

Give Them the Meaning They'd Rather Not Have

We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

from "Epilogue," Robert Lowell

Today, it feels as if we have run out of objects to consume, or if not, then the money with which to consume them. Media fills that void, widening it even. Be it popular media, the so-called "MSM" (or mainstream media), tabloid rags, your Facebook news feed, the latest Tumblr gone wild, Twitter; there is always something there for us to look at, to read, to pass on and pass over. Our notoriously shortened collective attention span demands new things constantly: new meanings, new words, new images. Elementary school teachers may lament that no one ever reads enough books, but one could argue that we read more than ever now—just not books.¹

Much of what we read, both words and images, is meaningless in the face of communication that is societally deemed as "important" or direct Placeholders and content-fillers. We continually generate new signs and new images and imbue each image with meaning and significance. And quickly new images and significances arise, leaving the old ones empty, or as signposts. Our vocabulary grows. Certain images and actions repeat themselves. Certain actions, long ingrained in our culture and habits, become codified into our visual language through photographs and video. Actions so banal that they speak just enough to make consumable noise when the author wishes to say very little.



"Woman dispensing beer directly from keg into mouth of man lying on ground"

¹ Teenagers may not be reading as many novels as their teachers may like, but they *are* constantly reading. Text messages mostly, and Facebook, gchat and other messaging services, internet forums. Of course, the problem with these forms of reading is the atrocious spelling and grammar. But consider that until the widespread use of the printing press, there was no such thing as standardized spelling, and languages changed fluidly. There aren't any copyeditors looking over your shoulder at your gchats, and as a result, written and spoken language has seen dramatic changes. Not only have new words and slang been introduced, but misspellings and misuses of grammar have come to be accepted more.



“Mature man eating food”

Long before the structure of the stock photograph had been determined, Roland Barthes wrote, “if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing!” Although Barthes was speaking of his own body, and not the body in general, he would find it apropos today that stock photography has neutralized the body into nothing more than a vacant sign, a letter. It is undoubtedly a difficult thing for one’s own body signify nothing to oneself, but in stock photography bodies and subjects come very close to signifying nothing. Instead, there is a vocabulary of signs, keywords from the photographer on what they think the clients look for:



“Romantic couple in the kitchen: Happy woman mixing vegetable salad while man embracing her from behind”



“Seniors browsing their smart phones”



Smiling multi ethnic business team: Portrait of multi ethnic business executives smiling at you while working at office

Stock photography is found everywhere, and is often ignored for its vacancy. Or, mocked for its falseness, its idealization of its subjects, and its impossible inclusiveness. It is usually most interesting when one recognizes that the image represents a myth. For example, a picture of a healthy young woman lit in golden tones, smiling as she eats a salad, headlining an article on dieting tips whose readers are mainly overweight, middle-aged women more likely to smile at a plate of pasta carbonara. Another common example is the laughing, highly diverse business team. Corporate stock photography would have us believe that middle management is totally diverse and gender-equal, and there's always someone in a wheelchair smiling. Everyone gets massages at the office, and not just the old rich white guy. Stock photography presents the ideal scenario, where conflict doesn't exist, or if it does, our emotional reaction to is predictable. Stock photography is also mutable. Go to a college campus health clinic and you might see the same unhappy girl in a pamphlet for safe sex practices and responsible drinking. Or that worried woman looking at a pregnancy test might be used by both a fertility clinic and Planned Parenthood.



"Caucasian teenager looking at pregnancy test results while sitting on toilet seat"

Images Rendered Bare. Vacant. Recognizable. addresses the possibilities stock photography presents, its potential for non-linguistic language, and its lack. Rachel Reupke's "10 Seconds or Greater" tackles the stock photography lexicon straight on. Young, healthy adults – just attractive enough – engage in bland, healthy, social lifestyle activities. Their existence is uncomplicated, ideal, marketable. A nice new condo, probably in the suburbs of a secondary city, IKEA furniture, minimal expression in décor. One can imagine they work in those happy bastions of corporate diversity. They cut fresh vegetables, come back from a run in pastel polo shirts, chat casually about this and that drinking wine or beer. While filmed in Britain, presumably with British actors, it is easy enough to place the scenario within any Western society. Lacking so many cultural signifiers, the viewers project their own cultural identity onto the scene and its subjects.

The film runs through a checklist of scenarios a director would want to make as if she were creating dozens of brief clips to sell. Long panning shots show the moments in between, the camera still running while the actors are not. Two women sit at a table with half-drunk glasses of beer, staring at them as if in sullen disagreement. Then an off-screen cue and both take a sip and start to talk happily. We are shown that those always half-empty glasses were only ever halfway filled.

The tropes of stock photography are ripe to pick from. Yet for all the vastness of imagery you can find on Getty Images or iStockphoto.com, its vocabulary doesn't encompass the entire range of human experience, only that which is in some way saleable. With "Frieze Stock Footage" Oliver Laric inserts his own images into the lexicon of free use video. Filmed at the Frieze Art Fair using advanced, expensive digital cameras, the subjects of most clips are not explicitly saleable, but rather, seem accidental in many cases. With extremely high frame rates and tight close-ups, the videos are brief glimpses, slowed down and divorced from context. The titles give textural clues, like "urinal" and "neon stucco pan," but the videos remain largely without meaning outside of the context that is not given, making it difficult to place them within a pre-written narrative.

On the internet, images pile up on top of each other, juxtaposed in myriad fashions, entangled, creating the strangest connections seemingly at random, as if any meaning there is random. Holen's "Finger in Eye, Handle Through Brain" piles stock images in much the same way, filtering them through search parameters, giving a thematic wash over everything, almost quite literally. Holen uses stock images to represent dichotomies, splittings, and containments. With bike handlebars coming out of images of skulls, the piece overtly references Phineas Gage, the railway worker who survived a tamping rod shot straight through his skull, and whose personality was exceptionally altered as a result of it. There is a logic to the images included – electric kettles, office water coolers, sea turtles, brains – but what they collectively communicate to us is harder to pin down. The flow of water we see is much like the flow of imagery that inundates us daily at our computer screens.

Friedrich Hölderlin wrote, “We are a sign that is not read/We feel no pain, we almost have/Lost our tongue in foreign lands.”² Although, when speaking of stock photography we may feel a long ways away from German Romanticism, Sean Raspet’s work lends itself easily to the sentiment. Like Holen’s work, Raspet’s pieces lay images on top of each other, only moreso³, making them unrecognizable. Cut up, re-imaged, they lose their subjects and meanings. “*Untitled (Police Incident(2))* 3, ((2007) – 2012)” is an installation of coffee mugs ordered through CafePress set atop the boxes they came in. Printed on the mugs are different sections and variations of one original image, layered and piecemeal. Furthermore, many images come from photographs of a similar installation, using the same original photograph (in this case, of police arresting a man outside of a Burger King). Photographs of this installation will be used the same way in future installations. “*Arrangement 63 (OBSCENITY TRIAL (2))*, ((2007) – 2012)” uses this same logic, which Raspet calls “a self-cannibalizing archive.” The images in these works are signs that are not read, cannot be read. The chopping and layering give the smallest bits of referents to grab onto, but ultimately everything feels foreign, unfamiliar. “All’s misalliance.”⁴

Raspet isn’t using stock photography, or even borrowing from its tropes, but is in a certain way creating his own stock photography with its own vocabulary and grammar. The multiplicities of content that are constantly generated, to be either consumed or ignored, demarcate the terms of our interactions. The vagaries of the internet, with its free-for-all abandon, have dictated that advertising, particularly cheap and/or inexpensive (even expensive advertising can be cheap), and all its images, follow us everywhere we look.

² “Mnemosyne (draft)” The original German is “Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos,” and a more literal translation is “We are a sign, interpretationless,” which perhaps speaks more to the point, placing the fault of ambiguity on the sign rather than the reader.

³ <http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/moreso.html>

⁴ From “Epilogue,” the last poem in Robert Lowell’s last published book. The following lines are, “Yet why not say what happened?/Pray for the grace of accuracy.” It is certainly a question we could ask here.



“There is a sense of anarchy in the air, empowered by social networks, a tribe of young people are rejecting compromise and insisting on bold transformation, standing up for what they believe is important, from rising tuition fees to democracy. This rebellious spirit is causing change.”

Heidegger quotes those lines from Hölderlin in his final lecture, *What Is Called Thinking?* He says that we are not yet thinking because what must be thought turns away from us, withdraws.

When man is drawn into what withdraws, he points into what withdraws. As we are drawing that way we are a sign, a pointer. But we are pointing then at something which has not, not yet, been transposed into the language of our speech. We are a sign that is not read.⁵

Stock photography does not come close to what Heidegger calls thinking, but stock photography withdraws. It withdraws its meanings and contexts and specificities, and in doing so points toward a language that has been insufficiently transposed into the language of our speech. This is why it is so rich a vein to mine from and distill and create new language.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray, (New York: Perennial, 2004), 18.