

*Commissioned with the University of Salford Art Collection, this text was produced in response to the work of artist Theo Simpson presented as part of the exhibition **40 Years of the Future: Where Should We Be Now?** at Castlefield Gallery in 2024.*

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## **Theo Simpson**

Essay by Duncan Wooldridge

Moving between images our eyes flicker, ricochet. Across their surfaces and details, rhythms and patterns, the animation of our looking - inquisitive, associative, constructing - propels us towards enquiry, a questioning. If this might begin with a familiar question, 'what is this? or 'what can I see?' – a search for recognition familiar to all photography – we go on to questions which are increasingly relational: 'how did this come together?' 'what is brought about here, what is made visible?' Such questions treat images not as simple facts to be absorbed or puzzles to be decoded, but as observations and experiments. We find ourselves (like the image maker) in a process of looking, and thinking, constructing.

In Theo Simpson's work there is an attention to social, industrial and artistic *assembly*. This spans across shared experiences and the collective commons (the formation of crowds, protest and audiences), recent histories of production (fordist and post-fordist labours, from the factory and the workshop, towards the photographic studio and marketing, communications, data and advertising) connecting also to collage, archival assemblage and installation – which is to say to artistic practices of construction. We might notice this first in Simpson's meticulous construction and attention to material and surface, and edge of the image – and its capacity to be built in across three dimensions, however subtly – but sustained attention reveals that it continues across the pictorial, demonstrating an equal concern for complexity and detail as we move into form and context.

Across these fields – each a multitude – Simpson has drawn in the past, the present and the future: the re-use of the advertising strap line "Tomorrow. Today." affixed to a high wall in vinyl, provides a reminder, a pause, and a prompt. Extracted from a 1980s Rover advertising

campaign (using the same typeface and punctuation), its re-presentation extends time past the emphases of its original campaign – the claim of a technology brought forward to satisfy the consumer – to describe new echoes of events, the past's own claims to the future colliding into the present. Are we living in a genuine moment now, or an echo of a time we recall all-too-well, with a similar mix of austerity, self-interest and businesses touting a new technological horizon to come? What have we learnt, and what will we use as critical tools?

The collapse of time reveals instabilities in the arrows of technical and industrial progress. Posing such problems, Simpson's work requires us to move beyond habitual quick reading, the satisfaction of convenient narrative arcs and the dogma of fixed positions: we need an understanding densely structured and entangled, felt but also crafted, brought about. This might explain our perception in the work that it contains no singular statement but a multitude of gradually building resonances. Influenced by multiple sources – the artists own assembled archive of imagery, an industrial atlas – but also archival and appropriation practices, and the work of collecting – spanning Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's *Evidence* drawn scientific archives, to Richard Prince's collections of literature and Americana – the work brings images, their contexts, labours and temporalities into a series of tensions. We might be struck by how much there is to address, but also how unnecessary it is to attempt a summary or a reduction to one destination, one claim, one take away. Instead, we are positioned to explore the universe of images, a world we are fabricating, with its interrelations of surfaces, discourses and hurried senses of time.

The carefully edited and re-assembled fragments presented at Castlefield Gallery produce not only an enquiring viewer, but possess a sense of imminent motion or prolepsis, drawing attention to both gesture and labour. Entering the gallery downstairs, we descend towards and then below an installation with a repeating image, covering the horizontal surfaces of the space as it meets the windows and paving outside. Cropped tightly, the image shows bodies in the street, revealing only the lower halves of the figures in the frame, a single subject poised as if seen at the first stages of a sudden movement. We know neither if they are beginning to sprint, or are already in motion, shifting and turning to negotiate the figures nearby. But we want to jump, to interpret, to produce a reading – though we will be held back in our descent to do so. The installation, its repetition stacked and staggered, constructs a filmic motion like frames of celluloid, counterbalancing our arrest, enacting a transfer of sorts between the image and our bodies. This image's tension, given to us without context, is also between movements: a heightened interpretative adrenaline, accelerating us into anticipating what will take place – perhaps a dramatic moment - defused in our repeated looking, as we reckon with the fragment that it remains and always will be – a part, a detail.

First, Simpson seems to say, we need to see this image as an image, with all of the complexity this entails and requires of us: we need to encounter the image as both matter and mediation, and this necessitates that our temptation to take what we wish from the singular frame is thwarted or at least delayed.

Drawing upon diverging strategies, Simpson's new collage works are constructed with two trajectories: on the one hand, a body of work is made of fragments which seem at first disconnected but will reveal their connectedness: small collages combine pieces of industrial, commercial and documentary fragments, seemingly brought together from a range of sources whilst describing an industrial culture we might think of as modernity which affects all it surveys, laced as it is with units of measurement, copious observation and constructed identities. This draws upon a process familiar in Simpson's works to date. But at the same time a series of unified panels of crowds and assembling bodies begin from a formal and pictorial similarity, becoming ambiguous and starting to fragment. Collage pushes and pulls: it draws together associations at the same time as permitting us to recognise and dismantle the image's own constructs. Simpson's technique of screenprinting onto electrolytically charged plates seems significant here: labour and industrial production might be our first associations, but these skills of manufactured assembly, which provide tightly integrated effects upon the images surface, are also multi-directional: electrolysis is a process that bonds elements together but is equally used in their separation.

As Judith Butler reminds us, assembly is the call to recognise the forces at stake in our interdependencies and interrelations: the very fact that we rely on each other for an unspoken but agreed civility and security which can be fractured at any time. Public assembly is, Butler says, neither inherently progressive nor destructive and so requires our thought as well as our affect. It can be organic and strategic, and acts as a representation of articulate collective action at one moment, and as a form of state identification, mob rule or convenient imagined community at any other. When we encounter the collected crowds and flags in Simpson's multi-panel works, the images we read are charged but resistant, causing our looking to dynamically seek connections and affiliation. We seek out details which permit us to position ourselves as viewers or respondents – as reactors - but this too is delayed by Simpson's panels, which need us to attend not only to the immediacy and affect of the image, but to the constructions which bring them together. In the moment of fabricated culture wars and incitements to division, we require that which the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe calls Agonism: a capacity to find a route beyond division that is all too easily constructed and maintained, to find disconnects in the joins and joins in the disconnects. Our culture and discourse wants to rush in: it desires the promise of tomorrow today. In these

new works, a crowd which at first seems to span the surface of an image, comprised of wide views and close details, contains rotated fragments and incomplete placards, seeming unified on first glance. Small pools of empty space are slowly revealed. Bodies which seem continuous are from different frames; flags which span horizontally across the image flow and billow, are extended and also mangled.

Taking a step back for a moment, we might note that the works in the space have gathered: they have clustered together in a group. One work has aligned itself to the edges of the wall, where a strip of the installation, with its repeating bodies, touches down on the ground. The persuasions of photography and its function as a compelling surface often conceals the way that the image *acts*. Simpson's attentive installation demonstrates the capacity for images to affect our movement, but also for photographic images to have complex characteristics beyond representation. When the Czech media theorist Vilém Flusser reminds us that photographic images are industrial inventions, shaped by a post-industrial society, he notes that we produce ever more images using automated tools, and construct ever more similar images, made with elaborate promises and claims, with heightened affects. What once was the domain of advertising – problematic claims to a world that does not exist, is now constructed by ourselves. How are we to break out of this image cycle? Flusser also observes that photographers offer us a way out: if we seek not only the probable, but also the possible, we might transform the world of images through strategies of experimentation and playful interruption. The stepping back that we carry out to look at Simpson's installation is one such moment: if we can note the work's carefully balanced fabrication, drawing together image, process, support and its placement in space, we might begin to think about the image as capable not of fixing the world as it is, but as something interrupting the flow in the world as it currently stands.

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