

ATLAS

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153 – John Houck, an Atlas Discussion

By: atlasnewsletter
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John Houck is an artist that I came to know through two different works, *History of Graph Paper* (shown at the Jewish Museum) and *Portrait Landscape* (shown at Hauser & Wirth). *Portrait Landscape* featured scenes cut from the film *Blow Up*, which I wrote about here at Atlas. Though I had seen the work and the name before, these pieces struck a chord. I have a love of process-based art and both works have a verifiable kernel of curiosity at their core. I have long had the persistent need to understand how something works and Houck's pieces made me question their materials and the source. Somewhere in that questioning, I noticed I had become a fan. Since I have the luxury of writing for myself, I can divulge my bias and pick favorites out in the open.

I had the good fortune to meet John during this interview, though our exchange was conducted via email over several months. John's work was recently shown in *Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015* at MoMA. On Stellar Rays in New York will show Houck's newest work from April 10th to May 22nd. The show is entitled *Playing and Reality*.



JB: How did *Portrait Landscape* (and I hope subsequent series) come into being? Aside from the work at Kansas in 2012, is this the first video you have presented?

JH: Good memory regarding the Kansas video. That is the only other time I've shown a video. I feel the video that was just at Hauser & Wirth, *Portrait Landscape*, is my first video. It stands on its own, whereas the piece at Kansas was a short loop and really made in relation to the other works in that show.

The idea for *Portrait Landscape* came together after reading Ben Lerner's recent book *10:04*. One of the many things that book got me thinking about was the intimacy of a parallel gaze. Like when you are at a museum show with a friend and both of your gazes are mostly parallel and focused on the works, but there is also this tremendous excitement about your friend and your shared experience with them. This led me to the idea of making a video where you would only see the back of the actors' heads and be looking at the film from their perspective. I wanted to take a film or series of films and cut out every scene in the film where there was a face visible from the front or in profile. You would experience the film as if looking over the actor's shoulder, no gaze would be returned to you, and there would be a lot of interstitial shots with no people in them.

I used to work as a software engineer and I studied computer science, so I wrote a bit of software to take a video and used a facial recognition library to auto-edit the film based on certain criteria. Initially, I tried the software on movie trailers, some commercials, and a few films. I used the software to get rid of any scene where the software recognized a face from a frontal or profile view. This produced some interesting results, but something I didn't expect in this process was the way the software misrecognized faces.

JB: Your process for the conception of the video seems to include a great deal of experimentation. Leaving process aside for the moment, I would like to talk about how are your images created. In my mind, the experimentation you describe in the making of *Portrait Landscape* has some distinct parallels to how you construct your photographic images. How do you see their connection (if you do at all)?



JH: Yes, I agree. I have been including more drawing and gesture in the recent *History of Graph paper* pieces and the misrecognized faces in *Portrait Landscape* fit well with this direction. There is a wide range of faces the software finds in the film, from cartoon-like to photographic. There is one face revealed in a tree that could be straight out of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

Like the *Aggregates*, *Portrait Landscape* is about creating photographs within a combinatorial universe. In each case, the software works combination by combination or frame by frame. All the possibilities within a system are revealed and my software is a step in making the photographs. It's an iterative, collage-like approach where photography is the glue holding it all together.

JB: On the process side, how much of a role does R&D play your work?

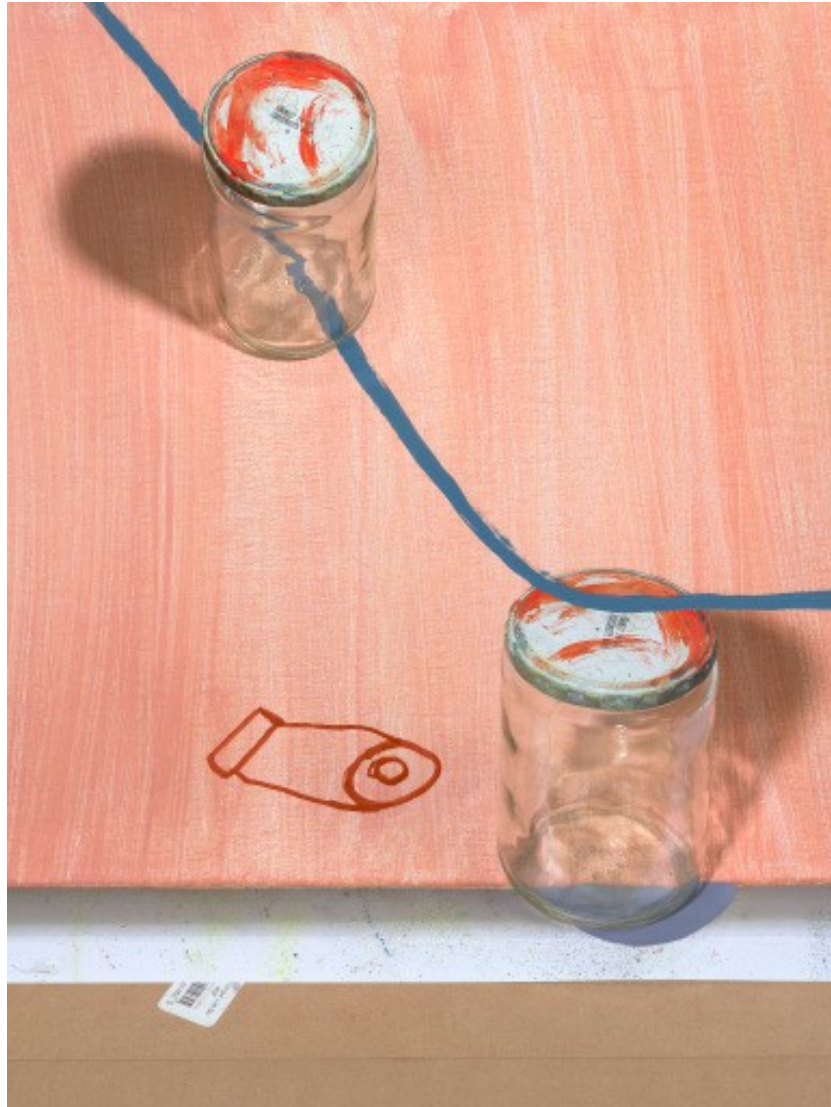
JH: I suppose software is the primary object of my R&D. Like any relationship though, there should be boundaries, and I'm cautious not to get lost in the immersive world of coding. When I wrote the software to generate my *Aggregates* series I would only code for a few hours a week. An important lesson I learned in graduate school was to write simple programs and then alter their physical output. In the case of the *Aggregates*, I started to fold them. The simple sketch like software that I write creates much more interesting results because so much happens in the translation from the digital to the physical. If I get too invested in the software, I merely end up with software and nothing creative comes out of that. This interruption of the digital ground has been a preoccupation of mine for some time. But lately, research without the development is much more important to me. For now, I'm quite taken with reading poetry and this type of research is what I'm more focused on. Software isn't going anywhere.

JB: I would not immediately assume poetry as a source for your work. Is this a possible digression or is it something you have done often? Would you tell me what poetry you are reading and how/ if you feel it is making it's way into your process or your work?

JH: I don't see it as a digression, but rather a way to balance, maybe even counter my experience writing software. Coding involves precision and formal languages; there is always a right answer. When writing software, you can see the cause and effect of what you are doing immediately. It either works or it doesn't and there is a real comfort in knowing there is an answer. Poetry and art on the other hand involve natural language and there isn't necessarily a definitive answer or even a correct one. I'm not sure how it shows up in my work, but like free association in analysis, it's a way to be surprised by one's own thoughts and a way to sit with a range of emotions. I have yet to shed a tear after writing a line of code, but reading poetry throws the door open to emotion.

JB: Is there something you have already created, aside from the *Portrait Landscape* video, that refers back to a research phase like you are currently having with poetry?

JH: The first time I showed *Portrait Landscape* in a gallery, to my surprise, people laughed out loud as they watched it. I didn't think of it as a funny piece initially, but I'm starting to realize that listening to comedy podcasts and going to see stand up comedy has been a kind of unconscious research. My interest in comedy has built over the last several years, but I didn't set out to explore comedy in my work. It's a welcome surprise that it is another interest that is now bundled into my work. The things I research or intend to put into my work often pale in comparison to the unconscious things that emerge by just showing up to the studio and setting to work.



JB: I do love that instinctual reaction in the presentation of video and film. People will simply react, and then spend time considering after the work. Regarding this unconscious reaction, the new show is called *Playing and Reality*. Can you tell me a bit about the way play enters into the show and the newest work?

JH: The title of the show is taken from a book of the same name by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. Winnicott says that we can only know our true selves through play, and that being able to surprise oneself is a sign of health. Before I read Winnicott's book, *Playing and Reality*, I had noticed that in the studio I was being much more playful. I was allowing myself the space to create nonsense. I didn't have to have an intellectual idea before making. I believe this playfulness largely comes out of being in analysis for many years. Coming from the hyper-rational world of software and the intensely intellectual space of the Whitney ISP, play didn't exactly come naturally to me. Reading *Playing and Reality* had a tremendous impact on me. My early work with the *Aggregates* was quite systematic and the fold was perhaps a marker of play. Now I like to imagine that the fold of the *Aggregates* has transformed into drawing and painting. I have always drawn and painted, but this is a landmark show for me in that it's the first time I have shown any painting or drawing. To go back to the

title of the show, the painting is the play and it's within the context of the reality of the photograph. I don't make any universal claims that painting is inherently more playful, but for me, in this moment, it is; and the combination of painting within the space of my layered, rephotographed photos has lead to a good many surprises. Of course, like creativity, play can't be willed, all you can do is show up and set forth.



JB: I appreciate this sense of play throughout the work in *Playing and Reality*, and I think during these past months the themes of poetry, comedy and inconclusive results have all been touched on in our conversation.

Many interviews like this would ask what is next, but I feel like asking that if you consider what came first, would you have ever imagined this progression 5 or 10 years ago?

JH: No, I never imagined this would be my life. I grew up working class and didn't visit an art museum until I was twenty three. I was fortunate that the first museum show that I saw was a stunning *Nam June Paik* exhibition at the Guggenheim. That show changed the course of my life; I knew immediately that the art world was a place I wanted to be a part of, but figuring out how to do that proved to be a very long process. Ten years ago I had quit my rather secure software job and was making the difficult transition to graduate school. I was a much more reserved, careful, and rational person a decade ago. I think part of why I initially started seeing an analyst was because I felt my life was so controlled and repetitive. Thankfully I feel much more playful and spontaneous and I have art and a couple of good therapists to thank for that.

-Jeff Bergman in conversation with John Houck
April 2016 (This conversation took place in 2015 and 2016)

For additional information on John Houck and his recent show I recommend the conversation that he had with Charlie Schultz and the Brooklyn Rail (Published April 2016)