

Doug Hall's Moscow Pictures
by Robert Riley
Essay for *Moscow Metamorphosis*

While it is too soon to define the characteristics of the photographic style of today, one common denominator, rooted in tradition, seems in the ascendancy: the direct use of the camera for what it can do best, and that is the revelation, interpretation, and discovery of the world of man and nature. The present challenge to the photographer is to express inner significance through outward form.¹

Beaumont Hall, *The History of Photography*

As a visual artist, Doug Hall presents the philosophical complexities of the appreciation of place and explores perceptions of contemporary space through photography and video. Hall's investigation of the subjectivity of photography is part of a period of image making when conventional forms of representation are being challenged.

Doug Hall's vision has evolved from the projected-image video installations he pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s into the suspended-motion photographs that currently occupy his artistic pursuit. Hall's work with moving images and photographic media initially found expression in his translations of large-scale architectural sites and landscapes through video for gallery installations. These ultimately led the artist to the still camera. The presence of the observer in the composition is a central theme in his video work, and also in subsequent projects for still photography.

People in Buildings (1990) is significant for its expansion of the video medium into cinematic and architectural proportions. Lauded for its translation of emotional states into the perception of contemporary landscape, this installation series spans several years of technical achievement in sound and image that established the artist's distinctive language of form. The work confronts architectural design and visual media as forms of ideological packaging. The combination of screen-size presentation and large image projection took the artist from three-dimensional ground into a four-dimensional space that envelops the viewer in fields of sonic and visual information.



People In Buildings, 1989-91, installation view

Hall's convictions that form and content are indivisibly linked in technology-based art, and that images in media art and photography represent ideas greater than the subjects they depict, endures in the progression of his work over several decades. The uneasy representation of time in convergent media today, and the silent claim of the photographic image, that it is the container of a universal meaning, are challenged in Hall's prescient visions for video installation.

The artist took inspiration for the double screen installation from his observation of people suspended in reverie or looking at something meaningful to them. Depicted within the confines of their workspaces, the portraits of *People in Buildings* collude with the large scale of the edifice, lobby, and structures of corporate offices. In this way, Hall references issues of privacy, public information and surveillance. As in the passage he provides for the viewer, Hall moves through the contemporary world of appearances and

locations to inscribe on video a memory of the past, a flash of desire, an instant of confusion. Hall places the viewer between backdrop and foreground, inside and outside - an allegory of malevolent influences and their consequences. Within the fixed enclosure of the museum gallery Hall created a fusion between the architectural language of place, the appreciation of time as content in visual art, and the heightened visceral effect of presence and perception.

In 1906 American photographer Edward S. Curtis studied the complex dialogue between the Native American and development in the west. He sought to capture in photographic documents the life and times of a human civilization under enormous pressures, to pass on to future generations. Curtis wrote in his introduction to his publication *The North American Indian 1898 -1930* : “the object of the work is to record by word and picture what the Indian is, not whence he came.” He observed that “the passing of each person means the passing of a tradition, some knowledge possessed by no other”²

The photographer understood that memory plays a critical role in the formulation of the future. Considered controversial in later years for altering his negatives to exclude all traces of advancement by removing elements such as clocks and wardrobe from his pictures, Curtis was not aware that revisionist theory would later add significantly to the historical value of his photography. In a direct appeal to the viewer, Curtis hoped the viewer would “see” the qualities of a civilization he depicted measured against industrial power and agribusiness, forces of advancement particular to his time.

People in Buildings, Hall’s video project for parallel screens, introduced an ambitious new direction for new projects in still photography. He extracted still images of hallways and other locations from the installation and printed them large. The artist composed each picture to project and elevate the viewer into the image as if suspended in space. Liberated from claims of objectivity, Hall’s photography functions independently, and subjectively, to tangibly portray states of being.

Illuminating comparisons can be made with photographer Eugene Atget (1857-1927). In 1912 he observed, and made a photograph of a large group of people by the side of a public square, who had assembled to view an eclipse. Atget's more familiar images of the architecture and neighborhoods in Paris, characteristically free of figures, contain a record of the city's population through inanimate forms such as doorways, steps and sidewalks. Both these interests are evident in Hall's Moscow project which observes groups of people at large in the cityscape, as well as the city empty of people, but containing traces of them.



Atget, *Impasse des Bourdonnais*, 1908



Hall, *Non-place 39, California*, 1991

Atget's photo documents were carefully composed and created a visual tension, absent at the time from conventional architectural photography. Like Hall, Atget allowed the technology of photography to affect his images.³ Repositioning his lens in relationship to the plate holder in the camera often scarred the images due to the abrasion of metal clips against the film emulsion. Atget's operation of the cumbersome camera apparatus successfully pushed his exposures to strengthen the visual impact of the image by drawing mechanically closer to his subject thereby advancing the viewer into the depth of the image as Doug Hall achieved in his first series of still photographs provocatively titled *Non-Places*.

Non-Places is comprised of images taken from the interior of public buildings - such as a city hall - designed for bureaucracy and built typically spare in their architecture and decor. Concentrating his vision on the passageways and corridors Hall focused on an environment within an agency to re-examine the laws of perspective in visual art that placed the viewer at the center of the picture thereby depicting the world as defined from a single point. These studies of perspective emphasize the composed vision of an embodied space and, like Atget before him, Hall tosses the viewer deeply into the picture as if suspended above the ground in the space of the structure. Hall's manipulation of the camera creates a feeling of placelessness and challenges the laws of perspective as a technique for the representation of space.

Atget's work was devoted to the documentation of the urban landscape, inscribed with human values and the triumph of labor that, if lost to redevelopment and shifts in the city's plan, loses its social significance. The artist believed he had in his possession all of Paris in a portfolio of images. Can a changing city, especially one transforming so fast as Moscow, exist, at a point in time, in a document of images?

In his essay *A Small History of Photography*, (published 1931) Walter Benjamin considered Atget and his photographs claiming that: "Atget almost always passed by the great sights and the so-called landmarks. It is in these achievements that (surrealist) photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to illumination of detail."⁴

Hall's series of pictures collectively titled *Public Places*, and some of the Moscow pictures, are photographs of tourist sites that typically contain a social element in their composition such as a scenic overview crowded with tourists or an urban intersection congested with pedestrians and motorists. The immersion of the viewer into these images through their impressive scale and depth brings to mind the experience of the explorer. The moment explorers confront vast amounts of space it is often said that they perceive not the vista but rather look deeply into themselves.



Belorussky Station, Moscow, 2006

Much like placing a piece of paper over the textures and contours of a reticulated surface and rubbing the paper with pigment in order to lift the impression away from a fixed object, Hall's *Public Places* and the Moscow pictures, build upon the initial impression, or exposure, by inserting figures or visual clues of the sort Curtis would have withheld from his film negative. Hall enhances the image of the site with added information collected photographically and digitally inserted to further define the function of location as commodity

Cities and Urban Architecture, an ongoing series that includes *The Moscow Project*, enlarges the scope of Hall's absorption with architectural design as a form of ideological packaging. Hall has photographed Paris, New York, Rome, Tokyo and Sao Paulo. The power of a building to represent the ideology of its builder is tangibly depicted in the series of images included throughout this publication. Here, Hall directly confronts

architecture: its design, materials, and proportions and the social context of the rapidly changing city.



Studio, Melnikov House, Moscow, 2006

For an artist who sets out to measure the world with composed vision, in panoramic photography or immersive installation, time is not lost. Like the video installations that precede them, Hall's photographs allow the viewer entry into the spaces they depict and concentrate the mind of the artist into material form. His depiction of the city is a depiction of himself, as Hall writes: "It would be a conceit to think that one could ever really describe a place, a city. All that we might be able to account for is ourselves within it. It's in this sense that a personal description of a city is really a self-portrait transferred."

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Footnotes

1. Beaumont Hall, *The History of Photography; New Directions* Chapter 16 p. 281 -294 Museum of Modern Art, New York; Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown and Company 1982
- 2.. Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian 1898 – 1930* (notes are in maine - tbd)
3. Eugene Atget *Atget*, John Szarkowski, Museum of Modern Art, New York. 2004
4. Walter Benjamin."A Small History of Photography" (1931) in *One-way Street and other writings*, translated by Edmond Jephcott and Kingsly Shorter; London/New York, Verso 1979.