

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE MAY2016



## FEATURED INTERVIEWS

*John Ashbery, David Hinton & Bill Jensen, John Houck,  
William Kentridge, Marcia Hafif*

## GUEST CRITICS

*Huey Copeland and Hannah Feldman: "The Tactic"*

*Art Books in Review: Stone's Throw*

*Field Notes: Syria in Flames*



# John Houck

WITH CHARLIE SCHULTZ

John Houck lives in Los Angeles and works out of a studio that previously housed a sizeable weed growing operation. Last Winter, five of Houck's photographs were featured in the *New Photography* exhibition at MoMA, and in April he is showing a new body of work at On Stellar Rays. Prior to the exhibition's opening, Houck visited the *Brooklyn Rail*'s HQ to talk with Charlie Schultz about psychoanalysis, the relationship between drawing and photography, play, and the history of the constructed image.

**CHARLIE SCHULTZ (RAIL):** Let's just dive right in here and start by talking about the title for your exhibition, *Playing and Reality*. What's the origin of this phrase, what is its significance for you?

**JOHN HOUCK:** I borrowed the title from the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. Winnicott's book, *Playing and Reality*, was a part of the movement in psychoanalysis away from Freud's drive theory and toward the social, and what would ultimately be called object relations theory. Winnicott was original in thinking that play was critical to feeling alive. Additionally, in my upcoming show at On Stellar Rays, I have been thinking of playing as embodied in the painted portions of my photos and reality as the photographic element of my pictures.

**RAIL:** How did you arrive at an idea of play in your work?

**HOUCK:** I'm sure for some people this idea of play is obvious or even redundant for an artist to bring up, but my art career started while I was in the Whitney Independent Study program. I was making work from an intellectual position and as someone who had spent a good amount of time in the overly rational world of software programming. I started seeing an analyst while living in New York, and I showed up to my first session with a notepad and pen in my hand. I planned on taking notes on my own therapy. My first analyst almost laughed me out of the room. Over time I've realized that play is one way I can sidestep my tendency to take a strong emotion and complicate it by intellectualizing it. We all have myriad ways of avoiding difficult feelings, artists are no different in that. For me, it has been drawing and painting that have fostered a space in my studio for play. I'm not sure why it's painting, but I think it has something to do with how messy it is in comparison to photography or computer programming. I also like that when I paint, Freud's idea that "a thought will come when it will, not when I will," seems to unfold more than in other modes of production.

**RAIL:** *Playing and Reality*—that "and" carries a lot of weight in this phrase. It points to the in-between space, the threshold between the play of creation and the reality of the creation, the gap between intent and outcome. I think your photographs are more of an embodiment than a representation, per se, of the event that occurs between playing and the outcome.

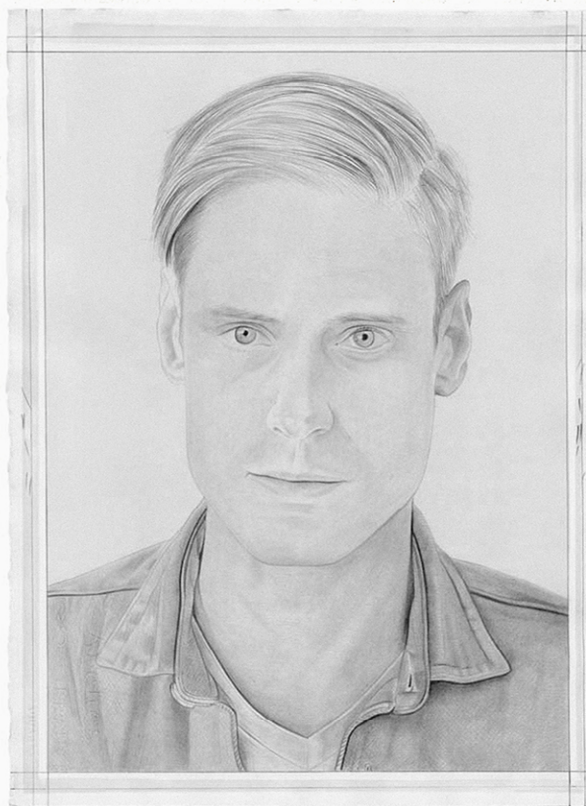
**HOUCK:** I hadn't thought of it as an event, but I like that idea: the event of making the picture is what happens between the play of the mark making and the reality of the photograph. That "and" also reminds me of Kaja Silverman's idea of photography as analogy.

**RAIL:** How so?

**HOUCK:** Rather than photography being a representation or an index, Silverman talks about photography as an analogy. She argues that we must look at an expanded history of the photographic and consider the pinhole camera, the optical camera obscura, chemical photography, and how photography migrated to literature and painting. And in line with relational psychoanalysis, she talks about two as the smallest unit of being. For me, her writing links photography with relational psychoanalysis.

**RAIL:** You've introduced a new element in this body of work—there are many painted marks—which is exciting. I like that some of the paint marks are representational; some are gestural; some adhere to the gravity of the image; some do not. It all seems very playful. How did you get going with this development?

**HOUCK:** Well, I was fascinated with painting in grad school, but I didn't really paint. Then later, I took continuing education courses in painting and figure drawing at UCLA. I kept picking it up and putting it down, this act



Portrait of John Houck. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by John Houck.

of drawing. I was really into life drawing, but my actual drawings just felt kind of dead because they were so isolated, in a way. I love the act of it and was very immersed in the process of drawing and the kind of touch that's involved in that, but it wasn't until I began drawing on top of the newspaper every morning with charcoal that I started to realize how playful it could be—this back and forth between a photograph and a mark.

**RAIL:** The history of photography is full of drawing. Talbot's book, for one thing, was called *The Pencil of Nature*. And the practice of drawing on one's negatives, to enhance something or cancel another thing out, has also been present pretty much from the start.

**HOUCK:** That relationship goes deep. There is a Ben Lerner poem from his book *Angle of Yaw* (2006) that speaks to this idea in a way I find useful. The first line of the poem is something like, "the camera was discovered before painting was invented. The first paintings were made on the inside walls of cameras." I think he's riffing off the Latin definition of camera, which could mean a room, a chamber, a cave—basically a kind of space. The crux of the idea, for me, is that as far back as the earliest forms of drawing—pre-linguistic even—painted marks were made within a context, and that context can be understood as a kind of camera, which is a type of space.

**RAIL:** Of course proto-photographic tools, like the camera lucida or the camera obscura, were designed as drawing aids. But there is also a question of intention, as in, what is the meaning of these marks? What are they meant to do? I don't think the kind of mark-making you are doing is related to retouching in the sense of trying to create a hyper-idealized image; it's much closer to the tradition of the photomontage, because there is a kind of visual accretion going on.

**HOUCK:** A curator once said to me that my work isn't photography, so much as collage that uses photography as the glue. I couldn't have come up with a more precise statement. Photography holds my pictures together, but I don't really care to take photographs. I want to make pictures and that has recently involved painting. And you're right, the kind of marks I'm making have little to do with retouching, the marks are more about pictorial space and rupturing the process of rephotographing. The marks are in a way, like the folds of my early "Aggregates" series. Much of my work is about how repetition is interrupted by desire.

**RAIL:** In terms of painted marks, there are really two types in your photographs: the ones you make on the photos themselves, and the stray bits of paint on the objects in the photos. And those marks act like a kind of second skin,



or a patina, that speak to the object's history. I'm thinking of the spray bottle in *Family Crest* (2016), or the mason jars in *First Set* (2015).

**HOUCK:** That's true. Those incidental markings on the objects do give a sense of tactility. I often think those marks point to Merleau-Ponty's idea that there is a "reciprocal insertion and intertwining" of the visual in the tactile, and the tactile in the visual. You can tell they've been handled. But I think they also allude to a sense of time, which is another philosophical conundrum at the heart of photography. That idea of ripping something out of time, of presenting the world as a kind of thing ripped from the flow of time.

**RAIL:** The painted flecks on the objects can be read as traces of use in the same sense that a photograph can be a trace of experience, or of vision.

**HOUCK:** The incidental marks are really interesting to me because they establish this kind of contingency of the world layered upon the object. In my photographs those traces come into play with my own intentional mark-making, which sets up a sort of dialectic. That wasn't something I intended; it's something that I just kind of realized in the process of making this new work.

**RAIL:** I noticed that in this new body of work the titles do not reference the original owners of the objects, as in *Peg and Jon* (2013), which I was happy to see in the *New Photography* show up at MoMA. Are these objects still coming from people close to you, as they did in your previous body of work, *History of Graph Paper*?

**HOUCK:** They are. But even though *Peg and Jon* is named for the people who gave me those objects, all the objects from *History of Graph Paper* were from my parents. My mom was a waitress and Peg and Jon were this older couple who would come in every night and have the same meal, the same single cocktail—just this lovely old couple. Jon was a retired architect who gave me his drafting equipment; he gave it to my mom who held on to it and passed it on to me in my early thirties, and that's how it entered into the *History of Graph Paper* work. All of those objects were really filtered through the relationship with my parents; with this new body of work I've started to think of each picture as a kind of third entity between me and another person.

**RAIL:** What kind of entity?

**HOUCK:** This idea of the third entity—I don't know where it originates, but I picked it up from a talk that Siri Hustvedt gave in 2004. She says that between any two people there is a third entity, which the two people create between them. It's a kind of dynamic energy, and by calling it an entity, you acknowledge it has a body. It struck me as a fascinating way to think about my work insofar as the photograph becomes the third entity between me and another person. In the end I don't think it would be helpful to name who it's for.

**RAIL:** I agree. That sentimental connection doesn't have currency for viewers because they don't know who you are, or who your parents are, or your friends. I feel like the danger with these works is that they can slip into homage, which doesn't have to be specific because the desire to honor something—to pay one's respects, so to speak—is universal and also kind of generic.

**HOUCK:** Yeah, I think if they were too overly determined in that way it would be difficult for the viewer to project their own connections onto the photograph or the series of objects. I mean, one reason I started asking other people for objects was because I'd basically run out of things my parents gave me. [Laughter.] Expanding the process out to a larger social realm seemed like a natural progression.



John Houck, *Family Crest*, 2016. 24 x 29 inches. Courtesy the artist.

**RAIL:** That's life too, right? I mean, the foundational relationship is with your parents; that relationship conditions and colors every other relationship. So it makes perfect sense to me that after creating a body of work that dealt with that parental relationship, you would move on to explore others.

**HOUCK:** I like that in this body of work there is a more expressive, playful aspect. But there's still the re-photographing. There's this way in which different types of marks, different types of painting, all become part of the same sensibility or atmosphere, largely because of the re-photographing in a kind of technical repetition that happens in the work. I think there's something important about this feedback loop. In grad school, I was trying to make 4 x 5 photos out in the world. It just didn't suit me at all as somebody spending a lot of time writing software. The compositional nature of photography—now that it's mostly digital—I think is what has kept me working in it.

**RAIL:** What do you mean by compositional?

**HOUCK:** Hal Foster talks about this in a book that he wrote on the Pop artist Richard Hamilton. His idea is that now that photography is digital, it goes from something indexical to a compositional kind of screen—that's been a phrase that keeps coming back to me—the idea of a compositional picture. The re-photographing combined with the mark making really opens up the idea of photography as a compositional screen. Something interesting happens when you make just a single mark in the space. The mark can go underneath the object, or be on top of it, or be distorted by objects in the photograph—it's

an incredibly rich interplay between mark-making, arrangement, and photography.

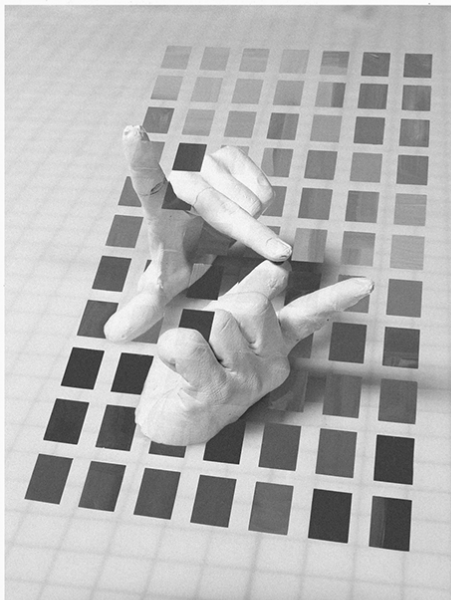
**RAIL:** You have a background as a software engineer, so you could easily use software programs, but you don't. Why?

**HOUCK:** I think it really comes out of studying architecture as an undergrad, and the way in which we used hot glue and cardboard to build models, which look unremarkable as objects, but when lit and photographed—the light can be fixed on them, in a sense the gaze could be fixed—and printed large, suddenly they became really activated spatially, even though they were being flattened out. I was fortunate in that during undergrad, we didn't use 3D modeling. Everything was done physically and I think my photos operate in that way too—almost like models to be photographed. Re-photographing is of course a way to make a layered model. You can start with a really simple thing, see how it looks as a photograph, and build it up layer by layer the way you would compose a painting. While this feedback loop of arranging, painting, photographing, and printing doesn't require a single line of code, it's akin to the process of writing software, and I find comfort in that.

**RAIL:** What is the painting process like for you?

**HOUCK:** [Laughter.] This is a very simple thing, but I've discovered that in the process of mixing paint to put on the photograph I can get into a sort of trance that's very different from being on the computer in Photoshop. Just staring at color on a piece of glass





John Houck, *Coordinate System #4*, 2015. Flashe paint on archival pigment paper (unique). 21 x 28 inches. Courtesy the artist.



John Houck, *Passe or Retiré*, 2016. 42 x 53 inches. Courtesy the artist.

and folding it in on itself over and over until I get something that feels right—that is a part of painting I never thought about, and it does put me in that kind of mind state where I can think and not know that I'm thinking, and then make the mark in relation to the photograph. Sometimes I paint as a step in the process of making a photograph, other times I just paint with oil on canvas all day and that immersive feeling that comes from mixing paint remains. In addition, many of the photographs in my show are based on my paintings. It's a reversal of the common practice of making a painting from a photographic source.

**RAIL:** I think your choice of color is very nuanced, very sophisticated, especially in the series of "Coordinate Systems" (2015). The way the painted grid blends into certain areas, camouflages, or draws itself out in other places makes the images much more arresting. I was impressed with the paint handling too, but the color seems selected with particularly careful and thoughtful consideration. You didn't re-photograph these pieces either; the final work is unique and the paint is right there on the print. What guided your thinking in this work?

**HOUCK:** I started making those pieces after I came back from Italy last spring. I spent a lot of time looking at Renaissance and pre-Renaissance painting and sculpture, and it had a tremendous impact on me. I came back to the studio, and within the first week I was live-casting my hands in different positions. That work in particular is coming out of this exploration

of the way the grid functions. In the Renaissance, the grid was a way to create a window onto the world and a sense of space extending into the picture. What I find interesting about these grids is that they are very frontal and sort of woven through the objects—the cast of my hands. So rather than creating a window, they create a space where the object almost appears to fall out of the picture, which for me goes back to a pre-Renaissance sense of space where objects are coming in and out of the picture plane, on the surface—I can't explain why exactly I was drawn to that, but I'd just come back from Italy and I had to make those, and they had to be paint on top of the photograph.

**RAIL:** The shoe-tying photo, *Passe or Retiré* (2016), seems like an outlier in this new series. I see it as a departure from the norm insofar as it's not so object-oriented, but more phenomenological. It's not just a shoe, it's a photo of a shoe being tied. Where did this come from?

**HOUCK:** [Laughter.] That came out of a drawing I did in the *New York Times* on top of an advertisement of a businessman in a suit tying a shoe. He was in this kind of ballet pose called *passé*, with his shoe up, he was tying it and standing on one leg. I got really interested in the idea of doubling that time and having somebody else come to tie the shoes. I was also reading a Nicholson Baker book, *The Mezzanine* (1988) in which he talks about how tying your shoe is the first machine you're presented with as a child. The first kind of machine you have to master is how to tie your shoe and you always need

help with that. So there's this other element of the machine, which is very much in my work, and the idea of relationality—the idea that someone will be helping you do this act, teaching you, showing you, tying your shoes with you. That kind of relationality became very important.

**RAIL:** The relationship between two people and a machine makes me think about the role of the photographer, the observer, and the camera. [Laughter.] I think it's a wonderfully humorous photograph, and I'm curious to see if you find yourself compelled to do more with physical action.

**HOUCK:** I'm very interested in having more figures and actions involved. I think the objects have served me well, but I do want to expand out a little bit and include more than just the hands. There's a kind of absurdity to it, a bit of humor, but there's this really moving moment that I didn't anticipate in the photo—the hand on the left is holding the lace, of course, but the shoestring is painted. It's not taut, it's kind of slack but in the wrong direction, kind of floating up rather than being affected by gravity. And that's something I painted incorrectly. Had I made a photo of that, it would've been too correct in a sense. With all these other layers removed, there's still this weird, floating hand and lace that I find so moving. I didn't plan to paint the lace like that, and I don't think I would have come to that without the re-photographing and mark-making that are now part of the process.

**RAIL:** It seems that the process lends itself well to instances of serendipity. Do you often find yourself surprised by things you've done?

**HOUCK:** For Winnicott, spontaneity and intuition are characteristics of health. One aim of Winnicottian analysis is to be able to surprise yourself. As someone who grew up training as an athlete, I thought I could just set a goal and will myself to surprise myself, but of course having the desire to be surprised doesn't work, all you can do is set up the conditions for it to occur. Wilfred Bion said, "Development itself is not an object that can be desired." Coming from the world of software—working in very precise and formal programming languages all day—that feeling of surprise was rare. It's through the process of free association that I've understood what Winnicott meant by surprise. With this shift in language, there has been a corresponding shift in my studio. My early work was more systematic and related to the primary language I was working in at the time; the formal language of programming. I still program occasionally, but I read a lot more poetry and literature now, and I'm still in analysis three days a week. In that early work the fold was my way to rupture a rational gridded surface, and now the fold has turned into painting across the reality of photography. ☺