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Interview with Mike Mandel

Ben Burbridge

Posted by [Ben Burbridge](#) on Wednesday, May 4, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)

I interviewed Mike Mandel in April last year in relation to my doctoral research, focusing particularly on the uses made of scientific imagery in 'Evidence', the seminal project he produced in collaboration with Larry Sultan in 1977.

Could you tell me a bit about the artistic climate at the time you were working on 'Evidence'? Were there artists or curators who were working in a similar fashion that influenced you or your thinking?

As far as the inspiration goes, I think the recognition that there was something in the vernacular that was worth considering was definitely out there. I think Szarkowski had published 'From the Picture Press' not too much earlier, and there was a project that some contemporaries of Larry and mine, Ken Graves and Mitchell Payne, produced called 'American Snapshots'. There was some other work that Jock Reynolds and Suzanne Helmuth were doing, using vernacular imagery, found imagery. So I think it was in the air. And we thought that there was another category of this kind of outsider imagery which hadn't been mined, which was government and corporate sources. So it was fairly intuitive, but we just figured there'd be something there.

We started with the logical, easy source, which was the NASA archive, located nearby to where we were living in Sunnyvale California. We saw pictures there that weren't the typical exciting pictures of astronauts. They were more anecdotal, just some odd things that weren't particularly exciting and we realized there could be a lot of other more ephemeral kinds of imagery that would exist in government agencies other than NASA. We thought police departments might be a good place to go because we knew that they would have archives, but we realized pretty quickly that most of that stuff was difficult for us because it was really hard to remove it from its original context: when you look at enough images of criminal activity, it looks like something that refers to criminal activity. It's bodies that are lying on the floor dead, it's people that have been beaten up. There were a few pictures from the police and fire agencies that were interesting to us, and they are in the book.

Our natural inclination was to go where we knew there was imagery. Again, we kind of intuitively started realizing that the corporate world of high technology and engineering, the sorts of places that served NASA—places like General Atomic, places that build big things—they were the places that had the kinds of imagery we were interested in; pictures that were recording these things, difficult to understand pictures of technology in the landscape, or technology that was affecting humans. This was not the way they were originally intended to be seen: they described what they were supposed to describe. But they spoke another language to us, about a much bigger story about how the world is being manipulated by our faith in technology. So it moved and developed naturally from a sort of intuitive sense of where we should go.

The types of pictures we were looking for, which were those kinds of pictures that could be taken out of context, did have these evocative qualities, and related to this loss of faith in technology that we felt was the story of 'Evidence'. We just knew they were there. The hard part was the fact that, even though you knew they must exist, how do you find them? There's no category system that allows you to find that kind of imagery, so you basically just have to look at everything. They wouldn't let us see everything, but we could look at everything that was no longer classified – anything that was more than ten or fifteen years old they just made available to us. So we're talking about tens of thousands of pictures in each location, maybe more, sometimes even hundreds of thousands of pictures. At the Metropolitan Water District in L.A. we looked through 400,000 pictures. Larry started at one end and I started at the other.

Were there any artists or approaches you felt that you were reacting against?

I think it was this sense of the modernist paradigm. I don't think it was any particular person or artist though, I don't think we were reacting against Szarkowski or any artist. It was more this idea that the signature of the artist was what it was all about. And it still is today. You look at a picture made by Martin Parr, you look at a picture made by any of the earlier photographers, like Callahan or Frank, and there's a certain kind of stylistic that looks like one of their pictures. We were certainly reacting against that idea, that the work should be concerned with creating a stylistic, and that to create a stylistic enabled you to have a value in the art world and therefore you're creating a market for your stylistic.

We were looking at these things that were basically valueless—and I'm speaking about that time, I'm not speaking about now, because now 'Evidence' has become a collectible item, so I've got to be careful what I say here—but at that time we weren't creating a style for ourselves that was a gallery signature, which was going to be a saleable commodity. It was about offering a philosophical understanding about how pictures mean what they mean, making a sequential relationship among the pictures and making this art work which was a book. The artwork wasn't anything other than the book itself, which was fairly inexpensive. It cost \$12.95 when we had them made originally. Of course things change down the line. The book sold out pretty much, and then it was recognized and then it becomes part of the art commodity world and then there was not that much we could do about it, other than think that, if other people are going to take advantage of it, we may as well take advantage of it ourselves. When it became a recognized collectible then we sold it. But originally that's not what the intention was.

It's interesting that you could mention Szarkowski both in terms of what you were responding to, so this interest in the vernacular that was in the air, and also as someone who was concerned with the creation of that modernist paradigm within photography through what he was doing at MOMA. I wondered where you saw the differences lying, in very practical terms, between what you were doing and what he was doing, in terms of re-contextualising a set of photographs? His show 'Once Invisible', which opened in 1968, also re-contextualised photography made for the purposes of science and put it into the modern art museum. So are the differences simply a matter of intent, or do you think there are more experiential differences for the viewer?

So you're talking about the differences between a curatorial approach and an artistic approach? Well I didn't see that show, but 1968 is pretty close to when we working on this project, only nine or ten years earlier. But we saw 'Evidence' as any other artists would see it, which was making some sort of complex personal statement out of this body of anonymous, factual information. I think the curator probably wouldn't look at it from that standpoint, he would be much more open-ended and try to present this variety of interesting stuff that maybe relates to a theme.

When they saw 'Evidence', a lot of people said, 'hey you found one that looks like a Ralph Gibson picture or an Ed Ruscha picture'. They thought that was what the project was all about. So maybe that's what a curator might do, identify these factual documents that might have these references to the art world. It might be the case that a lot of the pictures that we chose do look like those things because you can't get away from it. We were influenced by the experience of looking at all that stuff and that's what made us into the people that we were. When you look at enough Robert Frank and Walker Evans and Robert Cumming then you're just going to end up appreciating what you were looking at through how you were educated. But that's not what the intention of the artwork was.

We wanted to collect all this ambiguous and evocative imagery and put a huge amount of it on a wall and try to figure out how to create a sequential visual narrative out of that work, so that it has a beginning, and a development and a climax and a end and it actually makes some kind of understandable statement. I think it is one job of the artist, to create that kind of expression, whereas the curator doesn't really have that responsibility. They can just be curious sometimes in the variety of stuff that one might find. I think it's a much more cohesive personal expression than something made from a curatorial standpoint.

When you talk about your reaction against the modernist paradigm and the sense of an identifiable style, you clearly touch upon a set of ideas at the heart of postmodernism. But, at the same time, when you talk about constructing a sequential narrative through these images, there is the sense of an authorial presence emerging through the way the images are used and presented which perhaps runs slightly counter to that. At

the time you were making this work were you were conscious of these wider cultural currents?

I think that, at the time, postmodernism was defined in a number of ways: from an anti-consumer standpoint, as a multiplicity of styles. I think that, in 1977, no one really had a handle on what postmodernism even meant. I'm not sure people even do these days. But I don't think we were really concerned about that. I don't think we cared about seeing ourselves as the antidote to modernism, we weren't seeing it from those critical kinds of standpoints. I think we had a very intuitive sense of what needed to be done, or what was an interesting kind of work to make, and it had to do with the found image. To refer back to your earlier question, we were reacting against the idea of an artist's signature, and there certainly was this kind of anti-commodification aspect involved. Certainly, from my standpoint, I was very much drawn to this idea of making something that was not easily collectable or could not easily sit in the gallery scheme. They seemed to me to be the driving forces.

But in terms of any more philosophical postmodern attitude, we weren't didacts, we didn't come at it from a theoretical standpoint. If you were asking Allan Sekula or Victor Burgin these questions, that would be all they'd tell you, but we'd tell you that we couldn't stand listening to those guys for more than five minutes because it was all a load of jargon and theory. The stuff we were looking at did have a lot of sensual, evocative qualities which created a viewer affect, a response, a really sort of visual, visceral affect, just like any other artwork would have. So it wasn't about an academic, analytic impetus.

Although Robert Forth, in his introduction to the book, does hint at the political and cultural contexts from which the work emerged, events like Watergate and Vietnam. Did these provide the backdrop for the project, these occasions when the evidential had been manipulated or concealed?

We were working with these places of power, the places that built the nuclear reactors, the places that built the missiles. And we had this kind of guerilla opportunity, because we had this piece of paper that said we had a government grant for this National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. At that time, the corporations didn't really have an idea about what the Endowment for the Arts even was, there was none of the criticism that later came about when a lot of these really political artists were challenging cultural mores. That's when the programme really ended, when Karen Finley and Andreas Serrano created that kind of work. But when we had our grant it was like we were validated by the government, it was like a license to go in, they felt that they were participating in a government project.

So, of course, we loved the fact that we could get into all these places that built missiles and weapons and major engineering projects and get to look at all this stuff. These were the people who were in many senses creating the world. So there was certainly a guerilla interest in subverting them, by using their facts against them to tell a narrative that was against the narrative that they believed in. I think that was there, I think that was inherently there, but I don't think we considered ourselves political artists like so many other artists at the time, people like Group Material, or these people who were overtly trying to make a political statement.

We were criticized for that. There were plenty of Marxists who were criticizing us for not making work like that. Allan Sekula, in fact, very clearly said that this was exactly the wrong sort of art to make because here are these guys who are going into these places and are not explaining exactly what is going on, they're not explaining all the terrible things these organizations are doing to destroy the world, they're just creating this poetic fantasy. Well, really, that's your problem Sekula. You want to make that kind of work then do it yourself, but not with our project, that's not what it was about. It was about looking for a poetic way of using the imagery to speak in a different kind of language. It still had a political flavour to it, but that was our kind of art. Unfortunately, the Sekula kind of art turns out to be the didactic art, but it doesn't grab you in the same sense, it teaches you a lesson with a ruler, but it doesn't get you excited and involved.

How about the archivists and the government officials, did they ever see the work?

For the most part they lived in completely separate realities. The show was exhibited at the San Francisco Museum and, although it traveled, I doubt that many people who were involved in that kind of job saw it. Of course, many of the people we dealt with had a very specific job, which was to administer the photographic

archive, so its not as though they had the same connection to the mission of the organization. I think there were one or two instances when there was a guy who did mention that he was the photographer for one of the pictures in 'Evidence'. He wasn't saying that with a sense of outrage, but simply in terms of how curious it was that the picture could be in this context and be made to mean something so different to what he had intended, or what the job requirement was.

By and large, I would say ninety-nine per cent of these agencies don't even know that 'Evidence' exists, or existed. The art world and the world of making missiles don't really exist in the same world. I mean the art world doesn't really exist, period. Only the academics and the people who make money out of it care about it. The students, the academics and the people who make money off it. You might as well just throw it away. Does art have any function in contemporary culture, other than popular art? People go to see Avatar, but do people really care what the great photographic artists of the moment are doing? Does anyone even know who they are, other than the students of photography?

It keeps the curators and the editors and the people like me in work...

The 0.01% of the country who care or know. That's just how it is. We're just stuck in this hole...

I know. Believe me, I'm very conscious of the fact.

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