Picturing Things:
Advertising, Objects and Meaning.

Paul Alexander Langmead,
Department of Communications and Multimedia
Edith Cowan University.

Supervised by Lelia Green and Kevin Ballantine.

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Introduction

In a media-rich world such as our own, where so much of the communication we send and receive occurs in the visual realm, it is difficult to conceive of a medium more powerful than photography. Photography, however, is no more than a medium for representing things, a pointer to the true locations of meaning. With the establishment of photography within contemporary culture, the medium sits alongside other forms of representation, from which it has been constructed and which it has helped to build, posing as a purely denotative form.

Advertising imagery shares a similar cultural space, often relying on photography for the delivery of its message, while at the same time shaping the destiny of photographic representation. These two cultural constructs share a common and co-dependant past and as such can legitimately be viewed as interrelated forms. In the age of commodity culture, where identities are bought, sold and built using the blocks of consumer capitalism and the promises their products have to offer, the still life image (modified and improved by advertising and photography) has fast become a far reaching and dominant cultural form. It is photography's relationship with promotional media that renders the modern still life form radically different from the historical examples of the medium, and which has assigned it a new role within contemporary cultural production.

Advertising as ideology

How is meaning generated and assigned to objects and commodities? Andrew Wernick, Daniel Miller and Anthony Giddens in separate research agreed that meaning in objects is, in part, created by advertising networks (Wernick 1991: p32, Miller 1987: pp171-172 and Giddens in Warde 1994: online). An 'aura' (which according to Walter Benjamin is an idea or significance surrounding an object which has nothing to do with its actuality or intrinsic qualities, but rather with its social or cultural significance) is created for a new commodity or object by linking it with existing conceptions of past objects, ideas or cultural movements, in the hope that the image created for, or rather the meaning given to, the object will translate into sales (Wernick 1991: p32). Wernick calls this 'Imagistic Advertising': that is, advertising that makes no attempt to convey product information of any type, but only seeks to position the product within a cultural discourse (Wernick 1991: p24). This kind of advertising relies on pre-existing and understood cultural codes which are linked to the new commodity. The aim is to induce consumers to embrace what the product is meant to mean (Wernick 1991: p38).

Daniel Miller also acknowledged the role of advertising in codification; he noted that the fact of image-based leanings in modern advertising was a given. He states:

> *The critic who points out that the advertisement appears to have nothing to do with the material and functional nature of the product is merely reproducing the general illusion of vulgar functionalism enshrined in modernism. It is the secondary, often social, but possibly also humorous, moral or sexual connotations which represent the actual value of the 'aestheticised commodity' (Haug 1986: p72) to the purchaser (Miller 1987: p171).*

Miller is as ready as Wernick to assign a leading role to advertising in the codification of objects and commodities. Unlike Wernick, however, he attributes a large part of these structures of meaning to a kind of material linguistics, where objects attain, or rather

always have had, a distinct *linguistic* role within human interaction. Advertising, for Miller, draws on (rather than authors) this process, tapping into a latent, yet inarticulate, visual language that is little understood (Miller 1987: pp171-172).

Appadurai is less ready to accept a leading role for advertising in the creation of object meanings, he prefers instead to attribute this role to what he terms 'politics in the broader sense' (Appadurai 1986: p57), these being 'relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power'. Appadurai is, however, prepared to admit that advertising plays a significant role (Appadurai 1986: pp55-56); and even goes so far as to label the tendency advertising has to engage in object codification and classification rather than simplistic information transfer as the 'critical cultural move of late capitalism' (Appadurai 1986: p56).

Despite Appadurai's reservations (Appadurai 1986: p57) about the role of advertising, his concept of value works together with the social forces to which he attributes the networks of object meaning. Appadurai gives similar attributes to the terms *value* and *meaning* in relation to objects, preferring the term *value* to denote social and economic value within use and ownership patterns (Appadurai 1986: p8). Advertising essentially serves the interests of power and commerce, which, in the age of commodity culture and mass consumption, are *the* central 'contests pertaining to power' (Appadurai 1986: p57). It is therefore reasonable to claim that while advertising is not, by virtue of what it is and what it entails, an institution of codification; its present central role in the economy and politics of late western capitalism have thrust it into such a role. Appadurai did, however, note that demand and need rarely share anything in common, offering that demand was a function of 'a variety of social practices and classifications,

rather than a mysterious emanation of human needs' and that advertising was a form of 'social manipulation' to which demand, and hence consumption, was a 'mechanical response' (Appadurai 1986: p29). This in turn offers us a reason for Williamson's observation that the most interesting and diverse advertisements are generally in product categories where all brands are essentially the same (like cigarettes), and the category constitutes a luxury or un-necessary commodity (Williamson 1978: p25). Demand in these areas has to be generated as it does not exist of it own accord. Given that the bulk of consumer goods in a modern capitalist society fit into this category, it is easy to see that demand and need have little in common.

The principal role of advertising is to generate desire for a specific commodity, 'being is having, desire is lack' (Wernick 1991: p35). Successful generation of desire leads to demand (though they are not the same thing), and demand increases both the exchange and sign value of a commodity (Appadurai 1988: p29). Advertising's goal is to link a commodity with every desire, thus enabling satisfaction to be expressed through the act of consumption (Wernick 1991: p35). Advertising, then, is instrumental in the management of consumer demand, and the adaptation to and development of new and emerging markets; it achieves this by creating a desire, using the existing object/meaning framework, and then linking the satisfaction of that desire with consumption (Wernick 1991: p25).

Once the process of codification is complete, and the object has been assigned a place in cultural understanding as well as being assigned a desire to satisfy, it can become nearly impossible to dissociate the commodity from its created 'aura' (Wernick 1991: p32). The codified commodity is essentially a fiction, and the patterns of its use

constructed as having cultural significance (Wernick 1991: p32). Products are inseparable from language, and, in a sense, the language we use to understand the commodity is that offered to us by the advertiser.

Despite the role advertising has in the classification and codification of objects and commodities, it is important to remember that the creation of meaning in advertising is a side effect of the selling process (Wernick 1991: p26). Any values implied in advertising will necessarily be middle-of-the-road (Wernick 1991: p42); as the facts, and even aesthetics, are secondary concerns next to the ultimate bottom line of successful sales. After all, while using elements and aspects from both disciplines, advertising is neither communication nor art, but rather rhetoric (Wernick 1991: p27). In order to draw in the largest group of potential consumers, advertising will always attempt to be all things to all people; that is, unless a cultural consensus is present (such as a consensus on a particular target group on a certain issue), it will attempt to appeal to the lowest common cultural denominator (Wernick 1991: p43). Advertising is then, in a sense, a kind of 'cultural gyroscope' (Wernick 1991: p45), never breaking new ground or introducing new ideas lest it alienate a potential consumer.

Having said this, one could argue that the proliferation in recent times of advertising campaigns, like those of clothing manufacturer Benetton, do the opposite of this, that is; alienate particular segments of society whilst attracting others to buy the product. What is important to realise is that both producers and advertisers recognise and understand that very few products have the ability to be all things to all people. The more specific the message being sent by the codified commodity, the less general the audience, and hence, the more specifically targeted the advertising. The advertising of

Benetton was unique in its time in that it became decidedly unpopular amongst certain sectors of the community. Ostensibly, this trend in modern advertising appears to contradict Wernick's notion that advertising is a 'cultural gyroscope' (Wernick 1991: p45), but in some ways it also appears to confirm it.

Wernick, Miller and Appadurai all agree that the purpose and goal of the advertising system is to codify and classify goods (Wernick 1991: p38, Miller 1987: pp171-172, Appadurai 1986: p29, pp55-56). Specifically, the concept of a good brand cannot exist without the existence of bad brands. When objects are codified, they are necessarily *classified* as well, both in relation to other goods and in relation to the people who use them. Benetton's advertising strategy was to foreground this classificatory technique to the point that it was the totality of its communicative product. Benetton were patently aware of who their market were (educated, middle-class professionals with an emerging yet simplistic social conscience and a somewhat reactionary political sensibility), and knew that if their product could be identified or linked with this kind of popular thinking, that the net result would be increased sales.

The fact that this strategy, which had been both culturally and economically popular in Europe, failed in the United States simply confirms what Wernick was saying. The European experience had taught Benetton that the ideology they were selling was popular enough that any dissent would be drowned out by the collective voices of happy customers; their mistake was in thinking that Europeans and Americans shared the same mindset. By a 'cultural gyroscope', Wernick meant that advertising seeks a *balance* in how its product is publicly perceived, the kind of balance Benetton had achieved in Europe; enough controversy to allow their advertising to be discussed and disseminated

by a cultured and educated middle class, but never enough to allow the consensus to be a negative one. The failure of this balance in the United States resulted in the sacking of Oliveri Toscani, the man responsible for the campaigns, and proved Wernick's contention to be true: as soon as the gyroscope tilted off balance, the company reacted to correct it again.

Almost all niche producers use these kinds of strategies to codify their products into consumer categories within which their marketing departments feel the product is best located. Fashion labels in particular rely on their products classifying the wearer as a certain kind of person in order for the product's sign value to outweigh its use value. In order to do this, they must necessarily exclude consumers who don't fit the profile. This classification made by one label of its consumers will then be used by another label in applying a classification to its own consumers, except that the roles will be reversed.

Fig 1. Tommy Hilfiger *advertisement, Australian* Cosmopolitan *magazine June 2003*

Let us consider the following two examples of fashion advertisements, first individually and then in comparison to one another. The first advertisement is for fashion label *Tommy Hilfiger* (Fig 1.) and depicts a young woman dressed in the (assumingly) representative attire offered by the brand at

the present moment. The young woman leans against a wooden frame that resembles some kind of dock or pier, over which is draped a large towel or blanket. Behind her and only half in frame sits a bare footed man holding an acoustic guitar. In the background we can see water and a soft afternoon sky. All of this is for the purpose of advertising the new fragrance from *Tommy Hilfiger*.

The striped top and white over shirt have a distinctly nautical feel to them and invoke the image of a yacht just out of frame, even though one is not present. The man in bare feet with the guitar completes the story of a day at or on the water. This then takes us another step, the combination of these objects contextualises the product within the setting of leisure. The woman will not be wearing this fragrance to her place of work, she will be relaxing, perhaps sitting on the blanket draped over the pier and listening to her partner playing his guitar. The goal then of this ad is to say that if you identify yourself, or would like to identify yourself, with the nautical/boating/affluent set, then the *Tommy Hilfiger* product on offer is for you, and that by buying the product you are buying into that ideology.

The next example is an ad for English clothing label *FCUK*, and is a double page spread from the inside front cover of *Loaded* magazine (Fig 2.). The ad depicts four young people (one woman and three men) dressed in the clothing offered by the label. In the foreground are two surfboards, in the background, a VW Kombi van, another surfboard, outdoor/camping furniture, mountain bikes and a minibus that appears to be set up for camping and recreation. The setting is outdoors in full sun and has a relaxed late afternoon feel to it.

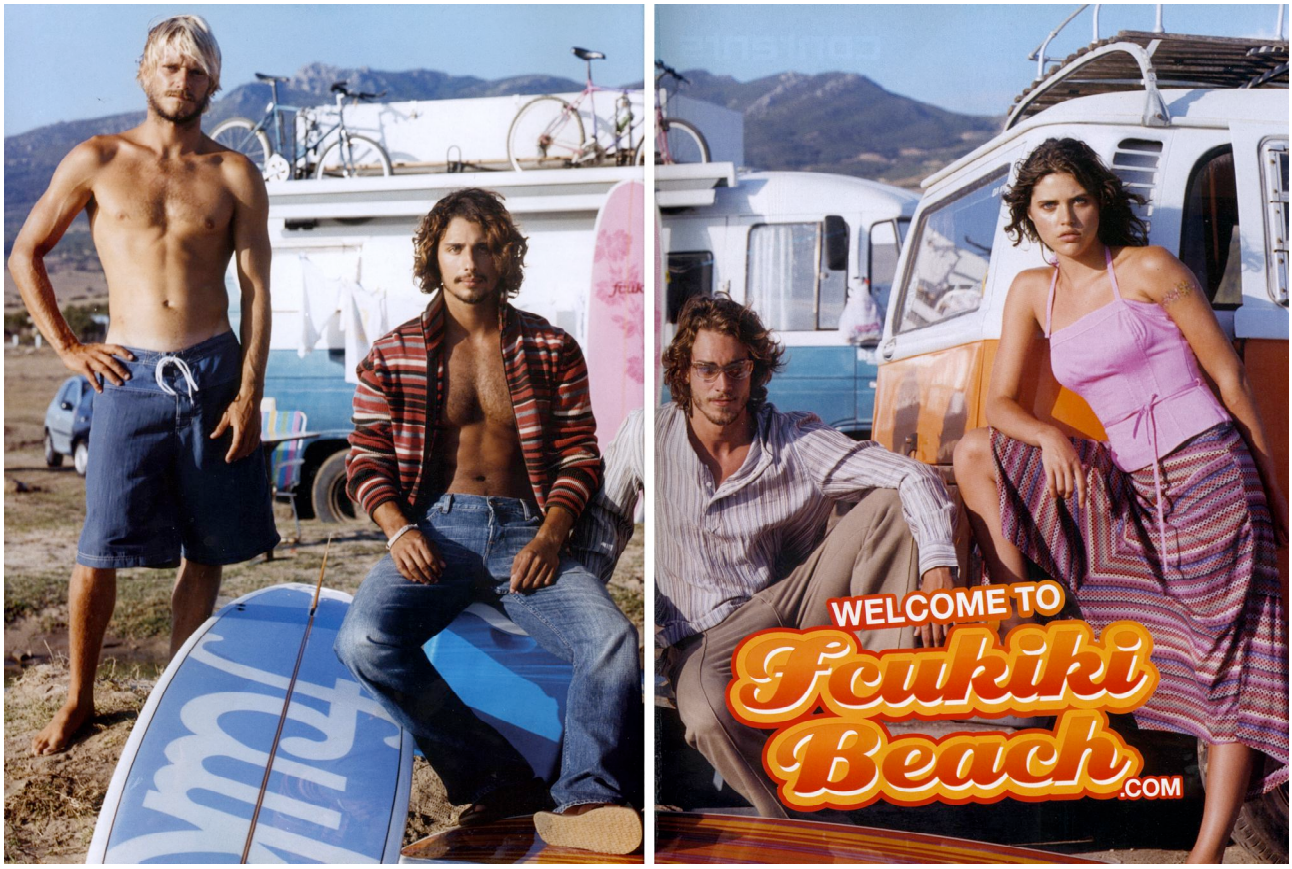


Fig 2. FCUK *clothing advertisement,* Loaded *magazine March 2003*

This ad is aimed at a less affluent, but still leisurely, target group. All of the objects present in the ad are for the purpose of recreation or sport. The clothes appear amongst a group of other items which attract the consumers the label desires as an audience, and puts off those whom it does not desire. This perhaps explains the inclusion of the mountain bikes, as it draws in a new group (mountain bikers) who may identify with or share ideological space with the main target group (surfer/beach types).

The inclusion and exclusion messages encoded in both of these advertisements become more apparent when they are viewed together, as each attempts to communicate to a different type of person. Each ad clearly excludes the group at which the other is aimed. *FCUK* has aimed its ad at a leisurely but lower middle class audience, the kind

who would go on a surfing or mountain-biking camping holiday in a VW Kombi camper van. The *Tommy Hilfiger* ad depicts people whom you would imagine would prefer to stay in a hotel and transport themselves in a European convertible. While neither of these ads can be seen as controversial, they still divide and classify in much the same way as the Benetton campaigns did: on the basis of an ideology.

What is important in both of these advertisements, and what has the greatest significance for photography, is that this classification is mediated by the products depicted in the photographs. The people present are largely irrelevant, and have little effect on the reading of the advertisement. In these advertisements the people are used in the same way as the objects; in essence the pictures contain no *verbs*, only *adjectives*, nothing happens or is about to happen within the frame. Advertising, however, has not created for itself this method of codifying and classifying objects, rather it has appropriated both an established set of social factors that govern and control the perceived social meanings of commodities and objects, and a pre-existing visual medium which possessed the rudimentary requirements for the transmission of promotional messages.

Social forces and object meaning.

As Appadurai and Baudrillard (1990: p19) have suggested, advertising does not have a monopoly in the codification and classification of objects; there is also a variety of social and cultural factors which help to contextualise objects in a broader framework of meaning. Both objects and commodities have a life history (Appadurai 1986: p17), and this history can be looked at in a variety of different ways. On the one hand we

have the 'cultural biography' of an object, which constitutes the past of a specific object: such as Elvis' guitar or Jerry Seinfeld's Porsche. 'Social history' on the other hand has more to do with the patterns of use than a story about who actually uses the object itself; it pertains to a complete class of object, such as all Porsches or even all cars (Appadurai 1986: p36). It may also be that an object's sheer cost codifies the object in a favourable or unfavourable light.

The best way to exemplify how the 'cultural biography' of an object plays a role in the codification of objects in general is by looking at luxury or 'enclaved' goods, and the rules and cultural norms surrounding them. The 'enclaved' good (Appadurai 1986: p22) is one for which there is an established and elaborate set of rules governing ownership. They are not commodities in the true sense, as their exchange is prohibited except in times of extreme hardship. The crown jewels, family heirlooms, and religious relics all fall under the category of 'enclaved' goods. This particular category of object is important because it has perhaps the deepest and most complex set of social meanings, and is yet considered *priceless* in terms of exchange value. These objects are kept absent from the commodity realm by decree rather than by any form of social valuation. Essentially the ultimate form of luxury object, they are a signifier of the highest social ranking. These objects attain these meanings by virtue of their 'cultural biography'; in the case of the crown jewels, the exclusivity and rank of past owners imparts an equivalent exclusivity and rank on the current owner. Additionally, the symbol of 'The Crown' comes to be a visual and concrete reminder of the concepts of nobility, royalty, privilege or tyranny; depending on the crown being discussed, and the individual discussing it.

Objects and commodities build up a mystique based on their associations with the present and past, in addition to their trajectory toward the future. But this does not mean that these social histories can't be changed. The example used by Miller (1987: p169) is that of the motor scooter in Britain. The Italian manufacturer's original intent for the scooter was the female market, but because the youth movement of the time resisted the more macho image associated with the conventional motorcycle, the scooter became linked to this particular youth movement (Mods), rather than to a specific gender. This is not to say that the codification of the manufacturer was completely discarded, simply modified, but from that point on the scooter came to be associated, in Britain at least, with the Mod movement. A similar change can be seen in the history of computing, as what was initially intended (and marketed) as a financial, business and sometimes family tool, in the hands of obsessive hobbyists (and let us not forget advertisers), becomes a cult object for gaming, role-playing and interactive communications.

The social forces to which Appadurai attributes the codification of objects intimately connected with the history of the objects in question: whether this is the history of a specific thing (cultural biography) or grouping of types of things (social history). These meanings and histories are then manipulated by politics, economics and channels of power within social discourse in an effort to build and maintain that power. Essentially, these meanings are constructed in an unconscious consumer world somewhere between the physical actualities of the objects themselves and the peculiarities of language and culture (i.e. their representations in various forms, including photographic) that create the contextual frameworks in which these objects and their multiplicity of meanings are arrayed.

With the extension of imagistic advertising to all corners of the globe, and into an increasing number of media, it is conceivable that the balance of power in codification between Appadurai's *social forces* and the control exercised over these forces by advertising has already shifted to favour the latter. As histories of promotional strategies in mass media replace the histories of actual use (through advertisements and endorsements, sponsorship of stars and product placement), the original social history of an object is easily manipulated to favour an advertiser's preferred reading, and to promote further sales. Thus 'reality', in whatever sense we can conceive of it, gradually gives way to the kind of *hyper-reality* described by Baudrillard, where the actual object effectively ceases to exist alongside the far more powerful and wide reaching representational system to which it has given rise (Baudrillard 1990, Baudrillard in Miller 1987: p165).

If we take a broader look at both of these ways in which meaning is manipulated, we can also see another pattern start to emerge: in each of these cases (manipulation of meaning through either advertising or social forces), there is a common influence around which meanings accumulate: *difference*. Both of these systems of meaning manipulation are essentially representational-linguistic systems, and hence necessarily imbue signifiers with meaning *in relation* to other signifiers. What is important, is that both these structures comply to a similar set of guidelines found within the field of semiotics.

For Sassure language is based on relations. Structural relations and difference, rules of juxtaposition and combination. Sassure also made the observation that these structures

could be observed in other systems such as cuisine, or fashion (Gottdeiner 1995: p7). Pierce agreed with Sassure in that meaning was related to the context within which a sign existed, but unlike Sassure, Pierce's model better allowed for the transferral of linguistic rules into other areas of representation and signification. Pierce was able to allow for signs to have differing meanings depending on an individual's point of view or life experience (which he called *infinite regress* (Gottdeiner 1995: p11)) by adding his notion of the '*interpretant*', a kind of link or secondary idea related to the signifier and serving as a point of reference for the '*reader*' to try and make sense of the sign through comparison or contrast.

Roland Barthes then expanded on Pierce's idea of infinite regress with his concept of the *myth*. In most cases, the signifier marks clearly what it is referring to, but in some, this relationship between signifier and referent is commandeered by cultural processes (such as advertising forms and the kinds of social forces described by Appadurai) and additional meanings and connotations are attached to the sign in question. For Barthes, signs can become signifiers of other signs, and these second order signs can be used to express not just meaning, but ideology or status. This can be built on still further into third, fourth and higher order signs to the point where the object matters less to meaning than the connotations that have become associated with the object. At this stage we reach the level of what Barthes called 'myth', the key characteristic of which, is when the connotation attached to an object becomes its own referant or signified. "In this way, a sign can become a hypostatisation that condenses an entire ideology in a single word or image." (Barthes in Gottdeiner 1995: p15-16).

Hegel believed that *objectification* and hence human self-actualisation was constructed through the creation of difference, in this case, difference between self and other and the exploration of the ramifications of that difference (Miller 1987: p24). Later we see that both Pierce and Sassure amongst others (Gottdeiner 1995: p7, p11, Bridge and Watson 2002: p508), attribute a key position to differentiation within the mechanisms of significatory systems and meaning. In essence, these systems articulate differences and classify individuals or objects through context. Signification, in this case in the form of commodity culture and advertising, becomes the agency of difference through which we classify ourselves (Lunt 1992: p69, Lee 1993: p26, p28, Douglas and Isherwood 1980: p59, Chesshyre in Parr 1999: p65, Miller 1987: p165, Baudrillard 1990: p12, p22).

Objects and commodities then represent a system of classification and differentiation (Douglas and Isherwood 1980: p66, Baudrillard 1990: p22). As objects accumulate together, placed by their consumers, the classifications become less arbitrary, different objects overlapping with or affecting the meaning of others in the array. As the array builds up a specific and meaningful classification of the consumer is built and articulated to others who understand and use the same system (Baudrillard 1990: p15, Bridge and Watson 2002: p515/516, Douglas and Isherwood 1980: p59, p62). This would imply that when we make a purchase we do one of two things; we either include ourselves in a group by that purchase, or we choose to exclude ourselves from another. The net result of course is the same: the purchase, whether inclusive or exclusive, classifies us as an individual and tells others of our ideological standpoint (Lunt 1992: p69, Lee 1993: p26, p28, Douglas and Isherwood 1980: p59, Chesshyre in Parr 1999: p65, Miller 1987: p165, Baudrillard 1990: p12, p22). The objects we choose to purchase and

then proceed to wear, drive, listen to, or use are making claims for us, claims we have chosen very carefully to make.

The role of photography in advertising.

Production itself is powerless to create meanings for these objects, instead it is within the nexus of consumption, that period of flux beginning just before, and ending just after the point of sale, that objects and their culturally held meanings are fused together (Appadurai 1986: pp13-15, Miller 1987: p170, p190). Advertising, and in a specifically visual culture such as our own photography, are implicated in this process, one relying on the other for the delivery of its message.

The problem for the producers of commodities before the introduction of photography was that the written word was insufficient, as Miller has observed (Miller 1987: p100), for the description of physical objects. Once the mass production of goods had taken hold, producers needed a means by which to show the goods to people over wide geographical areas without resorting to the actual transportation of the goods themselves. While access to representational images had existed for some time, in the form of painting, drawing and etchings, these media suffered the perceived problem of 'artistic licence' (not to mention difficulties in reproductions in any quantity). Even if the artist were to reproduce the image of an object or person as faithfully as a modern camera, the resulting images were still perceived by the viewer as the product of an imagination. Thus, the connotative power of this type of image took precedence over its denotative function.

While modern viewpoints have changed a little, photography is generally seen as the opposite; that is, the denotative powers of photography are considered stronger than its connotative function. Concepts of 'photographic evidence', 'seeing is believing' and 'the camera never lies' illustrate the public acceptance of the notion of 'photographic truth'. The change in the nature of advertising from simple statements of the availability of a product or service to the kind of imagistic advertising described by Wernick (1991) was affected by a new relationship between photography and the consumer product: imagistic advertising relying on the notion of photographic truth in order to function in promoting sales.

The fundamental desire to photograph, while existing as early as 1727, seems to have reached a fever pitch in Europe and its colonies in the two or three decades bridging 1800. At this time there seemed to be an urgent and accelerating desire amongst the artistic and intellectual (as well as within business) communities to acquire some means of photographing things. The perfect images cast by the *camera obscura* taunted these inventor's efforts, infuriatingly as transient as the scenes before them. The real desire was to control the final variable that made the camera truly photographic, that of persistence over time (Batchen 1997: p16).

Following control of this final variable, photography was to become the printing press that would free the object from the tyranny of transience. As the written word, and later the printing press, changed the nature of human communication, so too photography had a similar effect on the use of the object as a sign. The written word gave language much more power in terms of constancy and mobility. That is, rather than relying on the movement of language from person to person, and the resulting

'Chinese whispers' effect, words and ideas could now travel over immense distances, and more importantly over immense temporal distances, with little if any distortion. The invention of the printing press enhanced this ability still further allowing for the mass production and distribution of texts over the same distances, and to a multitude of recipients. Photography, then, has played the same role within the realm of representations of physical objects that the written and printed word played for language. Photography is in essence a tool which supports the mass dissemination of representations of objects or, more accurately, of object-signs. Just as the written word allowed people to 'hear' stories without the need for access to the storyteller, people could now 'see' objects without the need for access to the object itself.

The arrival of photography then was significant for advertisers. It allowed a product to be explicitly placed within a stylistic repertoire of objects in order to guide the perception and meaning of the new product in the eyes of the targeted consumer. Furthermore, it allowed the transportation of these repertoires over greater geographical and temporal distances than was facilitated by the use of physical objects for the same task. In a visual culture, photography is the single most effective way advertisers have of locating objects within the pre-existing array. Association, or indeed disassociation, with past and present forms allows the advertiser to speak to as narrow or as broad an audience as is necessary. By being aware of the existing objects associated with the targeted consumers, and associating the new product with them, the advertiser can speak specifically to their target consumer. (For example, a brand of shoe aimed at skateboarders would include in ad imagery a skateboard or a well-known practitioner of the sport, amongst other things.) This, coupled with the perception of

truth that had been attached to the medium, provided advertisers with a powerful *connotative* tool that was still perceived within the market place as a *denotative* one.

Photography did not single-handedly bring objects into the sphere of signification, this role already existed in the form of the sumptuary and religious items and iconography which made up Appadurai's 'enclaved' goods mentioned earlier (also Baudrillard 1990: p19). What it did do, was to vastly increase the scope for objects to act as signifiers, and for the number of people to whom they could act as signifiers, thus adding a visual element to the pre-existing verbal and written modes of signification. To printing technology (that allowed the mass production and distribution of text, invented a few hundred years earlier) was added the technology to do the same with images, creating a new type of visual communication which, in the advertising context, involved the use of both a visual and written language.

Narrative and the still life tradition.

Before this argument is developed to address the nature of photographic still lives and the influence that advertising has had upon them, it is perhaps wise to take a brief look at the history of the genre of still life in general, from ancient origins through to modern photographic practice, and to establish exactly *what* constitutes the nature of the still life image.

The *Oxford Dictionary* (1987) defines still life as 'Inanimate objects, such as fruits, flowers, dead game, vessels, etc, as represented in painting', but also grants that the Dutch use of the term also referred to animate objects in a state of rest. The definition

offered by the Oxford dictionary, and the description of narrative differences between still life images and history painting offered by Bryson below, would appear to imply that a still life image has more to do with narrative intent than with actual subject matter. Any image then, which downplays human interaction in favor of the representation of objects and their relationships to each other, can be defined as, and interpreted as, a still life image. While this may seem a stretch, consider the two examples of advertisements discussed earlier, and the ramifications of removing the people. The image builds its meaning through object correlation, and as a result the removal of the people from the advertisements would effect little, if any, change in meaning.

Bryson goes much further in an attempt to differentiate between still life and other visual art mediums:

> While history painting is constructed around narrative, still life is the world minus its narratives or, better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest. To narrate is to name what is unique: the singular actions of individual persons. And narrative works hard to explain why any particular story is worth narrating – because the actions in the story are heroic or wonderful, or frightening or ignoble, or cautionary or instructive. The whole principle of storytelling is jeopardised or paralysed by the hearer's objection: 'so what?' But still life loves the 'so what?' It exactly breaks with narrative's scale of human importance. The law of narrative is one of change: Characters move from episode to episode, from ignorance to knowledge, from high estate to low or from low to high. Its generative principle is one of discontinuity: where states are continuous, homeostatic, narrative is helpless. But still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs: there is wholescale eviction of the Event. At this level of routine existence, centred on food and eating, uniqueness of personality becomes an irrelevance. Anonymity replaces narrative's pursuit of the unique life and its adventures. What is abolished in still life is the subject's access to *distinction*. The subject is not only exiled physically: the scale of values on which narrative is based is erased also. (Bryson 1990: p60-61)

The earliest known examples of still life images appear to be those recovered from the ancient Roman city of Pompeii. From this early stage, still life images appear to have been a separate genre all to themselves and were viewed in a context separate from other types of images. That is; they were treated and looked at differently, primarily as

a decoration in a home or palace (Bryson 1990: p19). According to Ebert-Schifferer the earlier purpose in Rome was a display of status (Ebert-Schifferer 1999: p19) called *emblemata* (from Greek meaning to insert), but by the 17th century the meaning of the word, and the significance of such images, had changed to that of a combination of a motto and a visual image. The object within early still life imagery went from essentially representation of wealth to a representation of an ideology (Bryson 1990: p19).

Still life from its outset appeared to have two distinct purposes: the first was in marking a separation between nature and culture (Bryson 1990: p21). This could be seen, from the perspective of Hegelian objectification, to be a form of self-actualisation for human culture in separating itself from nature by use of the objects of nature, which it has acted upon and re-appropriated into culture. These kinds of images came in the form of nature's bounty, cultivated and ready for the action of human hands. The second was in the triumph of work in providing for human needs (Bryson 1990: p21), examples of which included the still life images of food in various stages of preparation that are so prevalent within both the history and repertoire of the genre.

While there may appear to be a point of departure for contemporary still life from these original directions within the form, there are perhaps more similarities than there are differences. Still life still depicts the triumph of work in catering for human needs, these 'needs' however have changed significantly in recent times. The acquisition of food and sustenance within an affluent capitalist society is more or less a given, while the human need to create unique identities within a more populous and anonymous world, and to differentiate one's self from the other in the age of mass production and homogenisation, has achieved much greater significance. So while the subject matter of

still life imagery has changed from depictions of objects needed for human biological sustenance (food) to objects need for human psycho-emotional sustenance (commodities) the primary focus and intent of the imagery remains the same.

The difference here is a shift of focus: in Roman times the differentiation that made one feel civilised was the ability to separate one's self from the environment and hence nature. The ability of humans to predict weather cycles and provide for themselves even in times when nature, of its own accord, could not, was what separated humans from animals. As time has progressed, and this task has become simpler, humans have turned to creating and communicating differences between each other; the differences between humans and nature becoming so great as to be assumed. Nature has been supplanted as a differentiator by social standing and prestige, and the concept of one's environment has transformed from nature into culture.

In the *Satiricon*, Petronius describes cultural work as mediation and artifice, representation and simulation. Power becomes the agency for controlling reality by being able to shift it from level to level of representation and ultimately into pure simulation (Petronius in Bryson 1990: p55).

If 'the law of narrative is one of change' as Bryson suggests (Bryson 1990: p60-61), then narrative structures within still life may exist, not in the traditional sense of how we currently understand the term *narrative*, but in its distilled form: *change*. The placement of objects together within a frame effects a discourse, as we have discussed, and the goal of this discourse is either to create a change of perception in the viewer, or to re-affirm an existing one. Bryson's claim is that still life is 'homeostatic', and that

its 'states are continuous', but what he fails to recognize that while this might be true *within* the image, it is not the case *outside* the image. Specifically, the state of significatory flux within which the modern object or commodity is located is not constant: whilst the representations within the image are static, and cannot change, the social and economic perceptions of those objects can *only* change.

To look for narrative within the image then would be to miss the point: narrative within still life imagery is located somewhere between the viewing public, the objects which comprise the image, and the distance (both physical and figurative) between the object represented and the current cultural discourse surrounding it. This discourse naturally relies, as discussed, on differentiation from (and comparison with) other goods; just as narrative structure relies on two distinctly different points of reference: *beginning* and *end*.

The narrative power of a particular still life image then depends on a number of different factors that are as follows:

1. The ability of the viewer to recognize the object not so much in the simplistic sense, but to recognise whether the object is currently culturally significant to the viewer and his or her peers.
2. The nature of the object's relationship to other objects that are near it, either within the same frame, within the same viewing space, or within the same cultural context.
3. The ability of the viewer to triangulate a significance for the representation of the object by allowing point 2 to influence point 1: that is. 'I know what this

> object means to me, but because of where the object has been placed amongst these other objects, I know that the author is trying to say that it means *this*.'

Meaning and narrative, in the form of changes in meaning, are brought about in still life imagery through a manipulation of *difference,* and its juxtaposition in context with other images as a reference (in the same way that meaning is created within representation and signification). The key difference between still lives and other forms of photography (such as documentary photography) is that still life images rely much more heavily on a context in order to become meaningful; whether this context be physical proximity to other images or a broader conceptual proximity to other cultural forms within the mind of the viewer. Still lives exist within an established and ongoing narrative that is continually being built upon and undergoing change; even though it is never truly completed. It does not, in the same sense as other narrative forms such as documentary photography or 'history painting', attempt to create finite narrative spaces of its own.

These narrative structures and modes of representation are precisely those used by advertising in the codification of new commodities. Advertisers make the assumption that the readers of advertisements are proficient at the task outlined in point three, and rely on the manipulation of variables related to point one and two in order to generate either a *change* in the audience from one perception to another, or a re-affirmation of meanings already established.

This, then, appears to be a major point of departure for still life photography from Bryson's traditional conceptual location of still life. 'Uniqueness of personality', particularly within advertising images, is paramount. This is the sole reason for the image's existence in the first place: to separate the advertised commodity from the multitude of others, despite separation depending on this wider context. Furthermore, with objects being the means for an individual's self-actualisation within a commodity-based culture, and with advertising feeding off this means of individual distinction, to claim that still life abolishes the 'subject's access to distinction' is clearly a fiction. To be fair, still life, including still life photography, lacks the ability to narrate explicitly within a single image, but its ability to do so within a series, and within a cultural context, is well established (and examined in the work of various photographers in the following section).

The key difference, then, between the still life tradition and its modern photographic counterpart seems to be in the field of narrative intent and individual distinction. The rise of photography, and the influence of advertising methods and vernaculars upon it, has caused a shift not only in the way that still lives are viewed within culture, but also in the way that they are constructed and deployed. The 'level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs' has since become the breeding ground for the differentiation of human identities, and as the object is elevated and codified into myth, the exceptional is captured daily within the modern still life image.

Practical examples: contemporary still life photography and the object.

The object/meaning relationship is a two-way one, between photography and the physical world. The more an object is photographed, and the more varied the contexts

in which it is positioned and associated, the more possibilities for meaning the object will have. The fewer representations of the object, the more rigid and stable the meaning. This, of course, is an ongoing communicative process that is never completed as long as the object in question has a social currency. It is also important to remember, that the object and its representation can have a number of distinctly different meanings. This is especially true when a representation is made of the object in a context with other objects. In isolation, an object is susceptible to the immediate connotations placed upon it by the viewer; based on his/her background or experiences. In a specific context (as opposed to a wide variety of contexts) the object's meaning is more tightly controlled and there exists less scope for interpretation by the reader.

These ideas are nothing new: objects have been used in this way for many years, probably since the birth of visual imagery or shortly after, and a comprehensive dissection of the *modus operandi* of advertisers is offered by Williamson (1978: pp20-39) and Wernick (1991). This simple idea; the relationship between an object's representation, its context and its meaning, is one that is so often overlooked when talking about photographic practice *outside* advertising. What is important here is that the methods developed for creating and reading images are derived from photographic practise within advertising; primarily because the majority of images we see are for the purpose of advertising. This means that the eyes with which we read contemporary artistic photography are the same eyes that have been raised on the consumption and interpretation of advertising imagery; so from the very outset so-called artistic photography shares a subset of its vernacular with advertising in the way that images are encoded and decoded. Artistic images then represent an advertisement of someone's (the photographer's) consciousness or identity. Additionally, the viewer is innately aware of this and looks for the message in the same

way that one would in any other image. Advertising in a sense leads artistic production, by which it is also led. There exists an interdependent relationship between the two, which brings about a synchronicity between life and art, advertising and photography.

This relationship is an important one for photography and for photographers, as it should force photographers to consider objects in a new light. Objects are not merely extras within a photograph; they are important signifiers affecting the associations and connotations conveyed by the image as a whole. The careful attention given by advertisers to objects within promotional imagery has made viewers acutely aware of the significance of objects within images. As a result, the importance of these relations carries over into photography and image-making as a whole. For still life photographers the ramifications of this relationship are even greater, since it provides them with a coherent narrative form. That is, by understanding and manipulating the semiotic momentum possessed by objects in context, the still life photographer is able to control, break down or extend the understood meanings of objects, simply by combining or juxtaposing them in an intelligent manner.

Once this is understood, we can begin to look at how advertising images and artistic photography work within the same vernacular, with only slightly divergent aims: one seeks to sell a commodity using an idea mediated by products and objects, the other to sell an image using a product mediated by ideas. Contemporary still life photographers exist within a dialogue between the imagery of the advertisements they mimic and the goals they set in seeking consumption of their images by a media-savvy readership. The still life photographer (or any photographer) is acutely aware of the effect of the subject, and the photographer acts as a kind of renegade executive, losing sight of the goal of profit and

seeking only the glory of self-centred, self-representation. The still life photographer is engaging with the discourse of commodity culture, using products to self-actualise but stripping these objects of any latent use value and reducing them to pure sign, pure representation.

Martin Parr, whilst not strictly a still life photographer, allows objects to come to the fore in his images and uses objects in such a way that they highlight the interactions between people and objects. In *Common Sense* (1999), Parr gives us no text at all, allowing us to make any judgements based on the images alone. Parr's brightly coloured close-up images of plastic toys, novelty foods, products on store shelves and currency in the act of use create an impression of the world of objects at play, being bought, sold, used and displayed.

Fig 3. Martin Parr, untitled double page spread from Common Sense*, 1999.*

In these images (Fig 3.), *Japan optics* and the Chinese pattern on the teacup show how un-English both things really are. Parr highlights the contradictions inherent in consumer capitalism. The Japanese origins of the camera (despite being emblazoned with the Union Jack) mock patriotism and loyalty as naïve. The teacup points to the Chinese origins of tea while the East Indian gingham pattern on the tablecloth makes a cultural statement

about British colonial society. In the image of the teacup, the cup represents British tradition. The two images work together, pointing out the contradictions mentioned above, and both the images together work to show the thought processes and feelings Parr has toward the British consumer, that of a blind and naïve patriot.

Fig 4. David Levinthal, Untitled from Small Wonder: Worlds in a Box*, 1996.*

David Levinthal's (1996) images also rely on a cultural context in order to convey their meaning. They rely on pre-existing perceptions of the objects used to construct the photographs, which make a statement about the scene constructed. In this image (Fig 4.), Levinthal uses plastic toys to create domestic and family scenes. It is not the scene that is the subject here, it is Levinthal's choice of mode of representation that gives the image meaning. By his use of plastic toys, Levinthal is asking the question; 'is this scene real?'. The simplicity of the scene and the crudeness of its construction would imply that it is not; the use of a child's toy to represent the goals of adult life pokes fun at the model of success presented by commodity culture. By using a form recognisable from advertising

(in the form of advertisements for housing and finance), he eviscerates the methods for representing such goals.

Fig 5. Chistopher Muller, Home and Dry II (1996). C-type print 160x259cm.

Christopher Muller's image is notable because it is deliberately placed outside the system of correlations used by advertising and still life imagery. By this I mean that, rather than grouping objects and relating them to each other, the photographer has chosen objects which don't relate, and which seem to have no message at all. It is the *lack* of a message here that *is* the message. The fact that the objects do not link up invites us as viewers to attempt to make them do so. The response in the viewer is to attempt to group the objects into categories; the mug tree, the rubbish bin, the mug and perhaps the folding chair are all items belonging in the kitchen; while the umbrella, the shovel, funnel, plastic container and umbrella base (centre), clearly all belong outside. The lamp is the odd one out and does not seem to fit with anything. Nevertheless, the items represented in the image are not what is important: the collection of items demonstrates just how much the viewer brings to the still life image, and how innate is the classificatory system taught to us by the advertising system.

The important factor here is that like the advertisements analysed earlier, all of the images above rely on cultural knowledge in order to convey any meaning at all. As in

political satire, an intimate knowledge of culture is required before the imagery (like the jokes) makes sense.

Practical examples: my own images.

So why still life? Because so much of the way we relate to and interact with the people around us is mediated by objects, they remind us of times past, of future possibilities, of family and friends, of beliefs and devotions, of our successes and our spectacular defeats. There is not a single human experience, feeling or emotion that an object cannot come to represent. These are all images of people and they are all images of myself.

Fig 6. Paul Langmead, Untitled, 2001.

This image was made in the birthplace of Argentina's Tango music and dance. It depicts Juan de Dios Filiberto, who was important to the development and style of Tango. Who this man was, however, is probably not of particular importance in this image. Statues and monuments are, for me, an attempt by a power elite to imbue a space, and indirectly, imbue the people who use that space with a common ideology; a sense of 'us-ness'. The defacing and modification of such statues is a very powerful way in which people use objects. By modifying them, not only are we stating that this sanctioned ideology is not palatable, but we are extending, adding to, and commenting on the originally intended meaning put forward by the monument. What I love about this image

is that this object has been completely re-consumed and re-defined. It has been modified and defaced by the people to whom it attempts to communicate in order to fit with the existing textures that surround it, to the point that any attempt by the power elite to restore it to its original state has been abandoned. But this re-consumption is more than just an aesthetic change, it signifies the refusal of the local community to subscribe to the elite representation of Tango communicated by the statue. To those who live in its birthplace, the reality of he Tango is that it is made of the same fabric as the rest of the place, and its reclamation is necessary for the survival of the local identity.

Fig 7. Paul Langmead, Untitled, 1999. Untitled, 2001. Untitled, 2002.

A recurring device in my imagery is the image of the doll, although I prefer to think of them as manufactured representations of people. Dolls are interesting because the doll maker subscribes to a similar vernacular in the making of a doll as one does in the making of a family photo album (Sontag 1977). That is: Dolls are always happy, dolls are always healthy and perfect, only the best is shown. To show them as morbid and false representations of humanity is a way of critiquing the falseness of representation itself. To use these objects in photography takes this critique one step further, by dehumanising the doll entirely, making a plastic mould the representation of what someone else thinks life should be and what 'childlike innocence' should look like. Real life is bathed in a

surreal and uncontrolled light. The practised placement of a doll's features don't reflect this, and for me, are not a representation of real life.

Williamson (1978: pp20–39) describes the process of advertising as a correlative one, that is, objects are assigned deeper meaning through correlating them to objects which already have a social meaning. While this is not the only method by which advertising operates, it is perhaps the one which most closely matches the way I work as a photographer and, as can be seen in the Martin Parr example above, the way other contemporary photographers, particularly within still life, operate. The key here is the juxtaposition of objects (or images of objects) and hence the use of a correlative effect. Three images on a gallery wall may stand alone as single images, but given the visual training of the average viewer (i.e. through years of consuming advertising), it is inevitable that correlations between the images will be made and conclusions drawn. As discussed in the previous section, it is not just correlations between the images presented that we need to consider: there also exists within the mind of the viewer (Pierce's *interpretant*) additional correlations with images not present. Let us consider the following example of three of my own images (Fig 8.):

Fig 8. Paul Langmead, Untitled, 2004. Untitled, 2003. Untitled, 2004.

The first is a picture of a Lithium Carbonate tablet, a drug used in the treatment of Bi-Polar disorder (formerly called Manic-Depression). For those with a familiarity with the drug and its purpose, there is a particular reading for this image on its own, and for the group as a whole: the drug creates a sweetness that is finite, it exists within a limit. For those without this familiarity with Lithium, a different reading may be made, for example: *drugs* create a sweetness which is finite, or even that sweetness is a human construct that is created by us artificially but somehow is still fleeting. The important thing here is not what the images or the set mean, it is that each of these objects are gaining meaning from each other through their correlation with each other, in addition to external factors. Information and contexts carried by the viewer effect the final reading of the sequence.

A picture of an object refers to the object, which has its own sign value and hence its own meaning, so how then is a picture of an object different from displaying the object itself? How does the medium of photography alter the sign value of the object? In effect, I believe that it marks the object as being of sign value, it isolates it and says: "This object is significant for some reason". The photographic image brings the object to our attention. In addition, it brackets the object within the same sign system as that of the advertisement (which so often appears in the form of a photograph), that is, it invites us to *read* the object in the same way we would *read* advertisements.

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative": in other words, *a set of objects*, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately invoked. (T.S. Eliot in Williamson 1978: p30)

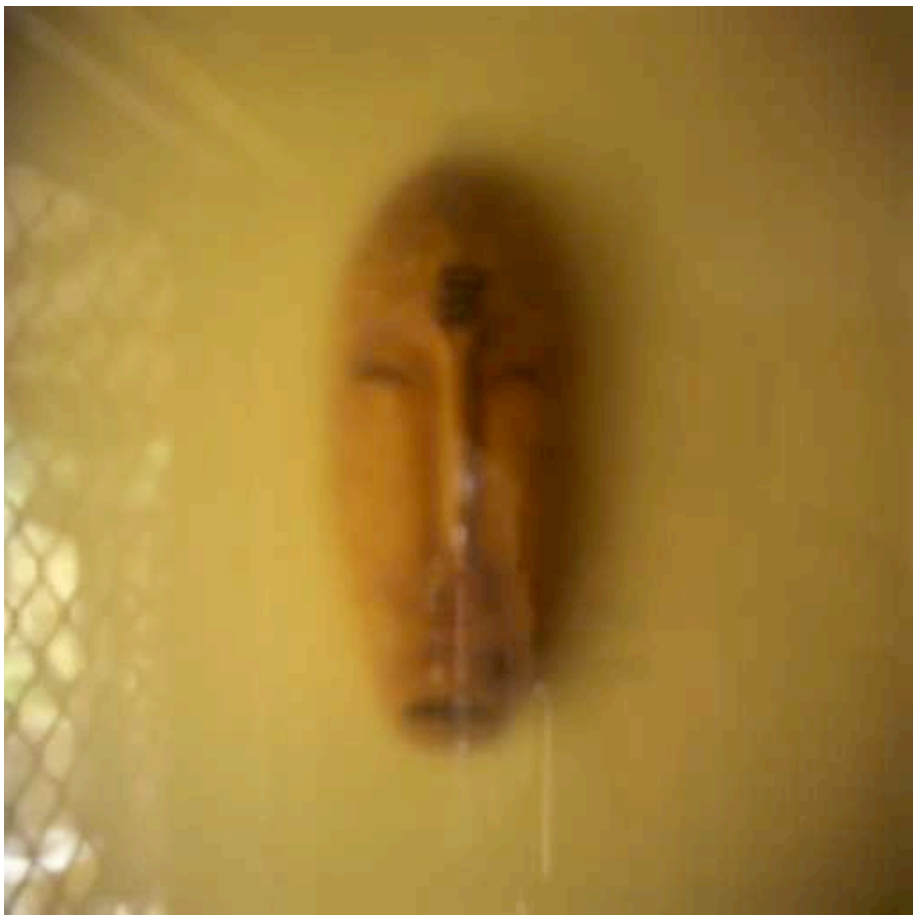
This then seems to be an idea that predates the era of mass value-laden advertising, but not still life imagery. So while the disciplines and vernaculars of still life in general (including painting *and* photography) have been appropriated by advertisements, the nature of the advertising system, and the cultural context within which it exists are such that the relationship between these two elements has evolved into a *discourse*, an *exchange* of ideas rather than merely a transferral of style from one to the other. In a sense, advertisements have developed and popularised a form that has existed for centuries in one way or another.

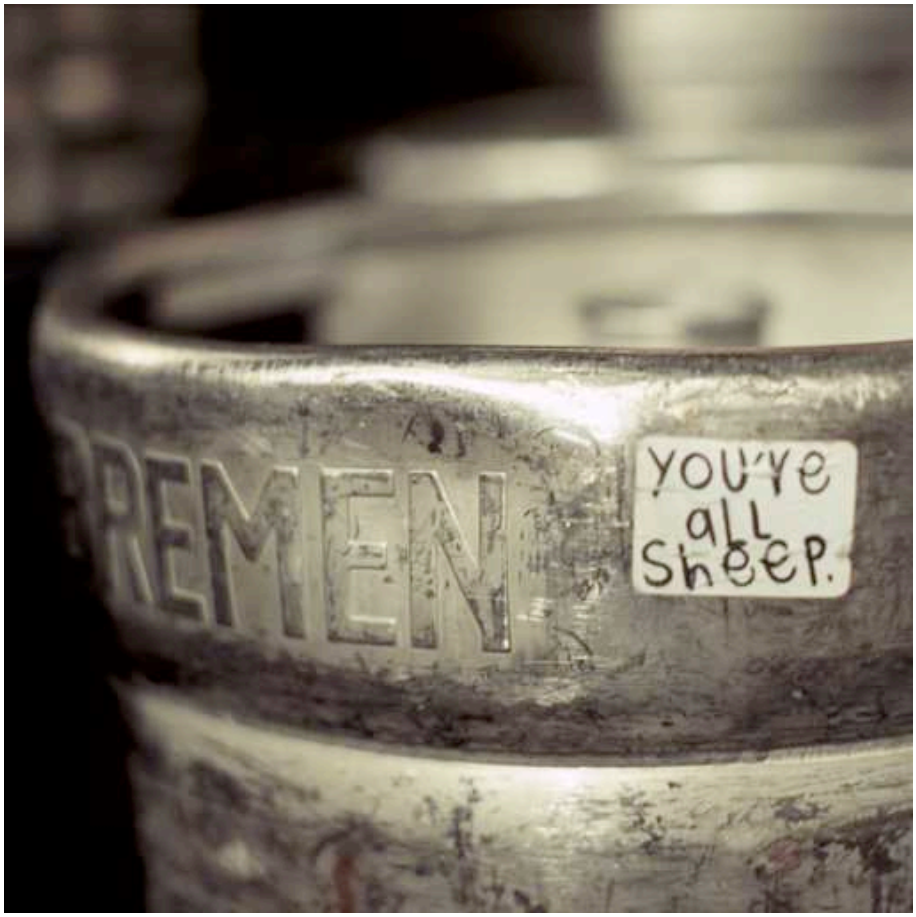
I feel that while my photography feeds off a form coined by art, but developed by advertisements, it does not specifically attempt to comment on or communicate with the advertising realm, at least not directly. My work rather uses a form that is instantly recognisable and decipherable by anyone savvy with modern popular culture, in order to generate the 'formula of that particular emotion' (Eliot in Williamson 1978: p30) which I feel best describes my relationship, and my generation's relationship, to the world. So, if 'The technique of advertising is to correlate feelings, moods or attributes to tangible objects (Williamson 1978: p31), then my work could, in a sense, be described as advertising.

Conclusion:

Still life is the re-representation of representation, but its subjects have yet to be completely recognised as a representational system; a fact which imparts upon the still life photographer a great power, the power to manipulate representation in a partly covert manner, and to surreptitiously create new meanings for old words. The key point here is that people relate and react to objects, in a way which is perhaps more profound than we realise. Similarly, people relate and react to representations of objects; in this case in the form of photographs. The modes employed by advertising in equating images of objects and the objects themselves has transformed the still life genre from a relatively obscure and functional art form into a powerful connotative tool for the dissemination of ideologies.

Still life photography outside of advertising practise is aware of this function of the form and uses the methods that advertising has established for the medium, and engages in an ongoing discourse. Far from being a coherent narrative form, still life photography is instead a communicative and classificatory form that relies on difference and context within culture at large in order to imply change, lack of change and meaning.

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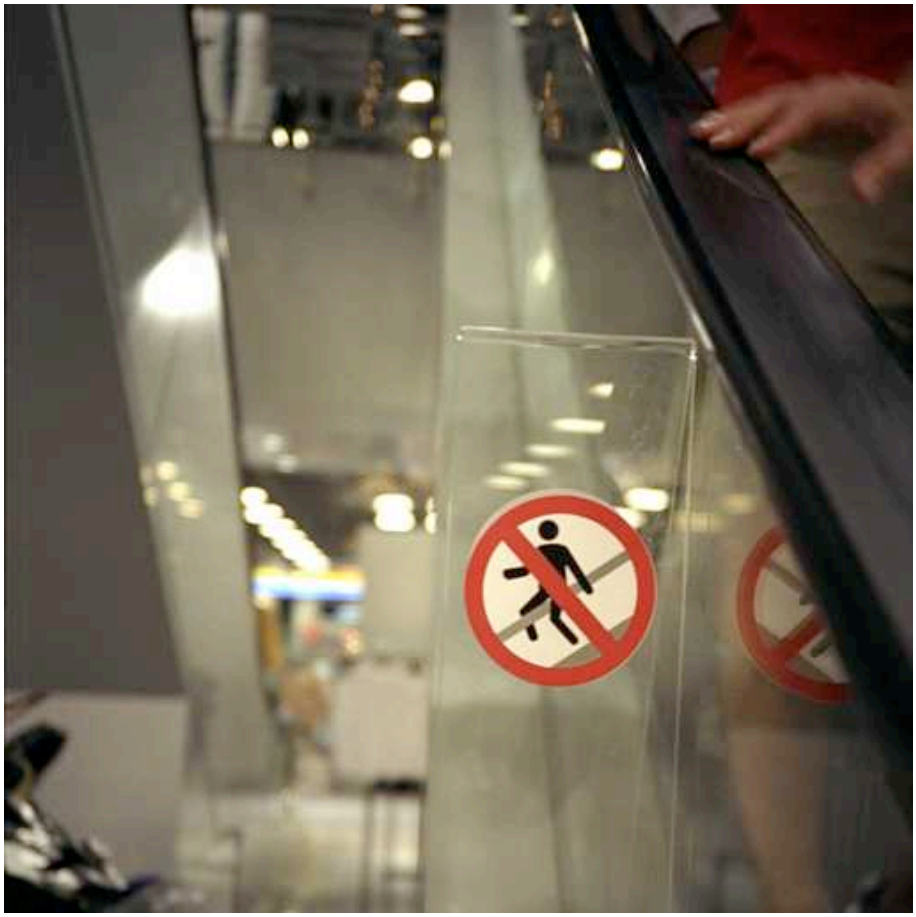


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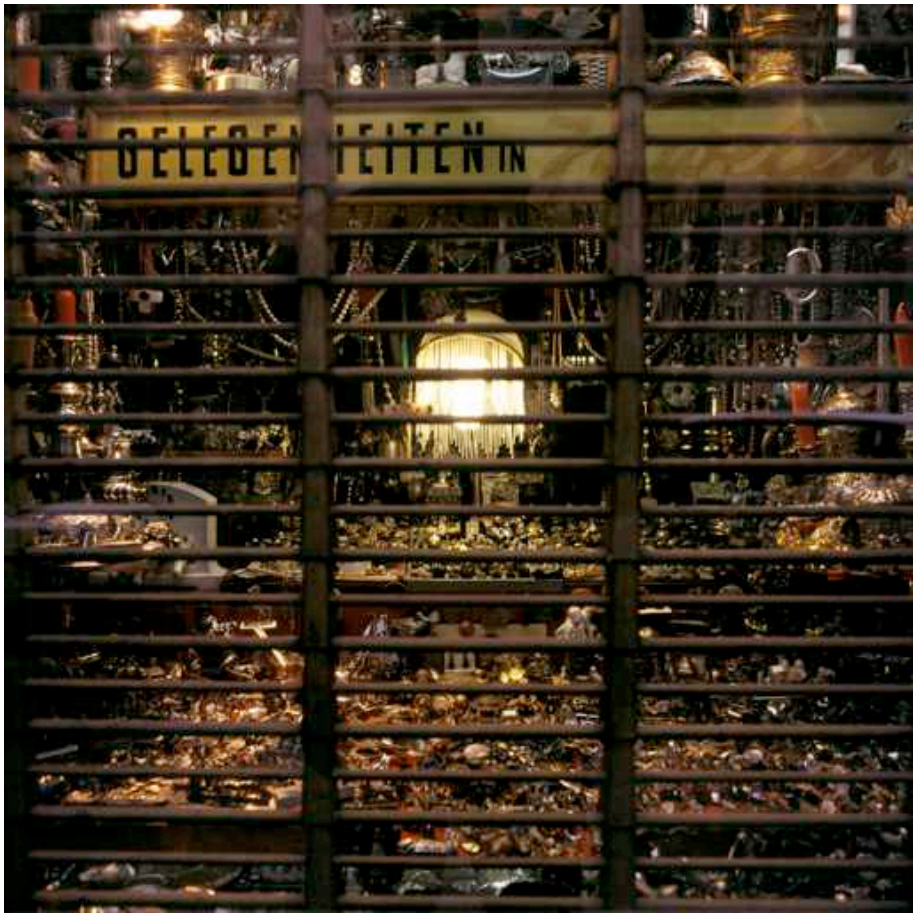

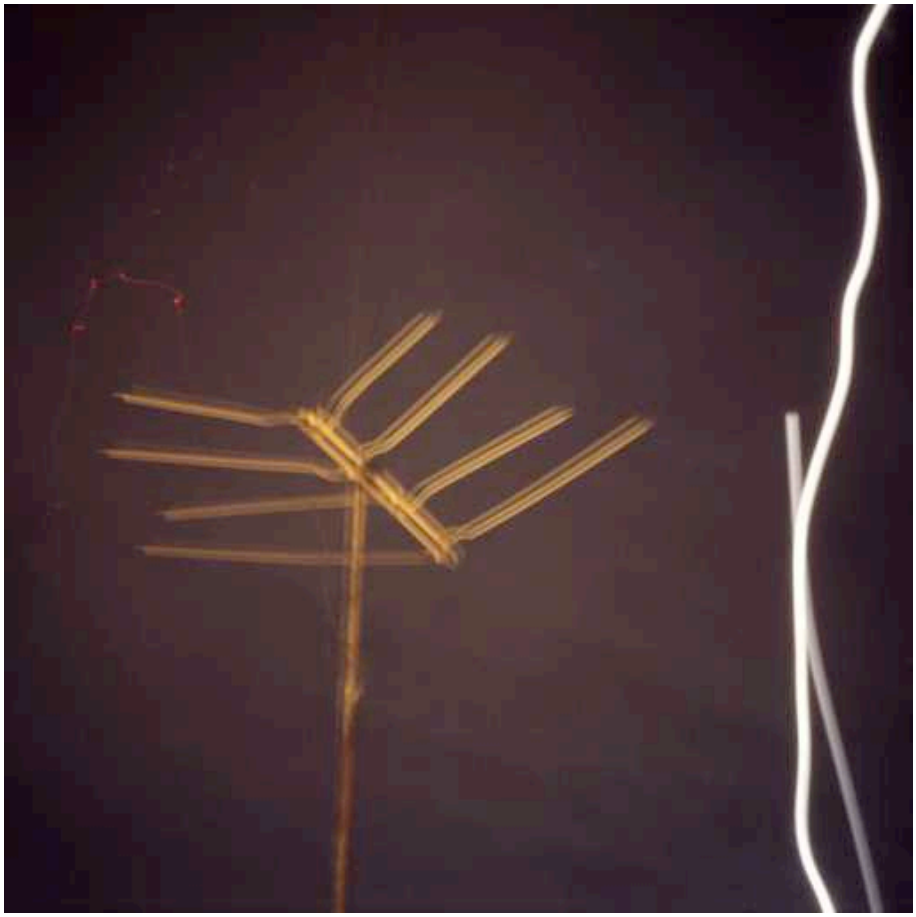

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