

Simon Obarzanek – Untitled Movement
Natalie King

I started to notice movements of people in the streets. Projects find me. This one was no different. I sensed a universal language through these physical movements. I looked closer at peoples' movements rather than their faces as I had in the past. On several occasions I walked into the city (Melbourne) and just watched people push through the space around them. Sometimes I took photographs of them to remind me of what I had seen. The strained movements against gravity struck me with force. I felt more connected to these than the lighter, fluid movements.

Simon Obarzanek

Simon Obarzanek roams the city collecting postures and visual freeze frames. We are reminded of Charles Baudelaire's wandering through the streets of Paris in the nineteenth century. At times, Baudelaire did not even own a worktable so his poems were composed during his *flânerie*.¹ His escapades became a productive method of research; the city entered Baudelaire's memory as a disconnected sequence of optical displays.

Over an extended period of time, Obarzanek like Baudelaire takes pedestrian excursions through the streets of Melbourne memorising a vast array of snapshots. His watchful eye is drawn to the motion of unknown people as he scrutinises their daily activities. A modern anthropologist, he records and stores these gestures that are later transformed into carefully framed photographs. In doing so, Obarzanek apprehends an action into a single image

yet he removes these subjects from their harried environment by presenting them as isolated stills. They seem purposeful, though detached, as the human form is depicted turning away from the camera oblivious to the lens' grip.

Preoccupied with the shape, gravity and weight of figures in space, Obarzanek captures the daily struggle of movement—rushing, carrying, leaning, twisting, bending and striding. By halting motion and stripping his subjects from social groupings, they appear alone and bereft against a dark backdrop. Although based on reality, Obarzanek infuses his photographs with a desolate emptiness as he recasts his urban observations in a controlled setting. Each image is composed in a similar way to erase individuality resulting in an eerie and anonymous portraiture.

Untitled Movement comprises twelve photographs that are not digitally manipulated.

With precision and tight control, we witness glossy hair in flight, a figure jumping, the exquisite texture of rain droplets, a woman contorted in a suit and the sheer yellow plastic of a raincoat. At times we cannot discern the gender or age of the subjects. This ambiguity is further reinforced by partly obscured figures who are heading towards an unknown darkness. We are left wondering: are they on the outskirts of a dense forest? Why are they performing these solo actions? Are these characters burdened and trapped by the awkward weight of movement?

Obarzanek's sitters comprise family, friends, acquaintances as well as his wife; recruited to pose in staged situations. They are photographed at dawn in order to combine natural lighting with a studio flash. The backdrop is a vast wall rendered in concrete with pigment rubbed onto the surface for texture. Rugged soil gives the illusion of a continuous backdrop:

The black soil and background are used as tools to point the viewer at the action in the centre of the frame. Light is used to contour the solitary figure against a blackened background so as to create a specimen of movement.

Obarzanek gives his subjects instructions about movement, consciously restaging and mimicking the many poses he has observed. Stripped of their urban context, these frames become sinister and purposeless. He chooses their attire including smart suits, workman overalls and a tracksuit. Apart from a red ball, there are no other signifying accoutrements, further suggesting detachment and giving rise to existential questions:

When I see a person creating a shape with their body in the street I do not sense the individual but a part, a piece of a larger performance. Each individual connects with others to create a visual language. I did not want faces to interrupt this larger work.

The by-product of an action, this type of portraiture is also part performance and part documentary yet it shares some

qualities of tableau photography as images are staged through the composition of costumes, gestures and styles. A precise camera angle is worked out in advance in order to articulate a preconceived theatricality of human action enhanced by dramatic light.

We are reminded of Bill Henson's early crowd series of darkened, blurred commuters and Sam Taylor-Wood's contorted and suspended self-portraits. Henson, Taylor-Wood and Obarzanek deploy sequencing combined with an absence of text, narration or script. Obarzanek's deft formal strategy gives the illusion of movement. Fraught with a quiet sense of mystery, there is an internal drama within the picture plane as each figure is enveloped by open space.

A lone photographer rummaging through daily life, Obarzanek alters the way we think about our physical and social world. By archiving the sculptural and bodily qualities of photography, themes of loneliness and introspection emerge. Through the intersection of theatricality and everyday life, Obarzanek induces ideas of beauty, sadness and alienation.

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NOTES

All quotes from Simon Obarzanek are from correspondence between the artist and author, July 2008.

1. For example see Charles Baudelaire's poem "The Sun", quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, The MIT Press, Mass., 1991, p. 185.