

# JAY MARK JOHNSON

Christopher Finch's notes from *x = t i m e* catalogue.

Coming across Jay Mark Johnson's photographs for the first time, a viewer may well be reminded of the photo finish images used to determine winners at track meets, horse races, and other sporting events. In Johnson's work, as in photo finish imagery, people, animals and moving objects are frozen against a background that has been dissolved by the camera into horizontal bands of color stretching from edge to edge of the picture plane. This similarity is no accident, since both Johnson and the photo finish cameraman employ the same technology--slit-scan photography.

As utilized by both, slit-scan is used to capture movement as it unfolds in time. In emulsion-based photography, the technology involves an actual slit moving continuously past the film, exposing a sliver at a time to create an image that "freezes" motion. With the highly sophisticated digital camera that Johnson employs, the same effect is achieved with a "virtual" electronic slit, a single pixel in breadth that scans the subject (which, like a race, is in fact an "event"). In either case, all of the movement that occurs in front of the lens, during a period that may amount to several seconds, or a fraction of a second, is synthesized into a single image. The resulting photographs capture, in a graphic way, the event that takes place during that period, so that in Johnson's pictures a person may appear more than once in the same image (having overtaken the tracking movement of the slit), and objects become subject to an exaggerated form of the photographic phenomenon known as "focal-plane shutter distortion."

What this means in practical terms is that a dancer, say, during the elapsed time required to perform the steps of a routine, is continuously scanned so that all of her movements are captured in a single "stretched" exposure. The end product is not conventionally naturalistic as it would be if the same movements were broken down into multiple frames by a motion picture camera. Rather the "stretching" transforms them into a visual synthesis of spacetime that in extreme instances can result in abstract forms resembling the loops of paint flung onto canvas by Jackson Pollock when creating his action paintings (themselves a form of spacetime synthesis resulting from dance-like gestures performed over a period of hours or days). Pollock at work would have made a splendid subject for Johnson's camera.

Studies of dancers and Tai Chi practitioners provided the launching pad for his explorations. From the outset, however, he understood that the slit-scan technique could be modified to suit different types of subject, ranging from natural phenomena (clouds, the ocean) to pedestrians and traffic on city streets. The latter category of image began with photographs of Pacific Coast Highway in Los Angeles (where he lives) and now includes images captured in cities ranging from Hong Kong and Moscow, to Hamburg, Paris, Belgrade, and Valencia, as well as the small town of Cetona, Italy, with which the artist has had a long and affectionate association. In these pictures, cars and trucks are squashed by the scanning process into toy-like vehicles that might have been imagined by concept artists at the Pixar animation studio. The character of the image is further determined by variables such as the placement of the camera and light conditions--as with conventional photography though achieving significantly different results.

If the camera is shooting down on the subject, as in the case of the Pacific Coast Highway photographs, the spacing of the lanes of traffic is recorded much as it would appear to the naked eye, but the slit-scan process presents vehicles as traveling at unlikely angles to one another and to the highway. Combined with the toy-like distortion of the cars and trucks, the effect is comical, but this is offset by the stunning virtuosity of the photographs. In other instances, Johnson places the camera closer to ground level—sometimes almost *at* ground level--which creates a frieze-like image, with cars and pedestrians frozen in profile like hieratic figures

# JAY MARK JOHNSON

in an Ancient Egyptian wall painting, the more distant vehicles appearing disproportionately tiny, pedestrians mingling with traffic in seemingly improbable ways, these apparent anomalies the result of exaggerated foreshortening inherent to the camera's optical system.

One remarkable thing about these photos of highway traffic, and a parallel series of railroad photographs, is that they retain a distinct sense of the location in which the exposure was made despite the fact that the background is obliterated, or rather transformed into multiple bands of color. Some images retain clues from the world of common sense naturalism—in the Pacific Coast Highway pictures, ocean and beach register as broad bands of color which are read by the viewer as water and sand—but often the background, streaked by the moving slit, is to all intents and purposes completely abstract. What differs from location to location is the combination of colors present in the background and the light that animates those colors.

This is very apparent in the “Swept Away” series of photographs that Johnson took in Belgrade--exposed on a freezing, overcast day, near a garbage dump frequented by scavengers (hence the title of the series). There may be almost no topographic information in these photographs, but the sense of place and season and mood is palpable in the somber tone and color of the images, in one of which a flurry of snow is transformed into a meteor shower of white diagonal streaks. By contrast, other images take their character from bright sunlight and the sharp shadows it casts—shadows that have a habit of behaving waywardly in slit-scan photographs, sometimes extending from the people and objects in directions that defy logic, as if produced by multiple suns. Where this is the case, as in *il mercato a sinistra* # 2 (2007) the results could be unsettling except for the fact that the visual contradictions of the image—which also include vehicles dwarfed by pedestrians—are mitigated by its overwhelming friendliness.

A striking example of the use of shadows is found in *l'enigma della puntlichkeit* (2008), an image of a railroad station in Hamburg taken from a high angle. The title pokes fun at the bureaucratic obsession with punctuality, but at the same time it borrows from the titles of paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, of which *l'enigma d'un jour*\* is an example. In that painting, as in many others, de Chirico made dramatic use of shadows and that is what led Johnson to make appropriate visual and verbal associations when he came to title this photograph. The viewpoint is high and the degree of distortion and fragmentation is slight when compared to many other Johnson photographs (and especially in comparison to the early dance and tai chi pictures) yet the slit-scan technique still lends its distinctive character to the image. The platforms and railroad tracks read almost naturalistically, but the streaking effect is present as always and emphasizes the horizontality of the image. The scanning has had the effect of reducing the human figures to streamlined silhouettes that lean forward as if in a great hurry--this is especially true of those on the most distant platform--adding to the urgency of the scene, though the primary drama is in the play of light and shadow, all the more effective because of the exquisite color.

In Johnson's photographs, color plays a role that differs from the role it has in conventional photographs in that it is only *partially* descriptive. It helps describe foreground elements in the normal way, but backgrounds are an entirely different matter. By being stretched to the length of the image, a patch of red that would be merely a detail in the background of a conventional photograph may take on a whole new significance, becoming an important element in an abstract field that resembles nothing so much as a striped canvas by Kenneth Noland. To use the word “background” is in fact misleading because slit-scan streaks the foreground as well as the background so that both are fused into a single field, that takes on a life of its own which sometimes suggests place and mood, and in other cases functions simply as an array of color. Good examples of the former are photographs of cyclists on the boardwalk in Venice, California, taken in 2006, in which a

# JAY MARK JOHNSON

strong sense of evening by the ocean is evoked. A striking instance of the latter is *Bauen Wohnen Streifen #1* (2008) in which a construction vehicle is dwarfed by the abstract field of colors against which it has been “pinned,” like a butterfly in a display case.

Like *l'enigma della punklichkeit*, *Bauen Wohnen Streifen* (“Building Dwelling Striping”) is a play upon a well-known title plucked from another context. In the second half of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger’s treatise *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (“Building Dwelling Thinking”) became a touchstone text for young architects of a philosophical disposition. It’s not surprising then to discover that Johnson has a background in architecture and design. In the late seventies, he was a student of Rem Koolhaas, under whose guidance he reconstructed in model form the 1927 Soviet Ministry of Heavy Industry building, designed by the Constructivist Ivan Leonidov (this model was later purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York). He interned with Peter Eisenman, designer of Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and worked in the studio of Aldo Rossi, who helped inspire his interest in de Chirico. Additionally he has been an artist and a visual effects supervisor in motion pictures, and—during the 1980s and early 1990s (living in Mexico and El Salvador for much of the time)—he produced radio and television programming and public service announcements sympathetic to the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and the Salvadoran FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front).

If this suggests a lively intellect and wide-ranging interests, I believe this is very much reflected in his photographs. They provide evidence of an easy familiarity with the world of art, but, as noted earlier in this essay, they are equally informed by concepts associated with theories of deconstruction and spacetime continuums. These images in fact deconstruct Euclidian space—or, rather, the photographic illusion of Euclidian space—and replace it with a visual record of spacetime events as they unfold. Attempts to make such representations in an art context go back at least to the Futurists and Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*. These in turn were anticipated and inspired by scientifically motivated photographic studies of movement by Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne Jules Maréy. Johnson’s achievement is to use current state of the art photographic technology to distil art from spacetime events in such a way that they become easily accessible to the viewer.

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In these pages, Johnson’s work is presented in four different groupings—“Motion Studies,” “Anachronistic Nature,” “Topological Shifts,” and “Spacetime Landscapes and Cityscapes.” “Motion Studies” includes examples from such series as the dance and tai chi pictures, along with images of swimmers, and these are perhaps the most explicit in illustrating how the slit-scan technique can fragment imagery, being radical expressions of the use of a camera to represent spacetime continuums.

“Anachronistic Nature” treats subjects, such as clouds and waves that are in fact events within a continuum that stretches as far back in time, and as far into the future as we can imagine. In human terms, at least, they were always there and always will be which makes them very different from the events recorded in other photographs, which—like a 100 meter dash—exist within an explicitly finite span. It’s true that Johnson is able to record only a few seconds at a time of, for instance, surf breaking on the shore, but none-the-less the resulting image evokes infinite repetitions of sets (the same infinite repetition of sets that hypnotizes the surfer as he awaits the perfect wave). The use of slit-scan subtly alters our perception of these sets.

When Johnson speaks of “Topological Shifts,” he refers to photographs in which the scanning process has altered the physical appearance of something in a way that evokes the mathematical concept known as topology (which amongst other uses has a crucial role in contemporary theories concerning the possible or probable

# JAY MARK JOHNSON

shape of the universe). Topology is defined the study of the properties of space that remain constant under continuous deformations. In 2008 photographs, such as *roller coaster #2*, made at an amusement pier near his home, the spacetime aspect of slit-scan actually causes a form of “continuous deformation” in which the curves of the roller coaster are flattened out beneath an undulating frieze of American flags--actually a single flag flapping in the sea breeze at the crest of the ride.

(Interestingly, during his association with Peter Eisenman, Johnson was involved in the design, rendering and modeling of Eisenman’s HOUSE 11A, a building structured upon concepts derived from topology and complexity theory.)

Johnson’s “Spacetime Landscapes and Cityscapes” represent spacetime continuums, but do so in a way that minimizes the kind of fragmentation and distortion that informs, in particular, the motion studies. These are places devoid of topography and without landmarks, and they are unique in the canon of landscape imagery in that they must be conjured into existence, in the imagination of the viewer, by the events that unfold before them—the readily decodable passage of people, animals, bicycles, baby carriages, cars or trains—since these events imply the existence of a palpable urban or rural environment to provide them with context.

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In the relatively short time Johnson has spent working with slit-scan (he began his explorations in 2005) he has already uncovered many possibilities, demonstrating that the process can be employed to record a wide variety of subject/events. There is no reason to suppose that this variety will not increase exponentially in the future, and perhaps the most exciting aspect of his art is that it tugs photography away from the gravitational pull of Euclidian documentation--which has dominated the field since its beginnings--and prods it towards new and ambitious aesthetic and intellectual goals.

Christopher Finch - September 2008

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