



The order of things:

THE EDITION AND THE SERIES IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOMEDIA

Daniel Palmer

THE COLLECTOR... ALWAYS RETAINS SOME TRACES OF THE FETISHIST [WHO] BY OWNING THE WORK OF ART, SHARES IN ITS RITUAL POWER.¹

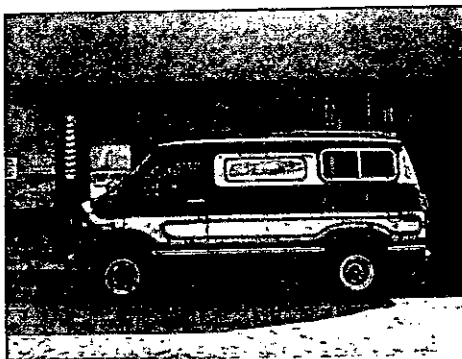
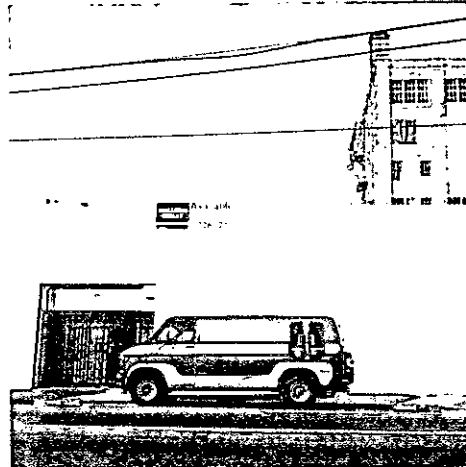
THE LATE 19TH CENTURY WITNESSED a double revolution in photography, effectively ushering in today's culture of disposable imagery: George Eastman democratised and industrialised the process of picture making with the release of roll film, and photographic images became reproducible in print media via the halftone process. But images function differently in the art world, and since the mid 1970s, when a serious secondary market for art photography emerged with regular auctions at Sotheby's, the prices for individual photographs have sky-rocketed. Despite its mechanically (and now digitally) reproducible nature, the photographic image has become an increasingly rarefied product, with a culture of the original embodied in the idea of the vintage print. As Rosalind Krauss has observed, "the vintage print is specified as one made 'close to the aesthetic moment' – and thus an object made not only by the artist, but produced, as well, contemporaneously with the taking of the image."²

Given this notion of photographic authorship, it is easy to see how the force of the vintage print extended to the idea of artists preparing limited editions. Previously, photographers had signed, dated and perhaps numbered their prints. It is well known that modernists such as Ansel Adams and Max Dupain never editioned their most famous prints, preferring to 'print on demand'. But as photography entered the art market proper, the notion of limited editions began to dominate. This process of 'systematic rarefaction' – a legacy of printmaking and sculpture, where the original plate or cast would deteriorate with each work produced – soon became the norm for successful photo-based artists. In the Australian art world today, where contemporary photography has finally emerged as a collectable medium, the pressure to limit is so strong that the emerging artist, confronting the dazzling possibility of a sale and, simultaneously, the determinations of the market, must simply make a choice as to the size of the edition. An open edition seems unthinkable.

Researching an article on the Australian photography market, I was nevertheless struck by a divergence of opinions on the question of editions.³ Most contemporary art dealers and collectors were predictably comfortable with the safety of limited editions. Especially striking was the evident pride of one dealer in describing his authentication ritual: at the end of each edition, the negative is cut up and the appropriate portion is sent to each of the collectors. Dedicated photography dealers and collectors, however, seemed more inclined to balk at the idea of the limited edition, content to evaluate each photograph on its own terms. Likewise, institutional collectors – state galleries and museums – are ultimately more interested in quality than rarity.

In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin famously argued that "[f]rom a photographic negative... one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."⁴ However, as anyone who has spent time in the darkroom will know, the 'infinite reproducibility' of the photograph is something of a fiction.⁵ A fine art photograph, crafted one print at a time, may be better characterised as a 'multiple original'. Certainly the question of editions was less urgent with analogue photography and hand printing, but even today the theory of endless identicals is some way from the reality of custom digital prints. Nevertheless, as photographic media have moved away from the handcrafted image to colour and digitally produced images, the desire for artificial limitation has intensified.

Photography is a system of representation dependent on reproduction and this quality, along with its supposed anyone-can-do-it mechanical nature, has traditionally hindered its saleability as art. And herein lies one of many ironies in the history of the international photography market. This is that the Pop and Conceptual art of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, which typically spurned the existing tradition of art photography as an expressive *object* and instead utilised the camera as a mere tool to realise or document ideas or performances, crucially contributed to the official annexation of photography into the category of art gallery art. Although the potential radicality of photography, as Benjamin



Anne Kay Beige and Brown Customs 2001
light-jet prints on Artmount 45 x 45cm each
Courtesy Scott Donovan Gallery, Sydney

suggested, had been that its reproducibility weakened the commodity form of art, the photograph materialised while art 'dematerialised'. As conceptual photography entered the art world, paving the way for the success of artists such as Cindy Sherman, editioning became commonplace and photography's status and dimensions gradually inflated to the painterly scale we see today.

The irony is that Pop and Conceptual artists consistently disclosed the commodity character of art via the mechanical nature of photography. Photographs were often the origin of the images Pop artists presented of popular culture and consumer society. Andy Warhol's democratic impulse (his desire for everyone to be able to own a work of art) hinged on his photographic silk-screening of authorless advertising images and celebrity portraits. His use of the print went some way towards democratising the distribution of art. Arthur Danto tells of five-dollar prints of one image, *Flower* (1964), so democratised that they were treated as virtually disposable – people wrapped packages in them – such that now they have a rarity and value "altogether subversive of artistic intention".⁶ Of course everything Warhol touched was eventually endowed with the magic appeal of the Warhol mystique, including his famous collection of cookie jars and his unique polaroids.

The idea of the series – a work comprised of a number of similar elements held together by a conceptual system or order – became a common strategy in the mid to late 1960s. While this is a distinct theme from that of editions (multiples of identical single images), the logic of the series contains the seed of a critique of the precious single image, and its development shows an interesting relationship to the art market. Consider Ed Ruscha who, via Andy Warhol's early work, created a set of coordinates for the coming generation of artists. Ruscha's serial work from the mid 1960s emerges out of a machinic and minimalist aesthetic in its stubborn refusal to display the signs of authorship. Ruscha became well known for his books. His first, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), presented exactly what the title indicates: 26 photographs of gasoline stations located along Route 40 between Los Angeles (where he lived) and Oklahoma City (where he grew up). In a widely quoted interview, the artist states:

*I think photography is dead as a fine art; its only place is in the commercial world, for technical or information purposes. I don't mean cinema photography, but still photography, that is, limited edition, individual, hand-processed photos. Mine are simply reproductions of photos. Thus, it is not a book to house a collection of art photographs – they are technical data like industrial photography.*⁷

After numbering the first printing of this book, Ruscha came to realise that this contradicted his stated purpose of making mass-produced objects. So, attempting to destroy the aura of preciousness, he reprinted the book twice, ending up with 3,900 copies in circulation, making his work available to audiences beyond the gallery and museum goer.

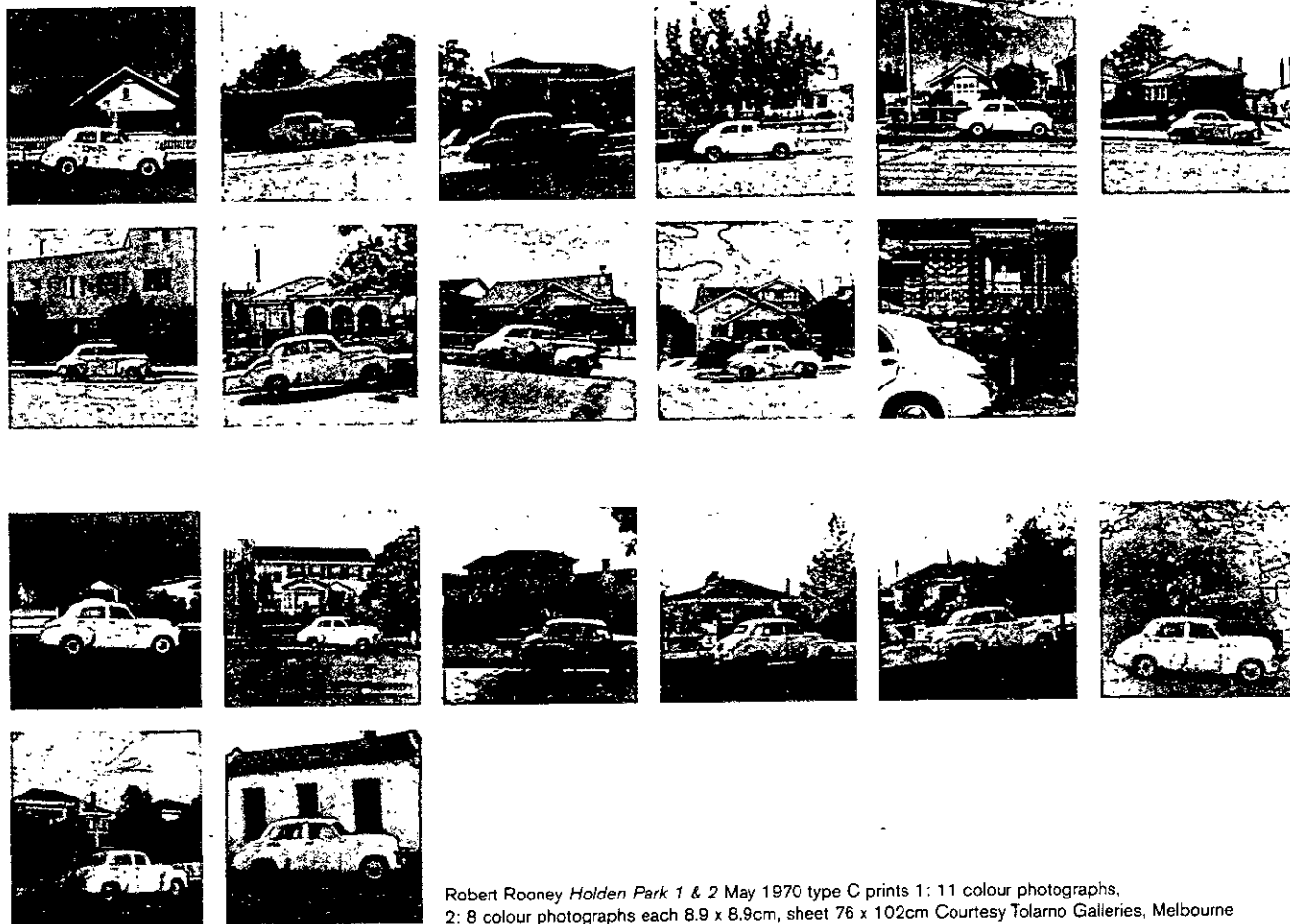
The 'serial attitude' thus became a way for artists to employ photography's functional status, and its reproducibility, for conceptual ends – paralleling the non-representational Minimalist aesthetic current within sculpture. Ruscha spoke of his pictures as a collection of 'facts' or 'readymades'. In serial works such as *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), the significance of the individual image, and in particular the notion of the masterpiece (in which an artist's genius is compressed into one singular artwork), is diminished by the seemingly unauthored view. In Germany, Bernd and Hilla Becher also offered a new framework for documentary photography with their frontal, unmodulated images of industrial structures – their 'typologies' of water towers and blast furnaces and so on. Presented in deadpan, minimalist grid structures, these works also mimicked the sameness of the commodity form. The Bechers, of course, were to bestow a generation of their students with a valuable conceptual pedigree – most famously Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth (who also cites Ruscha as a powerful early influence). Other conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham and Douglas Huebler extended their minimalist

investigations to a presentation of subjects that echoed the repetition and reproducibility of the photographic process itself. Huebler's aim in the series *Variable Piece #70 (In Process) Global* (1971–) was "to photographically document the existence of everyone alive". Amongst LeWitt's 'photogrids' is a work from the late 1970s documenting everything the artist owned in his house. It was LeWitt who in 1967 coined the memorable conceptual art dictum: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."⁸

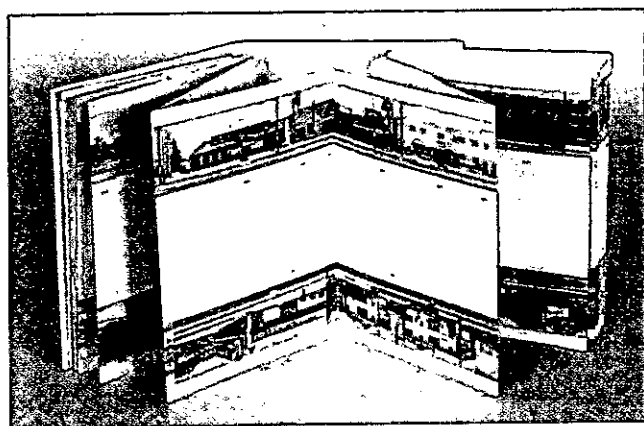
The influence of these practices remains palpable among Australian artists working with photography, and not for the first time. Melbourne artist Robert Rooney had already moved through a range of serial photographic practices in the 1970s, a decade in which he put down his paintbrush for a camera. His controlled conceptual approach, as Charles Green elaborates, was influenced by the chance-generated systems of John Cage, artists like Ruscha, as well as Rooney's local contemporaries.⁹ *Holden Park: 1 & 2 May, 1970* (1970) documented the ritual of parking a car in locations chosen semi-randomly from the street directory. Other series – such as *Garments: 3 Dec 1972 – 19 March 1973* (1973), a panel of Rooney's folded clothes taken at the end of each day, or *AM/PM* (1974) his bed, morning and night – investigated the artist's everyday routines. These and other performative photo-acts explore what Green describes as "the self's location within a circulation of objects".¹⁰ Unlike Ruscha, however, Rooney did not publish artist books, and his works exist as unique grids.

Twenty years later the critique of the commodity form of art is among the ruins of Conceptual art's utopian program and long absorbed by the art market. However, artists continue to work through the appeal and problematics of the photographic series. This work often stands as a self-reflexive mode of documentary, borrowing Pop Art's ironic sensibility. And if previous serial work had been more about time, today's seems equally concerned with place. In Australia, for example, Alex Cyreszko's matter-of-fact rusty cars, *Abandoned Car Series* (2000), convey both the absurdity of large chunks of metal wasting away on the pavement as well as offering an anthropological gaze on suburban Sydney. The automobile – the ultimate industrial commodity – is also the subject of Anne Kay's series on American vans, *Beige and Brown Customs* (2001). But by now this process is nostalgic. As the artist writes in an accompanying statement, the vans appear "reminiscent of hard-edge minimalist paintings, and relics of the 1970s ultra-customising craze in the States".

Turning its back on both the modernist impulse of self-expression and postmodernist staged allegorical tableaux, the serial method works to defamiliarise a common subject through repetition. Through specific arrangements and selections, a series can become a self-contained



Robert Rooney *Holden Park 1 & 2* May 1970 type C prints 1: 11 colour photographs, 2: 8 colour photographs each 8.9 x 8.9cm, sheet 76 x 102cm Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne



Ed Ruscha *Every building on the Sunset Strip* 1966 offset lithographs Collection the National Gallery of Australia

classification or taxonomic display. This is the case with Mathieu Gallois' *Flight 934-B* (2000), an ambitious photographic record of the passengers aboard a Boeing 747 jet neatly organised on the wall in the shape of the plane, as much as Alex Kershaw's serial work exploring "the relationship between the moment, monument and memento". Kershaw's recent photographic and video installation, *Geodetic Monuments* (2001–2), is a serial investigation of landscape, documenting survey markings to evoke notions of territorial possession.

Although their focus is sun-drenched Perth, Alin Huma's ongoing series of glarefoil-protected car windscreens, *Sunshades* (1998–), could be taken anywhere. A catalogue of sameness and difference, the images nevertheless form part of Huma's obsessive photo-inventory and spatial diagnosis of alienated settlement, especially when shown juxtaposed with banal images of empty retail spaces. As a counterpoint, his portrait series of cardboard air hostesses 'collected' at international airports presents a comic simulacrum of a global service class. As in Sanja Pahoki's series of office workers wearing sneakers on their way to work, *Suitable Women* (2001), seriality adds an amusing dimension to portraiture – already nascent in prototypical serial portraits by August Sander and Sue Ford.

Unlike the 'money shot' of the narrative series – think Tracey Moffatt's *Something More No. 1* (1989) – one image can rarely embody a conceptual series." More analytic and descriptive than narrative or expressive, serial photography seems removed from the single icon fetishism of the art collector. But regardless of how much it resembles commercial photography, whether the series is fragmented across the gallery wall as single images, or contained in a single grid, the question of editions will remain as long as artists require private sales.



Alin Huma *Untitled (from Air)* 1999-2001 type C prints 40 x 30cm

Dealers, meanwhile, are beginning to explore variations on the theme of the limited edition, such as rewarding collectors with initiative by increasing the price as an edition runs out. Digital photography may require a shift in mindset towards the limited licence – whereby what the collector is buying is not so much a precious object as the right to display an image. This approach is being taken up by some video artists (video's perfect reproducibility and lack of objecthood has thus far ensured a limited conventional art market). Collectable artists such as David Noonan retain a trace of their video installations, with special perspex screens and so on, returning photomedia to the sculptural cast.¹² But in an ideal world we might all be owners of video art (and indeed there is currently a push by emerging artists, such as Serial 7's in Sydney and the new Melbourne-based Projekt, to broaden its distribution).¹³ In the meantime, artists have to eat and economics determine that we can buy multi-million dollar feature films for \$20, while the closest most of us will come to owning video art is the infamous floating plastic bag scene in Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999) – a scene, appropriately enough, borrowed from experimental filmmakers such as Nathaniel Dorsky and Jem Cohen.

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- 1 Walter Benjamin 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations* (tr. Harry Zohn) Fontana, London 1973 p246
- 2 Rosalind E. Krauss *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1985 p156

- 3 Daniel Palmer 'Icons and Other Pictures: the Photograph in the Art Market' *Australian Art Collector* issue 21 July–September 2002 pp86–8
- 4 Benjamin op cit p226
- 5 In the 1970s, when the international market for photography was formalised, considerable discussion occurred over the fact of photography's nature as a mechanically reproducible medium, with the darkroom seen as the privileged place of the creative process
- 6 Arthur Danto *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2000 p380-1
- 7 From an interview with Ed Ruscha by John Coplans in *Artforum* February 1965, quoted in Lucy Lippard *The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* University of California Press, Berkeley 1997 [1973] p12
- 8 Lippard op cit pxiv
- 9 Charles Green 'Avoiding art, desperately seeking photography: Revising the history of photography by post-object art' in Ewen McDonald and Judy Annear (eds.) *What is this thing called photography?* Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2000, and Charles Green 'Robert Rooney' in Jenepher Duncan (ed.) *From the Homefront: Robert Rooney, Works 1953-1988* Monash University Gallery, Melbourne 1990 pp4–10. Green explores the link between serial photography, archives and memory, a theme explicitly taken up by some contemporary installation artists such as Patrick Pound in his work *Memory Room* (2002)
- 10 Green 'Robert Rooney' op cit p9
- 11 It is well known that Moffatt's relatively large editions have not harmed the commercial value of the work. One of her best known series, *Scarred for Life* (1994), was produced as offset prints to resemble a cheap poster, for aesthetic effect rather than democratic distribution
- 12 On the subject of video art collecting, the AXA Art Insurance website gives the example of Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist as exemplifying the market range for video works – with multichannel works for specific sites in an edition of three selling for upwards of US\$70,000, a single-channel tape available for US\$100, and a limited edition of video stills for US\$12,000
- 13 Projekt, an initiative of artist Brendan Lee is a quarterly 'video catalogue' that aims to expose the artist videos to a wider audience, utilising the internet to show QuickTime videos and selling multiples of videotapes and DVDs at an affordable price for personal use. See www.projekt.com.au