

JAY MARK JOHNSON

Jay Mark Johnson, November 23, 2006

Notes about Motion Study images

The works in this series are motion studies.

They focus on capturing and representing the continuous movements of the body. By isolating discreet gestures, they attempt to develop distinct, fluid delineations of bodily motion. In so doing, the works expand upon existing understandings of both the body's internal motivations and, by extension, its internal nature.

The studies also set out to challenge the normal mechanisms of perception. They use unconventional photographic techniques to schismatically shift the spatial and temporal dimensions of the image. Spatial verticality is preserved. But the horizontal dimension of the image, though it remains photographic, is not spatial but temporal. It represents not the breadth of space but the passage of time. By replacing one photographic dimension while preserving another, the resulting hybrid images are both strange and familiar. Deconstructing the process requires reverse engineering. It entails building two contrasting perceptual models, the normal one and the one of shifted dimensionality. In this fashion, the studies promote an enhanced understanding of the nature of perception itself.

The camera is a mechanism of advanced science that serves simultaneously as the scientist's instrument and the painter's brush. It is modified to capture not the static forms of the body but the fluidity of the body's gestures. A vertical array of digital sensors captures a thin slice of light, which, like an MRI vivisection, cuts a precise plane through the physical space lying directly in front of the camera. The surface movements of the actors' gestures are registered continually as they traverse the optical plane. The camera generates a steady-stream, linear image, from left to right, much as a seismograph produces a linear readout of movements registered on the surface of the earth. The resulting images become a series of distinct, gesture-driven "action paintings" in which fragmented body parts reveal the discrete yet continuous patterns of the gestures themselves. The concrete physicality of the body is rendered abstract.

The artist does not direct the performers—actors, dancers, martial arts performers, and other subjects—but maintains a methodological distance from them. From within their own disciplines, the performers choose their own moves. The photograph endures as an artifact of intent. One might say that, for the resulting images, *"X" equals the controlled interaction of ambient light with the actors' internalized thoughts and externalized gestures as they move together through space and time.*"

These photographs descend from diverse traditions in the arts. Veneration of the human form reached an initial summit in Western history with the Greeks. Isolated gestural sketches were used by Dutch and Italian masters and by 20th century muralists in preparation for monumental paintings and sculpture. The photographs build upon the sequential stop-motion studies of Muybridge, the spatial and temporal compressions of Cubism (as in Duchamp's *Nu Descendant Un Escalier*), the temporal distortions in Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*, the spatial color iterations of Albers, Schwitters and Kandinsky, the action paintings of Pollock in which outward form is meant to evidence an inward act, the figurative works of Bacon, the conceptual challenges of Cage, the additive rhythm of Glass, the interrogative designs of Wodiczko, the slit scan constructions of Trumbull in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as well more extensive and commonplace practices of cinema including the manipulation of parallax, depth of field, rack focus, raked lighting, etc. To accentuate form, preference is given to an Italian cinematographic treatment of light and space as developed from within the traditions of chiaroscuro.

JAY MARK JOHNSON

Viewed from a distance, there are two distinct areas of focus for this work. One is more closely confined to the production of image and its related aesthetics. In this narrowest sense, the work aims to be investigative. It employs technical instruments and a scientific methodology to a limited field of study while anticipating no specific visual results. Epistemology takes preference over style. Due to the shifted dimensionality, new images come to light. And with the new images comes a new, emergent aesthetic system. Taken together with the desire for a dialogue with history and a design that challenges perception, these closely focused aspects constitute the visual ambitions of the work.

The New Context of Knowledge

In the broadest sense, this series sets out to locate itself at the outer edge of the evolving expanse of human consciousness, of human knowledge. Increasingly, the vastly diverse disciplines practiced within the full range of human pursuits are being linked together into a single, integrated whole, which is instantaneously available to everyone everywhere. The extended reach of Internet search engines conveys an omnipresence and an omniscience that was previously unimaginable to the sentient world. Only gods could have known so much. From the all-encompassing singularity of this new knowledge system, a new, inexhaustible holism emerges.

But it is not the ubiquitous scope alone of this new knowledge system that bears such transformational consequences for human belief systems. It is also the inner workings of the system itself, its operational rules, the increasingly singular methodology for determining what qualifies as good information, what constitutes fact, what eventually gains status as popular truth. By creating an all-inclusive level playing field for the instantaneous exchange of ideas and information, the Internet (and to a lesser degree the other mobile and broadcast media networks) reaffirms and magnifies the conditions for ascertaining veracity and truthfulness, that truth must be observable and falsifiable. As a consequence, the standards that have evolved within the sciences become the norms for popular truth. Evidence takes precedence over conjecture. Facts beat myths. The new, boundless holism is grounded in a reductivist epistemology. The effect on the entire range of human belief systems is at least as profound as the physical relativity envisioned by Einstein or the inherent uncertainty formulated by Heisenberg.

One of the most powerful demonstrations in recent popular culture that “facts beat myths” can be found in the effect of the iconic photograph taken of Earth from outer space. With a single, fateful CLICK of the shutter, the astronauts returning from the Apollo mission ended a centuries-long process of the popularization of the scientific truth about the shape of the planet. All other earthly creation myths, no matter how apparently well grounded, disappeared instantly into thin air. With the sublimation of their distinguishing belief systems, many communities lost one of their most important mechanisms for marking their identity in the world at large. In a world of rapidly forming consensus on basic scientific truths, asserting spurious beliefs becomes an increasingly costly strategy for affirming cultural identity.

Human knowledge expands and matures through advances in the arts and the sciences in one of at least two general manners. Either they push the outer envelope into newer territory or they construct new symbolic scaffoldings which span across and link together previously disparate disciplines. In the empirical sciences, discernable advances are made when an established instrument or practice develops greater refinement or greater range. Art contributes by challenging perceptions, shifting perspectives or otherwise strengthening or broadening established understandings. The works in this series draw from a diverse range of these practices and traditions. In seeking to accomplish the general intentions of art while drawing on the established methods of science, the works employ an inclusive strategy. This approach is appropriate not only for the new, emergent holistic context but also for its increasingly reductivist rules.