



BARTLEBY REVIEW

Issue 33 - May 2015
.....
www.bartlebyreview.com

Pictures Don't Feel the Same Anymore ••• Zeb Zang

Apple

iPhone 6 Ad Campaign

Bus Shelter

Various Locations

A tree grows on a barren hill, weighted down beneath a cyan sky. The rain on the glass saturates its colours and the glow from behind the image deepens the contrast between each tone. The bus is running late.

This image was shot with an iPhone 6 and uploaded by Hyeong Jun K. before becoming an ad for Apple's new product, along with dozens of other iPhone photos, all enlarged to their impressive bus stop size as proof of the product's technical ability. The phone is nowhere to be seen. To show it would be irrelevant, so a despondent set of images showing where it can be taken acts as its replacement. As with every other image in this advertising suite, the one glowing in front of me demonstrates an adept understanding of compositional rules—a quality more com-

mon than uncharacteristic in any gallery of cell phone snapshots—yet an exclusively formal analysis would miss the point. This tree is advertising a phone. Aside from its commercial purpose, it points towards a basic fact: producing a beautiful photograph is no longer a challenge, and this has made beauty feel redundant. Susan Sontag discussed how images of violence and war might eventually render those subjects completely without affect, and it seems now the same may be true of beautiful, compositionally perfected pictures.

Continual expansion thins the care a viewer can give to an image. Photographic technology of any kind cannot compare in affective capacity by those that created the earliest still and moving images, such as the Lumière Brothers' film of a train which was potent enough to chase viewers from their seats. The more pictures in the world the less power each one has. Yet from the stereoscope to the oculus rift, innovators have always tried to push against this loss of pictorial potency with technical devices to force the image closer to reality. From their inevitable inferiority to real world, these developments towards optical immersion all pass into the realm of kitsch and satire, as viewers learn to spot their obvious manufacture. It is more likely to find immersion not within a single image but in the depiction of everything by everyone at all times—the infinite crowd sourced pool of pictures.

A phone may be the new populist form of communication or just a new source of visual noise, but it isn't quite killing art. I once heard a comedian say that art is harder to make as time goes on because everything has already been done. With artists there is often an overanalysis of things that have no relevance outside of Art, however the cell phone photograph retains consequence in the world at large as communication both personal and political. My concern is how pictures have changed in power and in feeling. Though the growth of photography is no more inherently negative than a new television channel, it may force a reaction and a new set of parameters by which art can retain relevance. As the iPhone makes optical perfection and innovative composition accessible to all, more demanding goals must be insisted upon. The challenge is for an insightful honesty that avoids the growing trend of solipsism common with the new ease of depiction. Emotion and affect are more hard-won than impressive visuals and good ideas.

The rain hasn't stopped as the bus arrives. I get on and the next day the ad is replaced. Yet it stays ingrained in my thoughts, as a picture important for some reason beyond what it depicts. A tree placed against a sky made by an apple.

Zeb Zang