

The Image:

invention

exploration

perception



In this talk I will discuss the photographic image by reference to my work and that of other photographers, under 3 headings suggested to me in an essay of Walter Benjamin's, entitled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936)

The topics are: Invention, Exploration, Perception.

1. Invention: I suggest that it is characteristic of photography that the creation of images involves invention, both technical and visual, to create an image that is perceived as 'real'.
2. Exploration: It is also characteristic of photography that it enables exploration of places and subjects otherwise either inaccessible or ignored, including non-material aspects of mundane reality.
3. Perception: I conclude that the 'reality' of a photograph lies not in its faithfulness as a record of the external world, but rather its truthfulness to the inner world of our unconscious.



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Jim Kramer
'High Speed Water
Droplets'

“By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on **hidden details** of familiar objects, by **exploring common place milieus** under the **ingenious guidance** of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of **an immense and unexpected field of action**. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories . . .”

“. . . the **camera intervenes** with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. **The camera introduces us to unconscious optics** as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.”

Walter Benjamin (1936) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'

Invention



Very soon after the photograph was invented (around 1839), photographers discovered that they could create illusions.

People tended to believe these photographs because they thought that photographs were an authentic depiction of reality.

They did not realize that the image could be manipulated either during or after it was taken.

Victorian 'spirit photograph';
Photographer unknown



In cinematography, Georges Méliès used the illusionistic possibilities of the photograph to invent the first 'special effects' in the early 1900s.



Star Wars

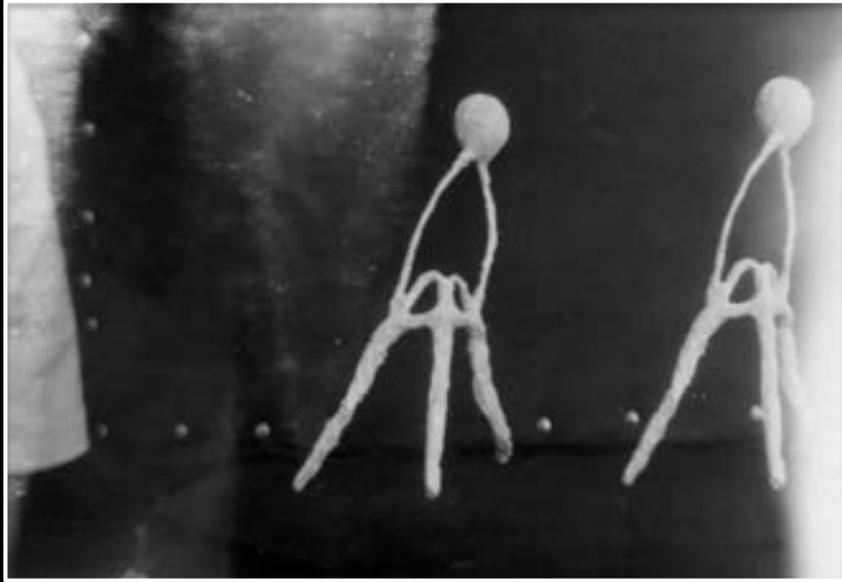
We now take these effects for granted in movies, but for some reason expect art photographs to be 'authentic'.



Jeff Wall, 'A sudden gust of wind' 1993 (after Hokusai)

A contemporary photographer who is prepared to manipulate images is Jeff Wall. About this image he commented: "I just worked hard on it and tried to compose. There is no guide, it's just a feeling, **a sense of the real, how things really are or would be.**"

Photographic experiments c1970



Double exposure

When I first began taking photographs at around 14 years of age, I was interested in the illusionistic 'tricks' of photography.



Time exposure



I was also interested in visual tricks created at the time the photograph is taken.

In this image I have photographed a second sculpture through an opening in the first sculpture; I have also tried to include a moving car.

'Trick' photograph
(Inge King sculpture) c1970



Web image

**A 'trick'
photograph**

At the time (the 1960s – 1970s) magazines were full of instructions on making trick photographs.



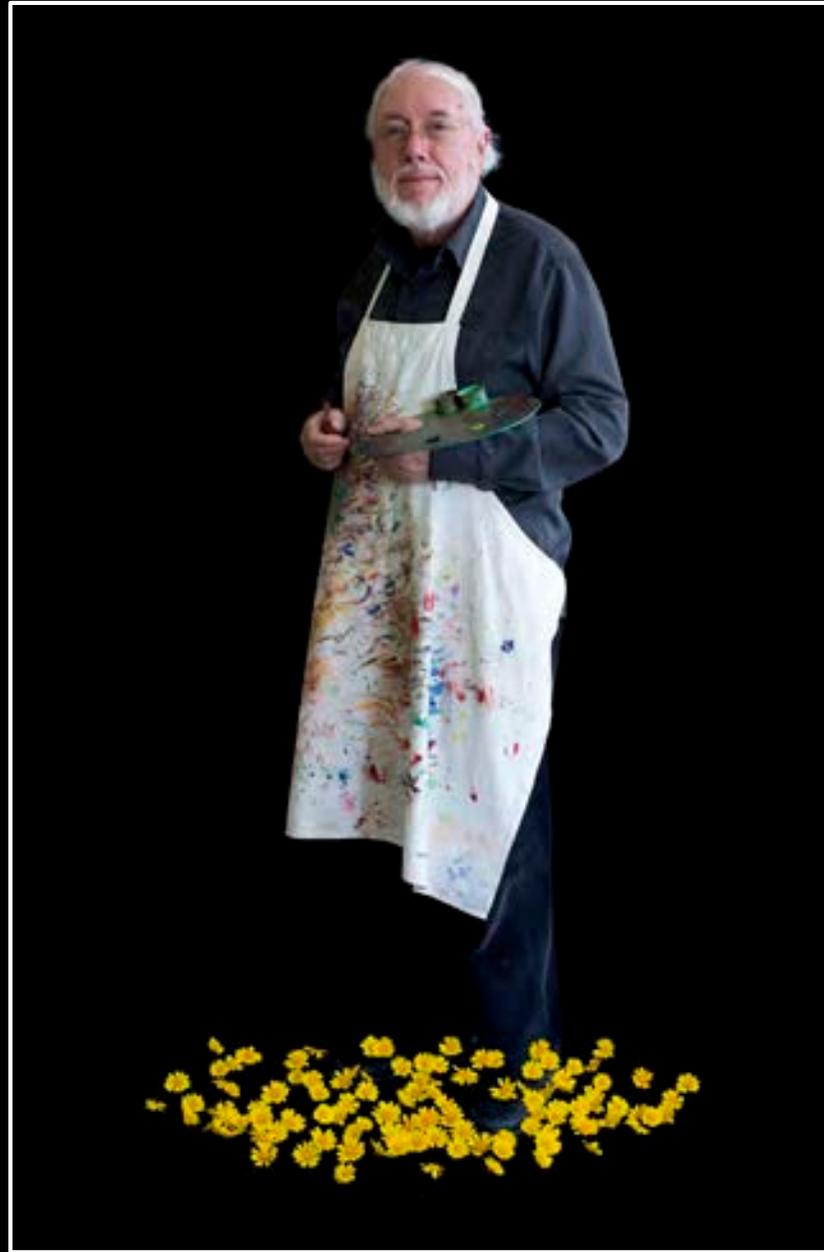
Jacques-Henri Lartigue

Remembering Benjamin's essay, the camera **intervenes** (in our perception of 'reality') through its **ingenious guidance**: that is, its technical possibilities that allow us to see what we normally could not.

The result, as stated by Jeff Wall, is a composition that has a 'reality' of its own.

So the image has an 'authenticity' to itself.

Derek, 2014





Stone Tree
2014



Abandoned unfinished house, Athienou
2014

Exploration

Eugène Atget: *Hotel de
Sens, rue de l'Hôtel de Ville,
Paris, early 1900s*



In the 20th century, photographers became fascinated by the camera as a tool to record social conditions and changes.



Walker Evans
Houses and Billboards,
Atlanta, 1936

“Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories (become an) unexpected field of action” Benjamin



Often, these 'documentary' photographs have a surreal quality, hinting at a mystery that lies beneath the mundane everyday.

O. Winston Link, Hotshot Eastbound, 1956



Jeff Wall
An Octopus, 1990



Jeff Wall
Some Beans, 1990

Jeff Wall is a contemporary photographer who realizes that an apparently mundane image can seem mysterious and unsettling.



Washing, Hobart
1974

When I began to take photographs 'seriously' at around 18 years of age, I too was interested in the 'strangeness' of everyday things.



I found that light and reflection can be used to make an ordinary scene 'special'.

Street after rain, Hobart, 1974



As can color and pattern.

Apple Boxes, Bacchus Marsh, 1978

The camera opens up our eyes to a vast range of new subject matter that had been 'missed' before.

This includes things that might otherwise seem 'ordinary'.

Whilst this photography was often interpreted as social documentation, in fact it was almost always contrived and influenced by movements like surrealism, searching for meaning beneath the mundane.

Henri Cartier-Bresson
Behind the Gare St. Lazare, Paris. 1932





Forgotten Coffee,
Karpas Peninsula, 2013



Bathers, Larnaca
2014

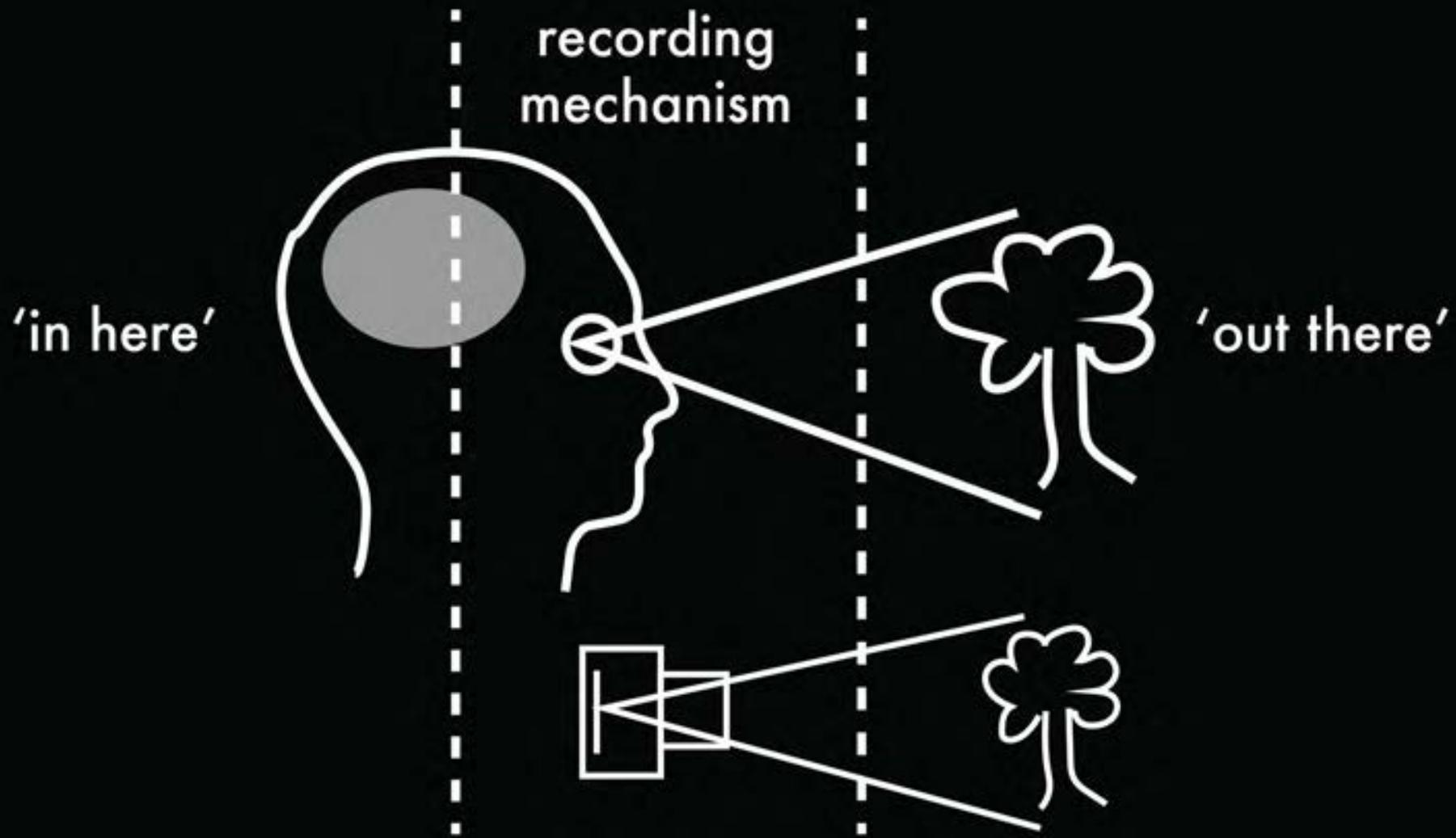


Old cinema, Larnaca,
2013

1. An artwork creates its own reality. Any technique used to create this effect is 'OK'. Photography is no different to any other art form in this respect.

2. The reality expressed in a photograph may also refer to aspects of reality that lie 'beneath' or hidden within the seemingly ordinary reality that surrounds us.

Perception



a basic model of of visual (photographic) perception

photographer



camera

subject

Raphaël Labbé

Following the lead of the earlier social documentary photographers, in the mid – late 20th century some photographers explored the visual complexity of the ‘social landscape’



Lee Friedlander
c1960 - 70s



Gary Winogrand c1980s

These images, which may seem simple, are very complex in the way that the the image is constructed.

Echoing Benjamin, John Szarkowski wrote of this type of photography:
“Photographers . . . Shoot from above, below, the back, close up, changing orders of importance or obscuring the subject etc. This revealed a richer and more complex world. These images revealed **both the clarity and obscurity of things.**”

John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's eye*, 1966.



Lee Friedlander, c2000



Around 8 years ago, I began to take photographs in this genre.

'Stop', Frankston, 2008



'Sub-marine', Melbourne 2009



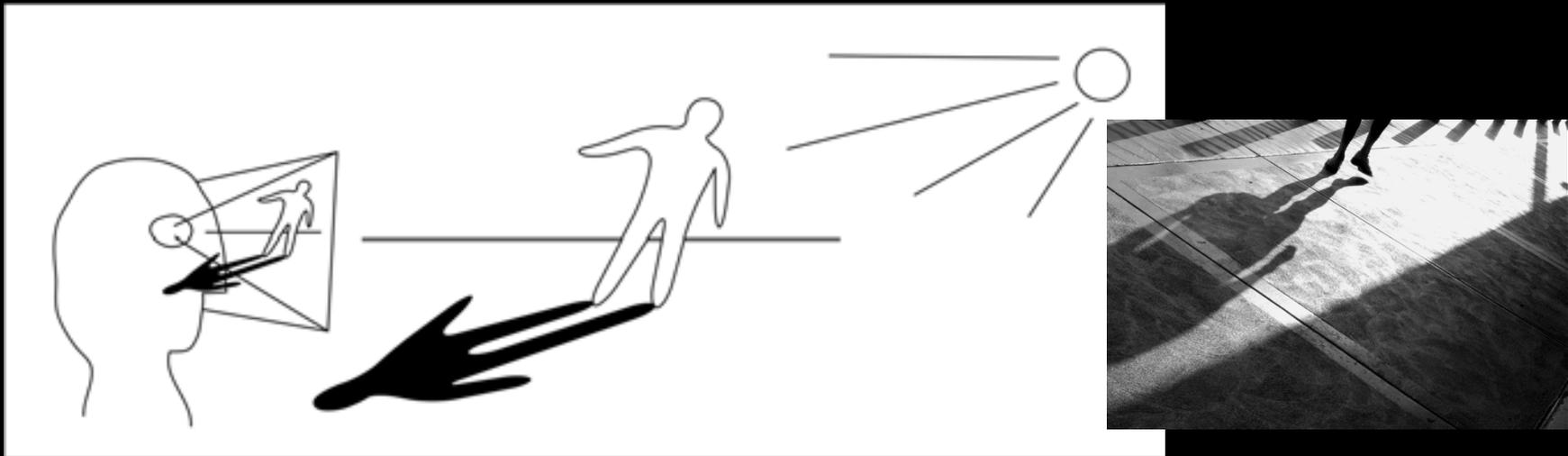
Sidewalk, Seaford, 2009

In my photography, the social document or *flaneur* aspect is less important than the visual composition and effect.

Photographer location

Subject location,
motion

Sun location



Picture framing,
angle, timing etc

Location selection,
Subject selection

Time of day,
season

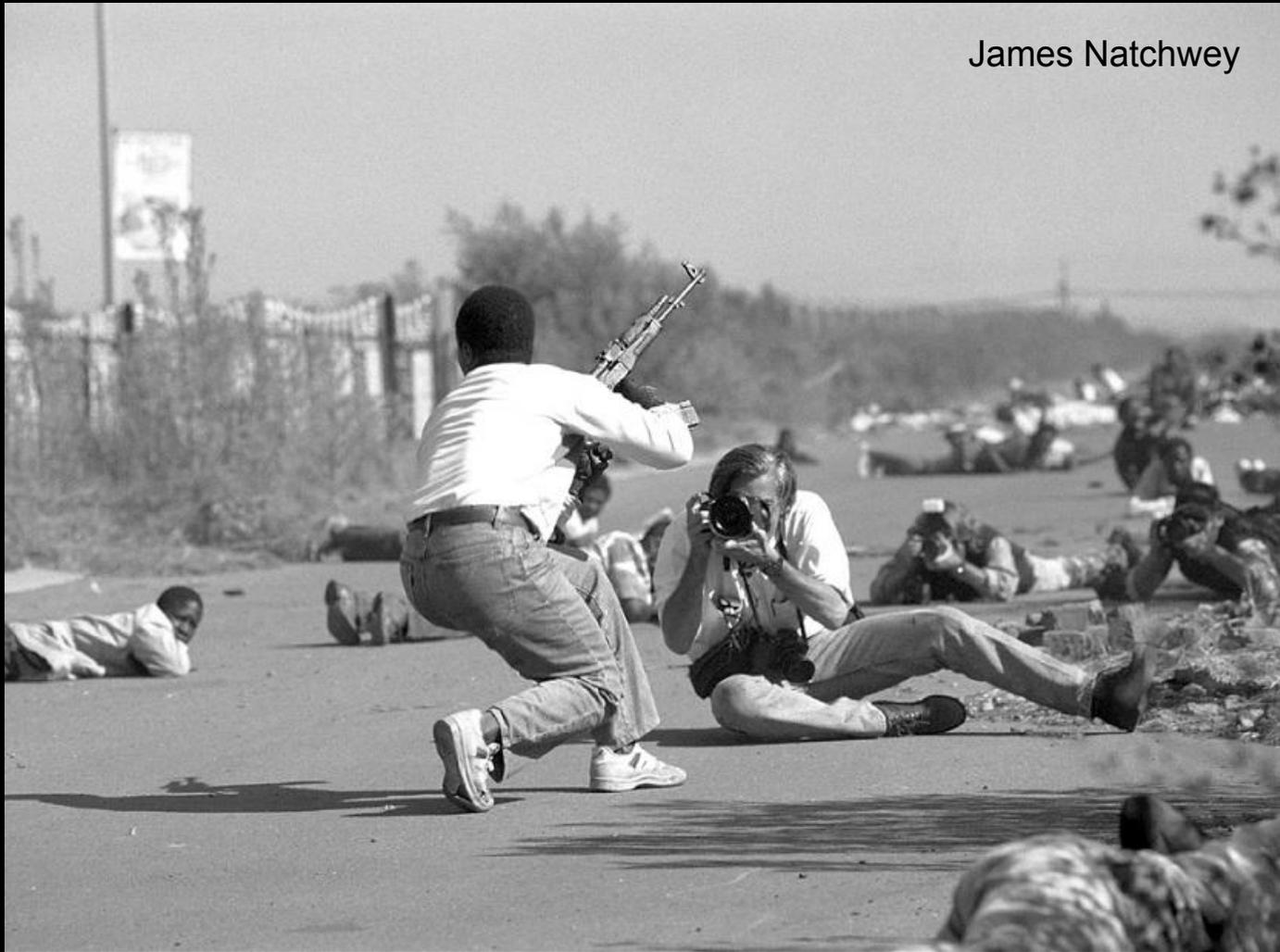
There are a lot of variables being juggled in taking this kind of photo.

This photography is influenced by Existentialism: externally focused, it sees the viewer ('us') as material beings in a material world whose physical facts we can record, but not necessarily understand. We have a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world. I will call it 'Existential Perception'.



Existential Perception

James Natchwey



In existential image making, the photographer is an isolated figure, trying to make sense of the confusing reality in which he/she is immersed. It is about surface facts.



'Angel', Melbourne 2009

Around 2010 I started to include reflections
in my photographs.



I began to photograph figures reflected in artworks in galleries.



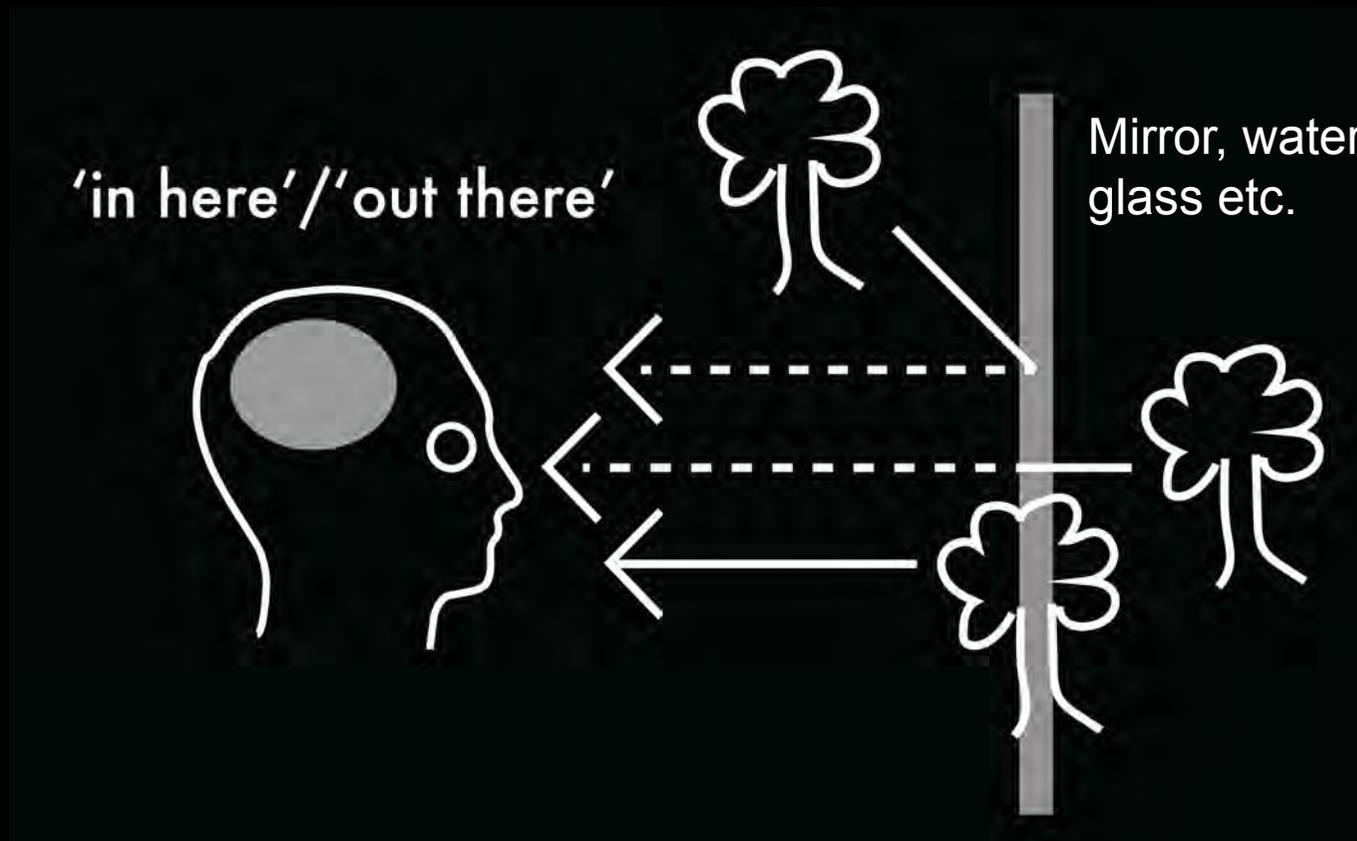
Or nature reflected in water, like this image of leaves and sky in a Japanese temple garden.

Temple Pool Reflection, Tokyo, 2011



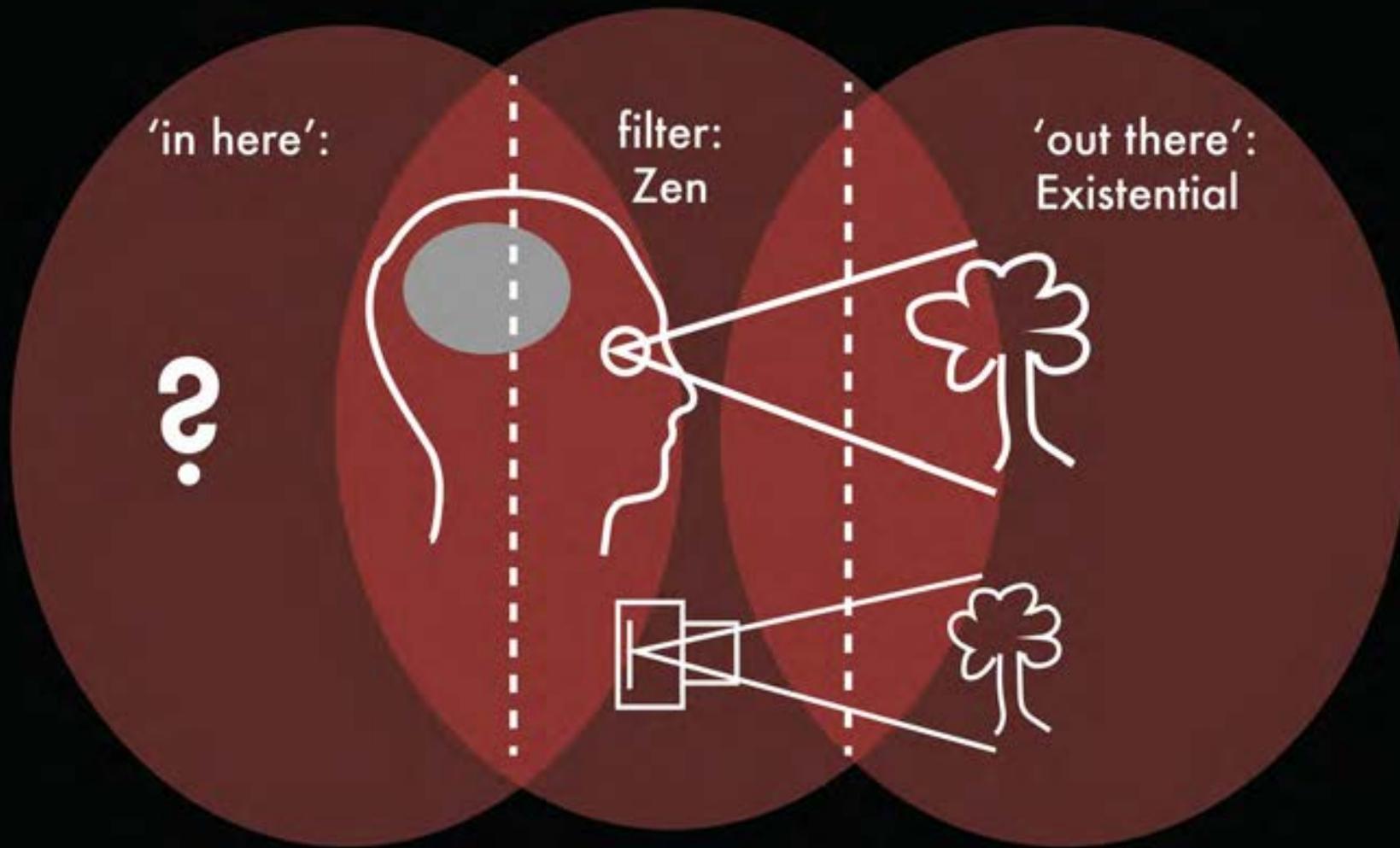
'Aquarium' (after Elli Lestas)
2014

This recent work, which raised a lot of discussion on Facebook, is in this genre.

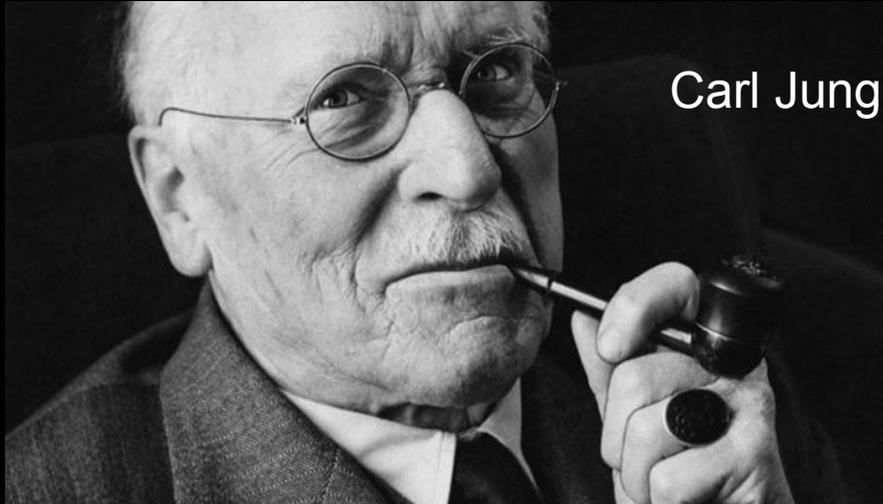


I was seeing 'reality' as something that was filtered and layered by our perceptions. I will call this 'Illusionistic perception'.

These works relate to my practice of Zen meditation. In Zen Buddhism, as in Buddhism generally, reality is understood to be an illusion of the mind, or at least it is a reality that has been distorted by our ignorance.



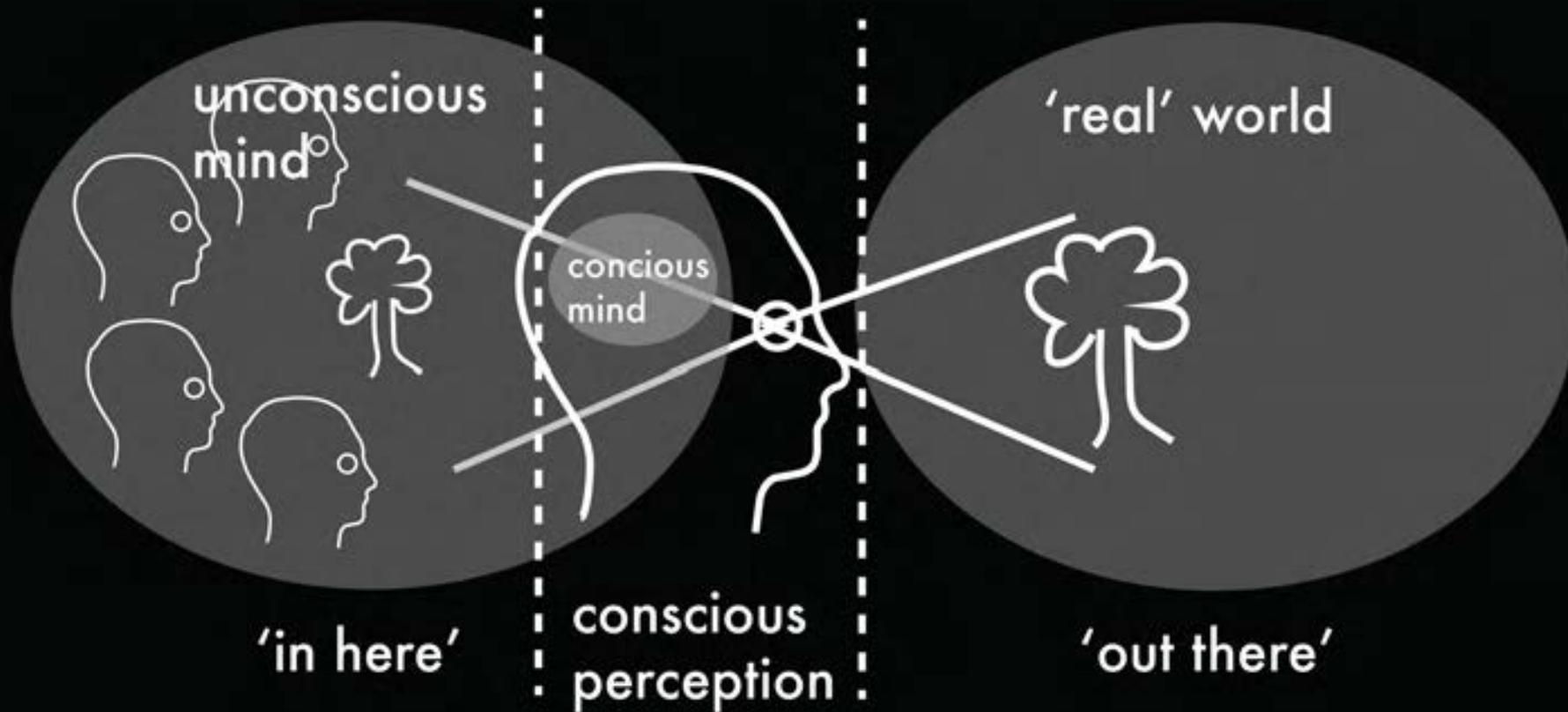
If Existential perception is focused on the external world, and Zen perception is about the filtering effects of the eye/mind, the 'elephant in the room' is the role of our inner life in perception.



Around 2 years ago, I began a course of 'Depth Psychology': a guided exploration of the contents of my unconscious.

Carl Jung was a Swiss psychologist who developed a very complete description of the human psyche. His description includes both the material and spiritual aspects of human nature. According to Jung, the human being is oriented in two contrasting directions: to the outer world of people and things, and to an inner world that includes our personal experiences and memories, as well as deeper knowledge that is universal and timeless.

Jung's description of the human psyche suggests that the unconscious has a huge and largely hidden role in how we perceive the world.



According to Jung, the contents of the unconscious are expressed to us consciously as **symbols**.

These include images of fundamental psychic structures called **archetypes**.

Light and dark is another symbolic language used by the unconscious to communicate with the conscious mind.

The unconscious communicates most explicitly in **dreams and visions**, which are frequently paradoxical

Religious art is a well known for its use of archetypal images and symbolic lighting.
Byzantine church, Chloraka, 2013

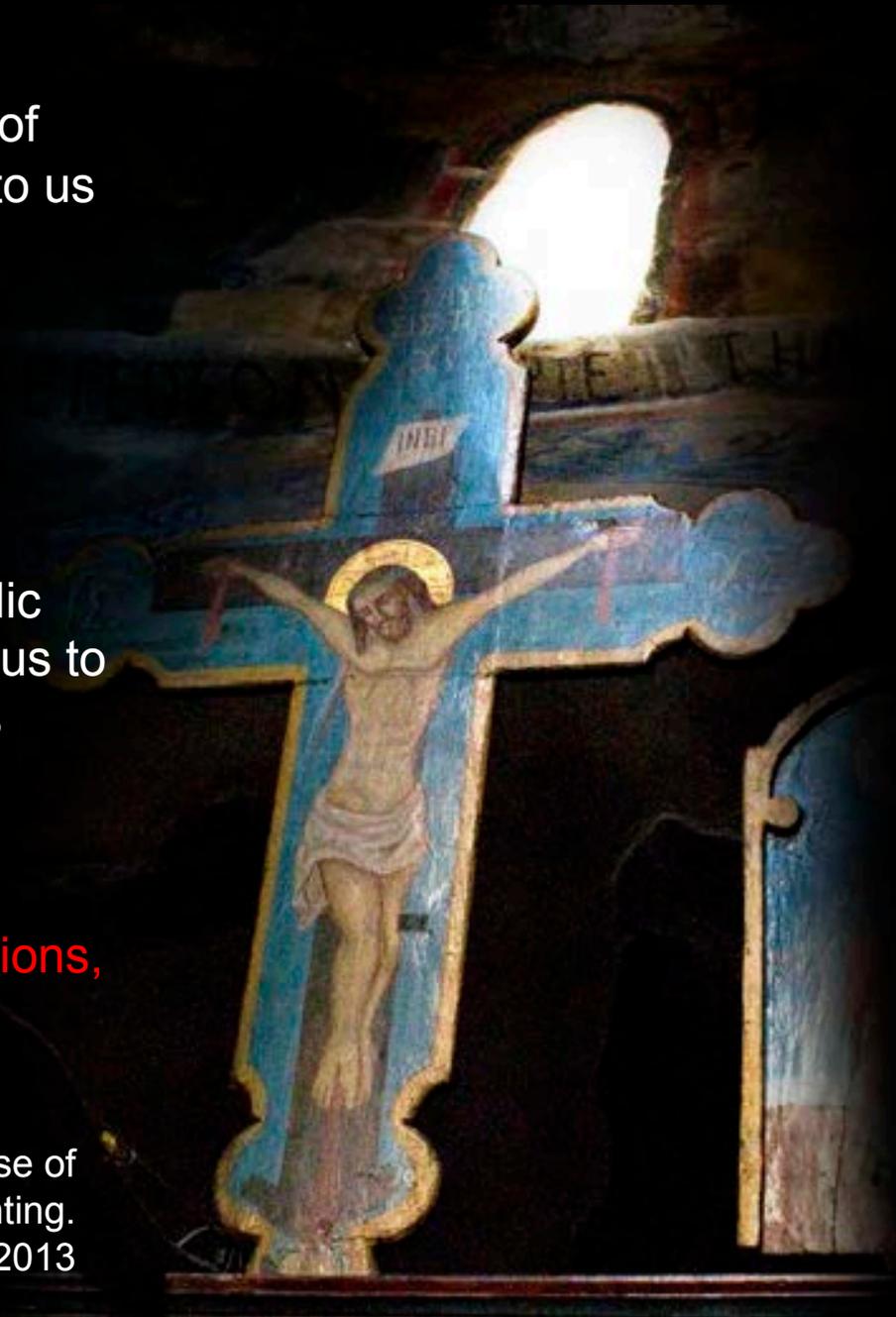




Image of an Angel



Image of a journey from darkness to light

Seeing the symbolic language of the unconscious in photographs helps to explain the secret power of these images.

Archetypal symbols



Derek Henry uses symbolic imagery in this painting which includes the 'green man': an archetype of man-in-nature.



Pete Bird's works include shamanic figures, who may represent psychic archetypes.



I have used archetypal images in sculptures.

Adam and Eve in the Garden, 2014

Light and Dark

'Symbolist' photographers of the early 20th century exploited the symbolic qualities of light – drawing inspiration from painting.

However this approach became unpopular, being seen as too pictorial and inauthentic.

Edward Steichen, Portrait
photograph of August Rodin,
1902





Despite this, today's fashion photographers have no qualms about using a variety of symbolic devices including lighting.

Bill Henson is a contemporary photographer who makes powerful use of the symbolic qualities of dark and light.



Bill Henson, 2000/2001/2002
Untitled



I used light and dark expressively and symbolically in some early photographs.

Church, Spain, 1978



Jeff Wall, 'Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)', 1992

The imagery of the unconscious is paradoxical. Canadian photographer Jeff Wall has re-created dream imagery in some of his works.



In this 'dream',
dead, disfigured
soldiers talk to
each other.

Jeff Wall, 'Dead
Troops Talk',
Detail

3. What is 'hidden' in a powerful image is its archetypal content: the symbols that connect us to deep levels in our unconscious.

It is in the unconscious that the significance of an image is determined. If the outer event is reflected by knowledge 'in our soul', the image will be deemed 'real'.



An archetypal image: the fairytale prince and princess.



Between the Dark and the Light,
Cyprus 2014

I am still exploring the symbolic qualities of light.



'Sun shines on the vagrant', Kyrenia, 2013



'Light conquers Dark (almost)', Larnaca, 2014



And beginning to experiment with
'fantastic' or dream imagery

'View from the bunker', near
Koufinou, 2014

The End