



Image: Stephen Andrews 2000-2001. Détails d'un ensemble de 48 bandes d'images faites de médias mixtes seu papier mylar.

the 1st part of the 2nd half : une exposition de la Art Gallery of Sudbury (Canada) organisée par Bill Huffman

Centre culturel canadien (Paris) - le jeudi 5 juin 2003 de 18h00 à 20h30

ALEXANDER NAGEL: *Talk to me about the relationship between the crowd scenes, which are composed of lots of small images and the filmstrips, which are also composed of lots of small images.*

STEPHEN ANDREWS: The filmstrips come out of the last body of work which is called 'hoi polloi'. It is a series of drawings of what might be seen as stills taken from a fictitious zoom shot. So it was about singling out an individual in a crowd. At what point do we lose our sense of individuality? It has become clear to me in the last couple of years of doing this work that 'film' in general seems to be very much about that moment, that cross over moment when everything changes. The film sequences allow us to determine precisely when that happens. For me it is coming out of a resurrection narrative, determining at what point one comes back to life and resume our identity. Or at what point does everything change irrevocably. The example here is the sequence of the explosion. The explosion happens and suddenly after that split second one's entire life is completely changed, your whole life is turned upside down. It is a marker.

A.N.: *The factor of momentous events seems to be inherent in your recent use of photojournalistic sources, since that sort of material is already marked as eventful. Did the 'hoi polloi' work come from that sort of source?*

S.A.: It was started at the time the 'days of action' were happening in Toronto. It was an amazing moment. The government that was elected on their 'Common Sense' platform did everything they said they were going to do and I think people were a little shocked because what it meant that education and health care were going down the tubes. We were supposedly getting all these tax cuts but they just changed the names of the words for tax. Instead they were changed into tariffs, levies and tolls and all these other ways of taxing people without them calling it tax. People took to the streets.

A.N.: *Yes, I remember. I had just arrived in Toronto and was amazed to see what a politically active place it was. I remember learning that the education minister never went to university.*

S.A.: Yeah, and the minister of transportation was a used car salesman.(laughs) It was a complete travesty of a government. So there were all these amazing demonstrations and the papers were full of photos of it. Usually there is a moment in the Zeitgeist that I pick up on. Since the papers were full of these images I responded to them.

A.N.: *On some general level it is a momentous occasion to bring so many people together but on another level crowd scenes are a-temporal. In a way they are 'out of time'.*

S.A.: Yes and no, for me there is always a kind of quoting of a particular moment. I tend to respond to current events. There is usually a specific event or story that kick-starts a body of work. Things as diverse as the self-immolation of a closeted man, iris scanning, DNA fingerprinting, breakthroughs in AIDS research. I guess the through-line is an interest in identity. The crowds, however, were an extension of my interest in portraiture. I have always been interested in the problem of likeness. For a long time I have done group portraits like 'Facsimile' which was 150 portraits of people who had died of AIDS, or the fingerprints series, I did hundreds and hundreds of those. So the crowd images were a logical extension of that. I can understand why I was subconsciously attracted to those images.

A.N.: *You seem to be interested in portraiture as a means of understanding not only who a person is but how that person changes. How identity actually can shift.*

S.A.: Yes, and I'm also interested in how a person fits into their particular context so that it is at the same time a picture of something

larger than themselves. The portraits that we go to the museums to look at have moved beyond their importance as 'likeness'. They stand in for every one. They aren't so tethered to their identity. If you look at the Fayoum portraits from Egypt, it is not really important to us who that person is in the end.

A.N.: *Yes, but it is important to us that it is a person, that it is an individual.*

S.A.: It seems that we never tire at looking at pictures of people even though the garments that locate it within a specific time period don't seem to trouble us in any way. We see through them to the person beneath.

A.N.: *Right.*

S.A.: I wonder why that is. We still have this identification with that person even though they are from a different time and place. There are a number of things that fascinate me about the portrait as a form. It is almost like time travel. In some ways the portrait is a mirror for us, so the present is our present but we are also transported back to another time. The sitter is always sitting there for the painter. We, the viewers have traded places with the painter and the sitter stares across the centuries to catch us in their gaze. That temporal collapse blows my mind.

A.N.: *At the same time, in your work that portrait-function is open to question. It is often on the verge of dissolving. It seems that in the end we don't reach what we meant to reach for. We don't reach the identity of the person. We zoom in on those crowds and the individual doesn't seem to appear, or we try to find that moment that separates night and day, that corner when everything changes from one moment to the next, and we don't find it. You are not just making portraits. Your subject is portraiture itself, you concentrate on that gap between viewer and image that portraits are meant to fill.*

S.A.: Yes. Some of the works in the series 'hoi polloi' make the viewer the subject of the picture. Which is a kind of portrait. They are drawings of an audience whose gaze is directed 'hors champs', to the space we as viewers occupy. They were drawn as if from the perspective of a stage or behind an easel. That idea is elaborated in the filmstrip piece 'the 1st part of the 2nd half'. A zoom shot is teased apart into its hundreds of component pictures so that you can gradually see a figure reflected in the eye of a person in the crowd, and you realize that it could be you. That is to say, you recognize something of yourself in them, you return their gaze and as you continue to zoom out they dissolve into the crowd and they lose their identity. And then it begins again.

A.N.: *If the 'hoi polloi' work is drawn, the film strips are photo-based, or least refer to a camera-function. How do you produce the zoom effect in them?*

S.A.: 'The 1st part of the 2nd half' has the look of film and is cobbled together using any number of techniques, drawing being one of them. Another one I use is photocopy transfer. I take an image from a photographic source, maybe a video frame-grab or a snapshot. I can animate it by blowing it up incrementally on a photocopy machine and then just select details from that blow up. They become consecutive frames out of an increasingly larger blow up.

A.N.: *So it is the same image just zoomed in on.*

S.A.: Yeah, just zoomed in on using the photocopy machine as a camera, but the frame size remains the same. Other times I just grab every frame from a video clip and do it that way. The camera movement is already there. I don't have to create it.

A.N.: *This is a really dramatic zoom right here (points to picture from 1st Part).*

S.A.: That is a picture of me reflected in an eye. The sequence begins in another shot that takes place in the Zocolo in Mexico City.

What I'm doing is looking for an equivalent for the viewer. So we zoom in on this crowd and we pick out this person who is sort of shadowy. He is sort of an equivalent for the figure reflected in the eye in the following strip. The figure here, we don't quite know what it is. It appears as if it might be some figure in a cave. It's for me evocative of Plato's cave, an idea I've used before. The idea that we are all just shadows projected on to the wall of a cave, nothing more than fleeting images, a figure for life.

A.N.: *There is a jump from this figure in the crowd to the figure in the eye that is not continuous.*

S.A.: Yes, call it poetic license if you will but they are related. It keeps zooming out and then you start to see that this is actually someone in particular. Right and then I jump cut to something else. Here I do this silhouette figure because again it relates back to the shadowy figure at the beginning. They seem as if they could be the same figure. We become unsure of who's seeing and who is observed. To complicate things further, while viewing the piece one can see oneself reflected in the shiny surface of the mylar.

A.N.: *That brings us to the idea of displaying the work as film strips. This mode of display opens up possibilities that you wouldn't have if you were actually making a film.*

S.A.: Right, I don't know if the filmstrips would work projected but when you see them by themselves you begin to think about temporality, how it all relates back and forth, because you can look back two seconds, forty eight frames earlier in the sequence and wonder how come this figure reappeared again.

A.N.: *Right, right. And it is a different array. In a way film is very time-bound whereas whatever you want to call it, collage or multi-image display like this, or like you have on a cathedral façade, allows you to cut through time in a direct way. You can connect things vertically, you can connect things laterally. So where here do you see a pregnant moment of lateral connection?*

S.A.: Ah, well particularly in the later sequences like the explosion sequences which I was describing to you. And in many other places as well. You move in closer on certain figures, as other figures slip out of frame and they in turn get put onto other strips. When hung side by side figures running out of frame appear to be going backwards in time if you were to read it from left to right. The figures appear to be running diagonally across the strips.

A.N.: *There are also moments when just by the movement of, let's just call it the camera even if it isn't a film camera, you move from something easily recognizable to something that is quite abstract. You move from a moment where you have a head to a moment where you have a kind of monochrome field. Why does that moment interest you?*

S.A.: I think, 'by any means necessary', right? Sometimes we have these thoughts or feelings that are quite abstract. They are as much a part of our quotidian experience as a linear figurative narrative. So if you are trying to represent the whole thing you have to represent both abstraction and figuration. The camera does something very interesting. When you zoom in on something it becomes something abstract. I guess it is called photographic abstraction. The camera by its nature is recording something that is actually there. So when you zoom in on some detail you are taking it out of its context. It is abstraction and it isn't. It is what it is. We just don't have a sense of its wholeness anymore. What it might become is something more than what it is.

Also, I just think of this as a kind of lexicon of film, with things like zooms, 'fade to black' or close ups or long shots. So this thing is loaded with quotations. It quotes film as a form. It uses things like 'based on a true story', the 'countdown', 'blue screen'. There is even a swish pan in there. There are also quotations of various auteurs. There is Brakhage. There is Warhol. There is Jarman. So it is kind of a double citation both of film itself and of the various people

that have worked with it. Also when you look at it from afar it is abstract in and of itself. All these images create a kind of pattern.

A.N.: *Filmstrips are very abstract, especially that whole beginning sequence.*

S.A.: Ye, the diamond sequence. It is right out of a Hitchcock credit sequence. Or like 'Man with a Golden Arm', or 'Psycho', or Vertigo'.

A.N.: *And what happens here, where you have the circular form that disappears?*

S.A.: Well, this would have been two images dissolving together before they print them. They would overlap them and then print them together. So the diamond fades out and the crowd scene fades in. So it is a gradual transition.

A.N.: *That's what is called a dissolve.*

S.A.: Yeah, a dissolve.

A.N.: *Let's get back to the paintings. You quote the colour separation process. What is it called again?*

S.A.: It's called colour reprography.

A.N.: *But the way you do it is different.*

S.A.: The difference is that I do it by hand. That is the only difference.

A.N.: *Black is produced in the same way?*

S.A.: Yes.

A.N.: *And how do you see the relationship to film in the paintings?*

S.A.: The paintings were done as 'promotional' material for the film. That's why I got into that dot-screen look. I was looking for something that pointed to mechanical reproduction, particularly printed matter. The four-colour separation, the dot matrix, all those things spoke to publicity or me or at least printed matter. In the olden days, right, they used to paint movie posters, so it is quoting that as well. All the source material for the paintings comes from the filmstrips. I mean they were re-formatted but the imagery is always re-formatted. Whenever you look at a movie poster it has been monkeyed with.

A.N.: *Yes, that's right, and it introduces the larger interest in folding in a reference to mechanical reproduction into something that is quite manual. Or the other way around. The movie idea is one more way of doing that. It is a problem that comes up consistently in your work. It comes up in the weather series, for example, the paintings that were based on the images that the fax machine produced. It comes up in other kinds of images like the thumbprints that seem to refer to photos but actually don't: what look like photos are based on drawing and the mechanical printing mechanism is your thumb. So the 'photographic' identity slips away even as the thumbprint, that seal of human identity, translates it. It seems to me 'Facsimile', which I've never seen, also works with this problem.*

S.A.: Yes, there are a number of things that operate in a machine-like way. With 'Facsimile' I used a jeweler's screwdriver to do the sgraffito drawings because it imposed a uniformity of line that mimicked the fax output. Still, you are aware of the presence of the hand there. The most interesting thing to me about imitating machine-like processes is that you can't help but fail. You can't reproduce this act over and over and have it be exactly the same. Even with the transferred photocopy sections of the filmstrip pieces, the act of gluing each frame onto the mylar one at a time, there are bound to be mistakes. Maybe an image gets torn while removing the paper backing or you glue an image upside down. In other parts of the piece the frames are drawn using the sgraffito technique. More room for things to go wrong. When you

look at each one of these frames that are drawn over and over you see the inconsistencies and perceptual shifts as the drawing is repeated. It all changes over the course of thirty-odd drawings. I think that in that failure you find our humanity. It is like the carpets in the Middle East, right; they always programmed in a mistake into their making because only their God could make it perfectly. Well, technology is one god in our pantheon. We like to think it can do it perfectly (laughs) though even it is human sometimes. However, I do try my best.

A.N.: *I want to get back to the issue of abstraction. I once showed you a catalogue from the Stiftung für konkrete Kunst in Reutlingen of an exhibition that paired Byzantine icons with mid twentieth-century abstract paintings. You pointed to the gutter of the catalogue, the 'fold' in between the icon and the abstract painting, and said, "I like to work right here." What did you mean?*

S.A.: With that catalogue I saw for the first time a western example of what I've always noticed about eastern religious art, which is that there is no distinguishing between abstraction and figuration in terms of its intention. The means of representing the divine are secondary to the message. Whether that be describing of the exploits of some god or the steps to a more exalted state of mind. The example for me is the representations of the hindu god Shiva. Sometimes artists used miniature paintings to create a kind of storyboard of his parables. Other times he is invoked using only an idealized phallus shape. I have taken those lessons in representation to heart and apply that way of thinking to most of what I do. What I do may take a more popular form like the filmstrips but they still operate in the territory between the figure and the abstract — I hope without being too obvious. Again with the eastern abstractions they are always representing something. It may be intangible but it is something. Likewise, I think that the mid-century painting is in a similar dialogue.

A.N.: *Your 'camera work' is another way into the problem. Technical devices, like zoom or slow-motion, can open up realms of experience that are 'mystical', in the sense that they disrupt time, they seem to fracture, to open up the surface of the world we normally see.*

S.A.: Some people might describe the result as essential. It is reduced like the process of distillation. There is a kind of purity associated with abstraction.

A.N.: *And you make a point of that by not only zooming in but then by transferring the zoomed-in image. That process breaks up the image. And you show the extreme logical consequence of the process in those paintings where we literally see just a few dots floating on a field. We have to imagine that at some level those floating dots are building blocks for an image. But there is no way we are going to get to that image.*

S.A.: No, you are right. I don't think that anything is disconnected. Even if I do this painting or that painting it is always attached to some other internal dialogue. It's tethered to all the other work. Each series is sort of bound together with the others.

A.N.: *You see those dots in the context of the head, and also in the context of the faces in the crowd.*

S.A.: What's interesting with the dot paintings of the crowds is that you have this microcosm, which is the dot standing in for a single thing among a multitude like an individual in a crowd. You have these small components come together to make up the individuals, which in turn make up the crowd. Hence the title of the series: "A small part of something larger". It is almost like a 'mise en abyme'.

A.N.: *How many dots are in the painting of the silhouette?*

S.A.: Probably 75,000. The abstract one as it were, the black painting has 100,000 dots. That is much more easily calculated. There are 25,000 yellow dots, I know that.

A.N.: *There is an essay by Walter Benjamin called the Storyteller where he talks about the kinds of activity that went on in an earlier mode of production. When people were sitting in a room together and sewing, certain kinds of stories and story-telling abilities were cultivated because people just spent a lot of time doing menial tasks that took time. With the mechanization and modernization of society that storytelling capacity falls away. What kind of experience did you go through painting all those dots? Was it ultimately a meditative experience? Did it actually inform and really make you think about the theme of the crowd-the one in the many? Or, was it just a kind of mechanical mediation through the body?*

S.A.: I do think that you do get into some state of mind. I started to do these paintings when a friend was diagnosed with terminal cancer. It was September the 10th (2001) so I was already in this kind of head space and I started the painting that day and the next day the World Trade Center came down. It was a perfect time to be doing that kind of work. It was simply keeping busy. Also, I don't know if you have ever grieved or not.

A.N.: Yes.

S.A.: Then you know it is really good to keep busy.

A.N.: *It is a process that cannot be accelerated.*

S.A.: Yes, and there is a certain madness in it, right? Whether it is organizing the clothing or letters of the loved one. There is something very methodical and determined in this organization to create order where there is chaos. Grief is nothing if not an overwhelming sense of chaos. One wants to make sure that everything is in place at this proximity to their death so that they can be conjured later. If everything is in order then we can keep them near to us.

A.N.: *That sounds like the function of ritual. It is a structure to manage things that aren't in our control.*

S.A.: Yes, and I think that you do it automatically. I think that it is somehow hardwired into us. Without any intention of doing it one ends up doing it. It is kind of fascinating. The first few times I did it I didn't even realize that I was doing it. Other people pointed it out to me. I did all these number drawings. Taking photographs of loves lost, dropping grids on them. Then assigning numbers to each square that corresponded to a shade of gray. Then reconstructing these photographs through numbers. Which I would paint by numbers. Thinking that at any date in the future I could reproduce exactly what I was seeing in the particular photograph on that day. I mean it is a fool's errand, but that doesn't really seem to matter.

A.N.: *And is there something to the fact that there is all of this colour in there and all of this work in there and ultimately it is a black painting.*

S.A.: (laughs)

A.N.: *In other words, it is all subsumed and in a way silenced ultimately by the result.*

S.A.: It is amazing, when you look at that painting you can really understand the task at hand.

A.N.: Yeah.

S.A.: It is about the amount of work that it represents. You can stare at it and probably get into a very similar mind set as I was in when I did it. You look at the patterns that are formed. You try and see something in it that is not there. Because of the different pressure of the application of the paint, some areas are darker than others. It appears as if there might be something there.

A.N.: *There is a fullness. There is an activity in the black.*

S.A.: So your mind can wander.

A.N.: *It is a sort of mystical reduction, the all in the one. The crowd is in the individual as well as the individual in the crowd.*

S.A.: For me it is an extreme close-up. It is a frame with an extreme close-up of John. You have zoomed in so far on the silhouette that it fills the entire frame. Without the outline you can no longer determine a likeness.

A.N.: *You are inside the shadow.*

S.A.: In that darkness you need an outline to see and without that you are untethered to the figure.

A.N.: *I think now I see a way back to the filmstrips. To me ultimately the effect of almost all your work is to insist on the various screens through which experience passes into our selves. We process everything through our memories, our obsessions, our experiences, and the world is just a mesh of these different configurations. Your work puts these screens before us. It shows mediation at work. The movie camera is in a way the ultimate instrument of mediation. It is a prosthetic device, extending from our eye. Film always shows us a partial view, a framed view, the view allowed by the camera. It is an image of how we experience the world, now reflected back on us. This is the point of that famous early film 'The Man with a Movie Camera' — I can't remember the director's name.*

S.A.: Vertov.

A.N.: *Right, Vertov.*

S.A.: The world comes to us through photographs. When I appropriate photographs the technology of the delivery system has to be foregrounded so that it is no longer just the thing itself. It is the thing transmitted. It is taking off from Magritte's "Ce n'est pas une pipe". It is not a pipe, it is a painting. So these aren't only what they are depicting they are also pictures of the means of transmission, pictures of the technology that brought them to us. They are icons that are squeezed through tubes or transmitted from space or brought to us via glossy magazines. What I am trying to do is visualize how the technical element imprints itself on the reading of the image. With these different technological interfaces foregrounded we can begin to think about the relationship between the image and the society it is delivered to. The image is impure. There is something of the mongrel in it. I relate to that. I have always thought of myself as a mongrel. If I was simply using the technology itself to produce the images somehow I feel that would be un-self-conscious whereas this is very self-conscious.

A.N.: *Technology is an opportunity to reflect on mediation but only if you mess with it in some way.*

S.A.: Yes, it has to be undone for you to be able to see it because technology is seamless. It is only by making cracks in it that it is revealed in interesting ways.

A.N.: *So your theme is not technology and its ills per se. You tend to think that technology brings to the fore certain issues about being in the world, about living life.*

S.A.: Yes, even picking up a pencil or a piece of charcoal and making a mark — that is already a technology. As soon as you put something between the hand and the representation, that is technology.

A.N.: And of course it is also art. Art is ultimately the world framed, recomposed, reconfigured. It makes concrete that process of reconfiguration that is already going on all the time socially and psychologically. It is a denser coagulation maybe, or it is altered in some other way. So technique — the manipulation of tools and materials — is more than just a means for art. It is also the problem and subject of art. •

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