

## *The Work of Mark Neville- Deep Surfaces*

By David Company

The wish to know and possess the surface of the world was satisfied and frustrated by the coming of the photographic image. First of all there was the rich detail of carefully made photographs, focused by precise lenses. Then came the moving photographic image (cinema). This in turn drove still photography to exploit the instantaneous snapshot. Moving or still, appearances could be scrutinised like never before. But the promise of photography and cinema was soon undermined by the collapse of faith in appearances. Modern life got the images of itself it thought it wanted but the sheer amount of visual data threatened to overwhelm the powers of interpretation. Surfaces came to be seen as enigmas. Appearance, presented by the camera so easily, so automatically, could either be subjected to the hard work of judgment or left to become a spectacular distraction from knowledge.

Mark Neville's *Jump Films* and *Port Glasgow* project may seem at first to have little in common. The *Jump Films* are super-slow-motion studies of fleeting events. *Port Glasgow* is the result of a year long study of a town in still images. However both are attempts to think about what we expect - or what we *can* expect - from the photographic surface of things.

In one of his *Jump* films Neville restages the artist Bas Jan Ader's film *Fall II* (1970) in which the Dutchman on his bicycle veered headlong into a canal. The threadbare casualness of the hand held camerawork expressed Ader's threadbare art and his view of the fragility of life in general. But *Fall* was a slightly misleading title. His film was not a verité documentary, although it has that look. It was a self-conscious performance. Strictly speaking, one cannot *choose* to fall. By contrast Neville's approach appears to be more straightforward. He *jumps* into the canal, in front of a high speed camera. On film an event that lasted just a few seconds unfolds before the viewer over five minutes. What we see is not the science laboratory or the contrivance of the Hollywood studio, where this kind of camera is usually deployed. This is five seconds of everyday life in Amsterdam. People walk by on the bridge from which Neville jumps. A bus creeps into shot. Neville's jump is minimal - he seems simply to let himself drop into the water. His descent is so slow the viewer may find themselves caught between wanting the film to speed up and wanting it to freeze into the still frame it almost is.

Neville's film is *too much* of a record. The slow-motion atomizes time to such an extent that it becomes something more and something less than the jump it records. For all that detail, for all that information, something escapes. The promise that the camera will offer up what Walter Benjamin called the 'optical unconscious' of things melts away. Certainly the veil of appearance is pulled back but what we get is not raw inner life but

the tantalising veil itself. This extreme slow motion is not just an abstraction from the speed of everyday life. It is an abstraction from the speed of everyday *thought*. No doubt Neville's mind is racing as he jumps (perhaps it is racing as fast as the film is hurtling through the camera) yet all we see is a slow, contemplative image. As he jumps Neville appears before us but he is beyond us too, on the other side of a rupture in time. Do this and his other *Jump Films* offer us a basis for understanding something or a substitute for it? Like the artist himself, the question hangs in the air.

*Port Glasgow* (2005) takes the idea of photographic surface in a more obviously social direction. Neville's starting point here is the potential and the problems of the documentary mode. The medium's early promise to tell us something about the lives of others became tarnished over time. Documentary virtually congealed into naïve cliché, voyeurism and formulaic exploitation of its subjects. Too often it was made to fit into the demands of consumer capitalism. At an extreme it turned into the compromised form of the expensive coffee table book. Glossy pictures of unfreedom.

Receiving a public arts commission, Neville spent a year photographing in *Port Glasgow*, Scotland. It is the kind of working class town beloved of traditional documentarists. The images he made move between familiar observational shots of the environment and highly theatrical, cinematographic stagings. As well as shooting alone the artist collaborated with people of the town and invited their active participation. Regular exhibitions and workshops were held during the year for the townspeople. Neville is not unique in this turn to a more reflexive, performative approach to documentary. Indeed this has been at the heart of many of the more radical attempts to reinvent the practice.

Neville's project *is* unique in the way in which it was returned directly and exclusively to the town. The artist's aim from the outset was to make a high production, full-colour hardback book. At first glance it resembles many other documentary books to be found in gallery shops and highstreet stores. But this publication was never intended for sale. Nearly 8,000 copies were delivered free of charge to every household in Port Glasgow. A gift of sorts, the book subverted the usual ways in which documentary is circulated and consumed. More to the point Neville tackled head on the challenge of making his own interpretation available to those he interpreted. So often documentarists play mere lip-service to this ethical demand. Neville made it the whole point of the project.

The town's reaction to the book was mixed, ranging from warm welcome and curiosity to hostility and accusations of bias. The response reflected the diversity of opinions and attitudes in a town that may look quite homogenous from outside. More to the point any audience from outside who sees the project (in exhibitions, artist's talks, publicity) faces the fact of knowing this work was not made for them. The outsider position is

not the privileged view here, as it so often is in documentary. It is given as a secondary position with all the complexities that entails.

As with his *Jump* films, Neville's *Port Glasgow* dramatises the abyss between seeing and knowing. But this is not *mere* drama, or spectacle, or even self-reflexivity for its own ends. There is much more at stake here. In film and photography the lens that comes between viewer and viewed is also the lens that makes the image possible. It connects *and* separates at once. It is not that the optical image can be objective or subjective - like a 'window on the world' or a 'mirror of the image maker'. Much more radically, it collapses the distinction between the two. That collapse is Mark Neville's subject matter. It is the common thread that unites his diverse projects.

David Campany's *'Art and Photography'* ( Phaidon Press 2003) surveys the major presence of photography in Artistic practice from the 1960's onwards. His current book *'Photography at the Cinema'* ( Phaidon Press) examines the dialogues between photography and cinema across the 20th century.