Reflections on Instagram series 'Sunlight through blinds in my studio, morning of 13th Nov 2017'

Contents

The nature of the project

Instagram is a place where people post photographs of things they encounter or experience in the world. It claims to be a platform for a community of people to "capture and share the world's moments". The photos are usually taken on their phones. Editing software is sometimes used to improve them before they are posted.

'Sunlight through blinds in my studio, morning of 13th Nov 2017' is a series of images produced to explore the use and possibilities of these technologies. You can view it under my Instagram username 'philbradshaw_' at www.instagram.com/philbradshaw_

Each picture in the series contains an image of sunlight through Venetian blinds in my studio and the light and shadows created. They are all produced from the same original photo and varied using the standard photo-editing app on my inexpensive Android phone.

The process itself is important. Every day another image in the series should be posted to Instagram. Only one should be posted each day. It must be from the same source. Additional, unrelated, images may be posted on occasions. These are the rules I've set myself.

Each picture is different. Each is unique. But they all show exactly the same scene. To elaborate, they all contain the same recording of the patterns and shapes and colours and shades created by the environmental phenomena that occurred at that particular moment in time and as recorded on the phone in a single photo.

But they are also the result of using the functionality available from the 'post-production' technology (the editing software), the communication platforms (Wi-Fi, internet etc.) and the dissemination software (Instagram) – to transform this original recording and publish it.

The greatest variation between the images, of course, results from the decisions made and the settings applied in the editing. These facilities were originally, I assume, meant to replicate the darkroom techniques used in analogue photography to tweak the image and make a 'better' photo. However, the digital facilities allow much more extreme manipulation. I have taken extensive advantage of this.

Aims and objectives

My initial aims and objectives when I decided to pursue this were:

- I wanted to do something on Instagram that related to its philosophy and function, using photography and my phone,

- I wanted to create work with these technologies, rather than showing pictures of work created by other means,

- I wanted to explore the elements involved in the process - what could be done with these everyday, ubiquitous tools?

- I wanted it to be a repetitive procedure, requiring daily posting,

- I wanted to create a series of images derived from a single original. I wanted to discover the possibilities and limitations in doing this. I did not want to post a different photo of things encountered in the world each day,

- More generally, I wanted an online project so that it would be visible every day to a broader, more diverse audience, and

- I wanted it to deliver unexpected outcomes.

Reflections

As I carried out this project it became clear that I needed to try to understand what was being achieved by it. What am I doing by pursuing it? What are the implications of carrying out such a project? What insights could be delivered? Why is it an interesting thing to do? I needed to analyse it.

The musings and ramblings that follow document this analysis. They contain my thoughts, views, reflections and findings regarding this project. They are a mixed bag, a mishmash of things that have concerned me, and in a somewhat unsystematic sequence.

Some, to my mind anyway, are resolved. Others are left as questions or areas for further consideration.

As the project continued some areas seemed to demand more of my attention than others.

Much of the value of the project for me is in this analysis. It is in the insights provided when its nature is considered, when my thoughts, concerns and understanding are explored, examined and developed. Of course, tomorrow or the next day or a year from now I might read these reflections and be appalled by them. What was I thinking? And what on earth made me decide to share them? Ah well!

Choosing the image

When it is time to post a new image, a decision has to be made which to choose. Very quickly I decided I would prefer to have a number of available candidates from which to choose. But why this one rather than another one? A number of factors seem to be significant.

How does a candidate image relate to previous posts? Is it like the last one? Should I post something along the same lines as recent images? With similar colours or effects? Or should I post something different to provide variety, a contrast?

Does it provide characteristics that are satisfying to me today (is it subtle, strident, subdued, garish, harmonious, discordant etc.)?

Is it an image I'm uncertain about and, if so, does that mean I should or should not post it?

Some consideration of how it will be received is also inevitable when selecting the image. Do I think it will be appealing or not, and again does that mean I should or should not post it?

Or is a candidate so striking, or so exciting, that I'm just compelled to post it immediately? Most often it is an intuitive choice.

Improvisation

Each new image is improvised. The number of variables possible in the editing software, coupled with its limitations, is such that I'm unable to predict the outcome to any significant degree. I like this.

So the process is exploratory, investigative, experimental, trial and error. There is always the surprise, the unexpected. I might start with an idea of what I want, but it always turns out completely different. As the project continues, it is true that I become more familiar with the possibilities provided by the editing tools but the outcome remains largely unpredictable.

Sometimes it is just done as play, amusement, to pass the time.

And if I achieve something I find interesting or exciting, I save it and may post it. Or I may subsequently process it some more. Eventually some images become starting points for a series of variations on the same theme.

Photograph or image?

The terminology to use is this discussion is problematic. What is a photograph? What is an image? A picture? I generally refer to the item posted to Instagram as a picture or an image. The picture depicts an image. All these images in pictures delivered to Instagram are from the same photo.

Each image is not a photograph; it is a reproduction and transformation via 'post production' manipulation of an original photograph. Where this gets difficult, of course, is that so is every other photo. What we generally refer to as a photograph is the output from a number of processes and it was always this way. It is not just the initial recording in the film or in the camera's digital rendering. Sometimes the processes produce refinements, sometimes more extreme alterations. So in that case, my initial statement was wrong, each image is a photograph.

Working on a daily series

Having such a regular procedure and working in series has its benefits.

You don't have to think so fundamentally about what to do next. The overwhelming doubt that artists may feel about their work and what is worth pursuing is pushed to the margins. It doesn't go away; it's just that it is overtaken by the immediate priority to create and post that day's image.

Choices have to be made, but they are limited within a framework. They are at the micro level, not at the macro or existential level. And working from one source photo means that new subjects to photograph do not need to be sought.

Those artists who pursue a single trajectory in their practice, those who have found their 'thing' and pursue it from one work to the next perhaps operate in this way.

Further, I find that having a routine means that I keep going with it. I like to select the image and post it at roughly the same time every morning, after breakfast. I know that there might be better times to post to Instagram for maximum exposure but this works for me.

A series of variations

As I said, I wanted to create a series of images derived from a single original. So what are the consequences of working in series? And how, if at all, is a series based on a single source photograph different?

Here is an extended extract from 'Systemic Painting' a 1966 essay by Lawrence Alloway. It could almost have been written for what I'm doing here. For myself I would substitute something like 'an artist who works with discrete compositions' for 'an expressionist'. Alloway's is an historic reference that has no relevance now. I see no reason now why One-Image art can't also be expressionist art.

> "A possible term for the repeated use of a configuration is One-Image art... The artist who uses a given form begins each painting further along, deeper into the process, than an expressionist, who is, in theory at least, lost in each beginning: all the One-Image artist has to have done is to have painted his earlier work. One-Image art abolishes the lingering notion of History painting, that invention is the test of the artist. Here form becomes meaningful, not because of ingenuity or surprise, but because of repetition and extension. The recurrent image is subject to continuous transformation, destruction and reconstruction; it requires to be read in time as well as in space. In style analysis we look for unity with variety; in One-Image art we look for variety within conspicuous unity. The run of the image constitutes a system, with limits set up by the artist himself, which we learn empirically by seeing enough of the work. Thus the system is the means by which we approach the work."

Working in series then gives an authority, a unity, to the components. They are not 'just' individual works. Having the same underlying form unites the individual works. They have the authority of the group. They acquire meaning from the series, from the system, from the limits set by the artist.

But, as an inevitable consequence, one component of the series may not get the same attention / focus as a standalone work. Its specificity is likely to be subordinated to the general series to some degree. If one of the works is displayed independently this is less of a factor, though still important.

Pairs and small groups take on additional meaning in their own right. 'Identical' pairs and groups (multiples of the same image) by their nature are different again and also take on added meaning. This is an area potentially to be explored in exhibition. (Note – I subsequently posted several 'doubles' to Instagram and I created a web work, 'the first 500', which randomly generates a triptych in real-time every few seconds – its on my website).

Looking at a photograph

I do wonder, too, whether there isn't an additional dimension to this 'One-Image' notion relating to photography, confronting the way you look at the photographic image.

The usual attitude of someone looking at a photograph is, I guess, to start with what is being depicted. It's seen. It's understood (sometimes not). The aesthetic qualities may be appreciated. In that sequence, probably. Then you move on to the next one.

So if someone repeatedly delivers variations of the same image then this, I suggest, changes what is going on and therefore how a viewer will respond. The chief focus of this exercise is somewhere else. Recognizing what is depicted is not the starting point for the viewer who has seen more than one of these images. It is not the photo of the 'thing in the world' that is most interesting. What's important in this case, is the creation of images via the post-production treatment of the photo and seeing how it has been changed, what has been created and how it differs from others in the series. There is a change of emphasis.

So the nature of looking is altered. To repeat the last sentence of the above quote from Alloway's essay, '...the system is the means by which we approach the work'.

Also, by implication, an unqualified affirmation of the constructed nature of a photographic image is produced.

Pointing and asking

The initial photograph shows a distribution of graphical elements created from sunlight, blinds and shadows. The image is pointing at this and saying 'look what light and this stuff in the world can create'. And 'look at how light doesn't always reveal, sometimes it conceals'. And 'look how from this ephemeral incident, pattern is produced'. And 'look how "abstract" it is. Isn't it interesting? Don't you like it?' The photographer is revealing something you might not have noticed, showing you the world through the camera.

And then, each image demonstrates how different it can be when you apply editing. Look how it is transformed. Look at the visual effects produced and the exciting colours. And this one is different from all the others. It is distinct; it has its own character, its own identity, its own individuality. And with every new image, the question for the artist is how can it be altered to produce something new?

The series, by extension, asks what variety of images can be produced from the one original using these tools? It asks how many and how varied are the altered realities, or different individuals, that can be produced? And the answers are an infinite number and an extraordinary variety. Each variation displays this one captured corner of the world treated differently and shown differently.

'Altered realities' and 'different individuals' are two different readings that could apply here. The first equates the endlessly varying images as alternative realities to the 'reality' initially recorded on the photograph in the camera. The second equates each to an individual, perhaps a person, all with the same underlying nature, but each unique.

Investigating / studies

The production of variations of images in this way could perhaps also be seen as a contemporary equivalent of the practice by generations of artists of exploring and developing work via repeated studies - a means of investigating. Now, due to the technology available the 'studies', the investigations, are themselves finished works.

Digital photography and printmaking

What I am doing here is using a digital photographic process. But it seems to me it is also a variety of printmaking. Like printmaking I have taken a single image and used it as a plate. I have then varied the colours and effects like a printmaker might use different inks and techniques with the same plate. Multiple copies are then generated and published via Instagram like a printmaker produces and sells an edition. In this case however, thousands of copies of a work are distributed instantaneously.

Exploring the editing software

To a great extent the project became an exploration of the available editing controls and effects in the editing software and the limitations of the software and hardware.

The software tools enable you to change the original but they do not restrict you to the type of fine-tuning normally conducted on photographs. The scope for transformation is vast. Pushing the software variables to extremes delivers exciting and often unexpected results.

They enable you to radically transform the image, but they are not limitless. There are restrictions. Indeed they do not permit local editing of details; they provide only global changes affecting the image as a whole. You can only do what the selected tool allows. Of course, more could be done with additional or alternative tools.

Also, manipulating the variables on a small phone can be awkward and difficult to control. Moreover, editing on a phone limits your ability to see the whole image accurately. When you subsequently view it on a larger screen features may be revealed that you didn't see during editing.

Delivering surprises

The process seems to be able to continuously deliver surprising results as new combinations or features are incorporated. This is an important element of what I want when producing work. It's like improvisation in music; each performance delivers a different outcome - sometimes very different. The underlying image acts as a foundation in the same way as the underlying tune upon which the jazz musician improvises. Of course, unlike improvised music where a time-based performance is delivered, here the improvisation is in the private production process and results in a single fixed image.

Enormous variety

As stated above, the resulting images vary enormously. Some are subtle and delicate; others are bold and brash. Some are monochrome, others a cacophony of colour. Some colour combinations are harmonious, others discordant, many unexpected. Some images are a minor variation from the original, others almost unrecognizable.

There can be a 'scatter gun' effect. Generally, I am unable to settle for any length of time in one area and explore subtle, minor changes. It concerns me if an image is too similar to the last posted image.

So far as I can see there is nothing in the way of a 'style' that isn't a consequence of the limitations of the technologies and the rules of the project. Continuity exists via the underlying structure, the underlying photograph. It is also generated when images provide the basis for further images and a particular 'theme' is explored.

The source photograph

The photo originally recorded, the source material for this project, was a product of my individual decision-making regarding where to direct the camera and the choices taken regarding the framing, zooming and other photographic settings.

But it also depends on the model of camera phone, the quality of the camera and the software rendering and recording of the digital image.

Indeed the specifics of the particular phone must be recognised, too. While all the phones of a particular model should be the same, it is never possible to manufacture millions of absolutely identical units. There will be differences. That's why you get obviously faulty phones sometimes.

This particular photograph

It seems with hindsight that there were good reasons why I chose to take this photo and use it for the project. It's quite 'abstract'. It has little narrative interest. It's predominantly 'pattern', repetition. It's linear, geometrical. It's all diagonals, verticals and horizontals. It's 'modern'. There is a dramatic contrast of dark and light. The composition is also roughly symmetrical, vaguely divided into rectangles covering half and quarters of the whole. And the prominent shadows link it to previous works of mine.

It's also ambiguous, uncertain, difficult to make out. There is only a small amount of specific incident. The blinds and shadows conceal the physical environment – for example, there is a TV that is not distinguishable at all.

The image is also quite frontal and close up, filling the picture frame, and can seem 'in your face' confrontational depending on the effects applied, though the pictorial or spacial depth is varied from image to image.

Is it 'retinal'?

There is obviously an intention, a concern to produce something visually striking, exciting or interesting every day. Does that make these images what Duchamp dismissed as 'retinal', concerned merely with visual effect?

It is likely to be the case that visual effect, the 'retinal', is what many viewers might register on first seeing one of these. And I'm sure that for me and for anyone else viewing them, that is much of the appeal of each new image. Indeed even when you know what the project is, the main attraction will be the visual effects achieved in today's image.

However I think that the fact that this is a project with rules and objectives, that it is a series, that it is process-based, together with its exploratory nature and the related analysis mean that most would classify this as conceptual.

For me, though, just because it is conceptual doesn't mean it can't be visually exciting, colourful, extreme, engaging. And vice versa. I see no reason why it can't be both 'retinal' and conceptual, visually interesting and 'an intellectual expression' 'at the service of the mind' to use Duchamp's own words.

Sumptuous but inarticulate

Listening to the radio, I heard a music critic comment that the piece he'd just played was 'sumptuous but inarticulate'. I understood this to mean that he felt the piece sonically rich, gorgeous perhaps, but failing to communicate clearly or effectively. This seemed to me worth considering in relation to these daily images.

However this led to me commencing, though barely scratching the surface of, a broad ranging consideration of communication and meaning in painting and abstraction in general which is far too extensive a research topic to be covered here.

Perhaps this is a subject for another document like this at a later date.

Conflicting with the Instagram ethos?

It is central to this exercise that it is done via Instagram. As I stated in my initial aims, I wanted to do something using Instagram and my camera phone that related to its philosophy and function. An exploration of the use and possibilities of these technologies is at the core of this undertaking.

However, carrying out projects like this is not really what Instagram is meant for. Rather than capturing and sharing the world's moments, I have captured a single moment and

am sharing it again and again and again in changing guises. I've turned it into an artistic endeavour. Does it matter? The thought that people might disapprove occasionally makes me uncomfortable. Perhaps it is annoying. Though no-one has complained. I've come across a couple of other people exploring similar undertakings, too. So it's not just me. I'll just have to live with the uncertainty.

Lesser art

Is it lesser art because it's on Instagram? Instagram has, after all, become synonymous with the disposable. Is it even real art at all if it is delivered via Instagram? Is it serious? Is it of value (it has no financial value)? Is this somehow not a valid context for actual art - as opposed to pictures of artworks? If so, is this true of all web-based services? Why is that?

Does art have to be contextualised by a gallery, museum or recognised 'artistic setting' for it to be art? Or at least to be taken seriously? Are there some places where what you see cannot be significant art? If so, what are they? What differentiates them? Do I have to reproduce the images as six foot (or eight foot or ten foot) canvases and have them shown by a major gallery for them to matter? Would they be more valuable because of the physical effort / engagement to produce it, the handmade-ness?

It is, I'm sure, true that people on Instagram generally spend very little time looking at an image. They swipe through them at speed. So there is little 'close reading'. But to a degree that is also true in galleries.

Is it lesser art because the artwork is available to thousands of people? Is it lesser art because it is the same image varied continually? Maybe it is lesser art because there is another one every day (they just come too often, there are too many of them, they have no scarcity value)? Is it lesser art because the basic photo is of limited interest? Or perhaps it's lesser art because the images vary so much, too much?

Is it lesser art because it is restricted by what can be done using a cheap phone and a bog standard photo editor with its clumsiness and its limitations? How can art of refinement, sensitivity, subtlety and eloquence be produced this way? (Are these things requirements of art?)

Or not?

The elimination of the commodity

Is art more important when it is a commodity that has to be bought, owned, collected? If it is more expensive, more difficult to acquire, then it has more value? But, this is to conflate the meanings of 'value' - the monetary value and the importance of the art, as art.

This work has no financial value, as I said above. It is not a commodity, it is not merchandise to be bought and sold. If you accept that these are works of art, and I insist that they are, then they are art provided free for all. Looked at like this, perhaps this is an area for further consideration, further exploration.

Additionally, the work is there for anyone to see. It has no scarcity value. It's insubstantial in the literal sense (unless printed). It has no lasting physical presence; it is ephemeral.

Its only value then becomes its art value.

A broader audience

Displaying the work online addresses a broader audience, people I would not otherwise connect with, from many different locations. It's also a welcome change to have an immediate audience reaction and gratifying to get any kind of feedback quickly.

Occasionally, however, it feels like you're working in public. Each posted image is available for immediate inspection and appraisal. This is probably partly why I usually try to have a few in hand ready for selection every morning – to enable me to be more confident in my choice to publish.

Resulting images

Of course, I don't really see the resulting images from this. I see the image via Instagram that appears on my computer or on my phone.

Others are seeing different images. What they and I see is something processed by Instagram and recorded in Instagram servers and communicated via the internet (and all that involves) to a specific, unique, device with its own technology and device settings and preferences with a perhaps a different operating system. It is this final device that presents an image to a particular viewer.

And every viewer's eyesight varies. And they see it in diverse lighting conditions in separate locations around the world and at different times.

But that's the process. That's the way it is. There's nothing that you can do other than recognise and accept it. The differences here remain in the realm of Duchamp's infra-thin – casts from the same mould.

What you get is what there is

Since the editing of the images and their distribution via Instagram are component parts of the work, there is no sense in which the subtleties and physical presence of the work are lost, which is a criticism directed at reproductions of paintings, for example. This is the work and what you get is what there is. And what you see on your device is the way to see it - even though it may differ from the way someone else sees it.

Introducing a random number based process

It occurred to me that perhaps chance could be used to determine the photo editing settings. The software works using a combination of slider-based, numerically defined, settings and the curve-type pull and stretch parameters, which have no numerical definition displayed. After 5 months, I started using a random number based process for some images to determine the settings to activate and the values to apply.

Introducing a chance-based component actually restricts the possibilities for an individual image. It limits my involvement to the non-numerical editing – specifically Vignette, Graduated and Curves - but only if the random number process allows it. My ability to control the outcome is reduced or eliminated. Of course, I still choose which images to post.

This technique is productive at times, increasing the possibilities by generating combinations of settings that I would have otherwise been unlikely to choose.

Often, however, the generated settings conflict or fail to deliver anything interesting. I suppose this is no different from a fully improvised procedure; sometimes nothing interesting comes out of it.

The random number calculations needed to be gradually refined to give optimum results.

Chasing a rabbit down a hole

After 190 days I decided to change the strategy for a while. Instead of each time taking the initial photograph and editing it, I picked one of the previously posted images and edited that to create a new image. The next day I edited that last image and on and on 'chasing a rabbit down a hole'.

This causes a gradual degradation as elements of the image are lost or broken up. The original is less evident. It also delivers new possibilities, new directions.

After continuing 'down the rabbit hole' for a while, the promising options seem at times to narrow and then might burst into a new area.

As well as the image degrading the underlying data seems to degrade, too. And changes you make on the screen in the editor turn out differently, sometimes very differently, when you save the file and look at it in the gallery viewer.

A later, more extended, excursion 'chasing a rabbit down a hole' was undertaken from day 295. This carried on for 111 'levels', each new image derived from the preceding image. Images far removed from the original were the consequence. And the gradual degradation was extended over a longer period. During the later stages there remained little more than traces of the source photo.

Thereafter, this became a normal part of the process. Sometimes I would edit from the original image, sometimes from an existing posted image "chasing the rabbit".

Not a readymade?

The original photo of which all the rest are variants is not a readymade photograph; I took it myself. Though a found picture could just as easily have been used. I might do that for my next project.

But is there really much difference between the photograph seen in the world and used and the image seen in the world and captured? Both are selected. This thought is kind of Sherrie Levine backwards. It suggests that not only can an existing photo be a readymade but also that all photographs of the 'external world' are readymades.

Derivative

These images are derivative.

They derive from their predecessors or from the original.

They derive from, and are limited by, the design of the photo editing software. The editing features / tools provided have underlying fundamentals, foundations, which dictate what is possible, needed or desirable. They derive from analogue photographic development practices and are based on standards and conventions and technologies developed for the digital world.

Plus they are derived from my personal influences and preferences and my particular history of exposure to art and to the world, which influences my choices and decisions when operating the editing software and selecting images to publish.

Printing

While the primary communication method for these images is via Instagram, what are the implications of printing and publishing or exhibiting them? Does that somehow contravene the spirit of the project? I'm sure that wouldn't stop me.

But which would you print? There are the images before they are loaded and there are the images on Instagram. There is a difference. Those in Instagram are square. So they have been cropped from the original. They're also at a different resolution. You can download them from specialist websites as 1080x1080 and 240ppi.

If the printed image is to be the Instagram picture, it probably needs to be downloaded from Instagram. Otherwise it is either a recreation of the work (if the image from the editing app is trimmed to be the same format) or a different work with a different format and additional elements. (But see the next subsection).

And what size should they be printed? Should they somehow reflect the published size in Instagram? Does it matter? And how should they be displayed?

Printing would allow exploration of pairing, combining and repetition. It would also extend exhibition options.

Originality and authenticity

Issues of originality and authenticity have been raised many times by many artists, academics and others over the last century. Do they need to be addressed further? Probably not. However by analysing this project, it's difficult to avoid them. By choosing to deliver works via Instagram it was inevitable that these issues would need to be considered.

By putting out these works via Instagram the posted image on Instagram is the authentic original. It is in the nature of the work. That's one of the points of this project. That means it consists of hundreds, thousands, an unlimited number of instances. And it's available to be downloaded and printed by anyone. And anyone who does this has an authentic original work – because that's in the nature of it, too. So where is the original?

If the original were to be considered the digital file created using the phone app then the Instagram version might be considered a (cropped) copy. Or, more convincingly, the cropping as the file is loaded into Instagram (which incidentally was not initially intended) produces a different work, another original. Or is it just a part of the process of delivering the finished piece, like cropping an analogue photographic image before developing it? In which case the file created from the phone app could merely be considered an intermediate element.

Of course, if the artist chooses to produce prints where does that fit into this? If the artist prints the Instagram image, how is it any different from any Instagram viewer printing it? It's not. Of course if the prints are altered or signed by the artist, it may completely change their status for a potential future owner. If, on the other hand, I were to print the image as it was produced from the phone app but before it was cropped for Instagram, this would be a different work, one not available via Instagram. In this case the file from the phone app would no longer be merely an intermediate element in the process; it has become the source of another original work.

Naturally, wanting to retain the freedom to do as I choose, I will obviously claim the artist's prerogative to decide what I consider originals and, in fact, not be restricted by such concerns.

Discovering the process

Through this analysis of the project, the structure and implications of the process have been exposed, as we have seen.

The media is fundamental to it. The exploration can involve all elements of the process, all elements of the media. Some things have been sidestepped thus far. There are still other avenues to be explored, should they be of interest.

Some things this is not and some things this is

Thinking about Andy Warhol, screen printing his repeated images in different colours – the Marilyns, the Maos etc.. I'm using varying colours and effects through a series. He was doing this too – with colours at any rate. Though the varying editing effects deliver a different image. His use of repeated images in varying colours in the same piece may be something to explore.

Thinking about Josef Albers' abstract painting series 'Homage To The Square' – what I'm doing isn't painting and it isn't geometric abstraction but it is related in that it is series-as-exploration (though aren't most series to some degree?). His exploration is colour interaction. Mine is something else. I am varying the elements of this process, particularly the editing controls.

Thinking about other painters' series – Claude Monet's Haystacks or Rouen Cathedrals, Giorgio Morandi's still lifes, Mondrian, Rothko, Ad Reinhardt's late black paintings, Diebenkorn's Ocean Park paintings, Jasper John's Flags and other series, Sean Scully's entire output, Robert Ryman, Bridget Riley, Stanley Whitney and a large proportion of other contemporary painters. They are following avenues in their production. What I'm doing with this series is not much different really. The things that separate it are that it's photographic, that all the images are derived from one source, that it's a daily procedure and that it's done with this set of technologies.

Thinking about Daniel Buren and his repeating 'stripe' motif – it's not like that, his work is fundamentally about using a 'tool' (the stripes) in situ to change the way you see the surroundings.

Thinking about Allan McCollum – his projects involve methods that produce variations and combinations to create large numbers of related but individual pieces. In his case these are generally 3D elements. My photographic series here is similar in its production of large numbers of variations, though not to the level of McCollum, and I am doing so from one source.

Thinking about On Kawara – his production of date paintings, the Today series, is an obvious predecessor to any such daily project. His is process-based text painting relating to the passage of time in his life and reflecting his location. There is no imagery involved except in the accompanying newspapers in the earlier stages of the project.

Offshoots

The daily images have provided the source material for a number of offshoots.

From the beginning I published videos on Instagram created from a month's images. Instagram limits video length to 1 minute so the objective was to see what I could come up with using Final Cut Pro editing and the images from that month. With the exception of the one year video, which contained all the images in chronological order, the images were always sorted into a random sequence. At the time of writing, other tactics for generating the videos included: randomly determining clip length, randomly determining cut or fade (cross dissolve) transition, randomly selecting to zoom in or out or to pan left or right, split screen or overlaid elements and combining forward and reversed playing.

Additionally, I have posted a few variations involving, for example, doubling the image and "slippage" of the image.

I also created a web triptych, 'the first 500' which randomly generates a triptych combination of three images from the first 500 images posted to Instagram in this series. It updates in realtime every few seconds and can be seen on my website.

With all these offshoots, the objective is to discover what can be generated using chance operations on top of the posted series images.

Why continue?

It is difficult to know how long this project will last and whether it will continue to be revealing and informative.

As the number of images in the series increases, does its importance increase? Are 100 images better than 10? Are 200 or 1000 better than 100? What if there are several thousands? Does it matter?

Is it never-ending and what are the implications if it is? Ad Reinhardt in 'Art as Art' says "There is nothing less significant in art, nothing more exhausting and immediately exhausted, than 'endless variety.'" But I think he meant 'unlimited variety'? This is not that. This variety is limited by the nature of the project.

There are times when it seems a waste of effort - why do I bother? But so far they have passed. What will make me decide to stop this project? Can it remain productive? Will it continue to deliver new insights, further understanding? Will it continue to raise questions?

To some degree this may be measured by whether there is anything more to be said here in this document.

And then, does this analysis become part of the work?

Philip Bradshaw, July 2018

Last updated June 2019