

Life's Traces: Arnaud Maggs (1999)

Arnaud Maggs: Works 1976 – 1999, Toronto: The Power Plant, 1999

The Work of Death in the Image by Philip Monk

For the purposes of writing about it, Arnaud Maggs's art career conveniently breaks in two. Maggs devoted a decade to his signature portrait works, by which he made his reputation, and a decade now to, for want of a better label, non-portrait works. These latter initially seem to defy categorization. They include a wall of Cibachrome photographs of more than eight hundred numbers in sequence, one four-digit number per sheet, which takes its title from a catalogue of recorded jazz music; an inventory of Parisian hotel signage; colour blowups of antique labels of obscure source and meaning; similar blowups of French mourning stationery; photographic reproductions of the pages of the address book of a noted French photographer; and photographs of turn-of-the-century salesmen's sample cases.

Despite the disappearance of the portrait image, the two periods of Maggs's work are related. The means of presentation (the arrangement of the photographic images in grids) persists, as does the general concern for classification—but of another order than the systems underlying the portraits. Starting with *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie: Les étiquettes* in 1994, Maggs photographed with the same scrutiny as his earlier portraits paper ephemera that he found in French flea markets. Even with the absence of an actual image of a person, these works create a poignant portrait of life's traces. In fact, it could be argued that the earlier portrait studies—although composing a fully realized body of work—were also preparation for the image of life suggested by what I will call his archival works. (These exclude the number and signage works from 1988 to 1991, which would then be considered to be transitional.) The allegorical themes of work and death that emerge in the 1990s—and they emerge apart from the image of the body—can be read back into Maggs's earlier portraits as the effect of time on the body.

We should not be surprised by the coherence of Maggs's oeuvre, as he decided to be an artist when a mature man. Maggs already had two careers when he began to work as an artist in the mid-1970s. Initially a successful graphic designer working successively in Montreal, New York, Toronto, Milan, and Santa Fe from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, he then became a commercial and fashion photographer for a decade in Toronto. This previous experience no doubt inflected his decisions as an artist at the time, if only in reaction. From his own field of commercial photography he had the celebrated examples of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon and their welcome in the museum world during the

mid-1970s. Portraiture, not their fashion work, was the means by which the two received serious consideration as photographic *artists*. But even their portraiture was, perhaps, still too tainted by its association with the vanity of the fashion world.

From the art world, the stellar example of a commercial artist making the transition so successfully to artist would be Andy Warhol. Two years older than the American artist, Maggs might have learned a lot from Warhol—not only in the structuring of images in an artwork. Warhol used the grid as a framework for the mechanical reproduction of standardized items of American industrial culture, from Coke bottles to publicity photographs of Hollywood stars. But Warhol was primarily a portraitist at a time when portraiture had long disappeared from art. Or at least he had found an unconventional way to be one through the vehicle of underground film. Maggs's portraits splay out spatially what Warhol's one-reel *Screen Tests*, for instance, unroll in time. The sometimes awkward presentation of self in both their works contrasts with the theatricalized confrontations enacted, for instance, between Richard Avedon and his celebrity subjects.

The continuing use of portraiture in the mid-1970s, then, would have to advance incognito and serve another purpose than the revelation of character. Warhol's attitude towards photography, and portraiture, as expressed in, for example, *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, 1964, with its silk-screened images of criminals lifted from FBI photographs, typically in front and side views, would influence a younger generation of conceptual artists. At the time Maggs decided to become an artist in the mid-1970s, conceptual art, one variant of post-minimalism, was at the height of its influence in Toronto as well as elsewhere. Derived from the formal structure and contextual consequences of minimal sculpture, and adopting the graphs and tables of linguistic analysis or scientific classification, conceptual art would end up, at its iconoclastic extreme, dispensing with the image and analyzing art as a system. Photography, however, became the privileged form of documentation for conceptual art, but usually in its clinical or banal industrial, commercial forms, lacking style or seduction. The closer photography came to transparent archival transcription, the better.

Although Maggs says he was not necessarily aware of an influence in his first works, which appeared nonetheless as a fully formed aesthetic, they share with conceptual art their treatment of subject and presentation. As in conceptual art, Maggs used the familiar device of the grid to structure the presentation of his images in horizontal and vertical rows. Typically, the images from this period were devoid of the expressive intervention of the artist or the medium; what was left was pure, matter-of-fact information. The repetition of the portraits (one head after another) revealed the common structure underlying human diversity,

which would not be visible on its own in one image. Thus, each grid functioned on the visual order as a rudimentary form of classification.

A number of writers have compared Maggs's project to that of the German photographer August Sander, who documented Germany's labouring and middle classes during the early part of the century. The two photographers seem to share a taxonomic urge to collect and categorize, using the human being as subject. Sanders created a panorama of the German nation choosing his subjects as types; individual photographs showed representatives of occupations and class. But all the telling features that mark Sander's subjects disappear in Maggs's works. Maggs enlarges Sander's scope in that he too is interested in ordering individuals by their institutional affiliations, but by a collective portrait, not single portrayal. *Ledoyen Series*, *Working Notes* and *Kunstakademie* group individuals, the former by their institutional function, the latter by their cultural association. The *48 Views Series*, *Turning*, and *Downwind Photographs* continue this aim, for which the Canadian art and cultural communities now supplied the subjects.

Maggs seems more interested in system than subject, which makes his works more abstract, or at least they abstract something collective from the human subject by their presentation, even though Maggs's sampling might be local. In fact, the manner in which he presents his subjects in a number of his portrait works, alternating front and profile views of their heads, returns us, perhaps not accidentally, to another, earlier instrumental use of photography—the mug shot, invented by the nineteenth-century French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon to classify criminal types and then to identify individual perpetrators for official purposes. The application of a system to a type is exactly what Maggs pursues, but not for any rigid purpose of sociological or quasi-scientific aim.

Whether the result of mental mania, primitive or scientific thought, the ordering of experience in some sort of structure seems to be a universal human impulse. Heir to the Western *episteme*, Maggs has used his photographic grids as taxonomic tables, so to speak, to reveal something of the human subject that one portrait alone could not accomplish. In these works, the grid, as much as the camera, becomes a tool for seeing. One cannot say which we observe first, a single portrait or the system that holds it in place, especially in a piece like *48 Views Series*, which incorporates so many images. To concentrate on what the grid puts in place, as an image alone, is to downplay both the mental construct and the taxonomic structure that is its visual representation.

Although it might not have been Maggs's intention with *64 Portrait Studies*, in any of the subsequent works we can see that the grid serves more purpose than just to display the portrait head within a larger formal system of visibility alone. (We are still free to compare individuals, but the scope and scale of a work like *48*

View Series, with forty-eight images in each print of 162 frames, makes the comparison of part to whole more holographic—finding the image of the part in the whole and the whole in the part—than physiognomic.) The grid exceeds formal classification by spatializing time. In any of Maggs's portraits, such as *Northrop Frye* or *Martha Fleming*, each print, as an exposure, is a moment of time. Since the portrait subject persists from frame to frame, and since Maggs does not edit from the shooting session, the work as a whole duplicates the period of the sitting. More particularly, the grid objectivizes the very routine by which the piece is made, a routine that dominates both the artist and the model. Even though each sitting is relatively short (taking no more than about thirty minutes), in any of the portrait series we feel the cumulative weight of time as each person in Maggs's project is joined democratically to every other. In the end, what comes across in these collective images is the work of time and therefore the work of death on the body. The sureness of death is at bay, and, perhaps, redeemed by labour, where the routine of living is united to the work of art making.



Viewers walking into a Toronto gallery in 1988 might have been puzzled by an installation of Maggs's work. Eight hundred twenty-eight numerically sequential images covered the full length of a thirty-eight-foot wall. It was not only the change of subject and disappearance of the portrait image that aroused curiosity—this was Maggs's first exhibited new work after a hiatus of several years. (Maggs was not inactive; he had been administering a survey exhibition of his work, which opened in 1984 and travelled, with the same thoroughness of application that he devoted to one of his grand portrait studies. More than thirteen thousand images were in the exhibition, which he designed. Maggs's interest was no longer in portraiture, although he later devoted a work to the photographers the Starn twins in 1990. The need to maintain and store all these prints in document boxes in steel racks mimics the collection of an archive. An archival sensibility ironically would guide Maggs in the making of his work during the 1990s.)

Each image of the work that was on display, *The Complete Prestige 12" Jazz Catalogue*, 1988, was of a four-digit white number on a black ground. The numbers, which started at 7001, had been Letraset and photographed, and the images were printed on photographic paper—a time-consuming process. This work specifically records the complete set of the twelve-inch jazz albums (only part of the output) issued by the Prestige label, but by number alone, without any other information. Such a reproduction of a numbering system—the system, not the thing itself—is odd, especially at this extreme of labour. The four-digit white-on-black numbering perhaps was originally suggested by Maggs's observation of the numbers of railroad boxcars outside his studio window, which

initially resulted in the work *Texas/Mexican* in 1985. Numbering, of course, is probably the oldest system of recording and classification. But Maggs has selected a subject that has autobiographical associations in that the work subtly acknowledges his career as a designer, as well as his passion for music. He has not reproduced any numbering system. He has chosen a system of ordering that accompanies other artistic representations—the music catalogue. Music has its own representational system of notation that has to do with performance, namely, the score; the catalogue is a form of reference that is unrelated to its musical content and only exists after a body of work is made, to entomb it, so to speak. Ever interested in systems, Maggs was intrigued by the notion of the arbitrary application of a set number that would forever designate a piece of music. The strict numbering contrasts to the enormous variety of music gathered within the framework of the catalogue of the record label. He wanted to make the system prevail over what it catalogued, and so in his wall work, Maggs creates a monument to that separation. His next work would also be based on the catalogue of one of his other musical loves. The letterpress prints, *Köchel Series*, 1990, reproduce the numbering of Mozart's compositions established by Ludwig von Köchel.

In 1991, while on a Canada Council grant in Paris, Maggs walked in search of a subject that would allow him to produce a portrait of the city. Like the photographer of Parisian scenes Eugène Atget, to whom Maggs would later dedicate a work and of whom, not coincidentally, he was thinking, Maggs did not seek out tourist panoramas. On the side streets, he eventually found his subject—in the city's generic hotel signage, the type that projects into the street, with "Hotel" running vertically from top to bottom. Ubiquitous, these signs are both there and not there, utilitarian but unnoticed, except in need. In the *Hotel Series*, as in his portrait studies, Maggs draws attention to the marked variation in the signage; he divides signs according to their typographic mode: decorative, serif, sans serif, black on white or reversed. As each sign is identified by street number and arrondissement, the work produces an unconventional map of the city that has to do with Maggs's own wandering and sightings. Maggs's later homage to Atget, *Répertoire*, 1997, which consists simply of photographic reproductions of pages of Atget's address book (the English for *répertoire*), similarly could be seen as a guide to that photographer's daily activity. The book records the addresses of his clients, from whom he made his living selling prints, and thus it too creates a specialized map of his beloved Paris through his commercial activity.

The Image of Work and Death

Although out of sequence in the chronological order of Arnaud Maggs's oeuvre, *Répertoire* is of a character with the next body of Maggs's work that could be designated archival. For the past few years, Maggs has photographed items he

has discovered in French flea markets. Mainly paper ephemera, this material has not been thought worthy of collecting. 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, which he now produces in colour and collectively hangs in his usual format.

Although print documents, the ensuing images are portraits of sorts. No more than a bundle of labels when found, *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie: Les étiquettes* unfolds a story of child-labour practices of the early twentieth century. The labels that Maggs found in Montpellier probably itemized piecework by girls in the weaving industry. The accompanying work, *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie: Les livrets*, shows their individual passbooks, the name of Maggs's pieces being derived from the French statute recorded on their covers. Unlike the period documents by the American photographer Lewis Hine, these works by Maggs represent a routine activity by reference to the administrative apparatus that the labouring child was a part of. This portrait exists aside from any images of the girls who did the work, and who are only known by their names—their Christian names on the tags, their surnames on their passbooks.

No doubt an academic could sketch a history of labour practices by relating this material to other archival information. But singular stories of Angèle or Antoinette, among others, would be lacking. Nor does Maggs tell their stories directly by expanding on what he found. (He practices history from below, in sympathy with innumerable nameless contributors and, in an equally modest way, by simply re-presenting his source materials.) The tags reveal another story. In that they probably register piecework by individuals, they measure out time—the time of work and the body's span of existence as marked by labour. More perishable than living bodies, ironically these paper ephemera are the only trace of the girls' lives that remain, at least for us. With the tombstone shapes of his photographs brought together like a mausoleum wall, Arnaud Maggs has built the young workers a public memorial.

Manifold in use, disposable paper is connotative of the dailiness of our existence, and of time passing. However, paper is also kept; love letters and death notices are souvenirs of and unique memorials to time past. Perhaps because of the private character of these ephemera made public in such a memorializing fashion in Maggs's installations, these works move people in a way that the cool objectivity of the portraits does not. Such was the case with *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie* and again with Maggs's next major installation, *Notification i and ii*, 1996. *Notification i and ii* is a collection of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century mourning stationery, the kind with ominous black

edging, that announces, without the recipient opening the envelope, a crisis for the living. A stunning abstract arrangement, like a rigorous early Sol LeWitt conceptual work, *Notification i and ii* is an overwhelmingly poignant portrait of life's traces, even in the absence of a human image. Once again, Maggs collected the letters, selected and photographed them on their flap side, framed, and hung them in a grid of 192 images with the pattern of their black crosses dominant. Russell Keziere has eloquently written of this work:

We cannot avoid their particulars, and this pulls us out of the pattern [the x's make] and back into history. Someone has died but we cannot know who, the identity is erased, the memory is embalmed within the photograph. We cannot turn the envelope over; the wound of the historical opening has been sutured closed within the photograph. . . . But there is no sentiment or grief in *Notification*, no lament, no personality, and no nostalgia. The identity of the deceased is under erasure at the very moment that it is, perhaps, the most recognized and identified.[1]

Because only the backs of the envelopes are visible to us, the destination of each letter has been obscured, but not its itinerary. Various postal impressions and official stamps, including those of wartime censors, have left their inscriptions. *Notification i and ii* enshrouds outmoded customs of time past in its photographic presentation, but it also creates a collective social document that reveals networks of affiliation through the circulation of mail. Like On Kawara's ongoing project of sending postcards stamped with "I am still alive" every day to select acquaintances, *Notification i and ii*, with its collective messages to the past living, uses the postal system as a metaphor for the quotidian.

We have already seen this mapping of movement personalized in the *Hotel Series* and *Répertoire*. *Répertoire* differs from Maggs's related work in being a document already kept in an archive. Maggs, long fascinated by this small book, made arrangements to photograph it, page by page, at the Museum of Modern Art. Atget considered his photographs to be documents, not artworks or aesthetic objects, which were made in the service of others—artists, decorators, the building trade—or directly for private or public collections and archives. His address book documents these relations. Maggs's *Répertoire* perhaps establishes a connection between Atget's *répertoire* and his photographs (now universally considered modernist art) similar to the connection between the Prestige catalogue, for example, and its collection of music, though the *répertoire*, as a personal document, is more idiosyncratic. The humble abode of the archive is an appropriate repository for this tool of a photographer who thought of himself as a tradesman.

Répertoire concludes the actual exhibition, but there are new works that continue Maggs's archival pursuits (illustrated here but shown concurrently at the Susan Hobbs Gallery, Maggs's commercial representative, with their source

material exhibited at The Power Plant). Trade seems the nexus that links goods and classes in these works, perhaps the products of children's labour transformed into luxury items for the carriage trade. *Aux Ciseaux d'Argent*, 1999, is made from a series of invoices from 1891 documenting the clothing purchases of a Parisian bourgeois couple named Gendot. If *Aux Ciseaux d'Argent* presents the opposite extreme of class and leisure from that of *Travail des enfants dan l'industrie*, *L'échantillonnage ii*, 1999, mediates the two.

Échantillonnage means "collection of samples," and Maggs's photographs are derived from sample cases of decorative dress trim from the turn of the century. Tools of the salesman's trade, the samples represent a stage between production and consumption. Divorced from their original utilitarian purpose, the samples over time have become beautiful objects in themselves, collectable, and re-presentable. In *L'échantillonnage ii*, Maggs has simply reframed what was already displayed in the cases. Intended as embellishments to fancy dresses, the ribbons are now blanched, and stained by the glue that holds them in place, clearly in the process of decay. Does featuring them so make them into *vanitas* images? Perhaps instead the artist identifies with the workaday routine of the tradesmen, handling simple materials that make an *objet de luxe*. Is the subtext a common message: beauty fades; salvation is in work?

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, a logic can be discerned in Arnaud Maggs's oeuvre. Starting with portraiture, he applied an analytical system represented structurally by the grid. Given the basic information contained in the photographs and the identity of poses, there could be no analysis without the comparisons that the structure of presentation brought to view. The analytical structure that seemed so pertinent to his study of the human head became less relevant when Maggs turned his attention to occupational and cultural groupings, as he did in such works as *Kunstakademie* and *48 Views Series*. One could argue that with these series the grid changed its function from asserting structure to highlighting process. Time is revealed as the subject of the portraits; it weighs on the sitters and imposes itself on the maker. Time and work are the obscured themes of the first period of Maggs's art career.

From an interest in what structural systems revealed in things (in the case of his investigation, the human head), Maggs moved to explore other systems of ordering pertaining not to the natural world that the human physiognomy, of course, is a part of, but to human affairs. Maggs chose the music catalogue, abstracting from its numbering, as in *The Complete Prestige 12" Jazz Catalogue*, a formal system of notation. Too formal, perhaps—because the catalogue in Maggs's mind can replace the material catalogued. Perhaps this formality (although all Maggs's works retain an intellectual and formal rigour) drew the

artist to material that has traces of the human touch or evidence of some act that touched the body in one way or another, as we have seen, through labour or death. His search led him to the yet-to-be-catalogued products of daily life, ephemera that seemed valueless. He rescued this detritus and lovingly elevated it to art, in the process becoming an archivist of sorts himself.

What guides Maggs in his search for and selection of material is probably idiosyncratic to the artist's sensibility. He shows a propensity, at times, to select by covert identification, as he did with *The Complete Prestige 12" Jazz Catalogue*. With *L'échantillonnage ii*, Maggs seems to share Atget's tradesman's attitude by identifying with the tradespeople who originally used the samples. If *Travail des enfants dan l'industrie* rendered palpable the themes of time and work as they affected the labouring child, *L'échantillonnage ii* identifies the making of art with practical human labour. In so building memorials to past human endeavours, Maggs's art challenges the work of time and death on the body.

NOTE

1. Russell Keziere, "Arnaud Maggs: Convergence without Coincidence," *CV Photo 39* (Summer 1997).

NOTE: This text may not correspond exactly to its published form.