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The photograph is always more than an image: it is the site of a gap, a sublime breach between the sensible and the intelligible, between copy and reality, between a memory and a hope. Giorgio Agamben

Arnaud Maggs: Portrait of a Working Artist



In 1973, following successful careers as a graphic designer and fashion photographer, Arnaud Maggs, who was 47 at the time, decided to abandon his commercial ventures to become an artist. Embracing his unique way of seeing the world, Maggs wanted to share his observations with a broader, more diversified audience. In his early works from 1976 through the 1980s he combined an interest in systems of classification and ordering with investigations of human physiognomy. In *64 Portrait Studies* (1976 – 78) he organized black and white frontal and profile portraits of friends, colleagues and new acquaintances in a monumental grid. Maggs also made a number of photographic works of twins and of fathers and sons, which explore the similarities and differences between close family members.

During a trip to Germany in 1980 Maggs realized some of his most ambitious works: *Kunstakademie* and his portraits of Joseph Beuys. The first of these projects, *Kunstakademie*, consists of an imposing array of images he took of students studying at this famed academy in Düsseldorf. Each young volunteer was documented by six pictures, three taken as profiles and three frontal views. The resulting portraits were compiled into a display of unedited contact sheets and a separate installation of a large grid made up of 148 prints. These serial, somewhat cinematic images evoke the passing of time. The viewer can witness the subtle changes in expression of the sitters as captured during their brief photographic sessions. This temporal effect is strangely echoed in the viewing experience itself. We become aware of the here and now and the fact the photographs were taken at another time (then), in another place (there), representing a specific moment in these people's lives.

Maggs used a similar strategy in the second project he realized in Germany, his now famous series *Joseph Beuys, 100 Profile Views* and *Joseph Beuys, 100 Frontal Views*. In these portraits of German performance and installation artist Joseph Beuys, Maggs fostered his concept of recording the passage of time and its effect on the sitter by taking one hundred shots of Beuys' profile and another one hundred frontals. The two series were then arranged into large grids in which each photograph is simply held on the wall behind glass with the help of metal hooks. Close scrutiny of the photos reveals slight changes in Beuys' facial expression in the frontal views and in his position, as he slowly starts to stoop, in the profiles. In this project Maggs deviated from the rigidity of the presentation he used in *64 Portrait Studies* (4 rows of 16 portraits) and *Kunstakademie Details* (4 rows of 37 portraits), in which the rows in the grids alternate between profiles and frontals. He chose instead to separate the two views of Beuys and treat them as their own entities, leaving two vacant spaces in the last row of each grid of one hundred portraits (5 rows of 17, the last row of 15). This absence in the last row suggests that the series is either unfinished or continues.

Another important element at play in these works is the relationship between the subject and the viewer. Maggs' work has often been described as formal or even clinical. His taxonomic approach lends itself to the documentation of subjects as specimens whose specific forms and physical traits we are able to scrutinize, analyze and compare. In the case of the Beuys portraits this process of revealing and displaying the subject is countered by Beuys himself, who appears to be projecting a constructed image, complete with his signature felt hat. Curator Maia-Mari Sutnik describes the impact of Beuys' expression on the viewer's reading of his identity and performance: "Beuys' individual inflections and the subtle tension from frame to frame serve as a counterpoint to the first impact of his compelling

defiance. Ultimately it is his underlying performance that illuminates the formal autonomy of Maggs' two most extraordinary portraits."¹ In his essay *Profanations*, Giorgio Agamben discusses how the subject in a photo demands something from the viewer. According to the philosopher: "Even if the person photographed is completely forgotten today, even if his or her name has been erased forever from human memory – or, indeed, precisely because of this – that person and that face demand their name; they demand not to be forgotten."²

It is telling that Maggs chose to photograph Beuys, who was not only a famous and influential artist but also a renowned storyteller. In 1964 Beuys produced *Life Course/Work Course*, a self-consciously fictionalized account of his life. This document marks a blurring of fact and fiction that was to become characteristic of the artist's constructed persona, which became indivisible from his art. Nine years after meeting Beuys, Maggs would write his own life story in the work *15*. The piece is composed of eight individually framed sheets of carbon paper upon which the artist has typed his autobiography, starting with his earliest childhood memories, his stint in the air force, and his career as a graphic designer, up until the moment in the 1970s when he abandoned his independent business as a fashion photographer to become an artist.

He describes a significant experience that motivated this major shift in his trajectory. During a life-drawing class Maggs noticed that the proportions of the model's head could fit perfectly within a circle. He writes in *15*: "Suddenly I was made aware of the infinite number of proportions that go into making each of our bodies so distinctly different and [if I could] actually bring them to the attention of the viewer, then perhaps I would be able to share my experience. So that was the task ahead of me." In the middle of each sheet of carbon paper that composes *15*, he placed a small grid of nine digits made with Dymo tape arranged in three rows. The digits add up to the sum of fifteen in any configuration: horizontally, vertically or diagonally. The text itself is almost illegible, except when read up close and under proper lighting conditions, and is also partially covered by the Dymo tape. The number "15" pays homage to another one of Maggs' artistic influences: American Pop artist Andy Warhol and his well-known saying that in the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes.

In doing research for this exhibition and current essay I became fascinated by this iteration of Maggs' biography, which one could argue has become akin to a fictional story, similar to Beuys' narrative in *Life Course/Work Course*. Many scholars and writers used Beuys' fictionalized account as a key to decipher and explain the artist's use of unusual materials and construct meanings for his eclectic production. In a similar fashion, many writers have relied on Maggs' biography, which the artist elaborated in *15*. This is not to say the artist's account of his life story is not useful in getting a better understanding of his practice; on the contrary, as with many artists, his personal experiences are intrinsically linked to his art and vision of the world.

When considering Maggs' production, one realizes that his projects can be related to lived events, people he has met, and places he has been. He chooses his subjects because of personal interest and to acknowledge people that have had an impact on his practice. These subjects include such influential figures as André Kertész, Eugène Atget, members of his local arts community, and the aforementioned Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol. According to Sutnik: "The inner logic that emerges in every aspect of

his work flows from his personal experiences, indelible impressions, and memoirs.”³ By photographing them, Maggs demands that *his* experiences not be forgotten. Even his most “scientific” or seemingly impersonal works with letters and numbers can be related to his life story.

As noted by various authors, Maggs’ fascination with typography, associated with his training as a graphic designer and lettering artist, is brought to the fore in a number of his works: for example, in *Hotel Series* (1991), where he created his own classification system to order hundreds of photographs he had taken of hotel signs while wandering through Paris, and *The Complete Prestige 12” Jazz Catalogue* (1988), another ambitious piece that presents 828 cataloguing numbers of 12-inch jazz recordings released by Prestige Records. In the work *15*, Maggs writes about his passion for jazz and how it became a distraction while he was a high-school student going to late-night concerts and buying records. He later mentions how while working as a graphic designer in New York he made the cover art for the celebrated live album *Jazz at Massey Hall* that features Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell and Charles Mingus.

Maggs’ interest in the beauty and form of things continually surfaces in his work. In the mid-1990s he started spending his summer months in France. He frequented flea markets where he found the various paper ephemera and books that have developed into the subject of his production for the last fifteen years. He soon became a collector of stationary, identification tags, display samples, invoices and rare books. What these disparate items have in common is their relationship to the past, to daily activities and to personal conceptions of the world we live in.

In her book *Profane illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* Margaret Cohen compares Walter Benjamin’s historiographical method to rag-picking. She goes on to link this with Surrealist André Breton’s description of the flea market as a place to find “trouvailles” - objects that hold a particular fascination and history. In the prologue to *Nadja*, Breton’s 1928 novel, he writes about the Parisian flea markets: “I go there often, in search of those objects that can be found nowhere else, outmoded, fragmented, useless, almost incomprehensible, perverse in short, in the sense that I give to the word and that I like.”⁴ According to Cohen: “Breton values debris not only for its aesthetic fertility but also for its relation to obscured history, and above all for its ability to make manifest repressed forces from both a collective and individual past.”⁵

The found objects or “trouvailles,” that Maggs picks out, photographs and then displays do not only document but also portray and commemorate human activities related to labour, consumerism and industrialization. This is the case in *Travail des enfants dans l’industrie* (1994), which comprises a collection of tags used to identify child workers in the French textile industry in the early twentieth century, and *L’échantillonnage* (1999), an array of samples used in the salesman’s trade. This theme also relates to the nineteenth-century consumer habits of the French upper-class as observed in *Les factures de Lupé* (1999-2001), comprising stationary documenting the purchases of a couple living in Lyon in the 1860s, and *Aux Ciseaux d’Argent* (1999), which brings together a series of invoices from 1891 recording the clothing purchases of a Parisian couple.

Other works provide insight into societal behavior. Examples of this can be found in Maggs’ *Lessons for Children* (2006), a simple book with large black text on white pages aimed at teaching children manners

and codes of conduct through short narratives, and *Notification XIII* (1996), comprised of a collection of nineteenth- and early- twentieth-century mourning envelopes, which were traditionally sent to announce the death of a loved one. About Maggs' archival works, curator Philip Monk writes:

“Being neither official documents of state nor memorabilia of famous personages, these anonymous pieces have been hoarded by sellers, not by cultural institutions. Having purchased this material, first found by accident and then sought out, Maggs became its unofficial archivist: he collected, preserved, and then documented the “collection” photographically. Finally, he redeems its status by elevating it photographically into art...”⁶

In this exhibition a selection of archival source material will be displayed to evince the shift that occurs as Maggs photographs and further transforms found objects by altering their scale and ordering them to create typologies. His resulting photographic installation works can be interpreted as monuments to the lost and forgotten and our experience of them – acts of remembering. In other recent production Maggs has turned his attention to rare books housed in specialized collections. In contrast to the ephemera found in flea markets, these volumes and archives are valued for their historical significance or association with people who have made meaningful contributions in their respective fields. In 1991 Maggs gained access to Atget's address book held in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He was given permission to photograph the handwritten pages of addresses belonging to the French photographer's clients. The resulting piece, entitled *Répertoire* (1997), brings attention to Atget's commercial activities (as opposed to his artistic production), which enabled him to make a living.

Over ten years later, in 2005, Maggs photographed the colour plates from the book *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours*, which he found in the Rare Book division of the Blackader-Lauterman Collection at McGill University. Abraham Gottlob Werner, a German mineralogist and geologist, published the handbook in 1814 (the expanded second edition was released in 1821) to elaborate a descriptive language based on objects from the mineral, animal and vegetable realms, to assist mineralogists and other scientists to identify and classify colours in the natural world. Although the subject of *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours* might have appealed to Maggs as an encapsulation of Werner's unique observations, interpretations and classification system (arguably his worldview) presented both in colour and text, it is the battered state of the book itself that was presumably used in the field that catches our attention. In her discussion on this piece curator Martha Langford writes:

“Here, as the plates are enlarged, the dilapidated condition of the object obtains the romance of a ruin: the fragility of the binding, the rounded corners of the sheets, the haloing effect of the edges; the poetic interweaving of rule, font, and script. At some time, in some place, increasingly remote from our experience, these pages were turned, and earnestly consulted for their correlations.”⁷

Maggs takes this fascination with the markings of time and handling to the next level with *Contamination* (2007). In this work he enlarges the water- and mould-stained blank pages of a small hand-held ledger bought from a specialist dealing in items from the Klondike gold rush. When the book is opened we notice that the ensuing organic shapes of the “contamination” are symmetrically mirrored on each spread. The ledger itself had been used by a prospector to record his daily expenses.

As such, it relates to Maggs' interest in the documentation of these types of consumer or professional activities, as in his works *Aux Ciseaux d'Argent*, *Les factures de Lupé* and *Répertoire*. What distinguishes *Contamination* from other works is the artist's decision to focus on an accident that materialized in the object itself. Hence *Contamination* arguably becomes a disruption in Maggs' own system of production.

In Maggs' archival works it is the subject of the photographs that evokes the passage of time and not the artist's usual mode of displaying them in a grid arrangement. To further demonstrate this shift, in his most recent works, including *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours*, *Contamination*, *Scrapbooks* and *The Dada Portraits*, Maggs has turned away from the grid and now hangs his series in a linear fashion.

In *The Dada Portraits* (2010) Maggs appropriated drawings of architectural details taken from a mid-nineteenth-century carpenter's guidebook to create portraits of artists associated with the Dada movement. These diagrams-cum-portraits attest to Maggs' potent imagination and design sensibility as he transforms the "ready-made" schematic drawings into the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Emmy Hennings, Angelika Hoerle, Hannah Höch, Suzanne Duchamp, Sonia Delaunay, Francis Picabia, Max Ernst, Mary Wigman, and so on, simply by creating an association. In early works he wanted to bring to our attention the shapes and forms he saw in human heads, and now, in an interesting twist, he asks us to find heads in superimposed, quasi-Cubist or Futurist renderings. Again he shares his unique vision of the world as seen and interpreted through his eyes and mind. In a way the *The Dada Portraits* forces us to realize that Maggs has been making portraits all along, even in his archival works, which manifest traces of people, and the numerical pieces, which reveal aspects of himself.

In the last work of the exhibition *Scrapbook* (2009), Maggs comes full circle by documenting his own archive, the ephemera that he has collected and arranged in scrapbooks since 1975. As in the work *15*, *Scrapbook* shows the traces of his life, his own story, and records the making of Arnaud Maggs through his career and persona, first as a designer and later as an artist. It is the portrait of the artist at work.

¹ Maia-Mari Sutnik, *Arnaud Maggs : Works 1976-1999*, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, 1999, p. 15.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, Zone Books, New York, 2007, p. 25.

³ Op.Cit., Sutnik, p. 16.

⁴ Henri Breton, *Nadja*, quoted in Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination : Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, year?, p. 97. (OC, 676; N, 52 in Cohen)

⁵ Ibid., p. 200.

⁶ Philip Monk, *Arnaud Maggs : Works 1976-1999*, The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, 1999, p. 25-26.

⁷ Martha Langford, *Arnaud Maggs : Nomenclature*, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, 2006, p. 24