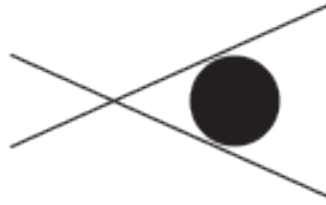


# aperture



April 2nd, 2013

## Interview with Owen Kydd

Owen Kydd is a Los Angeles–based artist who has recently garnered attention for his “durational photographs,” video works that run four to six minutes and explore the interstitial space between still photography and cinema. Curator Charlotte Cotton discussed Kydd’s work in her article “[Nine Years, A Million Conceptual Miles](#),” published in *Aperture*’s [Spring 2013 issue](#). Here, Kydd speaks with Aperture about his work and its relation to still imagery, experimental cinema, and technology. The interview is one of a series of online-only texts commissioned to accompany the Spring 2013 issue, “Hello, Photography,” which examines the state of the medium in a time of great change. —The Editors



Owen Kydd, Excerpt from Canvas Leaves, Torso, and Lantern, 2011, video on forty-inch display screen

**APerture:** How did you arrive at the concept of “durational photographs”?

**Owen Kydd:** I was thinking about the differences between cinematic moments with photographic qualities and static images with time added and decided that “durational” applied more to the latter. The idea of duration as “incomplete time” seemed to be a way of categorizing a flow of pictures without relying on models drawn from cinematic discourse. It was not a direct challenge to the definition of cinema—my work would likely fall into a strict definition of that category—but a way of proposing the possibility of undoing the time signature of the photograph. Whether a snapshot or a tableau, a photograph denotes the flow of time by its very lack of duration. It reveals the possibility of two types of time, one that is frozen and one that is always mobile. I am trying to reverse the typical effect of the still photograph, to ask people to think about creating stillness out of duration. It’s a performance of photography that I don’t think occurs so readily in the narrative activity of cinema.

**AP:** Photography’s evolution has always been determined by technology and your work reflects the fact that many cameras can now shoot both stills and video.

**OK:** That’s exactly it. I started making this work in 2006, when still cameras began to include decent video options. It seems so normal now, but I think when we look back at this development it will be seen not only as a democratization of filmmaking, but also as a considerable marker in the history of still images. In addition to these hybrid cameras, flat screens with resolution that made video look photographic became affordable. Before this people had to rely on projectors, which meant a darkened room, and, even in the gallery space, that’s cinema. It was really in about 2005 or 2006 that technology allowed duration to be a constant variable. I was hoping my project would retroactively define certain conditions of still photographs while actively reversing the absolute time of the photograph.

**AP:** Can you talk more about what you wanted to explore about “the conditions of still photographs”?

**OK:** I was looking for a set of “static” conditions that would make something look like it was in the middle of being photographed, even when in motion. That’s a difficult effect to categorize, and I decided that instead of directly trying to reproduce a set of photographic circumstances, I should start by confronting things that I found limiting in photography. I guessed that I might find this in some of the clichés of the medium; for example, I started with straight or documentary photographs because they were problematic for me as still images. I wanted to know if adding

time could allow me to avoid some classic presumptions associated with the documentary form yet still make good pictures. I was asking questions: if the subject of a photograph moves, can I say I've captured something decisive? And if not, can I create an image that continues to hold this type of charged moment?



Owen Kydd, Excerpt from Two-Way Polyester Flowers (For L.B.), 2012, video on forty-inch display screen

**AP:** What was problematic to you about documentary images?

**OK:** It's a big category and difficult to define, but I could say that certain photographs which claim to report the real have always had difficulties on some level. But luckily all photographs contain cells that eventually disrupt the certainties that were originally ascribed to them. I wondered if I could accelerate this process by changing the temporal status of the image enough to create a tension, or distance, between subject and viewer that would make us think about documenting in a more fluid form. The snapshot street image seemed like a good place to start because it is understood as the most instantaneous type of photograph.

**AP:** But many of your works are well-planned still lifes, not snapshots taken on the street. How does duration relate to the still life form?

**OK:** There were instances I felt like I was creating a camera-based “street” picture without a decisive moment, where I found a version of stillness that expressed an event. But there were other times when I felt duration trapped the subject in a succession of static moments that mimicked a more traditional search for the “essential” and did little to create the tension I was seeking. Ultimately though, I was learning about what made durational photographs work—different things that resisted the need to close the shutter just once. These were found in subtle temporal and atmospheric effects such as the movement of air and light, or materials and surfaces I was using—plastics, inorganic reflective surfaces, objects that had a trompe l’oeil or ambiguous appearance on the video screen. I brought back a collection of these elements to the studio to be assembled and filmed.

The most important thing for me, aside from the instrumental control that a studio offers, is the way it introduces a present tense. The studio erases temporal markers. I wanted to record the present-ness of the studio, possibly to ensure that there was even less chance of interning an event, but perhaps also to confuse the experience of viewing. I have been asked if my studio images are live feeds from another location, which I hope is a clue that something irregular is occurring.

**AP:** There is a sense of “crime scene” in some of the images—the atmosphere, the sense of oddity ...

**OK:** I am both documenting and remaking storefronts from Los Angeles as a way of performing classic photographic subject matter; storefronts have been a consistent subject for wandering photographers like Atget, Walker Evans, or Lee Friedlander. I found window displays on Pico Boulevard that clearly hadn’t changed in years and that were lit all night, which is mostly when I filmed them, without pedestrians and only the traces of headlights in the glass. It wasn’t quite clear what many of the stores were selling—a florist selling party supplies and trophies, for example, and stores with the word “museum” in their name. Maybe it’s also the imagined history of L.A., but instead of Atget-like scenes, these locations took on a noir effect, meaning they still felt like the crime hadn’t been committed. A key to noir is the separation of subjects from the world around them through the contrast of light and dark, and this contrast helps create sense of distance in the picture, providing a tableaux effect.



Owen Kydd, installation view of *Color Shift*, 2013, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.

**AP:** In terms of the concentrated looking and observation involved in your durational photographs, I'm wondering about how experimental filmmakers—people such as Michael Snow, Peter Hutton, or Andy Warhol—have been a point of reference for you.

**OK:** I am in debt to expanded cinema and works like *Empire*, *Wavelength*, or James Benning's films, and the last eight minutes of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'eclisse*, for making moving images appear as if they contain still photographic moments. But with most of those films, the viewer is always located in the same space as the work; there is a projector behind you, and a beam of light that situates you physically within the process of forming the image on the wall in front of you. And I should make the point here that even if you are able to watch these films on an LED screen today, they were initially constructed for projection in a darkened room. I chose flatness as a parameter in my work, and am thus bound to a form of picturing. Fiona Tan's monitor portraits and David Claerbout's slide shows, even though they are mostly projected, operate in a similar field. Essentially, I think that if the photographic instant has been aligned with the conditions of modernist pictorial space, then its inverse performance should share similar concerns with surface, distance, and time.