

John Beech's Found-Photo Drawings or, How to Live

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The world provides plenty of discarded photographs that can be picked up in junk shops. Still. They tend to be somewhat old, because of changing technologies, but also because any dumping usually comes after a lag. But they are cheap, not quite vintage. To paint or draw on these photos is to extend and articulate a relation defined by fairly clear parameters. I take the whole process as a guide to living.

John Beech doesn't select for the best photos. ("In fact, the really good ones I don't paint on.") He chooses the ones that have an interesting texture. That's his word, and I take it to mean it has an inviting imperfection, that it has tooth, so to speak, that it might respond well to an intervention. *As you move through the world, don't just get to places. Look at what is there—but not as an aesthetic picture. Look at it, seeing it as something that is good and imperfect and might need you to act in it.*

If you turn this page and the one beneath it, you'll uncover the first work reproduced in this book. You will notice that the artist acknowledges the photo not just as an image but as an object. One corner of the photographic print has been ripped, and the corner opposite has been folded and then flattened again. The painting activity has in fact brought these features into relief. Strokes of paint mount towards the torn corner but then leave it clear, a counter-pressure to the metal beam that meets it. At the other corner, a previous layer of paint, wiped away, has caught on the ridge of the once-folded paper, yielding a line made by no one. It looks like a crack, something showing through what now appears to be marble or glass. *Don't just look at the thing but at the ground of the thing. Don't view people as resolved figures; see them against their ground and interact with their ground. Then you will see them differently.*

Before turning this page, go to pages 94–95 and look at both images on the spread.

The two approaches are so different it is as if they are not part of the same project. But they are. We need to have both approaches.

Left side

Negation would be the wrong word, but a certain disregard is necessary to the approach. The photo is not an inspiration, but it does get used. It is turned to its side and only its most crudely identifiable feature, a grey grid of sorts, is set up. Then it is disregarded. The white splotch that has accumulated observes no distinction between the printed part of the photo and the white border. It has no relation to the photographic information, not even a contrasting one, not even a negating one. The paint avoids the look of having been applied as if something was meant to be done with it, and it is even farther from the idea that it is a form of geomancy, that the earth or some other power guided the brush. The green paint below is scraped remnants from some other activity, activity possibly meant for some other surface, as if this were the newspaper protecting the floor. What does it mean to work on something while not noticing it? What space do you have to be in to achieve this disregard? *There are times when you don't need to get along and you don't need to go against the grain. You use the world, but you don't let it determine your actions, nor do you insist on self-determination. And yet you act.*

Right side

If you are like me, you did not at first disentangle the added lines from the photographic information here. You saw lines enjoying a freedom that would merely fling wide but for a measure of elasticity that keeps them in relation to one another. This is dancing that dispenses with mere rhythm. You did not at first see a chair but were imagining unheard-of musical instruments. But then things start to settle out, the upended chair is distinguished, seen to be twirled and gently caught, upside-down but still poised, tethered by fluid but firm lines. Momentarily, we imagine that this is clever and start to become clever ourselves. We note that the lines are very close in thickness and tone and swoop to the curves of the chair, and—look!—even the white streaks of paper left in the wake of the faster strokes rhyme with the sliding reflections on the limbs of the chair. But that is to take a very static approach. Mimicry begins by fixing the object, whereas this work begins by upending the thing, releasing it from its usual definition and function. And now we have the result before us, offering us a new configuration that is both stable and unstable. *If you fix the thing you cannot enter into relation to it. Defamiliarize it so that you can dance with it.*