

The Sphinx of Sub-urbia: A study of 'cultural currency' in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries; the trajectory of Jan Vermeer.

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### *Abstract*

In 1998 photographer Tom Hunter was awarded the Kobal Photographic Award for a series of eight images of squatters, which utilised the compositions of well known paintings by the Dutch Realist Johannes Vermeer [selected figs. 1, 3, 5 and 7].

Hunter, although not the only artist to utilise Vermeer's works in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, is a vehicle for exploring the idea of the authenticity of the artist, a theme that has become increasingly important in an age of reproduction, and has placed increasing emphasis on the role of artist biography in the modern art market.

The writings of Jean Baudrillard, in particular his proclamation of the demise of a cultural reality, *Simulacra and Simulation*, is a recurring theme, and appear here as a theoretical tool for the investigation of Hunter's possible reasons for choosing Vermeer as his inspiration, as well as the implication of Vermeer's posthumous presence to Hunter's commercial success.

Vermeer was, of course, known as 'The Sphinx of Delft'. 'The Sphinx of Sub-urbia' in the title of this dissertation denotes Tom Hunter and readings that his role as both an artist and a member of an urban sub-culture lend to his work.

'Cultural Currency' as it is used here refers to the economic implications of the modern art market in terms of the importance placed on the ideal 'cultural authenticity', a phrase that situates artists and their work within an historical tradition of Western art.

## Introduction

The late 20<sup>th</sup>-century has done untoward things to Johannes Vermeer. His woman with the pearl earring stares uncomfortably from Parisian billboards, offering New Year's greetings from the French Communist Party, her frontal gaze an uncanny anticipation of Warhol's *Portrait of an American Lady*. Other of his visual progeny, unmoored from their self-contained worlds, adorn T-shirts, advertise furniture, and reassure a weary modern world that the serenities of home life compensate for the unpleasant realities of our fin-de-siecle era. More than most "canonical" artists, Vermeer has endured parodies, museum thefts, and forgeries.<sup>1</sup>

Wolf merely touches on the cultural phenomenon that has befallen the painter in the last decade; his example of the iconic image *Girl with the Pearl Earring* [fig. 9] pre-empting the success of Tracy Chevallier's novel of the same name published in 2000. Three years later a film based on the novel appeared, its critical acclaim at once exposing Vermeer to a wider audience, and making the face of actress Scarlett Johansson synonymous with that of Vermeer's anonymous model [fig. 10].

The 1990s was also the era in which Vermeer touched upon the realm of the contemporary art market, when eight of his best known compositions were transposed from 17<sup>th</sup>-century Delft to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hackney, by photographer Tom Hunter. The series, *Persons Unknown*, which depicted a community of squatters with whom Hunter was residing, achieved critical acclaim; Hunter was awarded the Kobal Photographic prize in 1998 on the merits of the crucial photography from the series, *Woman Reading a Possession Order* (1997) [fig. 1], which was based on Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (c. 1657-1659) [fig. 2].

Less than a decade later, Hunter was himself being exalted as a canonical photographer, his work being awarded with the first ever photographic exhibition to grace London's National Gallery, home to the country's collection of Old Master's from whom Hunter claims to take his cues.

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf, B.J., 'Inside the Camera Obscura', *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2001, p. 23

This paper aims to examine Hunter's recent success in terms of Vermeer's burgeoning commercial popularity over the last century and a half; a success that is laced with myths and half-truths that have endured to this day, beginning with his supposed 'discovery' by French critic Thoré-Bürger in 1866, and extending to encompass various biographical details, as well as suppositions regarding the subjects that he painted.

It was Thoré-Bürger; the pseudonym of one Théophile Thoré; who took it upon himself to ensure that this 'lost master' was never again lost to history and, in homage to the two centuries for which Vermeer had eluded western connoisseurs, christened the Dutch painter 'The Sphinx of Delft'.

Vermeer appears to have been 'rediscovered', once again, during the 1990s. The National Gallery of Washington and the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, launched a dual centred exhibition of Vermeer's paintings. Exhibited in Washington between November 1995 and February 1996, then moving to The Hague between March and June of that year, *Vermeer*, was the first solo exhibition of the Dutch Master's work, exhibiting 20 of the 34 paintings attributed to him; the collection representing two-thirds of his total output, being the same number of Vermeer's works thought to have hung in the home of Pieter van Ruijven, thought to have been the painter's sole client for most of his career.<sup>2</sup>

The run up to the *Vermeer* exhibition signalled a flurry of scholarship concerning the painter, the results of which were gathered in the National Gallery of Art, Washington's periodical publication *Studies in the History of Art*: Number 55, entitled *Vermeer Studies* was published in 1998.<sup>3</sup>

*Vermeer Studies* seeks, among other things, to resolve a number of myths that have endured concerning Vermeer and his career. There is not space to list them all here, but it includes the dismantling of the popular tale of his discovery by Thoré-Bürger, asserting instead that the discovery of Vermeer occurred in 1859, when *The Art of Painting* (1665-67) [fig. 4] was exhibited in Vienna's Czerin Gallery, attributed to a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 65

<sup>3</sup> Gaskell, I., & Jonker, M., eds., *Vermeer Studies*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998

'Peter van Hooghe' (Pieter van Hooch). It was seen by Gustav Waagen,<sup>4</sup> the first professor of art history in Berlin; leader of the so-called 'Berlin School' of art history.<sup>5</sup> Waagen had first hand knowledge of eight Vermeer paintings and correctly attributed work.

In 1866 Thoré-Bürger published the first of three articles concerning Vermeer in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*,<sup>6</sup> claiming that he had spotted the Czerin Gallery's misattribution in 1860, but not published his findings.<sup>7</sup> It was in this article that he enduring epithet 'The Sphinx of Delft' was coined.

The myth that Thoré-Bürger discovered Vermeer doubtless endured as a result of his high profile writings, which included, apart from his *Gazette* articles, several scholarly and critical publications on collections of European art, a series of controversial Salon reviews, and various other historical researches and publications which he continued working on until his death in 1869.<sup>8</sup>

Good stories die hard, a prevailing factor of the mythologization of the artist in the modern period. Svetlana Alpers goes further, asserting that the painter could not be 'rediscovered' as he was not unknown in his lifetime, nor were his works forgotten.<sup>9</sup> Rather, clarifies Alpers, a discriminating taste for the painter's realist interiors existed in the Netherlands, particularly his home town of Delft, during his life time, and that he continued to be collected in the Netherlands after his death.<sup>10</sup>

So why then, did Vermeer's reputation as a 'lost master' materialise? It is well documented that Dutch painting became popular in the rest of northern Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, Rembrandt being quickly established as the most popular painter in his class. The quickening of the trade in Dutch painting in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century prompted the publication of Hobbema's *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (*The Great Theatre of Netherlandish Painters and Paintresses*) (1718-1721),

<sup>4</sup> Broos, B., 'Vermeer: Malice and Misconception', in Gaskell & Jonker, *ibid.*, p. 19

<sup>5</sup> Anon, 'Gustav Waagen', *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/waageng.htm>, 2006, [01/08/06]

<sup>6</sup> Nash, J., 'Rediscovery', *Vermeer*, Scala Books, Amsterdam, 1991, p. 12

<sup>7</sup> Broos, B., *op. cit.*, p. 20

<sup>8</sup> Suzman Jowell, F., 'Thoré-Bürger's art collection: "a rather unusual gallery of bric-à-brac"', *Simiolus: Netherlands quarterly for the history of art*, vol.30, no. 1, 2003, p.54

<sup>9</sup> Alpers, S., 'The Strangeness of Vermeer', *Art In America*, vol. 84, May 1996, p. 63

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64

which became the leading authority on Dutch artists. Alpers has noted that for unknown reasons Vermeer was not included in *Groote Schouberg*, meaning that he remained a 'matter of local knowledge' for the century-and-a-half following his death.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the few Vermeers to leave Holland in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century were mis-attributed to those Dutch artists with whom 'outsiders' were familiar; one of Vermeer's most celebrated works *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* [fig. 2] was imported to Dresden, catalogued as a Rembrandt in 1742.<sup>12</sup>

The implication is of course that Vermeer was a victim of misjudged marketing strategies pandering to consumer tastes for much of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century. Even so, his *View of Delft* (1659-60) became the first Vermeer exported from the Netherlands (correctly attributed) for a public collection in 1822, forty-four years before he was purported to have been discovered by the French critic.<sup>13</sup> The myth of Vermeer's rediscovery was no doubt a valuable marketing tool in itself. As Bourdieu notes in *Rules of Art*, there is a need for a "creator of the creator" a consecrated discoverer who legitimates the work and the art.<sup>14</sup>

If one is to accept Bourdieu's analysis, one could suggest Thoré-Bürger's role as 'discoverer' of Vermeer may have bolstered his own reputation, but was also crucial to constructing Vermeer as an authentic Master, particularly in view of the scant biography available. Without a 'discoverer', a key detail could have clouded his perceived authenticity; namely that he was not recorded as a painter at the Artist's Guild, a formality required by law in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century.

The lack of biographic details surrounding Vermeer (At the time of his discovery Thoré-Bürger was unaware of his date of birth, or even, death) is the root of the handle 'Sphinx of Delft', but has other implications for the establishment of his posthumous reputation. During the 1860s the idea of the Romantic artist was at its peak, as a recent National Gallery Exhibition entitled *Rebels and Martyrs* demonstrates. The lack of information concerning Vermeer, the mystery surrounding

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 65

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, P., *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996, p. 168

him, perhaps enabled the 'idea' of Vermeer to be shaped in accordance with contemporary ideals. He became a device through which the Romantic idea of the artist, as one with a mysterious, ineffable and transcendent nature<sup>15</sup> could be not just mirrored, but authenticated. This idea is mirrored by Michael Wilson in his essay *Rebels and Martyrs*, in which he states:

The notion of the specialness artist that is cultivated in the nineteenth century [...] is projected back on artists of former centuries in order to validate it.<sup>16</sup>

This notion of the 'specialness' of the artist, although at its peak in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, was, of course, the result of an increasingly affluent middle class, and thus a broader art market, which first occurred in the mid 18<sup>th</sup>-century.

The catalyst for this dissertation was Tom Hunter's recent *Living in Hell and Other Stories* exhibition at the National Gallery, London, in which Hunter supposedly uses well know paintings as his basis for illustrating headlines from his local tabloid, *The Hackney Gazette*. In a recent review for *Photoworks*, Ian Jeffrey has proved a scathing critic of the exhibition:

Whatever possessed the National Gallery to make such a fool of itself? A friend, closely questioned, said that she thought it another case of 'uneven development' in which a group of naives had mistaken the back of the blade for the cutting edge.<sup>17</sup>

The main concern here is that of 'authenticity' and its relationship to the contemporary art market, and ideas of cultural value, or in an economic sense, the 'cultural currency' to which this paper refers. Hunter's exhibition at the National Gallery, the first ever show by a photographer, announces Hunter onto the stage of today's 'serious' artists. As this exhibition saw Hunter turn his attentions to a plethora of other artists from Old Masters to Impressionists (Vermeer's influence is only represented by *Woman Reading a Possession Order* [fig. 1], the best known image

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<sup>15</sup> Cubbs, J., 'Rebels, Mystics, and Outcasts', in Hall, M., & Metcalf, E., eds, *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1994, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, M., 'Rebels and Martyrs', in Sturgis, A., et al., *Rebels and Martyrs*, National Gallery, London, 2006, p. 13

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey, I., 'Review: Tom Hunter', *Photoworks*, Spring/Summer 2006, p. 68

from the *Persons Unknown* series), the exhibition serves as a sort of gauge against which the relative importance of Hunter's use of Vermeer can be determined.

The first chapter looks examines the link between Vermeer and Hunter through their use of photomechanical devices; Vermeer's camera obscura and Hunter's mainly digital photography. The use of photography opens up a dialogue on the use of Vermeer, or the 'myth' of him encompassing the popular *tableaux vivants* of the Victorian age (a term now used to describe Hunter's employment of Vermeer's compositions), cinema and fiction. My aim is to demonstrate that the proliferation of technology as well as art historical opinion has altered modern interpretations of Vermeer's work; an alteration that has in turn impacted on Hunter's quest to authenticate his own work by referring the painter.

The second chapter is a more detailed consideration of Hunter's use of Vermeer's imagery in the series *Persons Unknown*. This chapter situates Hunter's photography not as fine art, but as publicity images, on the basis that they were intended to change public opinion regarding the community of squatters and New Age travellers that is his milieu. A critical concern of this assertion regards the use of oil painting in advertising imagery, and a consideration of the psychological and political implications of Hunter's use of Old Master paintings (in this case those of Vermeer), namely the resurrection of the historical authentication of a 'great' artist; patronage.

The final chapter aims to situate Hunter within the historical traditions by which Hunter is authenticated today; the model of the Bohemian artist, the Bohemian having been denoted as the first urban 'sub-culture'. The theme of the sub-culture is a continuing motif that cements Hunter in the realms of both the Romantic ideal of the artist, and his own environment, that of Blair's Britain, in which culture has been high-jacked in order to authenticate an entire culture.

The writings of contemporary philosopher Jean Baudrillard, particularly *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), provide an ongoing premise for the definition of authority in terms of 'the real.' Baudrillard asserts that in the modern (indeed 'post-modern') world the representation denoted by the term 'simulacra' has been replaced by a

condition of 'simulation'<sup>18</sup>. A simulacrum is based on the representation of a tangible reality; a figure or deity; simulacra possess the form of a thing, but not its substance or proper qualities.<sup>19</sup> Simulation, on the other hand, is the act of resemblance, rather than representation, with the negative connotations of pretence or deceit.<sup>20</sup>

The act of simulation is one in which 'the real' has ceased to be a cultural reference, but has been replaced by symbols of what was once real; a self-perpetuating myth of sorts that Baudrillard refers to as, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."<sup>21</sup> The aim is to establish Hunter's act of simulation as the propagation of historically founded myth and symbolism regarding the role of the artist; the continuation of which continues to determine his cultural currency.

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<sup>18</sup> Baudrillard, J., 'The Precession of Simulacra', *Simulacra and Simulation*, Glaser, S. F. trans., University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1981, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, p. 1

<sup>19</sup> O.E.D., op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit., p. 1

**Chapter 1: Setting the scene; Vermeer from rediscovery to reinterpretation.**

In the web-cast interviews on the National Gallery website, Hunter does not present as a man of many words. His reasons for selecting Vermeer as the subject of his pastiches are vague; he apparently alighted on the work of Vermeer having sought to study the way that 'other people have looked at groups in society and elevated their status'<sup>22</sup>. He concludes;

[...] the Dutch painters of the 17th century were a group of painters who seemed to be elevating the whole standard of the Dutch people. So I thought that would be a nice way of taking on some of the compositional tools that the Dutch used in their painting, to promote my neighbourhood [...] I got more interested in one Dutch painter particularly, who was Vermeer.<sup>23</sup>

Tom Hunter was not the first artist to utilise Vermeer's imagery, but his *tableaux vivants* are bound to the work of the painter not just by the composition, but by the use of photography; Vermeer's use of the camera obscura has been widely documented, and is broadly accepted, thanks in part to the extensive research of Philip Steadman, who has suggested that any reluctance to accept that Vermeer made any significant use of the instrument, is bound up in old controversies concerning photography and art; both a reluctance to accept photography as an art form, which endured into the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, and the implication that the use of such a photomechanical device by a painter denoted incompetence.<sup>24</sup> This bias was probably based on the extensive use of cameras obscura and lucida by amateur artists during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, a phenomenon documented by David Hockney in his study of the history of the device.<sup>25</sup>

Vermeer now enjoys a reputation as the first great artist for whom photography was a crucial tool,<sup>26</sup> and has received even greater acclaim by director Peter Greenaway, for whom Vermeer has occurred as a motif in several films since the 1980s, who has

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<sup>22</sup> Anon. (A), 'Interview with Tom Hunter: Transcript', *National Gallery Website*, 2006, [http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/tom\\_hunter/feature/feature1\\_2\\_lrg.htm](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/tom_hunter/feature/feature1_2_lrg.htm), [15/05/06]

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Steadman, P., *Vermeer's Camera*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 1

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Gayford, M., 'The Vermeer Effect', *Modern Painters*, vol. 9, Spring 1996, p.26

described the painter as ‘the prototype of the filmmaker.’<sup>27</sup> Greenaway too utilised *tableaux vivants* in his 1984 surrealist film *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1984).

The use of optics, despite being considered novel and prestigious in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century<sup>28</sup> led to contemporary criticism of Vermeer’s work; one writer complained that the image provided by the camera obscura was “striking but false”, an opinion which echoes later critique by French writer Maxime du Camp, who in 1857 described *View of Delft* as “brutal and exaggerated”.<sup>29</sup> That this relatively modern analysis echoes criticism proffered a century-and-a-half earlier seems surprising, but that the photographic image was still ‘rare and exotic’, as L.J. Slatkes notes in *Vermeer and His Contemporaries*:

Today familiarity with photographic distortions has to some extent desensitized our perceptions of them. The fact is that we have come to view photographic images as “real” and thus accepted these distortions as part of “reality”. Du Camp, however, writing in an age nearer to the commentator who complained about the camera obscura image, provides us with an insight into how the Delft artist’s contemporaries might have felt about his work.<sup>30</sup>

Vermeer’s relationship to photography springs not just from his use of the camera obscura, but the period in which he was ‘rediscovered’:

As the modern discovery of Vermeer coincided with the development of photography, it may be that the gradual acceptance of the photograph as an art form facilitated the acceptance of Vermeer’s works, previously considered as “exaggerated” or even “brutal.” Although it is quite normal for contemporary art forms to create a taste for similar styles in earlier works of art, the case for Vermeer may be the first example of photography influencing our vision of painting, thus signalling a new phase in the history and criticism of art.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Greenaway, P., in Peuker, B., ‘Filmic Tableau Vivant: Vermeer, Intermediality and the Real’, in Margulies, I., ed., *Rights of Realism*, Duke University Press, London, 2003, p. 297

<sup>28</sup> Steadman, P., op. cit., p. 1

<sup>29</sup> Slatkes, L.J., ‘Introduction’, *Vermeer and His Contemporaries*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1981, p.10

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 12

Vermeer's most recent incantation, in the photographs of Hunter, demonstrate that his relevance to contemporary art is not restricted to the technological aspect of the photomechanical device, but became entwined, from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century onwards, with a complex discourse between theatre, photography, advertising, film and cinema, as well as fiction.

## I

As Roland Barthes observed in *Camera Lucida*, the origins of photography can be seen as more allied to acting than painting.<sup>32</sup> Photographs that are deliberately staged are part of a historic continuum that began in 1840 when Hippolyte Bayard set up *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*; a lament of the French government's failure to recognise his role in the invention of photography.<sup>33</sup>

Vermeer's entry into the canon, coinciding as it did with the invention of photography has prompted Svetlana Alpers to describe him as 'a latecomer and heir to the pictorialist tradition.'<sup>34</sup> In the same way that Hunter's motif has become the recreation of scenes from Old Master paintings, the practice of photographing scenes inspired by works of art became one of the key hallmarks of Pictorialism, the photographic style that strove to establish a distinct niche for artistic photography, which flourished between 1880 and 1920.<sup>35</sup> Although Pictorialism post-dated Vermeer's rediscovery by over a decade, photography had been anticipating the movement for some time:

Despite photography's immediate alliance with science as opposed to art, by the 1840s the influence of theatre on Victorian photography was apparent; an influence that had at its mast the *tableau vivant*, a popular parlour game in which participants donned costumes to create living, breathing tableaux of popular paintings and sculpture.<sup>36</sup> *Tableaux vivants*, which were performed in private drawing rooms as well as public theatres, were probably popular in their regard as socially acceptable

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<sup>32</sup> Barthes, R., *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill & Wang, New York, 1981, p. 31

<sup>33</sup> Pauli, L., 'Setting the Scene', in Pauli, L., ed., *Acting the Past: Photography as Theatre*, Merrell, London & New York, 2006, p. 14

<sup>34</sup> Alpers, S., 'The Strangeness of Vermeer', *Art in America*, vol. 84, May 1996, p. 64

<sup>35</sup> Pauli, L., *op. cit.*, p.33

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16

ways of flaunting one's beauty and flouting convention,<sup>37</sup> a fitting parallel with Hunter's use of the mode, in an era when convention is permissible enough to be unperturbed by revealing costumes, but admonishes unconventional lifestyles. By the time the invention of photography was announced in 1839, the tableaux vivant was an established form, and quickly became an obvious photographic subject.<sup>38</sup>

The Pictorialist Photographers, of whom Julia Margaret Cameron was a pioneer, were at their peak during the period between 1885 and 1905,<sup>39</sup> almost twenty years later than Vermeer's discovery, but an early photographer working within the trajectory of Pictorialist concerns was Oscar Rejlander, whose composite *tableau vivant*, *Two Ways of Life* (1857) based on Raphael's *Disputá*, is considered by many to be the first significant foray into High Art photography.

The practice of copying great works of art has long been a traditional way for students to learn from the Old Masters, a tradition, which, following the introduction of refined printing techniques, and later, photography, has been served by the study of reproductions.<sup>40</sup> Photographic pioneers such as William Henry Fox Talbot saw the usefulness of photography as a tool in education, and outlined his proposals in *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-46), one of the first books to use photographic reproductions.<sup>41</sup>

Rejlander saw more innovative possibilities; as an artist working copying paintings for lithographic reproductions, he saw the camera as a new, original way to copy works of art, by photographing staged tableaux of paintings. The intention of his compositions, including *Two Ways of Life*, was not only to pay homage to artists he admired, or facilitate the teaching of art, but to show that photography could match the seriousness of drawing and painting,<sup>42</sup> a concern later shared by the Pictorialists who wished to establish a place for artistic photography, distinguishing it from commercial work through its emulation of painting or etching.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Weiss, M., op. cit.,

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffery, I., (A) 'British Photography from Fox Talbot to E.O. Hoppé', *The Real Thing: An Anthology of British Photographs 1840-1950*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1975, p. 5

<sup>40</sup> Pauli, L., op. cit., p. 27

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 33

*Two Ways of Life*, was an ambitious image; featuring twenty-five figures, both clothed and naked, it was intended as a moralising tableau to illustrate the struggle between virtue and temptation.<sup>44</sup> At a lecture to the Photographic Society in 1858 Rejlander explained his reasons for creating the piece, omitting the role of the theme of vice and virtue, and instead focusing on the technical possibilities of photography. *Two Ways of Life* was intended to 'be competitive with what might be expected from abroad; it was to show artists how useful photography might be as an aid to composition and "to show the plasticity of photography."' <sup>45</sup> By the end of the year, Rejlander was not basking in recognition as an accomplished photographer, but defending the image from attack.

The attack focused on the image's possible obscenity, but this, Jeffery observed, was 'no more than an easily accessible public issue.'<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey cites a critique of the photograph proffered by founder member Roger Fenton at a meeting of the Photographic Society that year; he thought it 'too ambitious a beginning'.<sup>47</sup>

The implication of Fenton's comment is that Rejlander's ambitious attempt to make High Art through photography jarred with the medium's implicit concern with the opposition between nature and culture; a concern that had been set out in the 1830s by photographers like Fox Talbot to whom rural ingredients were readily at hand;<sup>48</sup> photography was considered as a product of culture and a reflection of nature.<sup>49</sup> Photography was a tool of science more than of art, and as such the photograph was considered both an artefact and a document. Fenton, known for his double portraits with painter William Grundy, in which they pose dressed in Middle Eastern costume (1855), a well taking reportage pictures of scenes of war in the Crimea in 1854, appears to have objected to the manipulation of photography;<sup>50</sup> an act that in itself denoted a fiction.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 10

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 11

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 12

## II

Despite such pressure from Realist photographer's<sup>51</sup> the staged image continued to be popular until the 1920s.<sup>52</sup> Vermeer's popularity can be considered secured by the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century (during the age of Impressionism, but more on this later) not just on merit of his entry into national art collections, but by the attentions of the Pictorialist photographers; Guido Rey and Richard Polak, among others, produced photographs styled on the paintings of Vermeer throughout the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>53</sup>

The relationship between theatre, tableaux vivants and the Pictorialist photographers demonstrate the phenomenon of popular entertainment influencing the medium of photography; an occurrence that has remained to the present day.<sup>54</sup>

The fashion for photographic tableaux sustained the popularity of the stereoscope into the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century;<sup>55</sup> a device which pre-empted the cinematic camera in its ability to provide the viewer with a sequential visual narrative. Pictorialism waned during the 1930s, when 'the Depression created a demand for documentary photography relating to social and political issues of the time. The aesthetic climate favoured "straight" photography,<sup>56</sup> as detailed in the manifesto of Modernist photographers Group f/64 who stated that 'photography must remain independent of the ideological conventions of art.'<sup>57</sup>

Many Pictorialist photographers, including Karl Struss, Ralph Steiner and William Mortensen relocated to Hollywood, a move which cemented Pictorialism's relationship with cinema.<sup>58</sup> The Pictorialists, newly ensconced in Hollywood, were, as Pauli observes, to have a strong impact on the development of cinematography, with photographers like Karl Struss, becoming well known for their skill at creating atmospheric lighting and 'his ability to encapsulate a story in a single image.'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Pauli, L., *op. cit.*, p. 16

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 33

<sup>54</sup> Pauli, L., *op. cit.*, p. 33

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

In a continuation of Photography's earlier relationship with popular culture, the new cinematic approaches popularised by the likes of Struss was to influence the direction of still photography.<sup>60</sup>

Cinema, and the dramatic effects it owes to the Pictorialist photographers working in Hollywood, was to reference Vermeer throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. In 1928 Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel scripted and filmed *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), now considered a Surrealist masterpiece. In the second scene, a woman stares obsessively at a book, tossing it aside to reveal that it is opened to a copy of Vermeer's painting, *The Lacemaker* (1669-70). The relevance of the image is sometimes cited as a representation of Vermeer as an 'old order in art', which is to be overthrown by the likes of Dali and Brunuel. Others have suggested, cryptically, that *The Lacemaker* represents the private fetish of the woman in the film.<sup>61</sup> Jonathon Jones, writing for *The Guardian* has tried to explain the fetishisation of *The Lacemaker*; the Surrealists, he explains, 'treated the love of art not as elevated but as the equivalent of sexual desire,'<sup>62</sup> and the use of the Vermeer is intended to highlight this.

The Surrealist's references to Old Master paintings were to have an immense impact on the way their work is perceived in the present day. In the words of Jones:

Surrealism's greatest contribution to modern life was to transform ways of looking at art. We now see all art - not just modern art - through surrealist eyes. The artists from the past who are most loved and understood today - a glaring example is Caravaggio - had nothing like the same appeal before surrealism; in fact, the first exhibition at which Caravaggio was treated as a master took place in 1922, contemporaneously with the first surrealist writings and artworks. Caravaggio is fascinating to us because his paintings throb with erotic tension. We speculate about his sexuality, feast our eyes on his provocative fruits and flesh, indulge ourselves in an orgy of looking. It was surrealism that licensed us to enjoy art in this disreputable way.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Jones, J., 'For Better Perverse', *The Guardian*, September 8 2001, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/surrealism/story/0,,554475,00.html>, [20/08/06]

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

The Surrealists were not, however, the first to explore the Old Masters in terms of sexual desire. Richard Polack's best known image, *The Artist and his Model* (1914) [fig. 11], takes as its subject Vermeer's *The Artist in his Studio*, but replaces the figure of the model (Vermeer's Clio, the muse of history, who, in Vermeer's painting, is enacting the role of the allegorical fame) with a nude who kneels upon a high backed chair. As a restaging of a Vermeer, *The Artist and His Model*, perhaps marks one of the earliest examples of the eroticisation of Vermeer's women; a guise that will no doubt remind modern viewers of Peter Greenaway's use of the same, in *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985).

*A Zed and Two Noughts* encompasses tableaux vivants of Vermeer's imagery into a surreal tale of two twins, Oswald and Olivier, who become obsessed with death and decay following the death of their wives in a freak automobile collision with a large swan. Alba, the surviving driver of the car is treated by Vermeer-ophile surgeon, van Meegeren, who shares his name with the famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century Vermeer forger. Van Meegeren dedicates his spare time to creating tableaux of Vermeer's paintings, using his mistress, who goes by the name of Catherina Bolnes (Vermeer's wife), and later, Alba.

In Greenaway's film, van Meegeren and Bolnes both enact a version of *The Artist in His Studio*; van Meegeren is dressed in statutory black and white striped doublet. Bolnes, on the other hand, takes up her place clad in just a red hat, in place of Clio's crown of laurel leaves; the hat, worn by Bolnes throughout the film, is the hat of *The Girl with the Red Hat*. By replacing Clio with a nude, a nude 'recognisable' as a figure from another painting, Greenaway is, it seems, putting aside the allegorical significance of the female figure in favour of shock value produced by the naked flesh, although it has been argued that Greenaway is attempting to use the nude to intensify the realism that the 'human figure already has in Vermeer's painting,'<sup>64</sup> as well as the suggestion that the nude is Greenaway's commentary on a voyeuristic attitude towards Vermeer's women.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Peuker, B., 'Filmic Tableau Vivant: Vermeer, Intermediality, and the Real', in Margulies, I., ed., *Rights of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2003, p. 300

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298

If Greenaway is indeed commenting voyeurism, then Polack is actualising it. It seems, however, that Greenaway is more concerned with the problems of fiction and reality, raised by the Dutch realist project, than such thematic contents and iconographies.

In *The Art of Describing* Svetlana Alpers notes that 'Dutch Art is notoriously subject to confusion with life,'<sup>66</sup> and it is this confusion to which van Meegeren has fallen prey, allowing Vermeer's identity (albeit a fictitious, often converse identity; unlike Catherina Bolnes, who bore Vermeer fourteen children, Bolnes serially aborts Van Meegeren's heirs) to impinge on his own, and his obsession, to impede on his 'real' guise as a surgeon. Greenaway's application of tableaux vivants within the film denotes this confusion of reality, and could also be in its basest form; the protagonist van Meegeren, who shares his name with the notorious 20<sup>th</sup>-century Vermeer forger, does not photograph the scenes that he direct, transposing paintings 'two dimensionality, into three-dimensionality,'<sup>67</sup> but not returning to the two dimensional image in the way that photography necessitates; the resulting tableau becoming a 'meeting point of several modes of representation [...] simultaneously evocative of painting, drama and sculpture.'<sup>68</sup> Van Meegeren's patient, Alba, completes this dialogue between painting, drama and sculpture when she becomes implicated in the extremes of van Meegeren's obsession with realism; having survived the car crash (that catalyses the character's relationship) with an amputated leg, van Meegeren amputates the other, in the name of symmetry, the act representing his first foray into 'sculpting with human flesh.'<sup>69</sup>

Peuker has also turned to Alpers to 'shed further light on Greenaway's engagement with Vermeer's paintings,'<sup>70</sup> suggesting that:

*The Art of Describing* locates in the painting of this period a system of representation antithetical to that of the Albertian (narrative) mode through which the painting has hitherto been read. The northern descriptive mode, as Alpers reads it, lacks a fixed point of view and substitutes the model of the

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<sup>66</sup> Alpers, S., 'Preface', *The Art of Describing*, Publisher, city, date, p. xxvii

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Peuker, B., *op. cit.*, p. 298

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297

painting as mirrored image for that of the painting as Albertian “window on the world.” The Dutch mode of painting, with its mimetic emphasis, thus emphasizes “seeing the world” rather than narrativizing and “reading” it.<sup>71</sup>

Peuker goes on to suggest that Dutch art shows that the ‘realistic’ image can serve as a lure for the eye<sup>72</sup> and that, in the words of Baudrillard, ‘meaning by its very nature is lodged in what the eye can take in- however deceptive that might be.’<sup>73</sup> Van Meegeren, she continues, has fallen prey to the confusions of this deceptive reality.<sup>74</sup> Alpers notes too that the ‘realism’ of the Dutch realist project can be likened to ‘the pictorial mode of photographs.’<sup>75</sup>

Greenaway has remarked that the conspicuous use of art within his film, is intended to the artificiality of cinema<sup>76</sup> This statement is perhaps not as obvious as it may at first seem; In an extension of his theory of Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard turns his view of the ‘hyperreal’ to cinema, with specific reference to the depiction of historical references (which Vermeer’s paintings are) propounding that:

Therein objects shine in a sort of hyperresemblance (like history in contemporary cinema) that makes it so that fundamentally they no longer resemble anything, except the empty figure of resemblance, the empty form of representation.<sup>77</sup>

Van Meegeren’s confusion of reality, that is to say, the deceptive nature of reality in terms Dutch realist painting could be seen to denote a sort of hyperresemblance; his images fundamentally representing nothing except resemblance; The surgeon’s concern with symmetry, which leads to the double amputation of Alba’s legs, despite their necessary concealment beneath her costume, seems to imply a transposition of ‘fiction’ or ‘possibilities’ to Vermeer’s work; any factual referential, (the probability that Vermeer’s women did indeed have legs beneath their skirts, being a somewhat surreal, but fitting example) becomes irrelevant, as the general resemblance is

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Baudrillard, J., in *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Alpers, S., *op. cit.*, p. xxi

<sup>76</sup> Greenaway, P., in Peuker, B., *op. cit.*, p. 298

<sup>77</sup> Baudrillard, J., *op. cit.*, p. 45

recognised, and the audience (including van Meegeren himself) requires no knowledge of the 'reality' of Vermeer's act of painting.

### III

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century perhaps the best known tableau vivant of a Vermeer is the portrait of Scarlett Johansson as *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, advertising the film of the same name, based on Tracey Chevallier's novel. The fact that the photograph can be seen as synonymous with the original painting is an example of a sort of confusion of reality with which the audience is complicit.

In its most basic sense, it is history's very position in the past that severs it from reality, allowing history to be depicted without reference to reality. Baudrillard states that '[history's] reinjection [into cinema] has no value as conscious awareness but only as nostalgia for a lost referential.'<sup>78</sup>

This nostalgia for the 'strong myth' that is 'history'<sup>79</sup> is played out not just in cinema, but in the plethora of novels concerning Vermeer's life that appeared on bookshop shelves throughout the late 1990s. Gary Schwartz, writing for *Art In America*, has suggested that the appearance of these 'book-length daydreams,'<sup>80</sup> is a direct result of the 1995-6 *Vermeer* retrospective in Washington and The Hague. The novels published during this period, of which Chevallier's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* (2000) is the best known, attest, according to Schwartz, 'to an ongoing popular fascination – and mistaken view of- Vermeer and his historic Dutch context.'<sup>81</sup> He suggests that fictional accounts of the artist's life were chosen by the authors, not just because of the creative leeway allowed by Vermeer's incomplete biography and posthumous 'mystique', but because the novels:

betray a yearning for old-fashioned authenticity; real love, real honour, real danger, true belief and authentic art.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 44

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 47

<sup>80</sup> Schwartz, G., 'Girl With a Pearl Earring: Book Review', *Art In America*, March 2001, at [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1248/is\\_3\\_89/ai\\_71558209](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_3_89/ai_71558209), [29/07/06], p. 4

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 4

This assertion could be a romanticised version of Baudrillard's comprehension of the void that negotiates history and the present:

Whereas so many generations [...] lived in the march of history, [...] today one has the impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it a nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references. It is into this void that the phantasms of a past history recede [...] no longer so much because people believe in them, or still place hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when *at least* there was history, at least there was violence [...] when at least life and death were at stake.<sup>83</sup>

Baudrillard has called history 'the last great myth', and likens his hypothetical 'age of history' to 'the age of the novel':<sup>84</sup>

It is this *fabulous* character, the mythical energy of an event or of a narrative that today seems increasingly lost. Behind a performative and demonstrative logic: the obsession with historical *fidelity*, with a perfect rendering [...] this negative and implacable fidelity to the materiality of the past, to a particular scene of the past or of the present, to the restitution of an absolute simulacrum of the past or the present, which was substituted for all other value [...] this is irreversible.<sup>85</sup>

Baudrillard's point is that the an overriding concern with representing material, or tangible aspects of the past is played out at the expense of all other values, frequently overlooks intangibles, social mores and opinions, for instance, resulting in a view of the past that is constantly informed, and re-informed, by a modern view of the past; the 'absolute simulacrum' of which he write.

This hypothesis is evident in the work of those novelists who concerned themselves with Vermeer's epoch in the late 1990s. In addition to Chevalier's offering was *Tulip Fever* by Deborah Moggach, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* by Susan Vreeland, Gregory Maguire's *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*. (Katharine Weber's *The Music Lesson*, departed from the genre of romantic fiction shared by the others, recounting the theft of a Vermeer by an Irish Terrorist group in the 1990s; the plot is based on the

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<sup>83</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit., pp. 43-4

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 47

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-8

infamous theft of thirteen works of art from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990, by the IRA who wished to trade them for the return of a prisoner residing in the UK.)<sup>86</sup>

Schwartz has demonstrated that these novelists universally read 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland in terms of the same central concerns; female domesticity and sexuality; representations of the everyday in art.<sup>87</sup> Borrowing from an American newspaper interview with two of the authors, Schwartz recounts their reasons for choosing as their subject Vermeer and his remote world.<sup>88</sup> Susan Vreeland is recorded as stating:

I think Vermeer provides a moment of calm and tranquillity in an age that moves too fast [...] He gives us permission... to be still a moment.<sup>89</sup>

Chevalier, even less helpfully, waxes lyrical about her long-standing esteem for the painting on which her novel is based.<sup>90</sup>

At first glance the reasons proffered by the writers seem nothing more than quasi-mystical interpretations of Vermeer's work; attempts to grapple with the void that separates the historical and the present, by attributing the trappings of the modern world to Vermeer's images.

The journalist to whom they are speaking offers her own explanation of the attraction of Vermeer:

Vermeer frequently painted women alone in quiet interiors, writing letters to unknown recipients or casting glances towards unknown subjects. These psychological moments, with clues that only hint at the full meaning of the paintings, invite interpretation.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Murphy, S., 'New theory airs on Gardner museum theft', *Boston Globe*, November 3 2004, at [http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2004/03/11/new\\_theory\\_airs\\_on\\_gardner\\_museum\\_theft/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2004/03/11/new_theory_airs_on_gardner_museum_theft/), [02/08/06]

<sup>87</sup> Schwartz, G., op. cit., p. 3

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

The assumption, by both author and, in this case, reviewer, that the novels have in some way scaled the depths of these 'clues' and have thus proffered an accurate psychological interpretation of the 'real life' of their subjects belies a simulation with its roots in both past and present. As Schwartz observes

The authors have convinced themselves that the Dutch Republic was a world in which honour was for real. More to the point- so was art. This was particularly the case with genre painting [...] particularly the household life of women.<sup>92</sup>

That female authors are attracted to the theme of household life in Vermeer's paintings, although noted by Schwartz, barely requires comment. What are interesting are the reasons he supposes attracts them. The women in both Chevalier and Vreeland's works serve as models for their fictitious Vermeer, and in doing so demonstrate a heightened and eloquent understanding of the art of painting, which barely befits illiterate maid servants. Consider the following excerpts from *Girl In Hyacinth Blue* in which Vreeland's Vermeer muses on the significance of a glass of milk:

It makes the whole corner sacred with the tenderness of just living.<sup>93</sup>

An observation which stills the novel's subservient protagonist to muse, later:

What he saw... was... stillness from the unacknowledged acts of women to hallow home.<sup>94</sup>

The painter's 'way of seeing' has long been championed in western culture as a sort of heroic act, verification of the 'artistic genius', discussed later; Schwartz proffers a somewhat sentimental explanation for today's popular fascination with Vermeer:

Not only do painters look this way, so do the heroines of the books by the female novelists. They compete with their artist heroes as lookers, demonstrating their visual as well as

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

emotional sensitivity. Vermeer provides an instrument for an intensified experience of present day reality.<sup>95</sup>

His explanation, sentimental as it is, if plausible is a demonstration of what Baudrillard terms the 'hyperreal[ity]' of simulation; 'the present day simulators [the author] attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation.' In this case the perceived realities of the modern woman are superimposed onto the Dutch maidservant thus authenticating the role of the modern woman by way of providing her with an historic counterpart. It is identical to Hunter's device of using historic artists as his authenticating counterpart.

What is key, however, is that the reality the novelists seek to represent is already obscured by decades of misinterpretation of Vermeer's paintings, that is to say the application of contemporary ideals to his work. The simulacrum that is the view of the past invited by the present comes into its own when one examines these hints towards 'the full meaning of the paintings.' A trawl through Albert Blankert's essay that accompanied the *Vermeer* show of 1995-96, demonstrates clearly that the subjects of most of Vermeer's paintings, far from representing idealized domestication of the Dutch 'everywoman', depict 'juffers' or 'juffertje', the courtesans of the Dutch aristocracy.

This misinterpretation of Vermeer's subjects lies in the 1890s, the period in which Vermeer 'came into his own as an artistic immortal.'<sup>96</sup> According to Schwartz, during the three decades between his discovery and this period, the image of Vermeer's art was interpreted, or read, during this period in accordance with common conceptions about what made Impressionism, the movement that rose to prominence throughout this period, great; colour, light, form, pattern, 'the impersonal gaze of the impassioned painter';<sup>97</sup> such metaphysical interpretations of the Impressionists have, in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, been reconsidered, but seem to have been continuously applied to the works of Vermeer throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Despite the new interpretations offered of Vermeer's work in the last decade, which includes new reflections on the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

'ample significance of the emblematic and erotic meanings found in his work,'<sup>98</sup> it is a romanticised ideal of Vermeer's women that endure, resulting in the accepted Dutch values of thrift, industriousness and piety being applied to subjects across the entire social and political spectrum of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Netherlands. It is the application of these very values that has obscured the identity of his more affluent subjects.

The depiction of just such ladies is a common motif in Dutch art; the 'juffer' usually being accompanied by their male counterpart, the 'juffer'. Such works were produced as moralising tableau, seen by a contemporary audience as depictions of a morally questionable high life.<sup>99</sup> As Blankert has observed, the less explicit frivolity afforded by the removal of the men from the scene has allowed later viewers to read the images in more dignified ways, but would not have obscured the suggestiveness of the scenes for a 17<sup>th</sup>-century audience.

Of course, Vermeer did produce several images of domestic harmony in which the values of thrift, industriousness and harmony are extolled as dignified virtues befitting women of the Dutch Republic; this is evident in such works as *The Lacemaker* and *The Milkmaid* (1658-1661) [fig. 8]. What is clear is that Hunter, in using Vermeer's imagery to 'dignify' his own community, has failed to differentiate between vile juffer and virtuous housewife, somewhat undermining his cause; but it is a mistake so ingrained in our modern understanding of historic works, that it matters not to Hunter's viewers.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>99</sup> Blankert, op. cit., p. 33

## **Chapter 2: Simulating Status; Hunter and the power of publicity.**

In this chapter I intend to investigate Hunter's use of Vermeer's compositions in his best known series, *Persons Unknown* and consider his possible reasons for simulating the compositions of this particular artist, as well as the impact of this choice on public perceptions of his work.

As, noted in the previous chapter, Hunter chose to model this particular series on Vermeer, believing that his imagery 'elevated the status' of the Dutch people, an elevation that he suppose could afford dignity to his own social circle. Such crude interpretations, delivered as they were, on film with the shifty upwards glance of a man remembering his lines, invite suspicion that Hunter has very little to say. But in a print interview with Jean Wainwright, featured in the first catalogue of his work, Hunter elucidates on the success of the *Persons Unknown* series, stating that:

They appropriate advertising methods. If you mimic art to sell a lifestyle then you sell your product. John Berger says that advertising often uses painting to lend allure or authority to its own message, so that by using Old Masters you are attaching values associated with the works; those of beauty, dignity, wisdom.<sup>100</sup>

Hunter is referring to John Berger's analysis of publicity images in the final chapter of *Ways of Seeing*:

There are many direct references in publicity to works of art from the past. Sometimes a whole image is a frank pastiche of a well known painting. Publicity images often use sculptures or paintings to lend allure or authority to their own message.<sup>101</sup>

Berger illustrates his point by juxtaposing a reproduction of Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (1832-33) with a photographic tableau of the same scene; apparently a contemporary advert for the music company HMV. The advertising pastiche is startlingly similar to Hunter's images.

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<sup>100</sup> Wainwright, J., 'Interview', Bracewell, M., et al., *Tom Hunter*, Hatje Cantz, Germany, 2003, no page numbers.

<sup>101</sup> Berger, J., Chapter 7, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, London, 1972

Hunter's motive in producing the images is clear:

[...] the pictures that I did with my neighbours were part of a campaign to show that we were worthwhile members of society, and we shouldn't just be stamped on and evicted. So I wanted to show the squatters as worthy people in society, not just some who were talked about in the Hackney Gazette as scum of the earth and destroying our society.<sup>102</sup>

It becomes clear that in order to explore Hunter's repertoire it is important to read them not as 'high art' images, recently on display in the National Gallery, but as the publicity material which they were intended to be.

Hunter's familiarity with Berger deserves a little attention; at the time Hunter shot *Persons Unknown* he was a photography student at the Royal College of Art, and *Ways of Seeing* was, I wager, his text book.

Two images from the *Persons Unknown* series are sufficient to demonstrate Hunter's possible utilisation of Berger's thinking; *Woman Reading a Possession Order* [fig. 1] and *The Art of Squatting* [fig. 3] (both 1997).

*Woman Reading a Possession Order* is based on Vermeer's *A Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window* [fig. 2]. Hunter does not adhere faithfully to the original composition; Vermeer's 'girl' is a small figure at the centre of the picture plane, framed by the open window on her left and a heavy curtain on her right. Hunter's 'girl' is positioned off centre, to the right of the frame; the curtain has been omitted- indeed she dominates the area of the frame that Vermeer reserved for drapery. By 'zooming' in on the composition Hunter creates a sense of claustrophobia, despite the mid-day sun that lights the room (a different time of day to the dusky yellow light of the Vermeer). The title advises the viewer that the subject is not reading a love letter (as is generally assumed of many of Vermeer's women), but a 'Possession Order', advising of imminent eviction from her home. The basket of apples, peaches, plums and pomegranates in a basket in the foreground is replaced by a resting infant.

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<sup>102</sup> Anon. (A), op. cit.

*The Art of Squatting* [fig. 3] is perhaps the second well known image in the series. Taking its lead from *The Art of Painting* (1666) [fig. 4], it depicts a sandy haired artist (who could well be Hunter himself) seated at an easel, in the process of painting an elfin blonde in jeans and t-shirt. Again the drapery of the original is omitted, leaving just a slip of curtain to the left of the frame. Where as for Vermeer the heavy drapery in many of his works seems to cast the viewer as voyeur, Hunter's framing invites the viewer into the scenario. *The Art of Squatting* [fig. 3] is not the most accomplished of Hunter's images (when seen at the National Gallery printed 6 feet high it is noticeably out of focus, and the lighting dull), but includes pleasing details; the famous map which dominates Vermeer's background is mirrored by a continent-shaped chunk of missing plaster, the exposed brickwork swathed in orange paint. The model is once again off centre, her head mirroring the curve of the missing plaster, serving to reassure that Hunter's departure from the complexities of Vermeer's original compositions are not the result of sloppiness or ineptitude, but a desire to create original compositions based on his own available resources. Similarly, the objects included in the photograph are not 'props' intended to mimic the carefully chosen objects in Vermeer's interiors, but the belongings of the models. In this way Hunter's tableau merge the boundaries between fantasy and authenticity.

## I

Hunter's adherence to Berger's 'laws' of the publicity image are simplistic, yet complex enough to confuse as to what is intended and what is chance. According to Berger;

Publicity images also belong to the moment in the sense that they must be continually renewed and made up-to-date. Yet they never speak of the present. Often they refer to the past and always they speak to the future.<sup>103</sup>

Hunter's act of reinterpreting Vermeer is, at its most basic, a renewal of the imagery. The depictions of the squatters, although seemingly set in the present, are in fact appealing to the past in the form of nostalgia, equating the "innocence" freely

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<sup>103</sup> Berger, J., op. cit., p. 130

attributed to any history predating modernism with the ideal of the bohemian lifestyle of the modern day subjects; The subject of 'mother and child' apparent in *Woman Reading a Possession Order*, [fig. 1] also draws on a social nostalgia for both family values, and the familiarity of the 'Madonna' subject within the oil painting tradition. The very referencing of the 'oil painting' by the photographer is a poignant reference to artistic 'authority' of the genre in Western Art.

Hunter goes on to make a direct reference to the act of painting; in utilising *The Art of Painting* [fig. 4] in order to produce its counterpart *The Art of Squatting*, Hunter seamlessly demonstrates Berger's claim that 'Colour photography is to the spectator-buyer what oil paint was to the spectator-owner'.<sup>104</sup> Hunter refers to the modernist ideal of the artist as 'other' to consumer society, an association which serves to bolster the credibility of his subjects who are, in a way, perceived as 'other' to consumer society.

As well as courting nostalgia, Hunter's images 'speak of the future' offering the possibility of a buoyant artistic community in which the viewer is implicated as an enabler, or even participant. According to Berger

[Publicity] is closely related to certain ideas about freedom: freedom of choice for the purchaser [...] It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying into something more.<sup>105</sup>

The 'implication' of the audience in Hunter's scenarios are key illustrations of the emphasis Berger places on the importance of the abstract ideals of 'freedom' and 'aspiration' when creating a successful publicity image.<sup>106</sup> Berger was writing in 1972. Had he been observing advertising imagery in the 1990s he would have been drawn to comment, no doubt, on the increasingly sophisticated methods by which aspirational "lifestyle" imagery overshadows the explicit placement of the product being advertised. Hunter is selling an alternative (aspirational) lifestyle, one that was thrust into the public consciousness as an antidote to Thatcherism and the consumer-centric emphasis of the 1980s, discussed later.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 140

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 131

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

It is in this repositioning of the classic formula of advertising (the glamorisation of the 'underclass' that became synonymous with 'Cool Britannia') that Hunter, however unwittingly, demonstrates a key shift in the social aspirations of the 1990s; the shift from a focus on transatlantic material culture to a focus on the "cultural authenticity" on which Blair's election campaign rode. Publicity, as Berger asserts, 'is the process of manufacturing glamour'.<sup>107</sup> Hunter is part of the tradition of photographers like Corrine Day (credited with the invention of 'Heroin Chic') and Juergen Teller that reframed 'glamour' as an (un-inclusive) common denominator.

Critics have accused Hunter of appropriating 'high art' imagery in order to attract the custom of the middle class market; those familiar with Vermeer's work. It is, however, unclear if Hunter's images were initially produced for sale, or simply in support of a cause. Nevertheless, the act of 'quoting' Vermeer echoes Berger's reasoning that;

Any work of art 'quoted' by publicity serves two purposes. Art is a sign of affluence; it belongs to the good life; it is part of the furnishing which the world gives to the rich and beautiful. But a work of art also suggests cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom which is superior to any vulgar material interest; an oil painting belongs to the cultural heritage; it is a reminder of what it means to be a cultivated European. And so the quoted work of art and this is why it is so useful to publicity says two almost contradictory things at the same time: it denotes wealth and spirituality: it implies that the purchase being proposed is both a luxury and a cultural value.<sup>108</sup>

The use of Vermeer's imagery, in the case of *Persons Unknown*, afforded Hunter's cause (and Hunter himself, as an unknown practitioner), the 'cultural authority' of which Berger speaks. In one sense, his choice of Vermeer is irrelevant, except for aesthetic reason; Hunter's assertion that 'the Dutch painters of the 17th century were a group of painters who seemed to be elevating the whole standard of the Dutch people', is not specific to the work of Vermeer. However, in an interview almost a decade later, Hunter takes pains to heighten this 'authority of association' by

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Berger, J., op. cit., p. 135

drawing comparisons between Vermeer's lifestyle and working practice, and his own:

I got more interested in one Dutch painter particularly, who was Vermeer. And just the way I worked, it just so happened that Vermeer worked in the very small town of Delft, and he dealt with a very small amount of people, and he only did a small amount of pictures, and he was totally obsessed by his small neighbourhood; which is what I've become. I live in a small street, in a very small community, and I've become obsessed with my neighbourhood and the people around me.<sup>109</sup>

Hunter clearly understands the power of 'cultural authority', which he describes it as 'cultural heritage', commenting that in using Old Master paintings he had

[...] taken these values [those of beauty, dignity and wisdom associated with Old Masters] and attached them to my photographs and by inference attached them to my models, therefore [...] attaching a cultural heritage.<sup>110</sup>

This perceived 'cultural heritage' is directly related to the 'cultural currency' referred to in the title of this paper. It is an abstract that is intended to be recognised first and foremost by an audience, the 'spectator-owner' or 'spectator-buyer'<sup>111</sup> who, according to Berger, 'must be persuaded and flattered by the artist or ad-man alike.'<sup>112</sup>

## II

To refer to the thoughts of Baudrillard is to question whether Hunter's utilisation of advertising techniques is a stylistic preference or a cultural prerequisite:

Today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising. All original cultural forms, all determined languages are

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<sup>109</sup> Anon. (B), 'Woman Reading a Possession Order: Interview Transcript', *National Gallery Website*, 2006, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/pub/video/tomhunter/girl/transcript.htm>, [15/05/06]

<sup>110</sup> Wainwright, J., op. cit., p. 22

<sup>111</sup> Berger, J., op. cit., p. 135

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

absorbed in advertising because it has no depth, it is instantaneous and instantaneously forgotten.<sup>113</sup>

In this continuation of his theory of *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard opines that 'advertising' is not restricted to the form of traditional advertising images (he later states that advertising has disappeared, been diluted as a specific form<sup>114</sup>) but is articulated in a breadth of 'cultural forms'<sup>115</sup> including that which could be termed fine art. What conjoins all modes of expression is, according to the philosopher, a concern with 'superficial form, of the smallest common denominator of all signification.'<sup>116</sup> In short, all modes of visual expression (in fact, Baudrillard applies his model to 'all modes of expression') are dependant on the application of a 'sign' or symbol to which the audience can momentarily relate; crucially, it seems, 'sign' is not required to be read as part of a 'weighty enunciation', but can be read without reference to any historical precession; the origin of 'sign' is irrelevant.

Baudrillard's is a troubling theory to apply in the case of Hunter; Hunter's images could indeed be read as 'sign', but of what? Does *Persons Unknown* symbolise? Vermeer himself, or the Dutch Masters as an historical entity? Does the series represent, as appears when viewed through a Berger-coloured haze, the centrality of the oil painting tradition to European visual language? Or perhaps the only 'sign' is the figures themselves, projecting a self-involved dignity that can surely be understood without reference to Vermeer's characters?

According to Baudrillard,

It is not by chance that advertising, after having, for a long time, carried an implicit ultimatum of an economic kind, fundamentally saying and repeating incessantly, "I buy, I consume, I take pleasure", today repeats in other forms, "I vote, I participate, I am present, I am concerned".<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Baudrillard, J., 'Absolute Advertising, Ground-Zero Advertising', *Simulacra and Simulation*, Glaser, S. F. trans., University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1981, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, p. 87

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 87

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 91

It seems likely that the 'sign' in Hunter's images, when read through a Baudrillardian haze, denotes the consumer items depicted; the possessions of the autonomous subculture which he depicts.

*The Anthropologist* (1997) [fig. 5], Hunter's reinterpretation *The Geographer*, [fig. 6] of Vermeer's *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer* (c. 1668-1669) duo, depicts a young man, presumably a student of anthropology at his desk in a bright yet shabby Victorian terrace. The room is cluttered with his assorted possessions; curious objects line a shelf behind him, papers and pictures are clothes-pegged beside his desk, and a battered leather briefcase, is discarded upon the dark rug that covers the bare floorboards. This antique addition, in combination with the subject's striped braces and collarless shirt, could alone evoke a nostalgic reading of academic life; an image as loaded in some circles as that of the solitary artist. But, if one is to apply Baudrillard's theory, it is the inclusion of a (contemporaneously) state-of-the-art laptop computer that denotes that by merit of being consumers, squatters are what Hunter terms, 'worthwhile members of society'.

Even the most modest of possessions can figure in the equation that consumption equals participation in society. *The Campaigner* (1997) [fig. 7] borrows its composition from *The Milkmaid* [fig. 8], and features a young man standing by a kitchen door, an age-worn table and wood panelled wall mirroring the familiar romantic visage of rural domesticity; the ubiquitous well scrubbed table of the farmer's wife, for example. The man, who is pouring tea from an (empty) novelty teapot with a look of studied concentration unequal to his task, shares his space with, among other things, a box of *Alpen* cereal and a giant *Coca-Cola* cup.: The familiar branding simultaneously reinforcing the subject's status within mainstream society and undermining their status as a subculture.

If consumer goods are the Baudrillardian 'sign' in Hunter's images, this does not necessarily detract from a 'Berger-esque' reading. One could conclude that consumer goods and the signs or logos by which they are identified are just as important a part of one's 'cultural heritage' as great paintings; furthermore, the inclusion of brands, in this case *Alpen* and *Coca-Cola*, which denote mass culture, within a 'high art' composition serve to make the classical references in Hunter's work more accessible,

and include the viewer in a set of shared values (the values of consumerism). It is this inclusion that underpins the viewer's role as, to reiterate Berger, the 'spectator-buyer' who must be persuaded and flattered by the artist or ad-man alike.

The inclusion of popular brands within Hunter's work have the dual effect of situating the image in the present, or at least the contemporary, while appealing to a breadth of nostalgic responses associated with advertisements and consumer goods. Berger's reasoning that publicity images must be continually renewed and made up-to-date while invoking both past and future<sup>118</sup> catalyses Baudrillard's point that all modes of expression are 'superficial form, the smallest common denominator of all signification'. All that is changeable is superficial, and must remain so in order to remain familiar and memorable.

I suggested earlier that the use of Vermeer could be incidental to Hunter's purposes; by this I suggest that the reinterpretation of oil paintings into publicity images denotes painting itself as 'sign'. The inconsistency in this argument is that certain works by certain painters (and the symbol of the painter themselves) do figure in an audience's consciousness more strongly than others.

Svetlana Alpers' pondering of Vermeer's cultural value, and her affirmation that Vermeer's paintings 'became a central value to European [and] American culture'<sup>119</sup> needs questioning. Alpers, writing in a professional publication, is not referring to a universally applied 'central value' but a value restricted to a minority of art experts, academics, and (overwhelmingly, middle class) gallery visitors.

Hunter, as a student of the RCA would, of course, be part of this milieu, but by using Vermeer specifically he flatters his audience, utilising a sense of mystification that still surrounds Vermeer, but less so other artists who have suffered 'over exposure' within popular culture. Hunter's photographs position those 'in the know' as part of the cultural elite, and at the same time extend an invitation to those less familiar with the Vermeer; the 'crucial' photograph in the series (a term awarded most frequently to *Woman Reading a Possession Order*) becomes *The Art of Squatting* [fig. 3]; the

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<sup>118</sup> Berger, J., op. cit., p. 130

<sup>119</sup> Alpers, S., 'The Strangeness of Vermeer', op. cit. p. 63

reference to Vermeer's most celebrated work ensuring that the cultural connection is readily made.

The choice of Vermeer is not, then, impassive but a well chosen counterpart to Hunter's campaign. In order to suggest that advertising privileges the 'smallest common denominator' Baudrillard must cynically reduce an audience, 'the social' to its smallest common denominator. In fact, 'sign' must be read in terms of an individual's cultural references; some of these references are shared, but none can be universal. Hunter in choosing to highlight the plight of his small community must reflect, intentionally or not, the tastes and cultural references of those who could aid his cause. In this sense Hunter's images can be said not to be concerned with the subjects depicted, but rather with the audience who will view it.

### III

By the very act of reinterpreting Vermeer's compositions, it could be concluded that Hunter is simulating not just the act of oil painting and its connotations of authenticity, but an entire discourse of class and gender founded in the politics of the spectator, or patron.

In his recent study of Vermeer, Bryan Jay Wolf has proffered a detailed analysis of Dutch genre painting, specifically the recurring motif of the 'lace maker'. Wolf has focused his attention at this point not on Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* but on a 1664 work of the same title by Vermeer's contemporary, Caspar Netscher [fig. 12]. His reason for overlooking Vermeer's better known work at this stage is not accounted for but is presumably intended to demonstrate that his argument can be applied generally across the genre. According to Wolf, the poignant question is one of literacy; who will read the world the artist creates.<sup>120</sup>

Netscher's *The Lacemaker* (1664) differs from Vermeer's composition in its depiction of a whole figure, which faces away from the viewer, highlighting a print pinned to the wall before her. The print, the only adornment to the otherwise sparse room, serves to underline her situation within a domestic space. The only other objects in

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<sup>120</sup> Wolf, B.J., 'Inside the Camera Obscura', *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2001, pp. 44

the composition, a broom, pair of shoes and mussel shell afford a emblematic reading of the modestly dressed housewife; the broom signalling cleanliness and housework, while the shoes and mussel shell allude to Dutch sayings that link women to the home; not to wear shoes is to stay at home, while the shell is typical of iconographic traditions of the period, demonstrating the *vrouw*'s desire to 'abide in her shell'.<sup>121</sup>

The scene could be read as one of banal domesticity, but Wolf positions the act of painting domestic interiors far from being neutral, signal a complicated discourse of class and gender:

Dutch genre painting is necessarily at odds with its domestic subjects [...] domestic persona cannot figure in the enterprise of art without calling into question painting's cultural situation and the painters' social allegiances.<sup>122</sup>

That starting point of this discourses the artist's social situation. The very act of painting domestic interiors, a decidedly feminine realm, means that the artist risks close association with the feminized sphere; this association exposes the artist as vulnerable, as feminized.<sup>123</sup> According to Wolf, this act of 'feminization' represents 'the potential erosion of his cultural authority'.<sup>124</sup>

The 'gender anxieties'<sup>125</sup> of the artist are heightened by the moralizing gendered elements routinely included within Dutch genre painting. The representation of a woman in an interior space serves to establish her devotion to the home, a distinct role expounded by the writer Van Beverwijck, "You, husband, work outside the house/ But inside tasks befall your spouse."<sup>126</sup>

In Dutch paintings the role of the man outside the home is as poignant as that woman within; the absent husband is frequently alluded to by Vermeer and other

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 34

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 43

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 42

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 44

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

painters, by way of a letter or print or painting upon the wall.<sup>127</sup> The inclusion of a print pinned to the wall is interesting because as well as functioning as ‘a surrogate for male presence’, the print demonstrates the commercialisation and dissemination of art in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, and its wider availability<sup>128</sup>; one factor that established the end of traditional patronage and emergence of the ‘bohemian’ artist, detailed in the next chapter.

Wolf has suggested that the inclusion of the references to absent husband, the seafaring or topographical themes implying that he is engaged in important labour or commerce outside the house, further distance the artist from the masculine world, reinforcing the ‘gender anxieties’ of the artist. This, suggests Wolf, can only be resolved through the introduction of a class discourse.<sup>129</sup> The resulting works suggest contradictions in the intentions of the artist who depicts domestic activity; the genre must be seen as a means to distance themselves and the viewer from domestic labour and feminized values; <sup>130</sup> to see is to supervise from the perspective of class.<sup>131</sup>

On this basis the motif of the domestic lace maker, far from being a study in idealized womanhood, is actually a statement of tacit obedience to the supervising classes. Wolf notes that lace making, far from being a pastime that befits ladies of the era, was a cottage industry reserved for women of a low social order, frequently immigrants.<sup>132</sup> Her representation within a domestic setting, with evidence of the commercialization of her task removed from view is a mythologization borne of upper-class anxieties about the potentially restive labouring classes; to a contemporary audience the lace maker’s lowly status would be apparent; so too would the implicit affirmation of social hierarchy: in presenting the lace maker as a bastion of sanitized feminine goodness based on docility and industry, the artist and viewer assume what Wolf described as a ‘managerial authority’<sup>133</sup> over the subject.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 35

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 44

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 43

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 43

The positioning of the viewer as an authoritarian figure serves to convert the labouring classes in general into a feminized population: silent, obedient and productive.<sup>134</sup> It is this association that distances the artist from the labours he depicts and confirms his own authority.

I suggested earlier that Hunter's images can be said not to be concerned with the subjects depicted, but rather with the audience who will view it. If to see is indeed to supervise, Hunter has recast the gendered concerns of Dutch interior scenes; the squatters in *Persons Unknown* have adopted the traits of the 'feminized' underclass, projecting a sanitized image of a potentially restive subculture; silence, obedience and productivity, in which the 'silence' of the figures is an unavoidable inheritance from Vermeer's original compositions, while 'obedience' is borne of the act of being directed for the camera, and, more so, the voyeuristic nature of the viewer's gaze; 'productivity' is signalled by the subjects 'participation' in society to which their possessions and consumer goods refer.

Baudrillard wrote that: 'To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have'. What Hunter did not have was a position within a confirmed 'high art' tradition, nor an established base of patrons to conciliate. *Persons Unknown* is not a simulation of Vermeer's paintings but of the patriarchal power politics of patronage.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

### **Chapter 3: Subjective Standpoints; Hunter's fictitious forbearers.**

In order to explore further my claim that the series *Persons Unknown* is built upon a discourse of traditional patronage, I wish to examine another body of work, which, produced between 1996 and 1998, predates it: *Traveller Series* (1995-8) [selected figs. 9 and 10]. Patronage, after all, denotes the presence of an art market, or audience. This chapter aims to place Hunter's accepted role, as artist, within the historical context which authenticates it, as well as in the contemporary context of the 1990s, an era which came to denote both authenticity and visibility, in both art and politics.

Hunter describes *Traveller Series* as the being borne of a desire to challenge common preconceptions about travellers in Hackney. According to Hunter:

[The series] was taken at the same time as an article appeared saying that all people living on this site in Whitechapel were smackheads who couldn't do anything with their lives and were all victims of society [...] When I was doing the pictures of the travelling community it was really to document their lifestyle, to show these recycled vehicles that had become homes [...] It seemed very pure that series, just visiting people and saying "I am sick of seeing crappy black and white images in the press, I want to show you how I see you in this beautiful colourful space of yours."<sup>135</sup>

Unlike his later work, *Traveller Series* is not allied to historical art images, rather a foray into the photojournalistic aspects of social documentary. His desire to challenge the black and white imagery associated with documentary photography is part of a wider dialogue which binds colour photography to a commercial tradition, with black and white imagery being the chosen vehicle of 'serious' documentary or art photography. This precedent came to be challenged in the 1980s by, for example, Paul Graham, whom Hunter cites as an influence.

*Traveller Series* consists of 10 wide angle compositions of the interiors of mobile homes and their inhabitants; all are untitled. The images, although not uniform, generally place the subject at the far end of their home, allowing the wide angle lens

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<sup>135</sup> Wainwright, J., 'Interview', in Bracewell, M., et al., *Tom Hunter*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, Germany, 2003, no page no.

to fit most of the interior into the frame. The resulting images seem voyeuristic; the inhabitant's mostly distant figure viewed at the end of their tunnel-like habitat. Some of the traveller's make eye contact, others, in an echo of Hunter's later work, are photographed reading, or seemingly absorbed in their own thoughts. Most are young people in their twenties, although three shots feature couples or families. The prevailing sense is one of silence and stillness; once again, to see is to supervise.

In order to comprehend Hunter's depictions, not just of squatters and travellers, but of his own lifestyle, an oeuvre which Michael Bracewell has deemed 'political' by its very nature,<sup>136</sup> it is important to consider the history of role of artist biography in the authentication of the artist.

The idea of 'authenticity' is linked directly to market society.<sup>137</sup> As Gary Alan Fine suggests in *Crafting Authenticity*, a study of the creation of a market for 'Outsider Artists' in the USA, the technological revolution which has enabled the high quality reproduction of art, has caused a resurgence in the market's concern with authenticity.<sup>138</sup> This concern has revealed itself as a fixation on the biography of an artist, and its ability to reflect the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideal of the artist as an 'outsider', a trend which has established 'Outsider Art' as the fastest growing art market of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-centuries.<sup>139</sup>

Hunter is not an 'Outsider Artist' per se, by definition of his education at both The London Institute and the Royal College of Art. I would argue, however, that his commercial success is, in part, the product of his biography and unconventional lifestyle.

## I

Michael Bracewell's interpretation of Hunter's work is decidedly romantic. He opines:

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<sup>136</sup> Bracewell, M., 'Tom Hunter and the Modern World', in Bracewell, M., op. cit., no page no

<sup>137</sup> Sondheim, A., 'Unnerving Questions Concerning the Critique and Presentation of Folk/Outsider Arts', *Art Papers*, July/August 1989, p. 34

<sup>138</sup> Fine, G.A., 'Crafting authenticity: The validation of identity in self-taught art', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 32, No. 2, April 2003, p. 162

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

You could think of Hunter's art as a timely revival of those bohemian values which the visionary film director Baz Lurhmann has popularised in his recent film *Moulin Rough* – the romantic credo of 'Truth, Beauty, Freedom & Love' upheld by Lurhmann's Romantic artistic revolutionaries.<sup>140</sup>

Bracewell's utilisation of a popular Hollywood film as shorthand for the social position of Hunter's subjects is a telling one; Bracewell has offered a fictitious ideal of Bohemian values as a vehicle of meaningful symbolism, presumed central to the cultural literacy of the audience, an example of a phenomenon that Baudrillard has described scathingly as an 'artificial resurrection in the system of signs [...] in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences'<sup>141</sup>. One need only look to the history of 'the bohemian' since its emergence of in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century to appreciate that the entire subculture is itself an 'artificial resurrection of a system of signs'.

The Bohemian myth, as Bracewell acknowledges, is a progression of the emergence of Romanticism in the arts; a complex development borne largely of the reaction of philosophers and writers against what they considered to be the 'excessive rationalism and false optimism of Enlightenment thinkers'.<sup>142</sup> Romantic artists came to be driven by a sense of vocation and a need to express their own unique vision, which they deemed independent tradition and the demands of patrons.<sup>143</sup> This new concern with vocation and personal vision transformed the definition of 'the artist' and proved to be the beginning of the notion of artistic genius; a notion enthusiastically adopted by the Romantic artists throughout the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, in order to lend prestige to their work.<sup>144</sup>

The term 'Bohemian', once denoted an inhabitant of Bohemia, but by the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century was understood as:

**3. A gipsy of society; one who either cuts himself off, or is by his habits cut off, from society for which he is otherwise**

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<sup>140</sup> Bracewell, M., 'Tom Hunter and the Modern World', in Bracewell, M., op. cit., no page no.

<sup>141</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit., p. 2

<sup>142</sup> Sturgis, A., et al., *Rebels and Martyrs: the image of the artist in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, National Gallery Company, London, 2006, p. 10

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

fitted; especially an artist, literary man, or actor, who leads a free, vagabond, or irregular life, not being particular as to the society he frequents, and despising conventionalities generally. (Used with considerable latitude, with or without reference to morals.)<sup>145</sup>

This definition, which demonstrates that the term has become shorthand for one with an 'irregular life', 'especially an artist', coincides with Elizabeth Wilson's recent research which has traced the emergence of an 'artistic Bohemia' to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrializing West, and positions it as a direct response to upheaval brought about by mass production; mass production, writes Wilson, 'transformed the sphere of cultural production and consumption, as market relations replaced established forms of patronage.'<sup>146</sup>

Wilson has demonstrated a direct link between an 'artistic Bohemia' and patronage, as well as identifying the period in which established forms of patronage became dismantled. This goes some way towards supporting the theory detailed in the last chapter that Hunter's work re-establishes the sensibility of patronage. Baudrillard's theory stipulates, after all, that a condition must be proved by its negative; 'the proof of art through antiart.'<sup>147</sup> It follows, perhaps, that there can be proof of patronage through anti-patronage; the period of anti-patronage being the condition that spawned the idea of an 'artistic Bohemia'.

The idea of 'anti-patronage' refers not just to a transformation in cultural production that rendered traditional forms of patronage defunct, but to an attempted shift by artists to redress the balance of power. Wilson describes the 'new bourgeoisie' as a 'fickle audience'; artists were no longer producing for a known patron but an unknown element, and thus a mismatch between 'creative ability and the market' occurred. This mismatch, according to Wilson, led to a trend among artists to produce increasingly avant-garde work in order to alienate potential (bourgeois) consumers whom they rejected as 'vulgar philistines'.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> O.E.D., op. cit.

<sup>146</sup> Wilson, E. (A), 'The bohemianization of mass culture', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1999, p. 12

<sup>147</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit., p. 19

<sup>148</sup> Wilson, E. (A), op. cit., p. 12

For a time, the bohemian did indeed remain a cultural 'other', indeed a 'subculture'<sup>149</sup>. According to Wilson:

The fully fledged nineteenth-century bohemians [...] belonged to an identifiable subculture. Bohemia is the name for the attempt by nineteenth and twentieth-century artists, writers, intellectuals and radicals to create an alternative world within Western society. Despite the exaggerated individualism of its citizens, Bohemia was a collective enterprise; the bohemians created and participated in a social milieu created *against* the dominant culture, as the artist made a startling transformation from paid ideologue to violent critic of society in the unfamiliar world of 'modernity'.<sup>150</sup>

Wilson makes a distinction between this early ideal of Bohemia, and the idea of Bohemia one recognises today. She argues that Bohemia became a recognised concept based on certain forms of behaviour and specific sets of attitudes which 'came into existence only when writers began to describe it and painters to depict it.'<sup>151</sup>

The idea of the Bohemian in painting is a major focus of the National Gallery's current exhibition *Rebels and Martyrs*. In the first part of the exhibition a progression of the representation the Bohemian is clearly evident: The first phase is well represented by works such as Victor Emil Janssen's *Self Portrait at the Easel* (1828), a self portrait of the artist working in the barren room in which he lived, worked and slept. Although the artist has applied a few devices of painterly metaphor (the bare chest, with shirt knotted around his loins, an allusion to Christian allegory, the herbs in the foreground representing the transience of life<sup>152</sup>) the image is a modest documentary of the artist in his space.

The second phase would be the selection of caricatures displayed, most dating from the 1840's and 1850's, the period during which, as we shall see, the 'bohemian artist' entered popular literature. The graphic artists working on satirical papers are

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<sup>149</sup> Wilson, E. (A), *ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Wilson, E. (B), *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts*, Tauris Parke, London & New York, 2000, p.1

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Sturgis, A., *op. cit.*, p. 68

credited with having established 'the currency of the bohemian type, his appearance, attitude and iconography'<sup>153</sup> evident in the popular series *The Artists* (1838) by Gavarni, which emphasise both the poverty and eccentricities of the bohemian (in this case *avant la lettre*<sup>154</sup>)

The third phase, from the 1840s onwards demonstrates the adoption of the stereotyped 'bohemian' by the artists themselves. Approaches range from sentimentalised depictions of the artist's poverty, as in Octave Tassaert's *The Artists Studio* (1845), to unconcealed self aggrandisement on the part of the artist; Courbet's *The Meeting (Bonjour Monsieur Courbet!)* (1854).

In the fourth phase, coinciding with the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the artist can be described as 'play[ing] the bohemian to the hilt'.<sup>155</sup> This is evident in Jan Toorop's *Self Portrait in the Studio* (1883) [fig. 15] in which the artist has gathered about his person the well defined iconography of bohemian life; the jacket with collar turned up, worn with wide-brimmed hat,<sup>156</sup> the oriental looking pipe on which he sucks, the disarrayed books that lie a shelf above the ubiquitous pot-bellied stove. The role of 'bohemian' was utilised not just in the work, but was a powerful promotional tool as Hermann-Paul's poster for the *Salon des Cent* exhibition (1895) demonstrates; the poster, for a show by emerging avant-garde artists<sup>157</sup> satirises the very artists it is promoting, depicting a caricatured 'bohemian', his puckered lips and floppy bow tie highlighting the unconventionality demanded by the audience.

This progression of the depiction of the bohemian illustrates Elizabeth Wilson's view that, from the point in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century in which the bohemian entered the realm of popular literature 'the figure and his audience have been inseparable', mainly because the literary construct has adhered to the depiction of 'the hero [...] the west has wanted to hear about its artists, a story of genius, glamour, outlawry and doom.'<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 91

<sup>155</sup> Sturgis, A., op. cit., p. 112

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 114

<sup>158</sup> Wilson, E. (B), op. cit., p. 3

The fictionalisation of the bohemian was to mark its transition from subculture to mass-culture. Henry Murger is credited with the popularisation of 'the bohemian' with a collection of stories in the popular press, which were collected in 1853 and published as *Les Buveurs d'Eau*, a reference to his description of them as 'water drinkers, artists too poor and too dedicated to their work to dissolve their problems in alcohol'.<sup>159</sup>

Murger's stories were the inspiration for what is possibly the best known paradigm of the modern bohemian resides in Puccini's *La Boheme* (1896). In literature (as Wilson observes) George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1896) became the first novel to overlook any hardships and popularise the bohemian life as romantic and picturesque; this was upheld in Margaret Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* (1924), a fictitious tale of impoverished artists and painters purported to have been based on the lives of Augustus John, Henry Lamb and Walter Broughton.<sup>160</sup> The reason I cite these two novels in particular is to demonstrate the emergence of an alliance, at least in fiction, between the bohemian and the bourgeois; *Trilby's* protagonist, an artist named 'Little Billie' traverses the artistic centres of London and Paris, seemingly on the whim of his heart strings, having fallen in love with his muse, Trilby. Wilson deftly characterises du Maurier's bohemians as 'decent Englishmen on temporary leave from the professional middle class'.<sup>161</sup> Similarly Kennedy's romanticized depictions of John and his milieu resonates with the success and public acceptance these artists had already achieved.

In short, 'the bohemian', came to be a fictionalized construct associated firmly within the upper-middle (leisured) classes. Within this fiction, 'the bohemian' far from being associated with the avant-garde art, came to represent a right of passage, a rebellion of youth, after which respectable life would be resumed. The imminent return to 'productive' society, one supposes, rendered the lifestyle non-threatening.

What defined the Bohemian, and secured its continuing audience, was a sense of persistent nostalgia; a nostalgia for youth, as it was the young who flocked to the

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<sup>159</sup> Murger, H., in *ibid.*, p. 1

<sup>160</sup> Kennedy, M., in Wilson, E. (A), *op. cit.*, p. 16

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

subculture;<sup>162</sup> and nostalgia for authenticity in art at a time when mass produced art had the ability to replace the craftsman.<sup>163</sup> The ability of new technologies, namely photography and lithographic printing techniques, to mass produce art images resulted in 'authenticity' being of prime concern to bohemian values; the result was the creation of what Wilson terms a 'legend' of the bohemian artist; the 'legend' drawing largely from Romantic notions of artistic 'genius'.

The depiction of the bohemian in popular fiction was the main factor at play in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries, which saw 'the bohemian' accepted into the mainstream, and even more poignantly, the bohemianization of mass culture. Wilson points to a fierce upward flow of culture in the late Victorian period which saw 'the bourgeoisie becoming as bohemian as the bohemians',<sup>164</sup> a phenomenon presumably fuelled in part by the period's fascination with 'exotica', in combination with the serialisation of the lives of (fictitious) bohemian artists in popular journalism, novels and illustrated magazines.

It is in this upward flow of culture, the bohemianization of the bourgeois, that the Bohemia became mythologized; it was the audience that perpetuated the myth, and, according to Wilson:

Once these representations [both visual and literary] existed new generations could build on them, so that the bohemian myth was self-perpetuating, the bohemian an icon that became more and more encrusted with additions based on successive artistic lives, both famous and obscure, as memoirs, novels and autobiographies recorded the myth, and recycled and amplified anecdote, legend and stereotype.<sup>165</sup>

The Bohemian had become a simulation of itself; one of the first modern subcultures<sup>166</sup>, seeking to set itself apart from mass culture, while being increasingly referenced and reproduced by it. By the 1920s Chelsea was established as the centre of bohemian life in London, its inhabitants disparaged by the conservative press as

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<sup>162</sup> Wilson, E. (B), op. cit., p. 9

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>164</sup> Wilson, E. (A), op. cit., p. 15

<sup>165</sup> Wilson, E. (B), op. cit. p. 6

<sup>166</sup> Wilson, E. (A), op. cit., p. 12

Not artists at all, but Arty People, they just talk about drawing and painting and their studios are only used for dressing up, for parties and dances.<sup>167</sup>

Here we see the creation of a bohemian 'image' based on the simulation of an original subculture; 'the bohemian' has become a parody of itself.

Not only was the bohemian a subculture, it was a specifically urban subculture. Within the fringes of the newly industrialised cities, and here the bells of recognition begin to chime in alliance if not with Hunter's own situation, then with the characters of *Moulin Rouge* with which Bracewell has sought to ally him; artists, writers and musicians played out the:

[...] dramatization of poverty combined with romantic masquerade and living on one's wits to become a *performance in its own right*, a demonstration of the will to shock. The role, necessitating an anti-bourgeois posture and contempt for conformity, was more than a pose, for it challenged the dominant morality of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeois society [...] the bohemian was a rebel, heroically rejecting middle-class safety and comfort for a life of poverty, risk and transgression.<sup>168</sup>

Baudrillard wrote that,

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality- a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity.

This parody, the perpetuation of this 'performance' is crucial to the mythologization of Bohemian values, and its consequent dialogue with 'the artist'; here lies its 'myth of origin'.

## II

Consider Baudrillard's understanding of the successive phases of the image;

it is the reflection of a profound reality.

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<sup>167</sup> Anon, *Daily Dispatch*, c. 1920, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 16

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

it masks and denatures a profound reality.  
 it masks the absence of a profound reality.  
 it has no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure  
 simulacrum.<sup>169</sup>

Note the cyclical nature of his theory; the 'reflection of a profound reality' refers to the act of simulacrum; the final three stages characterize a shift towards simulation, which becomes 'its own pure simulacrum'; the reflection has 'no relation to any reality', but is still reflection of an idea, ideal or fiction. If the successive phases of the image can be understood as ideological as opposed to physical it can be construed that:

- i) The early depictions of the *avant la lettre* bohemian at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century was a reflection of a profound reality.
- ii) The depiction in the middle of the century by satirical writers and artists served to denature that reality.
- iii) The artist's reaction to the popular image of the bohemian, whether sentimentalised or otherwise, masks the absence of the reality of the bohemian artist.
- iv) The self-parodying nature of the work of bohemian artists towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, is its own simulacrum, devoid of reality.

Baudrillard has stated that "present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation."<sup>170</sup> Whether Bracewell, in attempting to transpose Hunter's photographs of travellers onto an accepted model of 'the Bohemian', fulfils the position of "present-day simulator", more so than Hunter himself, is an argument that cannot be explored here. What does merit discussion is the broad base of cultural simulation that led to Hunter's recent popularity, a base that, like the model of the bohemian can be applied to Baudrillard's definition of the successive phases of the image:

- i) Hunter's *Traveller Series* is a reflection of a profound reality.
- ii) The act of photographing his subjects to serve an agenda is to mask and denature their reality;

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<sup>169</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit., p. 6

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 2

- iii) The association (by Bracewell) of Hunter's subjects with a fictional ideal of 'the Bohemian' (i.e. the film *Moulin Rouge*), masks the absence of a profound reality.
- iv) The viewers' acceptance of this association (an association which was present before Bracewell's summarization) demonstrates that the ideal of 'the Bohemian' has no relation to reality.

In depicting a subculture that can so readily be reduced to a fictitious equivalence, Hunter's act of simulation is the recreation of a model of the artist. This model, like that of the bohemian, is rooted in the demands of the viewer; a continuing demand for the affirmation of what the artist is; a reconciliation of Art and capitalism.<sup>171</sup>

Bracewell's positioning of Hunter within the nostalgic mythologization of the artist is more than just convenient shorthand. It demonstrates that 'the real is no longer what it was' and seeks, like Hunter himself, to redress public opinion of those outside conventional society.

Critically, 'one can live with the idea of distorted truth'.<sup>172</sup> If truth must be distorted in order to be palatable, it is no more evident than in the dilution of bohemian values to the point that they become acceptable, even prized by mass culture. The 'squatter' can be positioned as the 'new bohemian', a subculture that has suffered demonisation and mockery in the press, but is acceptable in the sanitized version of Hunter's imagery; the lifestyle even simulated (not entirely through necessity) by hoards of artists and students living in Hackney (Hunter's locale) and further a field.

Moreover, 'the bohemian' had become such a parodic simulation of itself, had become so engrained as a benign idiosyncrasy to be indulged in the middle-classes, that the (very public) emergence, in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, of a subculture (squatters/travellers) allied to similar social and political factors of the original 19<sup>th</sup>-century prototype, became a threat to the status quo.

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<sup>171</sup> Wilson, E. (B), op. cit., p. 3

<sup>172</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit., p. 5

## III

If the squatter is the 'new bohemian' that too must be a constructed status. A recent BBC Radio 4 documentary entitled *Squatter's Paradise*, has summarised the history of squatting, and the subsequent politicization of the movement: The 'Squatters Movement' was mobilised in 1946 when the influx of returning servicemen, as well as those whose homes had been bombed during the war, placed huge pressure on remaining housing in England, particularly in London and other industrial cities like Manchester and Sheffield, that had suffered heavy bomb damage during the Blitz.<sup>173</sup>

'Squats' were initially contained to army barracks that had been abandoned at the end of the war, and in 1946, the squatters were championed by the press, even Right wing publications like the Daily Mail, who applauded the ex-servicemen's initiative in helping solve the nations housing plan, calling them 'everyday heroes'.<sup>174</sup>

The Labour government also backed the movement, but endeavoured to capitalize on the phenomenon, ordering local authorities to provide the camps with electricity and water in return for ground rents.<sup>175</sup> This government intervention was to bring to the fore local prejudices towards the squatters, particularly in the rural areas where local people objected to the influx of 'townies' from the big cities; In 1998 Mass Observation recorded interviews with residents of a squatted community in a village outside Scunthorpe where the local council had flouted the government's ruling by refusing to provide the community with water or electricity. One woman recalled the problems she faced having to beg water for her family from local residents, concluding that such measures gained them a reputation as 'inconvenient beggars' plaguing the area, recalling:

People then talked about squatters the way they talk about those New Age Travellers today; we were dirty; we were considered dirt.<sup>176</sup>

The woman's recognition between the social situation of the squatters of 1946 and the New Age Traveller's is an important one, for Hunter's travellers are part of this

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<sup>173</sup> Whitaker, M., *Squatter's Paradise*, BBC Radio 4, 2 August 2006

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

movement, as opposed to the specific Romany type 'gypsy' for whom travelling is a historic way of life. We have seen that immediately following the war the press supported squatters, even if local communities did not.

The opinion of the press was, however, about to change thanks to the intervention of a political party far more fractious than Churchill's Conservatives: The Socialist Party seized on the plight of squatters at the end of 1946 with the intention of shaming the Labour government into stepping up its much needed new housing programme. The Party organised the ceremonial mass squatting of disused mansion blocks in Holland Park and St. Johns Wood, and the Ivy Hotel in Bloomsbury in order to highlight the contrast between the affluent neighbourhoods, and the city's newly homeless.<sup>177</sup>

The government reaction to the occupation of such central and visible sites was very different from the support they had shown for the squatters living in the otherwise defunct army buildings; the government ruled that the law had been broken and placed the Holland Park flats under police siege. At the same time the Police trawled London in vans with orders to evict anybody suspected of squatting,<sup>178</sup> a move that mobilised anti-Communist fears in the press that signalled the end of their support for the squatters, and demonstrated the intrinsic link between government, police, press and public opinion.

This link between authority and the press endured, as did the demonisation of squatters as a social enemy, and enjoyed a broad political dialogue during the Thatcher years, during which many subcultures were deemed 'the enemy within'; particularly those perceived to have Left wing leanings:

At its most ambitious Thatcherism presented a vision of what Britain should become, to define "what the nation is" and "who the people are", and to attempt to remake the nation in these terms [...] Thatcherism was repeatedly, as Thatcher herself put it in a speech given at the time of the miners' strike, set against 'an enemy without' [...] such as the Soviet

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

Union, and 'the enemy within' such as the labour movement and consensus politics more generally.<sup>179</sup>

If there is any doubt that travellers and squatters were a contentious minority during this decade, one has only to look to the event of the 1980s that became synonymous with the battle between travellers and authority; the Battle of the Beanfield:

On June 1st 1985, a convoy of new travellers, peace protestors, green activists and festival-goers set off from Savernake Forest in Wiltshire to establish the 12th annual free festival at Stonehenge. There were around 450 people in total, and they included a number of women and children. They never reached their destination. Eight miles from the Stones they were ambushed, assaulted and arrested with unprecedented brutality by a quasi-military police force of over 1,300 officers drawn from six counties and the MoD.<sup>180</sup>

Newspaper coverage, from both right and left, tabloids and broadsheets, was predictable damning of the travellers, and even more so of landowner Lord Cardigan, who subsequently provided eye-witness testimonies of police behaviour during prosecutions brought against Wiltshire Police.<sup>181</sup> One traveller involved in the events recalls that:

As a prominent local aristocrat and Tory, Cardigan's testimony held unusual sway, presenting unforeseen difficulties for those seeking to cover up and re-interpret the events at the Beanfield. [...] In an effort to counter the impact of his testimony, several national newspapers began painting him as a 'loony lord', questioning his suitability as an eye-witness and drawing farcical conclusions from the fact that his great-great grandfather had led the charge of the light brigade. The Times editorial on June 3rd claimed that being "barking mad was probably hereditary."<sup>182</sup>

Cardigan's case has highlighted the balance between class and supervision that encompasses all aspects of society, including that of the painter and the painted discussed previously.

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<sup>179</sup> Hill, A., 'Acid House and Thatcherism', *British Journal of Sociology* Vol. No. 53 Issue No. 1 (March 2002) p. 90

<sup>180</sup> Worthington, A. ed., *The Battle of the Beanfield*, Enabler Publications, London, 2005, back cover

<sup>181</sup> Lodge, A., 'Anniversary of the 'Battle of the Beanfield'', <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/regions/westcountry/2005/05/312088.html>, 2005, [01/07/06]

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

The united front between government and the press was demonstrated once again during the 1980s when 'Acid House', associated with countryside raves and the drug ecstasy was the focus of a moral panic within the right-wing tabloid press between 1988 and 1990. This panic was the subject of much debate in the House of Commons, and resulted in the legislation of the Entertainment (Increased Penalties) Act in July 1990.<sup>183</sup>

Sociologist Adam Hill has demonstrated the perceived danger of subculture to Thatcherism, focusing on the Acid House movement demonised in the press during the 1980s. The discussion of Acid House, a predominantly youth orientated branch of electronic music closely allied to the drug Ecstasy, may seem a peculiar counterpoint to the essentially pastoralised impression proffered by Hunter, but Hill has some important points to make.

Hill suggests that during the 1980s Acid House movement as a subculture can be situated as 'presenting a type of 'enemy within', not of course on the scale of the labour movement, but presenting a presence that did not fit with Thatcherism's concept of Britain'.<sup>184</sup> Hill goes on to establish convincingly that the government's intervention in the case of the Acid House 'panic', demonstrates that all sub-cultures represent a perceived threat to governance and authority.<sup>185</sup> The *Hackney Gazette* articles that informed *Traveller Series* all of Hunter's work demonstrate that this perceived threat is still reflected, at a local as well as national level.

#### IV

The perceived danger of the 'subculture' signals an ingrained separation of politics and culture. It was this separation that Blair's new government was apparently challenging when he came to power in 1997, and at this point Acid House had a surprising role to play.

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<sup>183</sup> Hill, A., op. cit., p. 89

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 91

JJ Charlesworth has developed this notion of the perceived relationship between youth, music, subculture (which he refers to as counter-culture), pinpointing the 1980s as an era which saw;

[...] the continuous assimilation of music as a venue around which to cohere around alternative ideas to that of the uptight, stuffy and foul-tempered public culture of the Thatcher years.<sup>186</sup>

He goes on to describe music from the 1980s as a vehicle for the dispossessed to communicate their point of view, resulting in the creation of:

[...] an unrecognised, marginal culture that grew up in the world between the boredom of the English suburbs and the embattled, beaten up city-centres. Between de-industrialisation and metropolitan decay, and out of the cultural confusion that it bred, this generation were part of an emerging culture in which cultural experience was no longer trammelled by all those contradictory edifices of post-war British life - Labourism and working-class associations, churchy morality, Tory middle-Englandism, nationalism and the welfare state.<sup>187</sup>

It was, perhaps, this with this in mind that Blair's spin doctors successfully fashioned a sense of political inclusiveness by using popular culture to enhance both the cultural and political currency of their politics; D:Ream's recently reissued hit *Things Can Only Get Better* was co-opted as the Labour campaign's anthem, and victory was celebrated at a celebrity party at 10 Downing Street.

New Labour's choice of anthem is, I believe, more subversive than it may appear, and helps to contextualise the mood of the 1990s in terms of a calculated shift away from Thatcherism and eighteen years of Conservative rule. *Things Can Only Get Better* had spent eighteen months in the charts between 1991 and 1993 as an anthem of the youth subculture known as Acid House. The tracks' original incantation was conveniently swept aside, and does not appear to have received any attention in contemporary press, but by selecting an anthem belonging to a movement

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<sup>186</sup> Charlesworth, JJ., 'Introduction', in Iain Forsyth & Jane *Anything Else Isn't You*, catalogue, 2005 reproduced at <http://www.iainandjane.com/press/anonymousovers/index.shtml>, [03/07/06]

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

condemned by the Conservatives, and more deliberately by courting the youth vote—perhaps recognising that youth itself had come to symbolise a subculture, apart from mainstream society.

Blair's election campaign successfully created a sense of inclusive cultural authenticity which echoed Thatcher's stipulations about "what a nation is" and "who the people are", but in a highly simulated form, what Bracewell has called 'a kind of ersatz social realism filled with colourful characters and affectionate nostalgia'.<sup>188</sup>

New Labour's 'official' idea of British culture transcended politics, it became a brand; 'Cool Britannia' appropriated and amalgamated several fledgling brand already apparent within the arts and media; British actors had long acquired the moniker 'Brit Pack', and similarly guitar bands like Blur, Oasis and Pulp became 'Brit Pop', and young artists (specifically those collected by Charles Saatchi and Jay Joplin) amalgamated under the signature of 'Brit Art' or 'young British artists' (YBAs).

This branding of culture by way of politics groans under the implications of Baudrillard's mocking mantra in which, "I buy, I consume, I take pleasure" becomes "I vote, I participate [etc.]",<sup>189</sup> but even more so, the false, nostalgic re-branding of a culture belies a void: The final phase of simulation, according to Baudrillard, "has no relation to any reality whatsoever", and it is at this point, "when the real is no longer what it was, [that] nostalgia assumes its full meaning."

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<sup>188</sup> Bracewell, M., op. cit., p. 1

<sup>189</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit. p. 91

## *Conclusion*

Hunter is a product of both the era in which he was working, and the model of the 'authentic' artist which has become proliferated and preferred in the Modern age. His utilisation of Vermeer's compositions is essentially a marketing tool that awards him a cultural heritage as an artist.

Photography is, in view of Vermeer's use of a camera obscura, the device that links the work of the two artists; this link is accentuated by the period in which Vermeer was rediscovered and the mutual importance of the new photographic 'way of seeing' which determined the way in which Vermeer's work came to be read, while Vermeer's posthumous success helped gain credence for photography as an art form by providing the genre, particularly the Pictorialist genre, with a cultural heritage of its own.

It is 'fiction' as much as photography that traverses the period between Vermeer and Hunter; this role of fiction becoming increasingly complex in its inclusion of *tableaux vivants* (the popular pastime that found its ultimate implementation in early photography and, as Hunter's use of the method demonstrates, has enjoyed a renewed popularity), theatre, cinema and the novel, as summarised in the first chapter. Hunter's fictionalisation of real events, which he gleans from his local newspaper, mimic the fictionalisation of the 'real event' of Vermeer's life, by novelists, and the creation of his paintings, as evoked by the characters in Greenaway's film. They, like Hunter characterize what Baudrillard describes as 'present day simulators'<sup>190</sup>, attempting to make the past correspond with their ideal. This 'ideal' is of, course based on the model of the Bohemian artist, popularised in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, demonstrated in the final chapter.

The reasons for Hunter's use of Vermeer in his first major work are tenuous; as we have seen, at the time Hunter created *Persons Unknown*, Vermeer was enjoying something of a revival, denoted by the *Vermeer* retrospective of 1995-6 and the associated scholarly interest, as well as his fictitious immortalisation by novelists

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<sup>190</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit., p. 44.

throughout the late 1990s. It is possible that Hunter's decision to use Vermeer as his model is simply a symptom of the period.

Hunter's assertion that his work 'appropriates advertising methods' in the second chapter, allows for an appraisal of his photographs not as 'fine art' but as publicity material. The discussion of Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, to which Hunter alludes, uncovers a surprisingly accurate observance on Hunter's part, suggesting that the text informed the photography to a large extent; this suggests that Hunter was actively attempting to evoke the artistic authority awarded to the act of oil painting above other mediums, but also nostalgia for the innocent age that the pre-modern era has come to symbolize; although this too is a construct not dissimilar to the ideal Dutch culture weaved by novelists like Chevalier.

The act of quoting a work of art provides the audience with mixed messages, suggesting both wealth and luxury, and spirituality and cultural value.<sup>191</sup> This paradox is interesting when read in conjunction with Baudrillard's thoughts on advertising; Baudrillard asserts that both advertising and fine art are part of the same breadth of 'cultural forms'<sup>192</sup> which depend on a series of signs and symbols for their appeal.<sup>193</sup> His assertion that advertising carries a mantra of sorts that equates consumption of goods with being actively participant in society demonstrates that the inclusion of branded products and consumer goods, like the lap-top, in Hunter's images, which are essentially images of a sub-culture separate from mainstream society, combine the cultural value denoted by the work's association with an Old Master, and the consumption of goods that denotes their active participation in society. The reading of the consumer goods depicted in this way would have extra poignancy in terms of early modern Dutch attitudes to conspicuous consumption, and, if space allowed, would provide rich grounds for extension of this topic.

Hunter's later work, including *Living in Hell and Other Stories*, takes as its reference the work of other Old Masters, as well as the Pre-Raphaelites and Impressionists. It is tempting to conclude that Hunter's quotation of Vermeer is irrelevant, and that Vermeer merely represents an idealised age. Vermeer per se, may be extraneous to

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<sup>191</sup> Berger, J., op. cit., p. 135

<sup>192</sup> Baudrillard., J., op. cit., p. 87

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

Hunter's requirements, but the Dutch Realist genre as a whole deserves consideration, particularly in view of the discourses of class and gender represented there, within the role of the spectator; A study of the popular motif of 'the lace maker' reveals that far from being a study in idealized womanhood and Dutch housewifery the image of lace maker is a political statement of the tacit obedience of the, potentially vehement, working classes,<sup>194</sup> and privileges the role of spectator to that of 'supervisor'. Although, perhaps, unwittingly, it seems that Hunter, in combination with his references to his subjects idealized lifestyles (that could themselves represent a pastoralised view of his subjects), and participation in society, is pre-empting his audience's role as viewer, awarding them the power of patron, his subjects sanitized, diluted, rendered non-threatening in an attempt to quell traditionally negative popular views. This flattery of the audience, if one understands Berger correctly, is key to establishing a market for Hunter's 'product' and in turn secures his 'cultural currency.'

As popular views of Vermeer have been moulded and re-written according to various premise of art history, for instance the view of the Impressionist movement at the time of his discovery as much as an existing taste for Dutch painting, Hunter too has been formed by ideals both past and present. The final chapter demonstrates that Hunter's photographs are in keeping with the 'inclusive' ethic of the 1990s, a cultural development constructed in part by the Labour government as a counterpoint to the oppressive Thatcher years which demonised sub-cultures. It also demonstrates the continuing desire for the Western ideal of the artist, an overhang of the Romantic period, which gained momentum thanks to the Bohemian artist, which has in time become a simulation of itself.

Hunter can be seen as the modern equivalent of the bohemian artist, placing him within the cultural heritage of the likes of Augustus John and Gustave Courbet, those great outsider's of the Modern age; comparison between John's gypsies, with whom he lives for many years, and Hunter's travellers are inevitable, particularly because both denote the new visibility of a previously invisible sub-culture. The biggest implication for the lifestyle of both John and Hunter is however, in terms of biography; artist biography, the 'cult' of the artist, is now a defining factor of an

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<sup>194</sup> Wolf, B.J., op. cit., p. 43

artists success, and is very much tied up in an artist's success; a fact attested to by the rise of the Outsider Artist in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: Hunter's commercial success is in part due to his unconventional lifestyle.

The writings of Jean Baudrillard have appeared throughout this dissertation, his theory of *Simulacra and Simulation* providing a sometimes nihilistic, but often valuable overview of the act of simulating the work of another artist. His view that the act of Simulation denotes the modern epoch as one when there is an absence of reality; real ceases to exist, but is instead replaced by a 'hyperreal' which displaces the 'real' from its historic core, replacing it with symbolisms for the 'real', which are continuously re-cycled and re-interpreted.<sup>195</sup> It is in this age of the hyperreal when nostalgia assumes its full meaning,<sup>196</sup> a theory that is supported by most aspects covered here, from the fictionalisation of Vermeer in novel and film, to the historical position of the Bohemian, to Hunter's steps, however subconscious, to position himself in the role of 'authentic artist'.

Cynics may see Hunter's recent photographic exhibition at the National Gallery as a demonstration of Baudrillard's final phase of 'the successive phases of the image', in which he asserts that 'it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.'<sup>197</sup> It is certainly striking that since creating *Persons Unknown*, some eight years ago, Hunter's photographs resembled the works he claims inspired them to a lesser and lesser extent.

A prime example of this is the show's signature image *Living in Hell* (2004), the counterpart of which is apparently Le Nain Brothers' *Four Figures at a Table* (about 1643). A glance at the two images belie few similarities; *Living in Hell* depicts an elderly woman (played by a retired actress<sup>198</sup>) ensconced on a sofa in a living room littered with the remnants of fast food meals and plagued by cockroaches: In contrast, *Four Figures at a Table* depicts a peasant woman and her family in a gloomy interior. The exhibition's curator's describe the woman as having 'an expression that

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<sup>195</sup> Baudrillard, J., op. cit., pp. 1-42

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Wiggins, C., 'Living in Hell and Other Stories', in Chevalier, T., & Wiggins, C., *ibid.*, p. 50

speaks of a struggle to bring up her children but it is tempered with a quiet sense of self-respect.’<sup>199</sup>

Consider the curator’s attempt to conciliate the two images:

In Hunter’s version of this composition, the family have gone. The woman is abandoned. She sits wrapped up against the cold as the electric heater glows dimly. The sofa is filthy and worn, there is decaying food uneaten in its cardboard wrapping. A naked electric light bulb illuminates the room and shows literally hundreds of cockroaches crawling over every surface. This harsh illumination starkly reveals her shocking fate. Cockroaches only emerge in the dark, so the implication is that the light has only just, that very second, been switched on to reveal the woman sitting in her dingy room, left alone and unloved. We can imagine her a few moments earlier, shivering silently in the dark, while all around her cockroaches creep. The Le Nain’s dignified poverty is ripped from its original seventeenth-century context and in 2004, becomes brutally undignified.<sup>200</sup>

The attempt to twin the two images is laughable, not least because it is the differences, not similarities between the two pieces which is most apparent; the reference to the light having just been switched on is a valiant but failed attempt to create a dialogue between the neon lit interior of Hunter’s photograph and the shadowy pathos of the painting that purports to be its inspiration.

Furthermore, the very act of ‘ripping’ the Le Nain’s dignified imagery from its original context to render it ‘brutally undignified’ in 2004, underlines the vast chasm between not just compositional values, but subject matter. The reading of the indignity of poverty jars with Hunter’s manifesto of previous work; to dignify his subjects.

In addition to *Four Figures at a Table*, the sole painting on display, a few of Hunter’s other inspirations were reproduced on information boards, despite the fact that some key painting are housed in the National Gallery’s collection; those belonging to the collection were for the most part the few paintings which actually share

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<sup>199</sup> Wiggins, C., *ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> Wiggins, C., *ibid.*, p. 51

compositional correlations with Hunter's pastiches. The most conspicuous omission was Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus* (1647-51), which Hunter utilized in the photograph *Ye Olde Axe* (2002), which takes its title from the Hackney Road strip club in which it was staged.

The omitted paintings are particularly notable in view of Saumarez Smith's introduction, which cites the establishment, quite correctly, as 'the home of the nation's greatest collection of Old Master paintings',<sup>201</sup> particularly in view of his attempt to relate these historical images to Hunter's 21<sup>st</sup>-century urban tableaux:

They [Hunter's photographs] are extremely raw, concerned as they are with the reconstruction of events which take place every day in London. [...] But it is easy to forget that many Old Master paintings themselves use potent subject matter and exploit human emotions. Many are about murder and violence in the kingdom of the gods, as we see [one does not, as it is reproduced in the catalogue, but not included in the show] in the paintings of Piero di Cosimo, where the Lapiths and Centaurs fight to the death.<sup>202</sup>

Visiting *Living in Hell and Other Stories* one had the uncanny feeling that in the same way that Hunter, early in his career, sought to use the work of Vermeer to establish his own authenticity as an artist, and thus gain the 'cultural currency' necessitated by the modern art market, the Gallery was now using Hunter's work as a authenticating referential.

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<sup>201</sup> Saumarez Smith, C., op. cit., p. 7

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

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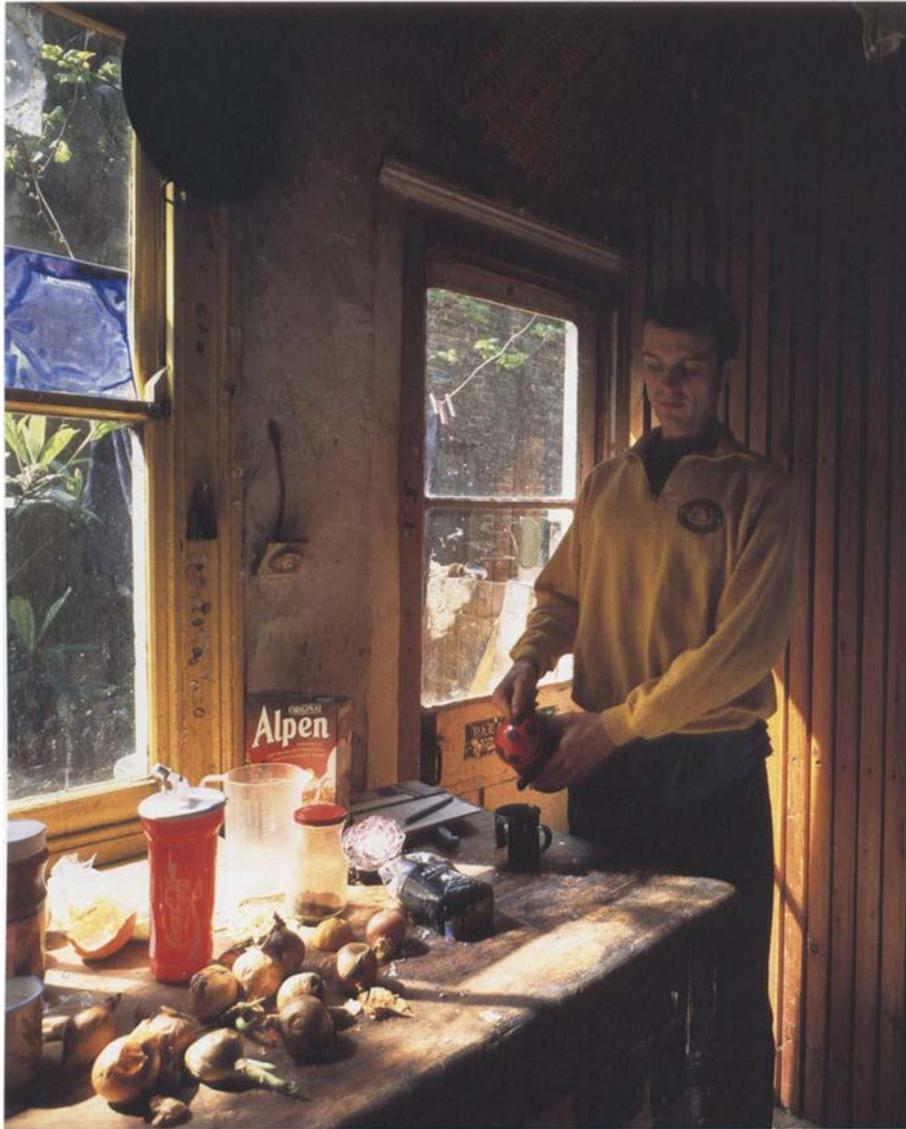


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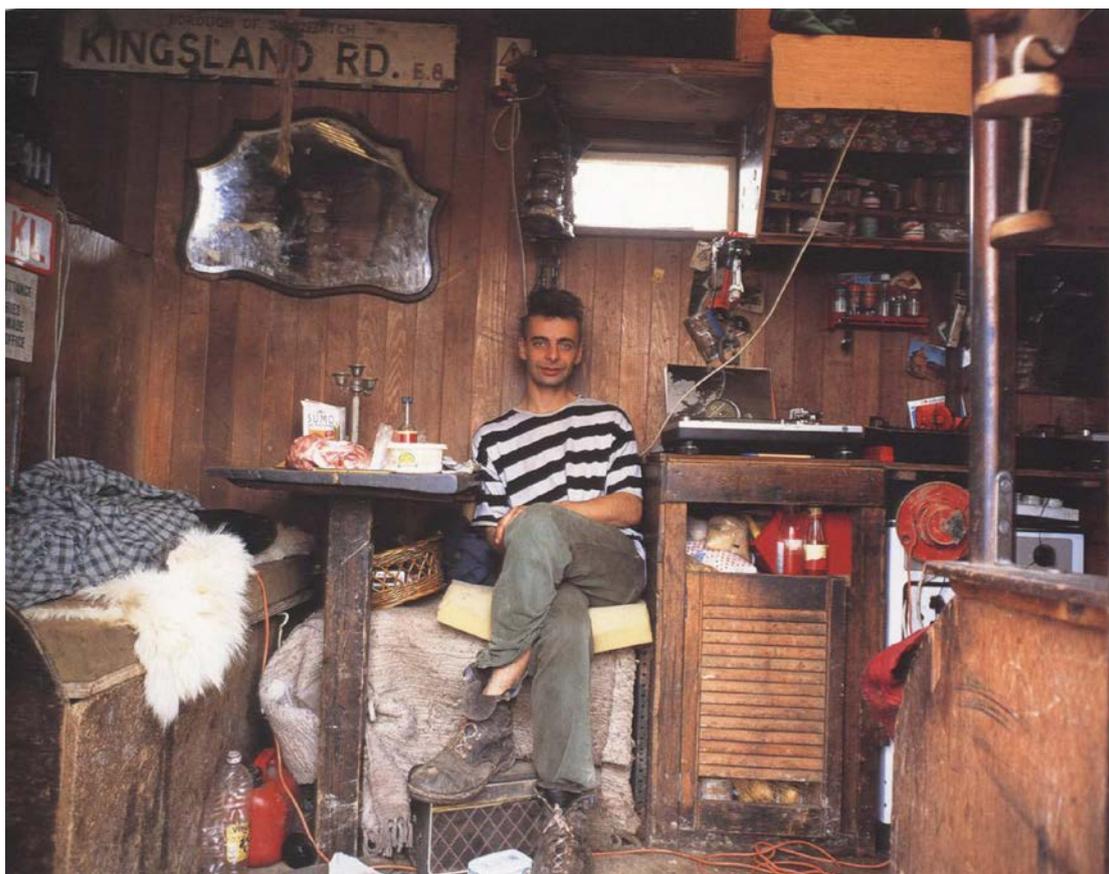


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