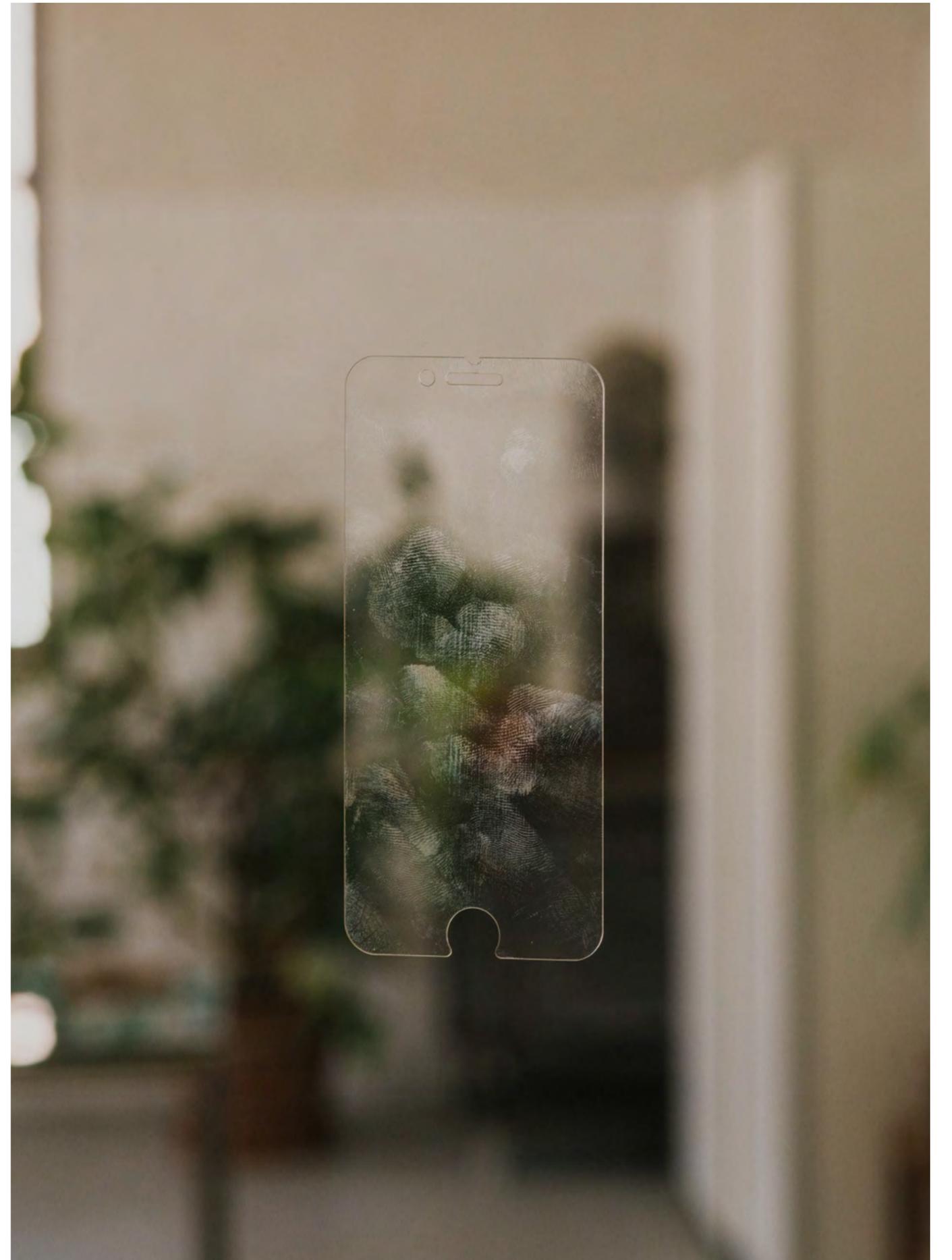


MIRRORS and WINDOWS

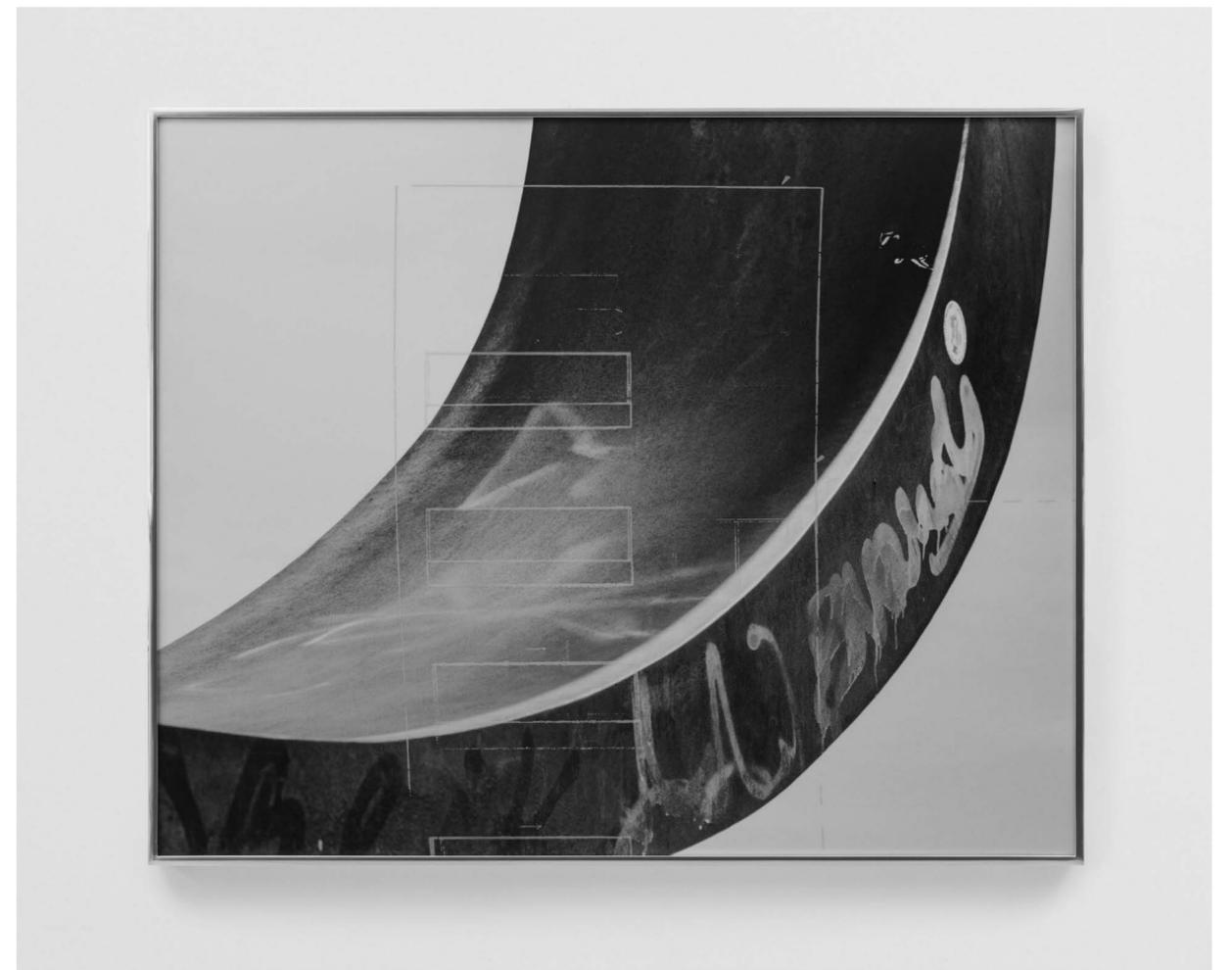
on 43–35 10TH
STREET

by
DANIEL SHEA









interview by **STANLEY WOLUKAU-WANAMBA**



In the catalogue essay from his influential exhibition, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*, John Szarkowski effected a rhetorical division of then contemporary photographic practice between the broadly romantic (mirrors) and the broadly realist (windows), as a means to explain recent transformations in the national scene.¹ While he goes to great lengths to stress that the division is more of a heuristic device than an objective method, the vestigial traces of a misunderstanding of that argument have become somewhat doctrinal in certain quarters, and have thus shaped much photographic education, exhibition and practice in subsequent years.

Under this misapprehension, many have held tight to the belief that artistic photography necessarily “suggests the central and indispensable presence in the picture of its maker,” and is thus necessarily reflexive and apolitical, i.e., a mirror.² Correspondingly, artistic photography that embraces the notion that “the world exists independent of human attention” and which reflects an “inclusive acceptance of fact, objective structure, and the logic of process and system” is necessarily impersonal and political, i.e. a window.³

For Szarkowski, these provisional distinctions can be parsed through the persons of Minor White and Robert Frank, both of whom had a transformative effect on the photographic scene of the 1960s through *Aperture* magazine and *The Americans* respectively.⁴ Between these two exemplars, whom he describes

1 *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*, curated by John Szarkowski, The Museum of Modern Art, NY, July 28th to October 2nd 1978

2 Szarkowski, *John Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* [New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978] p. 19

3 Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows*, pp. 18 – 19

4 Robert Frank *The Americans* [New York, NY: Grove Press, 1959]

as occupying two poles on “a continuous axis,” he notes “a dichotomy of feeling” that can be reduced to a differentiation in the interpretation of the word “personal.” Thus, mirrors reflect a personal practice that “leans toward autobiography, or autoanalysis,” and windows describe a practice whose photographs can be called “disinterested or objective, in the sense that they describe issues that one might attempt to define without reference to the photographer’s presence.”⁵

Szarkowski’s vexed attempt at differentiation between these poles is deeply resonant with the trajectory of Daniel Shea’s work, from his earliest series *Coal Work* (2007 – 2012) to his most recent book, *43-35 10th Street* (2018). Along the course of that evolving line, or across the modulating tensions of that axis, Shea has successively rejected the notional autonomy and transparency of the “straight” documentary photograph and employed ever-greater measures of reflexive technique to signal both the frame and the thing framed as made objects issuing from the artist’s hand. This suggests a move from window to mirror, or from the social to the personal (along that “continuous axis”).

However, any notion that this trajectory might reflect a depoliticisation of Shea’s practice would be misconstrued. His work has continued to attend to the complex, multiform, mutable constellations of neoliberal capitalism as they can be viewed through the prisms of the postindustrial landscape, or, in his latest work, through the prisms of inner-urban gentrification and modernist architecture. In at least this sense, he has been wrestling not only with what precisely constitutes modernity but with the legacies of Szarkowski’s brand of photographic

5 Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows*, p. 19 & p. 21

modernism too.

To complicate matters somewhat, Shea's latest book reflects a body of work that leans heavily toward "autobiography, or autoanalysis" in the mould of romantic mirrors, since it is situated in and named for his home, and since it partly describes the itinerary of his professional travels as a photographer. Equally, his book reproduces a series of photographs that can accurately be described as "artistically arcane, stubbornly subtle," and thus well within the mould of realist windows according to Szarkowski's schema. This is to say that his new work leaves us in something of a quandary as regards to the model with which we began.

43-35 10th Street insists on collapsing the suspension between the broadly romantic and the broad realist. It grounds itself in the always already politicised reality of the photographer's life, even as it simultaneously attends to the relative structural positions of the people and places that it depicts. Its route to reality goes by way of an embedded autobiography that reckons with the artist's position in systemic and romantic terms, and in this Shea elides what was made discrete in Szarkowski's formulation.

The profusion of mirrors and windows throughout Shea's work, in this sense, might be taken to articulate an embeddedness in a world shaped as much by semblance as by substance; one in which notionally opposed ideas of interior and exterior can no longer be conclusively or persuasively teased apart. 43-35 10th Street elaborates a conception of photography and of the world that it pictures, in which the self is never finally private and the systemic never ultimately separable from the individuated perspective from which it is observed. In the work, the personal and the political, the structural and the subjective, must be worked out in dynamic interdependent relation to one another. The challenge in that effort, at the level of photographic form, mirrors a pressing challenge in contemporary life.

The following is a conversation from December 2017.

Your new work, 43-35 10th Street, weaves together photographic representations of architecture, most crucially in the context of a modernist style as that relates to financial capital and gentrification, with depictions of construction workers, office workers, images of 'nature' and reproductions of your framed artworks. This last strand of images implicates you as an artist and situates your artistic production (and labour) alongside or against that of the construction and office workers. The modernist architecture stages these interacting elements in a contemporary moment that has come unmoored from the utopian aspirations we might associate with some strands of

modernism. What led you to implicate yourself in this way and to try to deal with the question of imbrication with the forces of capital more broadly in this new work?

I've spent a lot of time in the past making work about subjects: history, landscapes, industries; things I was curious about. Over time, I had internalised the notion of 'having a perspective' as an implicit part of observing the world. I can stand here and look at this and suggest that arranging pictures in this way may lead one to a similar poetic insight I experienced. When I was thinking more ambitiously, I wanted an arrangement of pictures to represent an arrangement of existing ideas about the world that might produce a thesis. It took some time, but eventually, I realised that how I made work and how I positioned myself weren't external to any of this. Having perspective is a convenient way of observing while remaining detached.

This was on my mind as I moved from the Midwest to New York five years ago, to a rapidly growing and changing neighbourhood, Long Island City. For the first year, I was in New York, I was traveling back to the Midwest to finish a project about the preservation of a historical ideal; American industrial prosperity. I was working in places that were experiencing continuous economic shifts, mostly through the decline in manufacturing, stagnating wages and the afflictions of rural poverty.

These economic shifts have had obvious sociological consequences that are now being parsed with existential urgency. But I had chosen to move to a rapidly growing city and neighbourhood experiencing a real estate boom through the mechanisms of international finance capital. On the last page from my previous book, Walter Benn Michaels wrote that "it matters that Blisner is a fictional town; it's fictional in the sense that it's a composite—not one town among others, not a slice of reality, but a constructed image of the whole. And that whole necessarily includes Long Island City, in the sense that the decline of Southern Illinois is inseparable from the rise of LIC."⁶ This simple insight, that it's not one thing or another, but one thing and another, or potentially, one thing because of another, became an important perspective shift. My own aspirations as an individual or artist weren't inconsequential, they mirrored the socioeconomic shifts being described in my work. In 43-35 10th Street, which is also the address where I live and work, my position in all this is a context that not only forms a perspective in which to see the world but represents a position that is complicit and

⁶ Benn Michales, Walter. 'Picturing the Whole.' *Blisner, IL*. Daniel Shea. fourteen-nineteen, 2014. p. 90.



internal to these wider macroeconomic and political forces.

It strikes me that for anyone arriving at the book unfamiliar with your professional work as a paid photographer, or even as a commercial artist, the most important 'site' in the book to address your complicity is in the string of captioned reproductions of artworks at the very end of the book. That sequence effectively transforms each preceding page into a future inventory of objects for sale, retroactively capturing (or co-opting) all the represented figures and spaces within the book as future sales. This suggests to me that the book is arguing that there is no notional 'outside' to the interacting political and economic and cultural forces it addresses (either for you or for us).

But I think, then, I want to ask you about the realm of the imaginary as a possible site interior to all this mess, but capable (perhaps) of transforming it. There's this photograph in the penultimate section of the book, which depicts a mural-sized advert for an EÖS property development with a woman stood in a variation on the romantic posture of *The Wanderer* in Caspar David Friedrich's painting 1818 painting⁷. She's stood atop a rock gazing west across the East River at the Empire State Building, like a feminine King Kong in a dressing gown and pyjama bottoms, ready to civilise the wilds of Long Island City. Notably, beneath her outsize figure, a number of black and brown people are making their way up and down the street. I know this is a very important photograph for you and I want to hear why, but I also want to prompt you to talk about a cultural imaginary in which certain notions of property, position, and power can be inflected through your work with questions about race as integral to capitalism and exploitation?

The realm of the imaginary is what makes the whole enterprise worth it. I think of this as being the only true interior and to the extent that the potential for interiority is autonomous, it serves as a type of thought experiment for political autonomy. This is one of the most important images in the book and is possibly the image that could also serve to summarise the whole thing. Your description of the picture is great, but there are a few other qualities that I think are important to highlight.

First, it's an image of an advertisement, and it's not clear if the advertisement is entirely photographic, or how intentional its formal ambiguity is on the part of its advertisers (my guess is entirely). Second, in terms of how that advertisement is situated in the world both in size and scale: a 5ft 10" tall

⁷ Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* c. 1818 (Kunsthalle Hamburg, Germany)

person would be eye level with the model's feet, and her figure is slightly larger than human. The ad is broken up into panels, relating to the architecture of the display, but also recalling the large-scale lightboxes of Jeff Wall, for instance, *Picture for Women* (1979).

Within the hegemonic terms established by neoliberalism, are claims for the liberation of people (including the oppressed and marginalised) through the liberalisation of markets. There are ways in which this is true; capital itself does not care about what pronoun a consumer uses, just that they are a consumer. It's not surprising that many large corporations took up the banner of equality and diversity issues in the 90's before the federal government attempted to articulate these very things, either through policy and/ or symbolic gestures. In the advertisement we're discussing, a woman is now Friedrich's Wanderer, not a man; feminism has liberated her here in this fictional paradigm, through feminism's own liberation through market centred claims. Importantly, she is a sole or lone wanderer, an individual. Her face is still obscured, as in the subject of the original painting, because we need to project ourselves into this space, to fulfil the aspirational quality of the advertisement. She represents a real person in addition to the idea of one.

And yet she is still understood to be a white woman. If whiteness can be understood as the defining social construct in American society, her whiteness is deliberate here. As much as the advertisement pictures exactly what it wants and needs, my photograph does the same. It's not coincidental that the population below her are made up of black and brown people. I made a few versions of the photograph and they all represented a similar pedestrian demographic breakdown, insomuch as that is discernible (which is actually quite important, related to ideas highlighted above). Every person in my picture, both real (the people walking down the street) and imagined (the woman in the advertisement) is pictured as the real construction of how we imagine race governing our social dynamics. We tend to think of race and issues of racism as being social in nature (stemming from a bias) and class as an economic construct, together forming a political reality, but the truth is more enmeshed. A neoliberal policy has correlated with increasing inequality; this reality has exacerbated existing racial disparities in wealth and mobility. But beyond these empirical truths, whiteness itself is still often trafficked as an aspirational mechanism within the logic of late capitalism.

Gentrification narratives typify these issues. We know that white artists pre-gentrify traditionally black and brown



city neighbourhoods by establishing signals for other less adventurous whites to feel comfortable. But how do the products of their labor also exemplify the economic changes of the last half-century? Who do they produce art for, both culturally and as commodities? My work has been bought by real estate developers in the recent past. If you cross your eyes for a minute and see the world a bit blurrier, the art market and real estate market function similarly; they are wildly unregulated markets of intense speculation. Both are driven by an aspiration whose foundation is the scarcity of highly-coveted objects and spaces and they are driven by a desire for a distinct position within a hierarchy. For the art buyer, this is about status and proximity to power and for the real estate buyer, this manifests in location and height, reflecting a more literal hierarchy. These foundations are built on a philosophy of unchecked and mythical individualism. Part of the success of neoliberal philosophy can be attributed to its deep affinity with some of the broader cultural forces of postmodernism, which deepens the analogy between real estate and art.

I'm also eager to ask you about touch, tactility, materiality, connection, and the various complex ways that the work deals with this. The recurring superimpositions in your images often elide solid architectural structures with the diaphanous surfaces of water or figures of natural life (leaves) and of waste (pillboxes). These images are deeply seductive, almost so much so that the dissonances in some of them isn't jarring. And then there's the photograph (not a picture of a framed photograph, but a 'straight' reproduction) of an iPhone screen protector with multi-hued fingerprints congested at its centre, glued to the surface of a pane of glass that could be a panel separating one of your modernist office towers from the street.

I see a large number of threads interweaving here; financialisation with ecological waste, illness with productivity and pollution, modernity and technology with distance, to name a few. But that 'screen protector' seems to figure physical contact as something inseparable from the illusory space of the networked world, which then makes me wonder about the idea of crossing thresholds, of making contact, of reaching the object and not tarrying with the image, so to speak. How did your approach to superimposition develop in the work, and how does it relate to technology, to brick and mortar community, and to human contact among the various mirages that are assembled under neoliberalism?

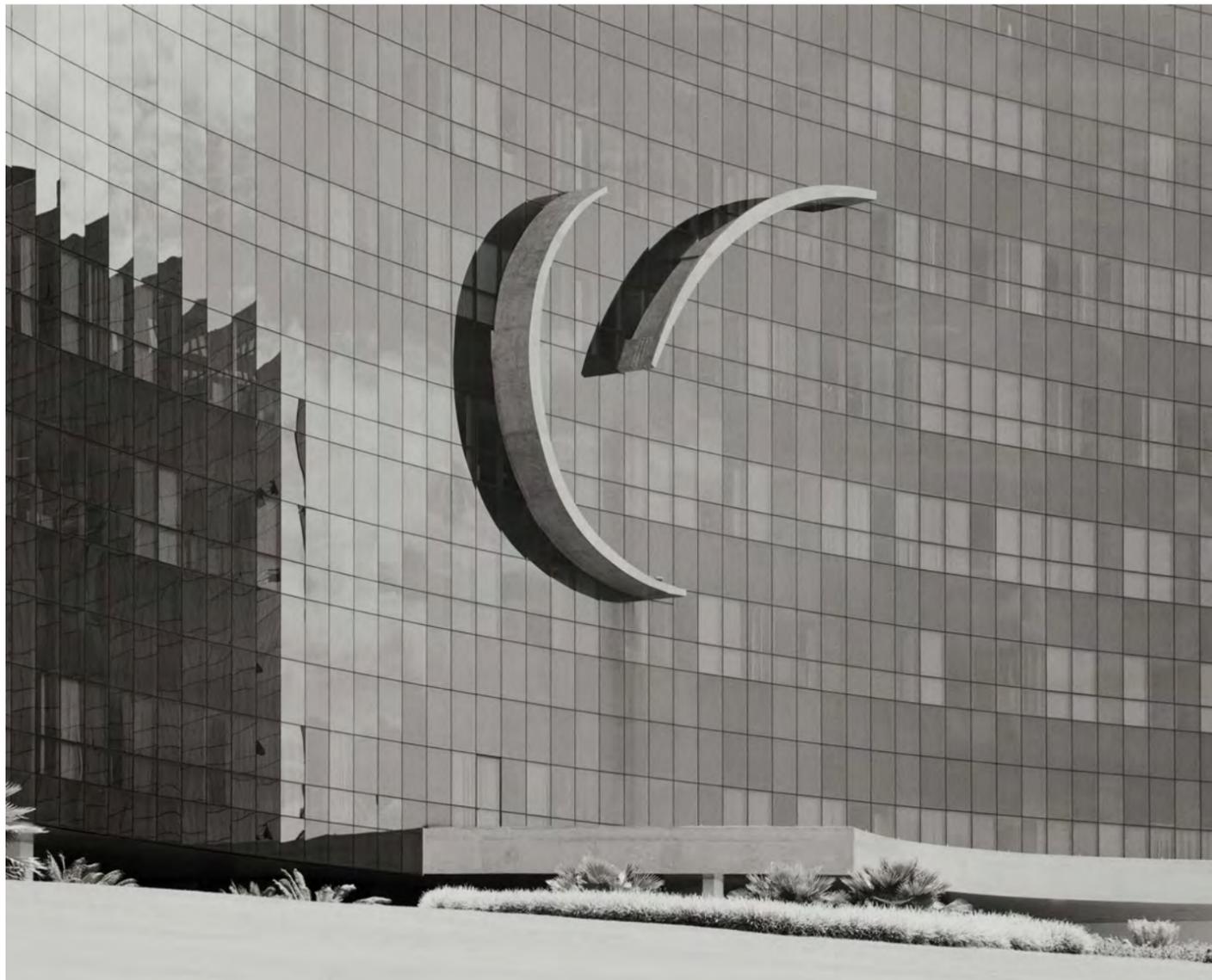
The screen protector became a useful analogy for the various ways of intercepting representation. Its use in the real world

is already so poetic; a backlit iPhone screen with seamless resolution is a mirage, we can touch the surface of the glass, which mediates and maps our experience, but its technology is so seductive that we'd rather diminish its quality to protect its seamlessness. The display is like free will. But when you buy a screen protector, one side has an adhesive coating, that makes an immediate impression if you touch it (almost like touching from within virtual space). In the 'straight' reproduction in the book, it's suspended in the middle of the frame. For a while, I was trying to figure out ways of having that be represented without showing the iPhone edge, so that we're just looking through the protector at the slightly diminished (but protected) image it presents.

But the frame was necessary for so many reasons. It becomes the subject. It's a designed object, easily identified all around the world. It's an object of this specific moment, inserted within a sequence of 400 pictures, some of which are geological landscapes, or images of water. It's a theoretical space—in the picture, and in the real world—much like the other types of frames within the book that are either filled or aren't. And when they aren't, their absence is a presence within the medium of book-making and design.

I had to practically consider how to show the work I was making, some of which was studio work, and some of it was just a growing body of images made with digital and analog cameras, or cell phones, or else rendered virtually. So the book deals with the difference between an image of an image, and an image designed into the space of the book, but confusingly, a lot of the physical works tactility deals with the space of design, or, its potential. And vice versa.

For a while, I was trying to keep a written record of the different types of threads I wanted to extend throughout the book, for example, modernity and technology, as you mentioned. But I lost track in a way that became meaningful, analogous to the illusory effect the real superimpositions have on some of the straight images. In a lot of the superimpositions, what should feel dissonant instead feels harmonious because of the mechanics of repetition and a nimble expectation of veracity. I care deeply about the way pictures are made and presented; craft is never nonessential, or outside the subject matter. I often feel stuck between modernism and the pressing need to address how photographs are made and consumed broadly right now (in the contemporary world). I've found this represents my politics as well. Not resisting technology, but seeing ways in which progress can still be truly progressive vis-à-vis egalitarian values.



Can you talk more about losing track, and maybe the ways that the book perhaps tries to (re)create that experience? 400 images is an enormous amount of content. The book is full of serial or typological gestures that create or evoke homogeneity and endless repetition, and I'm interested to know why it's this dense, and whether you feel that you wrangled it, or it wrangled you in some way? I can certainly see that that dynamic of the tail wagging dog bears on an underlying theme of neoliberalism's effects on individual agency.

I lost track while making this book because I mostly followed impulses. The book began with a really simple premise; to observe the residential real estate boom in my neighbourhood by photographing it, and to tease out more specifically what forms and details could be placed within a recent history of architecture. From there, a constellation of places and ideas started to develop, at which point it feels like everything is on the table. Every idea, impulse, scrap, place, and picture.

I found some footing while editing and designing the book, since I needed a structure, although at one point I experimented with a near randomised display of the images, with no structure, narrative or hierarchy other than the ones that were established serendipitously. Despite not using that model, I learned from it. I didn't want to be rigorous to the point of typology, and I didn't want total randomness. I want to quote my friend Charlie Engman, who had this beautiful criticism of an earlier edit: "It feels very detached and defensively cerebral (as opposed to ecstatically cerebral, if that distinction makes any sense)."

I wanted something that reflected both the process of attempting to put together the work and also how these observations came to pass. Defining a structure for the book allows the analysis to emerge, namely through narrative. We spoke about this recently, but in general, I love being able to make things by following poetic insight and then finding existing research from different realms of expertise (aesthetics, economics, politics) that can work in tandem with the constellation of ideas that begin to emerge in the work. Unlike these experts, this is process without procedure but like them, there is the potential for rigour and deep insight.

I've had to really defend the scale and/ or density with friends, editors, the publisher. I wanted to make something that couldn't be digested in one sitting, that demanded repeat visits, as does anyone making a book. But more importantly, the bloated centre of the book, which is mostly a 4-up gridded design schema, is prolonged to explore the dynamics mentioned above. This section wavers between

an index of images, with taxonomical rigidity, and a not fully blended soup. It's not exactly that the mire is unstructured; rather, it's meant to suggest a latent structure.

As the book pushes towards the covers, the design becomes more sparse, the images articulate their intention with more precision (they are more modernist), and punctuation happens. It wasn't possible to make a book that read like this without its length and pacing.

Something I've noticed in your work these last few years, and in the work of Stefan Keppel and Michael Ashkin, is an emphasis on verticality and flatness in addressing an explicitly neoliberalised urban (and ex-urban) landscape. This emerges partly through the orientation of the picture frame, but also through the selection and arrangement of certain architectural forms within the photographic space. The extensive horizontal landscape image, oriented to a stable horizon, proffering great depth of field, premised on a certain optical mastery of the scene, gives way in all of your work to a fragmented partiality, and to a certain dense seriality. This happens especially in the book form, as in Long Branch (Ashkin), or Entre Entrée and Flat Finish (Keppel), or Blisner, IL and 43-35 10th Street in your case. How do dynamics like flattening, typological treatments of photographic subjects, and an outright density of images all work together for you? Should we consider these factors in relation to the question of autonomy you raised earlier?

I think the pictorial dynamics of a compressed image space mirror the mechanics of seeing and existing in what constitutes our contemporary lived experience. Despite living in the lushness of sensorial opportunity that cities can present, we are more likely funnelled into the periscope of an iPhone screen, to be thrown outwards and upwards into the expanse of digital mediation, like two cones touching points. My own experience of moving through the city is often feeling overwhelmed by the engineering and scale, guided only by navigating abstractions such as fixed points of interest or transit. I never get tired of the view from my roof, a parallel view of the north/ south axis of Manhattan; a rare opportunity to see 'the whole thing.'

Verticality has subsumed the horizontal aspirations of the West. Aspiring to build higher is not only about a sincere desire to engineer possibility, but also about the cosmos; an attempt at godliness better expressed in this vertical dimension than along the horizon; like reaching for the sun, instead of the sunset. This idea is explored through landscapes in the book, often automatically rotated perpendicularly to fulfil the expectation of verticality.



There are traditional landscape pictures in the book that are made using the conventions of that format. With the increasing verticality and density of Long Island City, a place to stand and make a picture like this is harder to find. The images in the book that are made like this are photographed from the privileged perspective of height, which is a commodity in a landscape of new urban residential architecture. These landscapes are photographed in a romantic mist, sequenced as establishing shots within the book. The suggestion of a stable, continuous horizon is one of linearity, extended also along the axis of perpendicular depth, rendered through the mechanics of focus in a picture. These landscape photographs are postcards from the past and future simultaneously, a suggestion of landscape as a trope.

But what about a similarly perpendicular trope; a landscape of prosperity, aspiration, and ingenuity imagined through a means outside of exploitation? Autonomy can be achieved, I think (and I hope) through pictures of ideas that suggest related ideas with different outcomes. Unlike the suggestion of linearity within the conventions of the landscape picture, and its corresponding depth of field, the optics of telephoto lenses contract the experience of urban living; like walking through tall buildings to get somewhere, to its extreme conclusion. The resulting pictures, fragmentary parts, may

suggest a linear whole, but the view is too claustrophobic to be suggestive; its linearity must be completed with imagination. Capital necessitates distinctions in order to exploit. These camera optics also allow one to isolate a subject, to pull architecture into the picture frame as if it were an object in the studio.

We've come back to where all the work began; the studio, your home, your entangled, perhaps 'claustrophobic' position amidst the things your work describes and critiques. You said that the "dynamics of a compressed image space mirror the mechanics of seeing and existing in what constitutes our contemporary lived experience," and I think that's accurate and that it also that raises rich questions for a photographic practice concerned with addressing that reality. As you've moved through the construction of fictional places (such as in the Blisner books) to the embedded stance you occupy in the image economy, and in the gentrifying landscape of Long Island City, have you found a new relation to documentary practice? Where have you ended up?

Every project I've worked on has left me feeling very unsure about arts' relationship to politics through form. With the earlier social documentary projects, it was the method of storytelling itself. With Blisner, Ill., it was how narrative structures (in this case, folkloric, reverent, nonlinear) often



don't do an adequate job of addressing the systemic. With Blisner, IL, through an attempt at addressing that previous insecurity, I went to the other extreme and subsequently felt very unsure about how the photographs might "mimic the dispassionate logic of the system they critique," as you had written. This is what was on my mind as I began working on this book, and why I decided to make it personal.

My personal experiences include ones that many share, i.e., living in a fast-changing and expensive city, attempting to find economic security and a community, and absorbing/pondering/questioning the ways in which modern technology influences behaviour. My personal experiences are also more narrow and specific; wanting to be an Artist, being white, being in a position where I'm able to make a living with what I do, a living that is often provisional, precarious and scattered.

The resulting work I make often takes the form of its subject; in this case, the contemporary city, which, if we can use documentary as an adjective with a broad meaning, is not itself documentary, however, the thesis of the work is. Architectural forms, from disparate places and historical moments, evolve and echo. If modernist architecture reflected a utopia of civic engagement, neoliberalism's departure comes in the form of a utopia of consumer engagement. That's a critical observation that is as direct as any, an observation made of this particular moment in 2018 (whether we view it as a utopia, dystopia, or somewhere in between) and it's an observation likely best understood

within this moment as something many of us know and feel. Because of the conditions of making, which is akin to thinking out loud, one can be bound to one's particular moment, and yet observe and picture something else simultaneously. I'm insecure about many things, but that feels profoundly secure to me. In the same way that I feel secure in desiring a politics of emancipation.

From Maggie Nelson⁸:

"In one of his last psychoanalytic papers, D. W. Winnicott wrote: Fear of breakdown is the fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced. This statement has always been a source of great comfort to me. For years I took it to mean that the other shoe has already dropped, that you've already been to the place you fear the most, that you've already come back from it. It's only lately that I've realized that Winnicott is not suggesting that breakdowns do not recur. Now I see that he may be suggesting just the opposite: that a fear of breakdown in our past may be precisely what causes it to repeat in our future."

And J.G. Ballard⁹:

"Free of vegetation, apart from a few drifting clumps of Sargasso weed, the streets and shops had been preserved almost in-tact, like a reflection in a lake that has somehow lost its original."

43-35 10th Street is published through Kodoji Press (2018).

⁸ Nelson, Maggie. "The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial," Graywolf, 2016

⁹ Ballard, J.G. "The Drowned World," Doubleday, 1965

