

Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art

By Martha Langford

Répertoire

Another kind of community – another aggregate of interests – is the underpinning of an eccentric and strangely sensual photographic work by Arnaud Maggs. His *Répertoire* (1997) makes a subject of the annotated address book that contains some of French photographer Eugene Atget's commercial records, an object now held by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. From cover to cover, this photographic relic is documented in forty – eight colour views that are framed simply and arranged in the form of a large grid at mural proportions. I say "relic" risking accusations of blasphemy, for Maggs's subject is the very antithesis of a religious or fetish object. Atget's *Répertoire* was a practical instrument used to conduct his business which was, as he always insisted, as his tradesman's sign proclaimed, to furnish *documents*. According to Molly Nesbit, the late nineteenth – century appetite for visual documents, or "study sheets," drove Atget's productivity and shaped his unique photographic style:

Whether drawn or photographed, the document was playing an increasingly important role in the elaboration of scientific and historical proof. It became a standard way of expressing knowledge; it became a means to knowledge; and it put together pictorial forms of knowledge, though they were not yet taken up as aesthetic forms and exploited for their own sake. That would come later.

In the meantime, Atget's clients were painters, sculptors, architects, decorators, craftspeople, industrial designers, set designers, urban planners, publishers, and librarians, whom he visited in their places of business.

Atget's *Répertoire* is thus not a guide to pictures taken, but to pictures wanted. Clients are listed, as well as their addresses and Métro stops. Other notations, less systematic, include the best time to call, purchasing history, type of requirements, and connections to other purchasers. This book – there were apparently others – was in use from about 1900 until he gave up business (he died in 1927). Atget, as Nesbit says, was encouraged "to map out his documents according to their functions," and also to map out his life, in order to move through the city efficiently as he served and expanded his clientele. Nesbit, whose rigorous analysis of the *Répertoire* strikes a chord in Maggs, helps us to understand the practical function of Atget's photographs as an explanation for their extended life in the collective imagination:

The photographs in their capacity as documents asked for a narrative, dramatic action, a relation to a larger whole; they anticipated a look that would pirate; they also expected a look that would supplement. Each kind of document however worked off a different profile of possibilities; the nature of the supplement varied with the genre. This much can be said of all documents for artists: they anticipated a look that would see ahead to fully brushed and well – populated landscapes, characters, narrative action, and punch lines, the horizon of expectations in the artists' practical vision. Space in those documents left room for a look; more than that, it signified absence.

The infinite possibilities of Atget's pictorial spaces have been analysed by scholars from every angle, though there is apparently still room for discoveries. Atget's address book, as a document of the documents, can now also be said to have "anticipated a look" that would "pirate," "supplement," and signify "absence," for this is in effect what Maggs has done with his photographic work of art, *Répertoire*.

The notion of *pirating* needs, however, to be qualified. Maggs sought permission to photograph the original object and did so in the precincts of the museum. This act is neither modern piracy, the stealing of intellectual property, nor Postmodern appropriation, the reconstruction of intellectual property, but straightforward documentation. Maggs made a photographic document of the *Répertoire*, in the same spirit that Atget photographed Paris and its environs: to make the subject available for study in detail; to look at the object whole as it had never been seen before. Like Atget's highly detailed, and equally selective, documentation of Paris, Maggs's *Répertoire*, is only an impression of wholeness. Not every page is represented; some of the blank pages have been omitted, to the consternation of at least one photographic historian. The artist has taken licence with the document in order to present it in a grid structure of forty – eight views, which, by no coincidence, conforms to a system of portraiture that he developed in the 1980s. Under this system, people who agreed, or asked, to pose were photographed forty – eight times, half of these facing the camera and half in profile. The effect of Maggs's method was to neutralize the usual underpinnings of a portrait – psychological, social, environmental, and so forth – to the advantage of documenting and comparing specimens of human physiognomy. The project was pursued assiduously, creating an enormous archive that represents Maggs's network of artists, performers, curators, chefs, theorists, family, friends, and public intellectuals. Maggs's address book, if it exists, remains hidden; he could be said, by his look, to have pirated Atget's, building a photographic monument to their shared sensibilities.

Bringing a facsimile of the *Répertoire* into the light allows its partial, encrypted entries to be *supplemented* with memories and narratives. This is another form of pirating, 'a somewhat romantic practice' that Irit Rogoff finds erupting even in

the taxonomic geographies of Foucault and Dennis Wood: "What is so interesting to me here is that the slightest breach of the agreed – upon system of represented knowledge allows for everyone's flights of fancy to enter the argument, and that is as it should be but so rarely is." The mapping and indexing that are the function of Atget's personal atlas contribute to many histories of Paris; they stretch beyond the biographical frame of the photographer; they form a crowd. Seeing Atget as the servant of so many masters complicates the understanding of his photography as a form of place deixis – reference to a location in relation to the speaker, in this case, the photographer. One begins to wonder which of these clients is sitting on Atget's shoulder as he aims his camera at a Parisian façade.

Each handwritten entry, even the simplest name and street address, pushes this inquiry along, summoning the powers of memory and imagination. Remembering Atget's photographs in the context of the *Répertoire* is looking back in order to "see ahead." These meetings over pictures, did they lead to ideas for pictures? For such is the nature of photography done on spec, or so one might speculate. And how are these documents used? This figure moving between studios and workshops, supplying the history painters, but also feeding the designers, is he ensuring the preservation of old Paris, or cross – pollinating the old with the new? Both, and this is not the only duality to be considered.

Photography's connection with death – the trope of *absence* in presence - seems to be expressed in the *Répertoire's* well – thumbed condition and the lines drawn diagonally across so many names and addresses. But Atget's marks are not so easily decoded. To dwell morbidly on Maggs's *Répertoire* is fatal to its understanding, for when the address book was in use, Atget's cancellations might have meant "moved," or "out of business," or "waste of time." Cancellation, in these cases, is not giving up, but turning one's attention elsewhere, replacing blind alleys with open prospects. The multiple appearances of some names also suggests that Atget was wont to reclassify his entries, reorienting his approach path to his clients. For whatever reason, these cancellations and relocations are about life, because life keeps going, and with ruthless regularity, sloughs off memories that have lost their utility. Maggs's *Répertoire* is a portrait of that process, in "48 Views."