shown that dated fashions and aspirations have comic value; the success of 'vernacular' photo blogs, such as Awkward Family Photos, relies on similar reactions. Regardless of location and particular circumstance, when viewed at a distance in this exhibition, optimism looks embarrassing and pride seems mawkish. Painted improvements to photographic portraits appear misjudged; idealising studio backdrops announce artificiality: all endeavour is bathetic. The wealthy and the poor, the living and the dead, the luxurious and the mundane, are each held up for ridicule. Decontextualised and dehistoricised, all can be brought into equivalence.

In part, the decontextualisation exercised in *The House of Vernacular* is achieved through the standardised format of the photographs' presentation, where four of the seven sets of images are presented in the same mode, as unframed, white-bordered digital prints, of equal size, tacked directly to the walls. In the case of the richly retouched *Retratos Pintados* photographs from Brazil, for example, where the originals, in all their variety of sizes and frames, and with their applied layers of paint, would reveal layers of significance and allow the material interventions to the print to be understood, this seems a crucial shortcoming. Certainly with the photographs of litter bins, this is a missed opportunity, for the originals are stored at the University of Brighton's Design Archives, only a stone's throw from *Fabrica*. Had they been shown in their original material condition (and with the important functional detail provided on their reverse), the photographs would come to be seen less as the apparently arbitrary, and therefore 'plain weird' iconography of the inconsequential, but could have been understood in context, as material designed to be used as part of the Design Council Picture Library's catalogue of post-war public design practice.

Equivalence and decontextualisation also occurs with the three slideshows, where no more than a title is provided for each presentation, and as with all of the collections, no discussion of the photographer or the source institution is provided. A selection of photographs, for example, commissioned by the Social Democratic Party of West Germany, full of political promise for a hygienic, modernist future that has yet to materialise, comes with little annotation. What we need to learn from these images – seen in disconcerting juxtaposition, incomprehensibly projected (and thus inverted) over a pool of reflective water – is provided

by the accompanying traditional, comical, 'oompah' music of 'Happy Old Germany'. With The Corinthians series, taken from the book of the same name published by The Archive of Modern Conflict, Kodachrome images from 1947-1974 are projected from a slide carousel onto a screen in the corner of a constructed living room. Chintz furnishings, flying ducks, plastic flowers and a cross-stitch title provide the frame for the anonymous, or at least *anonymised*, projection. Incongruity and haplessness characterise the selections, where familiar double-exposed and blurred photographs of cosy domestic and local scenes, such as fetes and beauty contests, mix surreally with discomfiting imagery from funeral parlours and car crashes. These appear, confusingly, amidst what looks like commercial imagery from military training camps and hospitals. There is no rhyme or reason for the pattern except that disjuncture is the principal organising strategy of The House of Vernacular's Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe. Peculiarity is played out through the sinister (uncanny twins; a burning house; a tarred and feathered man) sharing a bed with the nostalgic (ceramic figurines and velvet poodles), sometimes in the frame of the same image (where children play on a rocking horse next to a display of weapons). With historical context, purpose and use secured, the photographs would be much more informative, but just as when a joke must be explained, the hilarity would be lost. The 'vernacular' at work here is dependent on unintentional comedy, achieved by suppressing photographs' particular and wholly distinct origins.

There is no doubt that some of the issues raised by the decontextualisation of this exhibition, and its flattening of difference, are rooted in the very term that is used to organise the material. Formerly most commonly associated with architecture and language, the term vernacular has come, especially over the last decade, to be used as the adjective of choice when describing the vast and diverse range of photographic material that falls outside the small and exclusive canon of art practice. As a term with increasingly respectable currency, yet without firm ontological status, vernacular has become an inclusive umbrella label to encompass not only the 'found', amateur and/or personal images with which it is most popularly associated but, at times, all non-art photographs, that is, what could be called the other 98%. If the term includes, as in some definitions, utilitarian visual material resulting from an almost infinite variety of purposes, from advertising and science to the records of various disciplinary and commercial institutions, vernacular comes

to seem impossibly generous location that needs to accommodate literally billions of heterogeneous residents that may have very little in common in either purpose or appearance. The infinite breadth of the term's inclusivity moves it dangerously close to meaninglessness. A further issue with the term is that the category is forever in a dialectical relationship with the art from which it apparently differs. It is always defined by what it is not. By bringing to the centre that which is seen to inhabit the margins – such as amateur photography – power structures are hardly challenged; if anything the boundaries between centre and margin are reiterated and thus reinforced.

As the text panel that introduces *The House of Vernacular* states: 'Although the driving force behind vernacular photography is the straightforward motive to record rather than to create art, it shares much in common with contemporary artistic practice and is a significant contributor to the language and wider appreciation of photography now.' Vernacular photography in this exhibition is thus both not art, and akin to art, and its ultimate purpose is to add value to the art world. The particular cultural, social and political contexts for the images used are largely repressed, and their varied and complex intentions are ultimately diminished by their reduction to diverse forms of 'vernacular'. Parr understands vernacular as characterised by a simplicity of purpose, and positions its apparently direct nature in counterpoint to art's sophistry, yet this simplification can only occur if the photographs' origins are overlooked and they are presented as free-floating objects. That this was the achievement of the exhibition was reiterated when I overheard a gallery visitor hesitantly expressing reservations about what she saw as the invasiveness of the project. Her friend reassured her, 'Oh, they are all photographs that have been thrown away, and Martin Parr just finds them and gives them meaning.' Emptied of what they once were through reformatting and decontextualisation; made comical by musical accompaniment, theatrical staging and kitsch props; the meaning of disparate photographic material originating from personal, institutional, political and commercial sources is up for grabs as if the photographs were just blowing in the streets. In rehoming apparently homeless photographs, *The House of Vernacular* thus confers authorship and authority on what is described as the photography of 'everyday life', creating new categories of art objects where the photographs become what many visitors could recognise as 'very Martin Parr'.