The Crisis of the Artificial:

Why Does Everything Look the Same?

(VOLUME I)

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THE CRISIS OF THE ARTIFICIAL:
WHY DOES EVERYTHING LOOK THE SAME?

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THE ABSTRACT

In this thesis I will argue that the realist photograph conditions us to see, experience, and imagine the world in a narrow realist manner. I will contend that the questions we ask through realist photo-observation frame the world as a concrete reality. I will propose a framing theory for the use of photo-observation in design that encompasses abstraction and artifice to counter this by imagining reality as malleable. I will contend that my research presents another way to understand the nature of the questions one can ask through a photograph. This leads to a further question, although not restricted to photography, about the reality we are designing in the post-industrial age and that is 'why does everything look the same?'

I present the case that ethnography has a long history of using photo-observation as a method of inquiry and there exists an extensive body of literature that discusses how to do it. More significantly much of this literature interrogates the epistemological and ontological dimensions of doing it. Regardless of the differing epistemological and ontological views that exist in the ethnographic research community, each view has a well-developed theoretical framework for using photo-observation. And though the ethnographic literature theorises the relationship between photography, the production of knowledge, and the problematic nature of notions of reality and truth, photo-realism is still the modus operandi of ethnographers.

By contrast design has relatively recently assumed the ethnographic turn and many research methods from ethnography, photo-observation included, are used by design practitioners and researchers in their inquiry. Where there is some literature that discusses how to do photo-observation for design there is a paucity of material that deals in any substantive way with the epistemological and ontological implications of doing so. Photo-realism is also the modus operandi of design researchers using photo-observation but it is used without any thought given to these implications or the epistemological and ontological differences that exist between ethnography and design. I will contend that ethnography is essentially concerned with telling us 'what-is'. It is in the main a narrative practice and the realist photograph, as data, is an object of interrogation, analysis, and interpretation to be written about. I will argue

that design, by comparison, is fundamentally concerned with 'what-might-be' and that in spite of it being a transformative practice that shapes the world through images and objects its use of photo-observation conforms to the realist pattern.

Through my research I present the case that irrespective of these differences the use of photo-observation in both fields presupposes that photography can be used to ask questions. Inevitably these questions attend to reality - and what we may ask of it - but not in the commonplace sense of a reality the photograph apparently shows, the canonised and naturalised regime of pictorial realism that derives from its indexical relationship to its subject. The more fundamental questions pertain to the reality that we inevitably transform through the interplay of the imaginary and the images of photography via our embodied perception of the world. This is the subject of design, and though some critical theorists have touched it upon, it has not been theorised through design practice. With reference to several case studies of my own abstract photographic practice I present a new theory and new point of view for design to ask questions using photo-observational research and escape the banality of the real.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother Judith. Given my teacher's comments on all of my school reports (each of which she diligently kept) and my previous aptitude for study I think she would have been amused and surpised I got this far.

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"I don't know where the artificial stops and the real starts."

Andy Warhol