

for LONDON INDEPENDENT PHOTOGRAPHY

**FLIP**

Arun Misra interviews:  
**Clare Strand, Photographer and Artist**

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## Clare Strand, Photographer and Artist Arun Misra interviews

Clare Strand is a prominent British conceptual artist, working with and against the photographic medium. Over the past two decades she has worked with found imagery, kinetic machinery, web programs, fairground attractions and, most recently, large scale paintings.

Strand's work has been widely exhibited in venues such as The Museum Folkwang; The Centre Pompidou; Tate Britain; Salzburg Museum of Modern Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

She has produced three publications: Clare Strand Monograph (Steidl 2009); Skirts (GOST 2014); and Girl Plays with Snake (MACK 2017).

In 2020, Clare was shortlisted for the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize. I spoke to her in June this year about this and her conceptually driven approach to her works.

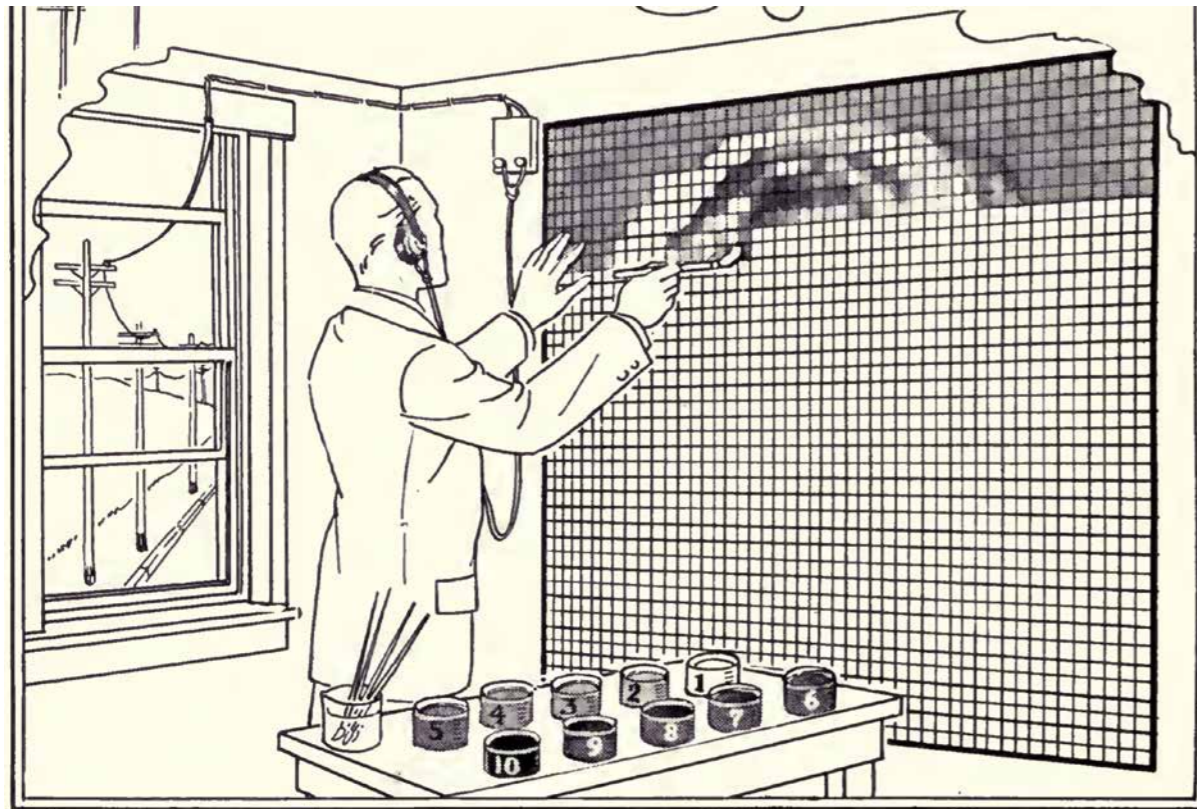


Fig. 26. A Simple Method for Sending Pictures by Wire or Radio



*The Rag Pickers Tower 2012 (Installation view) © Clare Strand*

**Arun Misra** *How did you first become interested in photography? What influenced you?*

**Clare Strand** There are many parts that make a whole. It is therefore hard to pinpoint a moment or a person or a thing that set things in motion. I think, like my work, my interest and my career comprise of many serendipitous moments and impulses that connect and drive themselves.

**AM** *You have said that you work with and against the photographic medium and that you are not attracted to subject-based qualities and the immediate demand of information that are associated with the photographic image. How did you become interested in exploring these ideas?*

**CS** Though the aesthetic and objectness of my work changes from one project to the next, there is always a connection to the photographic, even though sometimes the output does not look like a photograph. Over the years I have sometimes found it useful to think about photography by not using it.

**AM** *What would be a good example of your work where you have thought about photography but not used it?*

**CS** *Spaceland/Flatland* (2012) talks about photography and uses photographic materials but does not look like 'photography'. *The Rag Pickers Tower* (2012) is a totem of Popular Mechanic magazines with coloured markers - this has a photographic reference but no camera involved. *The Nature of Research* and *The Research of Nature* (2014) are two costumes that could be worn to make a photographic work but in themselves are not photographic. However of course all these works can be and are photographed!

**AM** *What do you mean by working with and against the photographic medium?*

**CS** Photography means many things to many people - this is what makes the medium so interesting. In general we might think of photography as an action between a human and a camera, a medium that captures an indexical reality,

a machine that represents and fixes a moment in time, I think over the last three decades I have played with some, if not all, of these assumptions.

**AM** *Why aren't you attracted to subject-based qualities and the immediate demand of information that are associated with the photographic image?*

**CS** It's because I don't require photography to be representational.

**AM** *Your work 'The Discrete Channel with Noise' was shortlisted for The Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize in 2020. This is a fascinating work. Can you talk about the concept behind this work?*

**CS** *The Discrete Channel with Noise* is a receptacle of many interests in regard to the study of communication and transmission, from Claude Shannon and the *Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1948) and George Eckhardt's book *Electronic Television* (1937), to Laszlo Moholy Nagy's *Telephone Pictures* (1923) and Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Humans Beings* (1950). Jean Cocteau's *The Human Voice* (1929) added to the mix, along with the film, *The Fly* and Mike Teavee's analysis of Wonka Vision in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. All this 'jumper grass' (see below answer) was collected against a backdrop of Brexit, Cambridge Analytica and fake news - all playing a part in thinking about information and how it travels, distorts and is scrapped.

**AM** *There is clearly a lot going on here. Why did you make this work?*

**CS** As you say, there are a lot of ideas behind the work and I can talk about it from several different perspectives. I think essentially it comes down to being very aware of my/everyone's everyday involvement with the sender/receiver dynamic. I've always found it beneficial to have a visual manifestation of a concern or problem - once I can see something tangible I am far more able to think clearly - this is what the *Discrete Channel with Noise* does for me. By physically painting each 'picture element' I make a process that is considered inhuman and intangible, human



left: *Discrete Channel with Noise: Information Source #1*, 2018  
 right: *Discrete Channel with Noise: Algorithmic Painting; Destination #1*, 2018 (Installation view)  
 both: © Clare Strand

and tangible. When I look at the final work I wonder where the missing information has gone in-between the photograph and the painting and subsequently think about the ramifications of data sharing in a wider context.

**AM** *What is the work doing? How does the work engage with its audience?*

**CS** The audience is best asked this question. I can't control how the work is received. I certainly do not expect all my references and research to be brought to bear. It is my hope however that our everyday sender/receiver correspondence is reflected upon. The title *The Discrete Channel with Noise* is named after a chapter of Claude Shannon's extended essay, so there are hints as to where the work is placed. Most interestingly the audience does play an important part in continuing the work, as when they photograph the paintings on their phones and start sharing on networks they start a new cycle and iteration of the project.

**AM** *I am very interested in your method and*

*thought processes. Can you talk about these so our readers can get a glimpse of what goes on in your mind?*

**CS** *The Discrete Channel with Noise* process divides an 'analogue' image into a coding system using numbers 1-10. Each number signifies 10 paint tones between black and white. This code is allocated to 10 images chosen from my archive and read over the phone to me by my husband, whilst I painted (blind to what photo was being transmitted) each numbered tone onto a large piece of paper with a matching grid applied to it. This process was put forward by George Eckhardt in 1936 (pre-internet) as to how we might share images. I made this work whilst I did a residency in Paris - the first time I had been away from my family in 14 years. This seemed a good opportunity to put George Eckhardt's proposition into practice. Through actively being the receiver I am then led to the history of Information Theory and the historical and contemporary issues surrounding the transmission of information and all the references as mentioned above.





above: From the series *Unseen Agents*, *Photism 1.2*, 2013

right: From the series *Conjurations*, *Aerial Suspension*, 2007, both: © Clare Strand

**AM** *Your photographic career has been underpinned by research. You have said that your research method is 'like rolling in the grass and seeing what you pick up on your jumper.' Can you tell our readers how you go about this in researching new works?*

**CS** What I mean is that one might place oneself in an area of interest and then start rolling. When you've gathered enough grass on your jumper or when you can't attract any more detritus— you might like to study what you've acquired. Then perhaps you might start deciding what is of interest and what is not. This is my research process.

**AM** *Unseen Agents is a body of work that explores the supposed psychic emanations from the adolescent child and the often-assumed capacity of the photographic medium to accurately record non-physical phenomena. What is this work about?*

**CS** The work refers in part to the inception of

photography and how it supposedly bore witness to the unseen and the spiritual world. In the late 19th early 20th century many young women and girls for example, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, the Fox sisters, Helen Duncan, Stanisława Tomczyk... seemed precociously aware of how the camera could trick – understanding something that even until now we find hard to comprehend.

**AM** *Did you discover anything about yourself from doing this work?*

**CS** *Unseen Agents* was made in 2003 – I learnt that concept dictates the process. I am not a fan of Aura photography but for the concept of the work it was absolutely necessary to use it. When working in this way you allow the work what it needs and not what you want.

**AM** *Many people have really good ideas for a photography project that they want to explore. Can you describe your creative processes that have helped you to realise your ideas?*





above & right: *From the series, Skirts, 2011, © Clare Strand*

**CS** I would say that to make work you have to have some personal connection. Often, I worry that some make work about topics that are outside of their own experience because the topic is 'right' or fashionable or current. I would advise against this unless you have real insight and expertise. Sometimes photography thinks it can know everything ... but it really doesn't.

**AM** *Can you talk about your 2011 work Skirts which is held in the collections of three major art institutions in the United States? What is this work about?*

**CS** *Skirts* are 10 relatively small images of an assortment of dressed tables in front of a theatrical curtain. To me a typology of table skirts is both absurd and mysterious. The utilitarian use of the table skirt is for me a metaphor for photography, in that photography can be a façade, it can decide what it seen and what is hidden.

**AM** *You also made a photo book about this work with GOST. How did this come about?*

**CS** The book *Skirts* is made of just the 10 skirts images and produced at the same size of the 10x12 prints. Each image is printed with a rich duotone – so there is a real likeness to the original works. The ambition of the book was that the reader could cut out and frame each page and have their own series of the work.

**AM** *There is clearly a philosophical dimension to your work. Can you talk about this?*

**CS** All my work and life (just like everyone's) is about trying to get a grip on an understanding of the world. I don't pretend to have any of the answers but hopefully I can make some problems clearer.

**AM** *Many aspiring photographers are looking for*

*their 'first break' and have their work recognized. From your own experience what would you say to them?*

**CS** Things have changed so much over the years that it might be most advantageous to advise having a high Instagram following (which incidentally I don't have). I think in general I would give the same advice as I was given by the curator Val Williams many many years ago...that is, careers are made of longevity and of making good work ....And whatever you do don't be fashionable...the latter is something that has definitely stuck with me.

**AM** *What do you enjoy doing besides photography?*

**CS** Currently I am teaching myself how to play popular rave music riffs on my daughter's keyboard. My most recent accomplishment is *Insomnia* by Faithless.

*Thank you Clare, it's been a privilege talking to you about your practice and sharing your ideas.*

