Translating A Silent Language

Photographing Social Interaction

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Thomas Slade

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Abstract

Working with photography to alter our perception of time, this project examines social interaction in a city environment. I have adopted the unobtrusive role of the flaneur and observed how social norms orchestrate social behaviour in public spaces. I chose to use constructed photography and I selected and recreated observed moments. I made images that I hope come alive within the expanded time of a still photograph. Through these reconstructions of observed behaviour I set out to question the capacity of photography to amplify reality and demonstrate how a fictional image might reach closer to a lived experience. I focussed on overlooked moments to produce an expansion of time that allows the viewer to question the ordinary values that shape social behaviours in the everyday, providing an opportunity to recognise the complexity of a lived experience as part of everyday actions.

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Introduction

In any culture there are a number of social norms used by members of its society in order to interpret the actions of others and how to respond accordingly. In societies where people function with individual motivation, social norms help manage the interaction of strangers in common situations such as navigating the sidewalk or choosing a seat on public transport. My Master of Fine Arts research examines how social norms orchestrate the behaviour of strangers in public spaces. The focus of my work is the observation, interpretation and magnification of this interaction. My interest in social behaviour has stemmed directly from my own experiences and to photograph these experiences I began by putting the camera down. Instead, I adopted the role of 'flaneur' as observer which provided me an opportunity to gather evidence in situations where the camera could interrupt everyday actions.

I have developed an approach that might be termed quasi-sociological as I draw on the theory of sociology to guide my observations of social behaviour, informing the photographs I constructed under a controlled setting. In my discussion I draw on an understanding of sociology and the everyday informed by the writing of Erving Goffman and Michael Sheringham, helping place the theoretical framework which has guided my thinking. I look to Susan Sontag and David Campany to discuss photography's ability to freeze and enhance the visible and how my process of gathering evidence can present an expanded experience of time.

In my analysis of constructed photography I argue that the necessary interruption into the everyday that is required to construct a photograph does not separate the photograph's connection to the everyday. I suggest that the evidence gained through the position of the observer maintains this connection. I use Michael Fried's examination of photography in his book *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* to refine my creative practice and look to photographers Jeff Wall and Phillip Lorcia diCorcia who have contributed to the foundation of ideas around the constructed photograph, helping me establish my own position within this method.

A Silent Language: Understanding Social Norms

I consider myself a confident person who is relatively comfortable meeting new people and I feel at ease interacting with strangers. At the same time I can also encounter levels of social anxiety when I am not confident in a social situation. As I move throughout the city environment I am sometimes comfortable in public space and at other times uncomfortable. In situations of comfort I am happy to move with the flow of people. In situations of unease I have found myself moving towards the edge of interaction to maintain a sense of comfort. From this position I unintentionally found myself observing others rather than interacting. I began to intentionally situate myself on the borders of interactions involving groups of people to notice how strangers accommodate the presence of others and the specific behaviours people use to navigate public space.

These studied observations of social interaction sparked the initial idea on which my photographs are based. What occurred to me as a potential subject developed out of the realisation that interaction within the city, aspects of everyday life such as walking down the sidewalk or joining a queue, are orchestrated by the adoption of social norms. More specifically what is being used in public spaces are 'culturally accepted norms', which are the expected sets of behaviour in public, accepted by society, that have developed in a particular culture. As Harold Garfinkel (1967) describes they are what each member of society uses in order to interpret and decide how to act in a social situation. Adam Kendon (1988) adds that they are the behaviours of the majority of the public who are governed by reciprocally held norms of proper conduct.

When talking in terms of 'culture' it was important to establish a cultural orientation at an early stage of my research. The understanding and application of behaviour depends greatly on what the participant knows. As cultures not only vary from country to country but also region to region, the context of culture affects the interpretation of behaviour and how people respond to the action of others, which has directly influenced not only the creation of my images but also their interpretation. Having been to other cultures I have seen firsthand how expected behaviours vary, for example, how my own unawareness of culture affected interaction when using public transport in Katmandu. In Katmandu it is completely acceptable to push up against others to maximize space. There was also a lot of animated

conversation that contrasted the reserved behavior I have witnessed using public transport in New Zealand. Edward Hall's book *The Silent Language* Hall (1959) stresses that understanding culture is vital to the ability to read the actions of others. For my own observations of behaviour in public space I have used the urban centre of Wellington, New Zealand as a case study.

Understanding of the sociological aspect of my study has been guided by the work of sociologist Erving Goffman whose research is consistent with my own photographic concerns, to display social interaction. This parallel focus is highlighted by Goffman's (1963) description on social arrangement "Briefly, a social order may be defined as the consequence of any set of moral norms that regulates the way in which persons peruse objectives" (p. 8). The work of Goffman has provided essential guidance to my understanding of interaction.

Social norms often appear automatic and subconscious, but as I began to study social interactions more closely, I started to notice the acute understanding each person has in their use and how these are learnt behaviours. I believe social norms to be a conscious act of the participant, deploying the behaviour from subconsciously derived responses. The participant can respond in a subconscious manner because social norms are so common and expected from others that they are given little recognition and can be deployed with little conscious thought. But in showing an understanding of the culture and applying the right behaviour for the situation, with the correct timing, shows an underlying consciousness must be applied. An example of this is the simple act of walking down a bustling sidewalk. Large numbers of pedestrians can move swiftly using subtly gestures and slight changes in direction to move into gaps allowing people to come within inches of each other without touching. In his study of American plazas William H. Whyte (1988) comments on this proficiency "There is a lot of skill here. We've tracked people on scores of crossings patterns with a digital timer and never do they collide. A tiny hand signal, a brief retard, a tenth of a second, the timing is absolutely superlative". That social norms require a high skill level yet, can be used with little conscious engagement shows their contrasting function which has made them a particular area of interest for my project.

Watcher of City life: The Flaneur As Photographer

As people tend to avoid strangers with a camera or at least change their behaviour when faced with a camera, the act of studying interaction by photographing has the direct effect of disturbing the very subject I wished to record. The idea of spending time in public spaces to observe social interaction without my camera to gain information on which to build photographs has developed as an integral feature of my practice as a photographer. This appearance of the stroller through the city allowed me to walk the edges of exchanges as one of the inter-actors and note behaviours without disturbing them. Through this intentional role as a watcher of city life I have taken on the role of flaneur. The concept of the flaneur as an observer was termed by the 19th century poet, writer and critic Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire worked from the French masculine noun flaneur which translates to idler or wanderer (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.). In contemporary terms an idler or wanderer can have negative connotations with loitering, opposing the trends of the capitalist society. But Baudelaire looked at the wanderer as a disguise that enabled the participant to walk within the city and unobtrusively observe. In the article "The Flaneur, the Badaud, and the the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860 – 1910" Gregory Shaya (2004) summarizes Walter Benjamin's exploration of Baudelaire's Flaneur as "a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern city life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city" (p. 47).

This deliberately slow exploration of the city gives the flaneur the ability to step back from one's surroundings and observe more acutely the actions of public space. The ability to step back in a physical sense puts one in a position to watch human interactions but more importantly I think it is the mental approach to allow oneself to observe in a conceptually reflective way. As Wayne Mellinger (2011) notes:

> To live in the city is to live in the presence of strangers. For those of us living in cities, passing strangers on a busy street is unremarkable. We rush to our next appointment, preoccupied with our own thoughts navigating the crowded sidewalks. On 'auto pilot', we don't even think about our many brief encounters with unknown others in public spaces (para. 1).

One can be in the midst of a bustling city street 'occupied with their thoughts' weaving

through numerous strangers and not notice how a shared understanding of behaviours, such as a subtle change in direction, a glance of the eyes or a snake of the hips allows participants to interact with a high skill level based on a shared understanding. However, if one were to enter the bustling street 'keenly aware' then these actions are able to be noticed.

For my own intentions I am able to adopt this style of flaneurie by focusing my observations on a specific site. I developed my own observational strategies and interpreted John Rignal's (2004) description of the flaneur from "the casual eye of the stroller with the purposeful gaze of the detective" (p. 19) into my own ideal of 'the casual *appearance* of the stroller with the purposeful *observations* of the detective'. My observational strategies involved being part of the interaction I was watching while subtly making notes on characteristics that would inform my photographs. These observations were done over a number of visits at a particular time of the day applicable to when the photograph would be made.

Neutral Interaction: Participant Disengagement

Punctuating the lack of conscious engagement with these behaviours is the common situations in which they are used. Actions such as waiting for public transport or waiting for a movie to start at the cinema can be overlooked by the larger task of getting to a destination or the movie itself starting. In Michael Fried's book *Why Art Matters As Never Before* the author cites Fran Leibowitz (as cited in Fried, 2008) who supports this idea by stating that:

> most people who walk through a city ignore it. This is how most people 'bear' a city. And what most people are especially, particularly ignoring are the other people. In a sense, this conscious, constant, relentless, ignoring of other people is the primary experience of living in a city. (p. 239)

While Leibowitz's comments may be sardonic in nature it is apparent that within a city this 'ignoring' of one another is a feature of social interaction, and could be used as a strategy of avoidance. It may seem that in this ignoring many people actually do not interact, they merely pass through a similar space at a similar time. However, as Leibowitz alludes it is the very act of 'consciously' ignoring others that is the interaction itself. This form of behaviour was termed by Goffman (1963) as 'civil inattention' which involves the unobtrusive and

peaceful scanning of others that allows for neutral interaction. This deliberate 'inattention' highlights impersonal qualities of the city.

Actions such as waiting for a bus can seem an insignificant part of the main activity of getting home but these moments are everyday activities where information, in the form of behaviour, is simultaneously given off and received by participants. I have termed these moments and spaces as transitionary. In these moments, as people look to the bigger picture, they often disengage from the others around them, meaning they miss or avoid the information provided by other participants.

In a digital age this disengagement is heightened by the use of cell phones or mobile devices. Mobile devices have taken over the role of the newspaper and allow the user to signify to people around them that they are engaged and do not wish to engage. This form of behaviour is what Goffman (1963) describes as a 'toy involvement', an action used to intentionally remove oneself from the current situation. The popular use of cell phones show how keen people are to detach from these transitionary spaces and signify a lack of interest to the social situation itself. However, it must be considered that not all people disengage. People also take the opportunity to enjoy the anonymity the city provides. I believe in these situation people's minds are more attuned to other matters than to the actions of others around them. In both cases I believe there is a certain amount of detachment.

My observations in public spaces have made me even more aware of the popularity of mobile devices. With advances in mobile technology devices are now able to provide more functions than simply calling or texting. People are able to communicate not only with friends but a much wider audience and with connection to the web the user has access to the virtual world at their finger tips. While providing a much broader range of connectivity the individual functionality of mobile devices means that in an effort to stay connected people are losing a connection to their immediate world. In the construction of my photographs I have made the deliberate decision to exclude mobile devices. This decision was made to reduce the essence of the individual in public space and accentuate the relation to the others around them. This absence of mobile devices also works the theatrical nature of my photographic constructions that I discuss later in my writing.

Enhancing The Visible: Presenting The Everyday

In an attempt to photograph everyday interactions and the function of social norms I have had to consider the question of what would make the photographs work as works of art and address how the photographic image presents our experience of time? If these are situations that people do not pay much attention to in real life why would they want to look at a photograph of them? As Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (as cited by Fried, 2008) remarks on "seeing life itself" states "but then we do see this every day and it makes not the slightest impression on us". Wittgenstein then counters this with "True enough, but we do not see it from that point of view" (p. 76). The motivation of my work can be linked to the statement of both Leibowitz and Wittgenstein. Leibowitz talks about a 'conscious ignoring' of the city as its 'primary experience' and Wittgenstein about not seeing life from 'that point of view'. In regards to Leibowitz's statement it is the very act of ignorance towards interaction within the city that makes it a subject worthy of exploration. The nature of being ignored creates an opportunity for examination. In regards to Wittgenstein's statement it is the ability of the camera to produce a fragment of time, that is unobtainable to the natural eye, that provides a unique 'point of view' for examination.

Interaction within the city is a constant stream of motion. Pedestrians moving this way and that, traffic buzzing, advertising intercepting at every step. Add to this the capitalist notions of 'time is money' and the appearance that people are efficiently going about their tasks, the city is a place where the senses are being constantly engaged. As Whyte (1988) noted on his observations there is an "extraordinary diversity of action". The camera allows me to produce a fragment of time, providing an opportunity for the viewer to examine social behaviours normally lost to the busy nature of the city, a critical feature of my study.

I feel it is important to consider the opportunity that video could provide a medium of capture that would record the flow of this 'diversity of action'. Videoing from a discrete position so as not to disrupt the interaction the video could record public spaces in much the same way as Beat Streuli did in his time based video series'. Streuli filmed people waiting to cross at street intersections, walking down the footpath or at bus stops. Streuli presented these videos in slow motion with an emphasis on the lack of unawareness of the camera by the subject it was recording. A problem (this is not always a problem with video but in this case I think it is)

with video is the moving image does not allow an uninterrupted contemplation. As Sontag (2002) explains "Television is a stream of under selected images, each of which cancels its predecessor. Each photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again". (p. 18)

Figure 1. Beat Streuli. *Manhattan 09, 102_7119*. 2009
Retrieved from http://beatstreuli.com/manhattan-09.html

Streuli balanced his video projects with photographs of the same locations and provided an analysis of time through the two different methods of capture. Rupert Pfab (1999) in his essay *Photographs Of Modern Life* comments on the photographs of Beat Streuli and the camera's ability to 'freeze' by stating "Time in Streuli's photographs has not only been arrested, but also made perceptible" (p. 24). The key attribute in relation to my work, and to the power of photography, is that time has been 'made perceptible'.

I feel it is important to note that photography has the ability to not just freeze time but to also capture extended periods. In this I am reminded of Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Theatre* photographs. Sugimoto positioned a camera at the back of a movie theatre and made one single exposure corresponding to the length of the film being shown providing a different approach to the 'freeze' which is a perception of time. In both instances the output is the same, a single photograph where the movement has been frozen and made 'perceptible' and another where the movement has blurred or vanished all together leaving only the stationary objects perceptible.
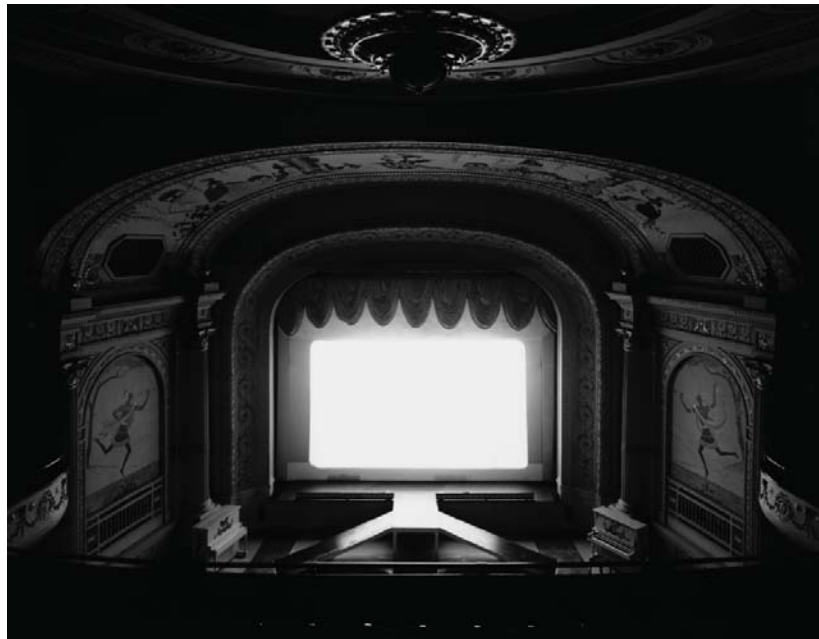
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Figure 2. Hiroshi Sugimoto. *Cabot Street Cinema, Massachusetts*. 1978

Retrieved from http://collections.lacma.org/node/197209

The camera not only signifies the 'arresting' of time but also how time cannot be stopped. As Susan Sontag states it is (2002) "precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to times relentless melt" (p. 15). Through its creation photography has changed what is visible to the human eye. Aspects that were once too small, too far away, too fast can now be presented for examination by the photograph. Sontag (2002) underlines this by saying "No one would dispute that photography gave a tremendous boost to the cognitive claims of sight, because - through close up and remote sensing - it so greatly enlarged the realm of the visible" (p. 115). In the context of my photography, what a photograph can do is allow the viewer to examine what would normally be a passing moment, giving them the opportunity to notice characteristics of interaction they would normally miss due to the continuous nature of everyday life. I hope that fascination might be found in the behaviours suggestively contained in my work, evoking a sense of the familiar upon the viewer through the rendering of common situations.

Looking At The Overlooked

I have suggested social norms can be dealt with at a low level of conscious engagement as the participant functions on 'auto-pilot'. Aiding this lack of engagement my theory is that social norms are commonly overlooked. By using the phrase 'evoke a sense of the familiar' I mean to bring attention to these situations that are experienced but overlooked. By engaging the viewer with a photograph to experience these situations on a conscious level I believe the depicted situations will ignite a memory as the viewer will recognise they have experienced something like it before, hence, made familiar.

Figure 3. Thomas Slade. *Street*. 2016.
Retrieved from personal collection.

In Michael Freid's book *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, in the chapter "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday"*,* Fried cites Jan Tumlir's thoughts on the everyday's relation to art and in particular picture making. Tumlir (as cited by Fried, 2008) discusses the idea of recognising in a picture what people have seen, or as I suggest, experienced before.

The everyday, or the commonplace, is the most basic and richest artistic category. Although it seems familiar, it is always surprising and new. But at the same time, there is an openness that permits people to recognize what is there in the picture, because they have already seen something like it somewhere. (p. 64)

This idea of the familiar being 'surprising and new' is endorsed by Sontag (1973) who looks at Dorothea Lange's encouragement to her colleagues to focus on "the familiar" by stating "it is with the understanding that the familiar, rendered by a sensitive use of the camera, will thereby be mysterious" (p.121). While I completely agree with the everyday being a 'rich artistic category', I disagree with the idea that 'it is always surprising and new' or in Sontag's case 'mysterious'. I believe the everyday does not 'seem familiar' but *is* familiar. To photograph the everyday and make it 'mysterious' I think would require using the camera's technical functions or a subjective view to abstract the everyday to a point where it is not recognizable and therefore mysterious. Through the repetition of everyday situations the low level of conscious engagement needed to navigate the city goes against something that could be surprising, new or mysterious.

I think there is a difference between what I describe as overlooked and what Tumlir describes as new. I interpretation Tumlir's 'new' as moments where something out of the ordinary occurs, gaining the attention of the people who notice it. Whereas my definition of 'overlooked' is the repetitive actions, such as joining a queue, where full conscious engagement is not required. This overlooking comes from the idea that the participant has completed the activity numerous times and can complete the action on 'auto-pilot'. It also refers to my term of transitional space and that in some instances the participants thoughts are elsewhere, accentuating the overlooking. In Heidegger's (as cited by Fried, 2008) description of describing a "concernful absorption in the world" he states "the phenomenon of the world itself gets passed over in this absorption in the world" (p. 64). This is supported by one of George Perec's (as cited by Sheringham, 2006) central concerns "to rescue the everyday from the neglect and oblivion to which it is customarily assigned" (p. 1-2). By focusing on everyday situations it is my intention to bring an awareness to what is already familiar, 'the phenomenon of the world' but, as I suggest in my theory of transitional space, as does Heidegger with his 'absorption' - 'passed over' for the bigger picture.

Rescuing The Everyday

There can be negative connotations with the everyday being boring or banal. Instead what people should be looking for, or what imprints itself on the memory, is the moments of difference that are not everyday or familiar because they break the cycle of repetition. Michael Sheringham (2006) considers the everyday in a negative sense. He states "At the everyday level, life is at its least interesting, in opposition to the ideal, the imaginary, the momentous" (p. 23) or in Jules Laforgue's (as cited by Sheringham, 2006) cynical exclamation "A life reduced to the level of the quotidian is scarcely worth living" (p. 23). As Perec refers to, the everyday is often assigned to 'neglect', the periods of life that get 'passed over'. It is one of my primary themes that everyday life should not be 'passed over'. I do not wish to argue that the everyday is full of wonder and that people should go around completely absorbed, observing fervently every detail, but I do wish to provide an opportunity for the viewer to recognise the complexity of lived experience embedded in everyday moments. In overlooking the everyday we are missing out on life. If the viewer could look to the question posed by Sheringham (2006) of "at the heart of the matter is the question of paying heed to what we overlook, and more particularly of being present to the full range of our experience" (p. 28) the everyday might become compelling. Sheringham (2006) writes:

> The everyday is beneath our attention. It is what we overlook. On one view this is as it should be: the everyday is a place of perdition. Why linger on what is merely daily? Our duty is to higher things: we are right to shun the ordinary. Yet, by a different token, we overlook the everyday at our peril. It is the source of our truth; the daily world is our homeland: we alienate ourselves in the extraordinary, not in the ordinary. (p. 22-23)

Figure 4. Thomas Slade. *Cinema*. 2016.
Retrieved from personal collection.

By only noticing life when the repetition of the ordinary is broken by the extraordinary a great number of actions are missed. Part of my photographic work is not to state unequivocally that everyday life is continuously extraordinary, but for the viewer to question their own personal values of recognition placed on each state, ordinary and, extraordinary.

What makes the everyday unexpected is the participant has not given, or an extended period has elapsed since they last gave conscious consideration to an action of the everyday, a state I refer to as overlooked. Through the repetition of the everyday the participant does not get the opportunity to be reminded of this familiarity, they simply go through the motions that their experience allows. For a participant to be prompted to some form of recognition, in other words to make them look beyond the overlooked, they need an extraordinary event to break the repetition of the everyday and grab their attention. In this case the word *extraordinary* may be too dramatic and it is simply an event, such as a pedestrian tripping that breaks the repetition of the expected. Sheringham (2006) gives his own explanation of how a break in repetition highlights the difficulty in seeing the ordinary flow of the everyday.

> Between a motorist who parks a car effortlessly, and a learner who makes a hash of it, is the difference that in the latter case people watch, comment, and sometimes intervene? But if this makes the incident noticeable is it not because it is a disruption, a tear in the fabric? What of the fabric itself? How do you see that fabric if it is only the tears that make it visible? (p. 265)

Prompting Recognition

Sheringham (2006) refers to Perec's writing *Les Choses* where he suggests that the "*absence of dialogue and paucity of salient incidents produces a hypnotic prose that highlights the sequences and rhythms rather than a specific moment*" (p. 254). While I am interested in the 'sequences and rhythms' as opposed to the 'specific moment' I have to consider how the photograph is a 'specific moment' and can I represent the sequence and rhythms of the everyday? I have written about the importance of the camera's ability to 'freeze' time and allow the viewer to examine an arrangement of the everyday. But also this piece of frozen time highlights a specific moment taking the action away from the context of sequence and rhythms, or what Sheringham referred to earlier as 'spaces, rhythms, objects and practices' in which the action occurred.

Because the viewer has experienced the behaviour contained in my photographic construction but not consciously given it thought (what Perec referred to as 'neglect and oblivion') the photograph has the potential to prompt familiarity and create a connection with the viewer. This connection and familiarity refers back to what Tumlir said was an opportunity to 'recognize what is there in the picture, because they have already seen something like it somewhere'. Perec, (as cited by Sheringham, 2006) on his thoughts of the work of memory in the everyday, elaborates on Tumlir and parallels my own thinking "memories of this kind are not simply there, waiting to be recorded, they need to be provoked, rescued from oblivion" (p. 275).

An example of this, seen if figure 5, could be the expected norms people use to ride an elevator. The considerations of personal privacy and space, and the averting of eyes are features of expected norms when using an elevator. These actions are so familiar that participants can overlook how they orchestrate interaction and are an example of how everyday situations can be more interesting when consciously considered. In this example it is the perfect spacing of people that I noticed through a number of different observations. In addition to the spacing the curious way in which people looked around the confined space of the elevator, most trying their hardest not to look at the other participants.

Figure 5. Thomas Slade. *Elevator*. 2016.
Retrieved from personal collection.

By choosing common locations such as a bus, the movie theatre or the sidewalk, in most cases the viewer will not only have 'seen something like it' but will have actually experienced the interaction depicted in the photograph. If my photographs are successful the viewer will not only be familiar with the interaction but characteristics of behaviour they have overlooked will also appear familiar. I believe this familiarity will provide context to the 'sequences and rhythms' lost by the camera producing a specific moment. As people are familiar with the actions and spaces depicted they can fill in their own narrative of what happened before and after based on their own experience, placing the photograph back into the 'sequences and rhythms' from which it was taken.

Conscious Unconsciousness: Maintaining The Everyday

By paying too much attention to the everyday do the moments and scenes I construct still belong to the everyday? I think it is important to examine that if by highlighting the specific moments I have chosen, what Sontag referred to as 'slicing out life', am I putting these

moments into the spotlight? And by placing these moments in the spotlight and exalting that these moments one might consider as ordinary are in fact interesting, do they lose their connection to the everyday because they have lost their qualities of being ordinary? In terms of the qualities of ordinariness that are associated to the everyday Sheringham (2008) writes "The paradox here turns on questions of will and awareness. Boredom is one way of experiencing the quotidian, but when we are conscious of being bored we have, according to Blanchot, parted company with the essence of the everyday" (p. 20). By making people 'aware' of the minutiae of everyday life, does it cease to be part of the everyday?

This highlighting and consciousness has meant that the moments I have chosen have lost their 'essence' to the everyday. This is only exaggerated by the fact my photographs are constructions which takes their staged nature further from anything that could be considered unconscious. However, a link to the 'essence' of the everyday is retained in the method of my photography. My constructions are based on the behaviours of people who were not conscious to everyday interactions. They were people who were going about their day with their own 'absorption in the world' and thus, were in essence with the moment. By reconstructing what I see as the flaneur, the detective who watches unobtrusively, the semblance of my photographs has come straight from the essence of the everyday. This highlights the importance that the role of the observer has played in maintaining an authenticity and balances the consciousness that my own observations brought to the everyday.

Seeing The Street: Realism In Photography

In the book *Street Photography Now* authors Sophie Howarth and Stephen McLaren (2010) discuss street photography as "focused on the task of seeing the everyday world around us more clearly" (p. 61). While I do not consider myself a street photographer in the traditional respect of photographers such as Cartier-Bresson or Gary Winograd this statement has a direct link to my own photographic motivations within this series. Referring back to statements I made in the section *Enhanching The Visible: Presenting The Everyday*, I am observing common situations of everyday interaction using the camera's ability to 'freeze' and capture what would normally be a passing moment. Hence, I am 'focused on the task of

seeing the everyday world around us more clearly'. There is also a strong link between my approach and that of the traditional street photographer in the locations we observe and the everyday behaviour we wish to portray. However, despite our similar focus there is a great difference in the method we use to present the everyday. Straight photography is seen as presenting a fact or document, constructed photography, through its manipulation of the everyday, is seen to interfere with this relationship. However, through certain methods of construction and an authenticity of the photographer this relation can be maintained.

Figure 6. Gary Winogrand. *Los Angeles*. 1969.
Retrieved from http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/262308

Howarth and McLaren (2010) write that the "essence" of street photography is "the impulse to take candid pictures in the stream of everyday life" (p. 9). This particular statement distances my own method of observing and then constructing photographs despite the similarities of attempting to see the everyday 'more clearly' and portraying behaviour. Later in their book in the authors (2010) make further statements that I feel compelled to debate as they undermine my own photographic motivations. Talking on contemporary photographic methods of "Photoshop" or "carefully planned" photographs, the authors claim that viewers are "disinclined to trust the candid moments captured by the bona fide street photographer". The viewer is "so used to seeing images that have been tweaked or smoothed with a little Photoshop voodoo" that "the relationship between truth and fiction in street photography has become even more complex in recent years" (p. 179). What I feel undermines my own

motivations is the association that for photographs to be 'trusted' or truthful they must be uninterrupted and not posed by the photographer.

The claim that street photography needs to be taken in the 'candid stream of everyday life' suggests that as soon as Photoshop or a photo is 'planned' it can weaken the relationship to truth (what I consider to be realism). I argue against this and claim that my photographs are not weakened because they were constructed or because I have used Photoshop. Where the camera has the ability to disrupt the essence of what it is I want to photograph I have used the construct to enhance my interpretation of the everyday. A key theme that I have continually wrestled with in photography is this relation to realism. Through its mechanical ability to duplicate its view the camera and the photograph have strong ties to truth or what may be considered as fact. This was apparent particularly in photography's early stage where its detail surpassed that of painting. On the surface this detail may seem accurate but the camera, the photographer and the photograph all create problems when considering photography and truth. Howarth and McLaren acknowledge this problem when they cite American critic Lincoln Kirsten (as cited in Howarth & McLaren, 2010) who states:

> The candid camera is the greatest liar in the photographic family, shaming the patient hand-retoucher as an innocent fibber. The candid-camera with its great pretensions to accuracy, its promise of sensational truth, its visions of clipped disaster, present an inversion of the truth, a kind of accidental revelation which does far more to hide the real fact of what is going on than to exploded it. (p. 180)

Photography's ability to produce detail is balanced by its 'inversion of the truth'. With both of these components at play within a single image David Campany's (2009) analysis rings true where he suggests "Most of the photographs that surround us operate somewhere between fact and fiction" (p. 98). I feel all photography inherits problems in trying to represent facts but I also strongly believe an authenticity of realism can function in a photograph. For me, this authenticity comes from not only the ability of the camera to produce detail but also the intentions of the photographer. It is my argument that a constructed photograph can work in the same way as a straight photograph and can sit in the domain between this scale of 'fact and fiction'. In the same way a photographer can use straight photograph in an attempt to authentically show what is real or 'hide the real fact of what is going on', a constructed photograph can also work in this area based on the photographer intentions.

What the constructed photograph introduces is an interference with the idea of the image as a document, as fact. On the surface this separates the subject's relationship to the real because of the photographer's intervention into the 'stream of everyday life'. When the method behind the construct is understood this separation may not be as clean as one may initially think. As the camera is just a machine that cannot capture without the aid of a photographer these associations are created directly by the intentions of the photographer. The method I have used of observing the real, interpreting the information I have gathered and representing this information in a photograph balances against the intervention I have made into the 'stream' to construct the photograph.

I disagree with Cartier-Bresson's (as cited by Sontag, 2002) view that "the thing to be feared most is the artificially contrived" (p. 118). My approach to communicating realism through a photograph is supported by Sontag's (2002) own views that claim "photography's commitment to realism can accommodate any style, any approach to subject matter" (p. 120). Working with straight or constructed photography it is the intentions of the photographer who can make the 'commitment to realism' work, as Miles D Orvell (2013) explains in his analysis of pictorial photography. It is "a medium that permits the staging of scenes in the interest of gaining a larger truth than would otherwise be achieved". Due to the camera's ability to disrupt the nature of my enquiry could it be argued that some moments of the real are better translated as constructs? This view is supported by photographer Doug DuBois who used constructed images in his examination of Irish youth. Talking about his photography DuBois' (2015) view is that:

> the real in the photographs is all smoke and mirrors and not far from the truth. But in the end it all comes down to a faith that I can make and combine images in a way that doesn't betray the trust given to me by the people in the photograph. If I can do that with honesty and a faith in my own sense of the truth, the smoke and mirrors don't matter much at all. (para. 11)

Figure 7. Doug DuBois. *Untitled*. From the series *My Last Day At Seventeen*.
Retrieved from http://dougdubois.com/mldas/

Would Cartier-Bresson consider such an opinion knowing that a photographer such as Jeff Wall based a constructed photograph on what he had witnessed in real life? This authenticity of the real is valid because it needs to be apparent in my photographs. It is through my photographs the viewer needs to be able to make a connection to the everyday, not that they need to mirror reality but they need to be believable constructs of the everyday. In the following statement Wall (as cited by Fried, 2008) discusses a method of his photography he calls 'near documentary' which along with Orvell and Dubois supports an idea of how constructed photographs can relate to the real:

they are pictures whose subjects were suggested by my direct experience, and ones in which I tried to recollect that experience as precisely as I could, and to reconstruct and represent it precisely and accurately. Although the pictures with figures are done with the collaboration of the people who appear in them, I want them to feel as if they could easily be documentary photographs. In some way they claim to be a plausible account of, or a report on, what the events depicted are like, or were like, when they passed without being photographed. (p. 66)

Figure 8. Jeff Wall. *Tattoos and Shadows*. 2000.

Retrieved from https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2001.171

What I am trying to challenge is that can a constructed photograph maintain an authenticity of the real through the process of being constructed or does the construction override any relation to truth? I argue that through the process of observing and gathering information the construct has the ability to produce an expansion of time that could be seen as more real than a documentary photograph because of the distilling of a larger amount of information (observations made over time) into a single moment and because the intentions of the photographer are 'honest' and 'truthful'.

Theatre of Life: Theatrical Documentary

The process of constructing a photograph allows the photographer to decide how much of the construct they choose to show. This may be as minimal as a near documentary picture of Jeff Wall's or as elaborate as a photo from Gregory Crewdson's series *Beneath The Roses.* Freid describes this showing of the construct as the 'to be seenness' of a constructed photo. An intentional decision by the photographer to let the construction be seen, as in Fried's (2002) example of Jeff Wall's photo *Passerby* "so that the picture as a whole combines a manifestly

antitheatrical 'actional' motif with the fullest possible acknowledgement of photographic artifice (note in particular the reflected light from the stop sign toward the left), hence to-be-seenness″ (p. 91). It is this intentional 'to be seenness' of constructed photography within the photographic medium that I find so fascinating. With the viewer being aware of the construction does the role of the photo take on a different reading to that of a straight photo?

Figure 9. Jeff Wall. *Passerby*. 1996.

Retrieved from http://www.museomagazine.com/JEFF-WALL

Figure 10. Gregory Crewdson. *Untitled*. From the series *Beneath The Roses*. 2003 – 2008.

Retrieved from https://artblart.com/tag/beneath-the-roses/

While including a level of theatricality to my photos may initially seem to separate the scenes I have depicted from the reality in which they were conceived, I would like to discuss briefly a theory of Erving Goffman's that align the theatricality of my photos to that of the everyday. In Goffman's book *The Presentation Of Self In Everyday Life* the author suggests that when in public the individual, who is aware that they can be observed by others, may 'perform' in order to give off a desired appearance. Goffman (1963) describes this as a performance that "may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" Goffman continues to write that "we may refer to those who contribute the other performances as the audience" (p. 8). There is a relation between theatre and public spaces where people interact and I have accentuated this theatre of life to play on this idea to signify that the difference between theatre and reality may not be as separate as first thought.

Fried (2008) also refers to Wall's near documentary process as "fundamentally, an antitheatrical ideal" (p. 66) a combination of antitheatricality and to-be-seeness is a contradiction in terms. Where antitheatricality implies the work is not theatrical, the to-be-seeness works in the opposite to show the hand of the photographer. Fried (2008) is aware of this relationship in Wall's work, "the to-be-seeness of his pictures, which if not in conflict with their antitheatrical thematics is at any rate by no means simply aligned with it" (p. 246). For my own work it has been beneficial to work in a more theatrical manner and with a stronger presence of the construction than Wall. This is where my work differs from Wall's. Rather than work in this antitheatrical manner I have made a conscious decision to work with a strong presence of the 'to be seenness' and show the image as a constructed photograph. I disagree with Fried where he says Wall gives 'the fullest possible acknowledgement of photographic artifice'.

Figure 11. Jeff Wall. *Mimic*. 1982.

Retrieved from http://thesip.org/language/en/work/jwall-mimic-en/

Figure 12. Jeff Wall. *Men Waiting*. 2006.

Retrieved from https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/20297

Photographs such as *Mimic* and *Men Waiting,* hold a strong presence of Wall's term 'near documentary' as opposed to displaying the 'photographic artifice' whereas in my own work this 'acknowledgement of photographic artifice' is achieved in a more upfront manner. It was

important to me that the appearance of the subjects was not the action that showed this 'acknowledgement'. I felt that if the subjects were too controlled this would weaken the photos connection to the observations I made of natural behaviours and the essence of the everyday in which the photographs were conceived. While the positioning of subjects maintained a natural appearance the upfront manner in which the photographic artifice is shown is achieved through the obvious positioning of the camera and the use of additional lighting. In seeing the interference of the photographic method the viewer must consider that the presentation of the photograph is intentional and within that presentation lies the reading of what the photographer is attempting to communicate.

Absorption And Light

The photograph *Mario, 1978* by Phillip Lorcia diCorcia is an example of how introduced artificial lighting can accentuate a feeling of photographic artifice in a different manner to the photographs I have discussed by Jeff Wall. Not only does diCorcia direct the subjects to ignore the camera (what Fried refers to as absorption) he also works with the subtle addition of artificial light in a way that further accentuates the constructed qualities of the photograph. The combination of absorption and lighting produce the kind of photograph that Fried (2008) describes as "an image of all but explicit contradictions - absorptive-seeming but unmistakably posed, "utterly ordinary" (galassi) and quietly bizarre" (p. 250). A further example is diCorcia's use of lighting in his series *Street Works* in which he transforms the side walk into a stage where the light signifies to the viewer that there is more at play than in a traditional street photograph. In my own work I have adopted Wall and diCorcia's strategies in considering the use of light and the quality of absorption in the constructed photograph.

Figure 13. Phillip Lorcia diCorcia. *Mario*. 1978.

Retrieved from http://www.moma.org/collection/works/46273?locale=en

Writing on *Street Works,* Sophie Clark (as cited by Fried, 2008) states "The resulting photographs seem to offer a commentary on the solitude of modern living, the theatrical lighting spotlighting just one individual in a busy street, and showing the way in which people fail to relate to one another" (p. 252). I also work with theatrical lighting. However, I am not interested in how people are failing to relate in public space. My constructions draw on observations that might point to how we actually relate.

Figure 14. Phillip Lorcia diCorcia. *New York*. 1993.

Retrieved from http://www.moma.org/collection/works/57889?locale=pt

diCorcia's photograph *New York, 1993,* from his series *Street Works*, has been a particularly strong influence on my practice as it functions with the 'explicit contradiction' of simultaneously showing the everyday and the presence of the photographer. His use of lighting, while subtle, creates the feeling that something is not quite right, or as Fried (2008) suggests, something is "peculiar" (p. 250). While his use of lighting lifts a scene from the everyday, its controlled use does not necessarily separate it. It would be easy to imagine *New York*, 1993 is a constructed photograph directed by the photographer, but this is not the case. diCorcia's street photographs were taken directly from the 'stream of everyday life'. As Fried (2008) explains "One could even imagine, in the aftermath of Wall's break through achievement, that diCorcia's New York was similarly cast, rehearsed, repeatedly photographed, and digitally improved by the photographer, though in fact it was not" (p. 256). The idea of the theatrical fused with the everyday has been a very strong influence on my understanding of the relationship between the constructed moment and realism in photography.

Rather than simply appreciating the constructed qualities of Wall and diCorcia I have built on top of what has come before me. Where Wall looks to create 'a plausible account' of a moment he has witnessed, or where diCorcia creates moments that openly confront not only absorption but also the construct, I have used my own method of construction built on the method of observation, extraction of overlooked moments and expansion of time in a still photograph. Working with the contradiction of 'unmistakably posed' places my work within contemporary constructed photography and challenges the idea that the construct fails to address realism.

Figure 15. Thomas Slade. *Gallery*. 2016.

Retrieved from personal collection.

While creating the photograph *Gallery* I was reflecting on Wall's idea of absorption as in his photographs *Housekeeping* and *Adrian Walker,* where he directs the subjects to ignore the photographer and deliberately turn away from the camera itself. In the photograph *Bus* the subjects have been directed to do nothing else but to ignore the camera, in *Gallery* all but one subject is either involved in a conversation or looking at an artwork which as Fried (2008) describes "exploits the magic of absorption to induce the viewer to accept as verisimilar something that he or she knows to be improbable at best" (p. 75). This helps maintain a sense of realism in some of the photographs set against other images in the series that are 'unmistakably posed'.

Figure 16. Jeff Wall. *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Department of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver*. 1992.

Retrieved from http://www.vancouverbiennale.com/artist-collaborators/adrian-walker/

Figure 17. Jeff Wall. *Housekeeping*. 1996.

Retrieved from http://www.museomagazine.com/JEFF-WALL

In the photograph *Elevator* I directed the subject to look directly at the camera as if through the observer. In doing this I have stayed true to my observations of elevator behavior norms, while simultaneously ensuring there is a clear constructed feel. The photograph sits within a series to intentionally question the consistent qualities of absorption throughout the series. *Gallery* also plays another important role within this project. When the whole suite of photographs is displayed in a gallery the audience may see themselves as the subject of the work from the positioning of this photograph within the series.

In David Campany's (2008) description of how Jeff Wall reconstructs events he observes that "The documentary function of the medium is partially suspended and the camera as witness is replaced by pictorial hypothesis 'this was' gives way to 'what if this was?' " (p.137). This is similar to my own process that I have described above in which I play the role of detective, gather evidence and then construct an image that is a pictorial hypothesis. I employ both the processes of Wall and diCorcia, light and absorption, to interrupt the flow of everyday life and produce an image in which 'this was' might give way to 'this is'.

Conclusion

The role of observer has allowed me to explore social interaction within the city environment. Initially this role was not as photographer but as a gatherer of evidence. Constructing my photographs based on this evidence challenges the idea that the construct fails to address realism within photography. Using this process I have photographed interaction and presented an expanded moment of time allowing an uninterrupted contemplation which reveals overlooked behaviors of everyday situations. It is my hope that these photographs prompt the audience to consciously consider social interaction and that this consideration may change how they connect to the everyday.

Appendix 6
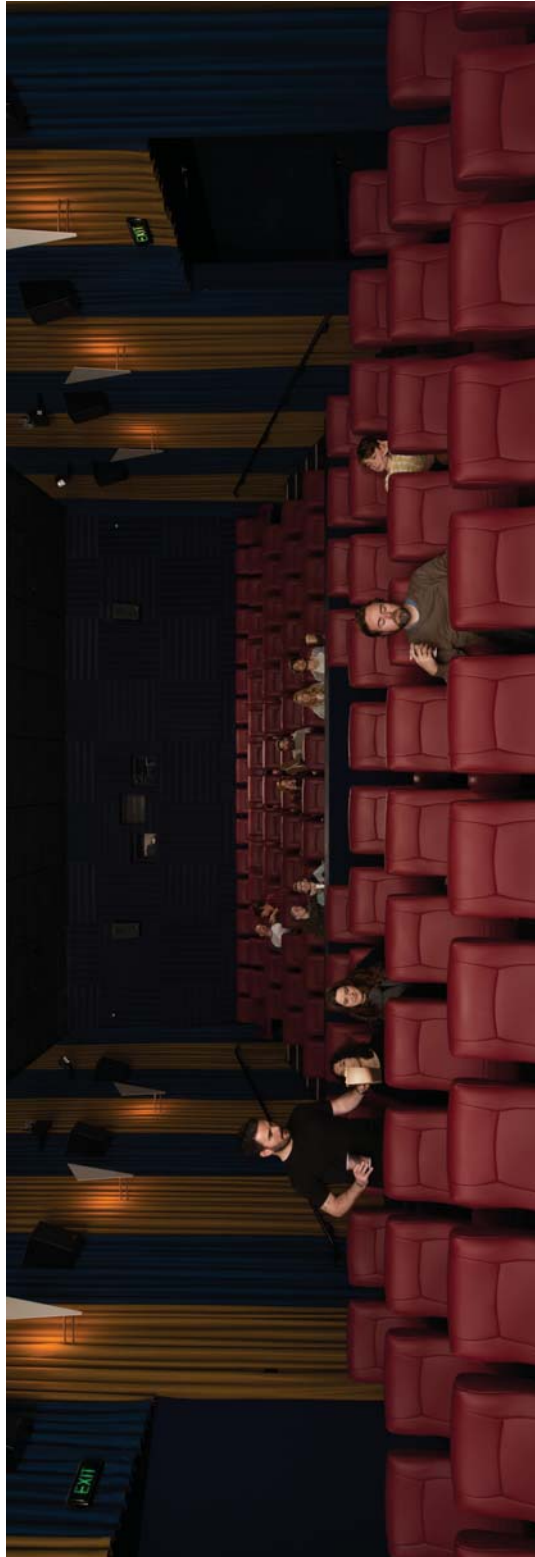
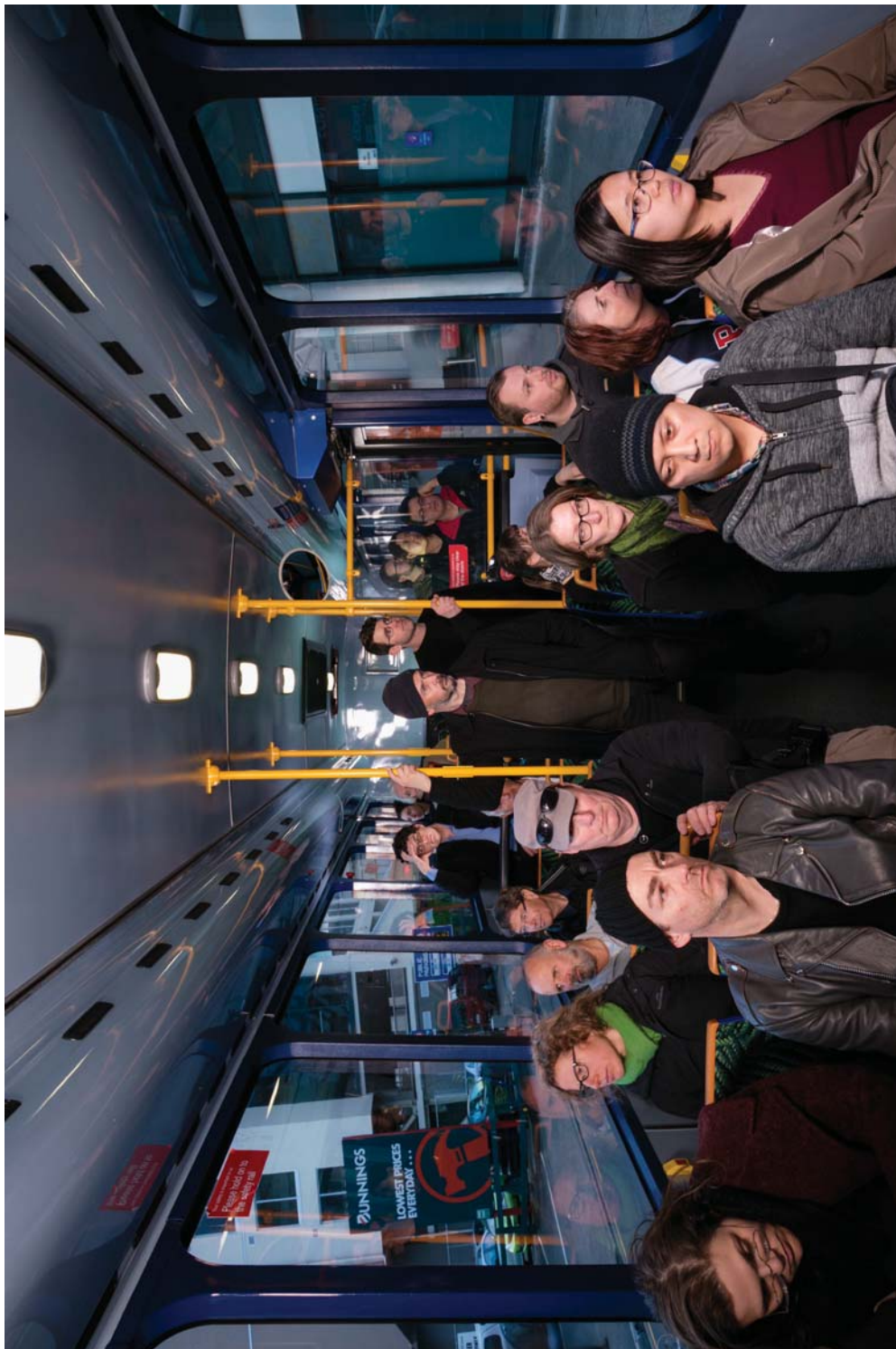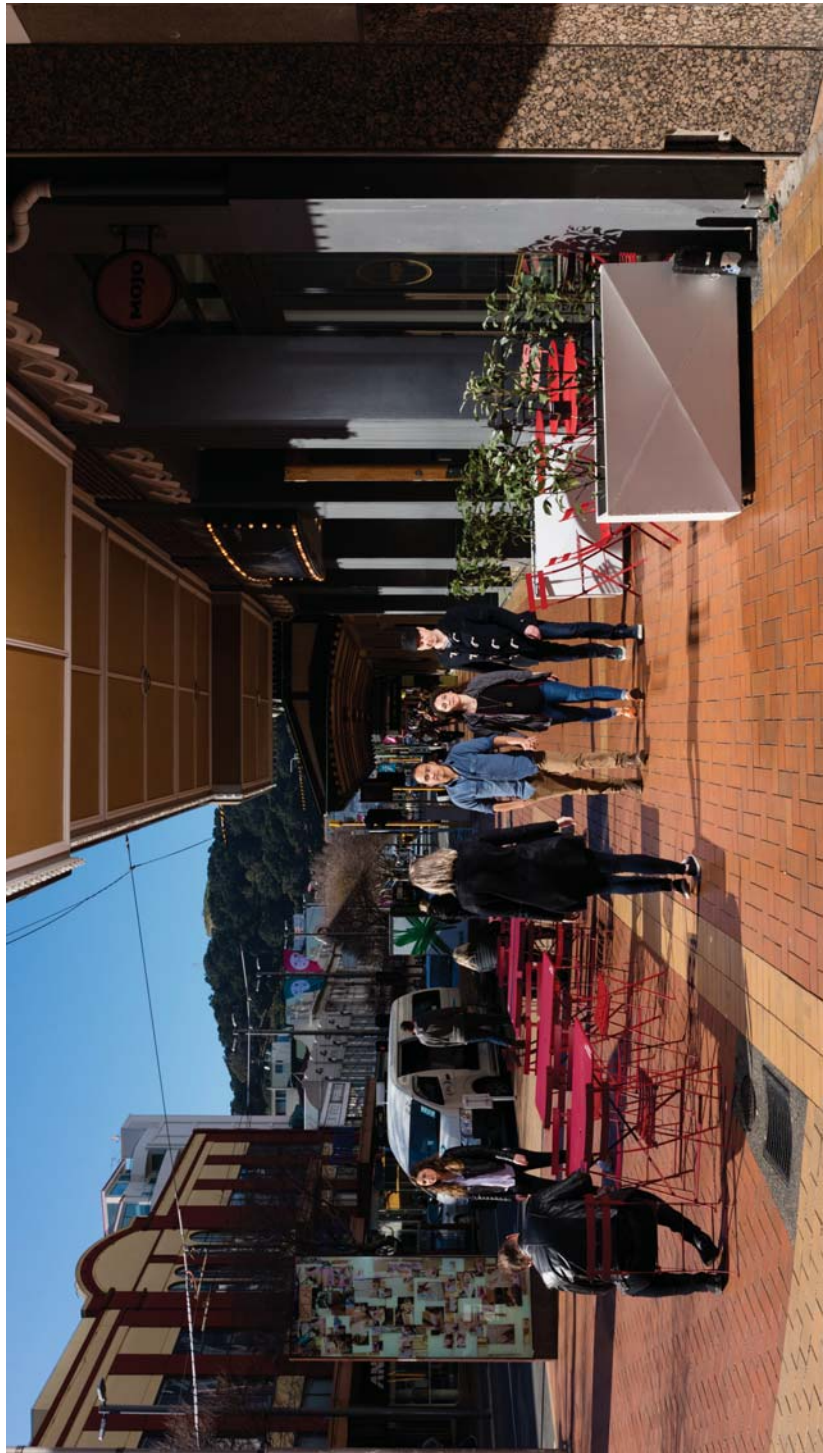Queue: One must not stand too close to others but one must stand close enough to signify they are part of the queue. People almost always face forward and a formal composure is maintained. Spacing between people is a consistent distance. This is the same distance used in other social norms.

Bus: On a crowded bus people cannot manage their personal space they must share it with strangers. People micro manage their behaviour. They make themselves small. They angle away, stare out the window, sit on the seat edge. Some rather stand than sit next to someone. A bag takes up a seat dissuading other passengers.

Elevator: Users maintain a consistent distance between each other. Do not look at the other. There is nowhere to look. Look straight ahead. The intentional ignoring of others is too obvious.

Street: The intentions of movement: small gestures, a hand motion, a sway of hips act like indicators on a car. The reading of others takes more consciousness than other norms. A glance of the eyes if often, the only signal of recognition.

Bus Stop: Participants spread horizontally down the sidewalk. At busy times it is acceptable for people to stand close together. This is done by maintaining a consistent distance, roughly about an arm's length. When it is not busy, spacing is far and wide.

Cinema: Arrangement is organised around the practicalities of watching the movie but this will not stop people from sitting near the edges or towards the front. If privacy can be maintained this is preferred. In a half empty cinema the empty seats are the commas signifying separation.

Gallery (opening): There are two modes of interaction. People who circulate observing the art and people who have stopped to converse. The motion of circulation acts like a current caught on a rock only to release under tension.

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