

**The London Consortium**  
**Static.** Issue 08 – General

On Jessica Westbrook's *General Assembly*  
By Christien Garcia

<http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue08>

---

© Christien Garcia / Static / London Consortium / December 2008

---

STATIC is the web resource of the London Consortium, a unique collaboration between the Architectural Association, Birkbeck College (University of London), the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Tate. Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

---

The London Consortium – <http://www.londonconsortium.com>  
Architectural Association – <http://www.aaschool.ac.uk>  
Birkbeck College (University of London) – <http://www.bbk.ac.uk>  
Institute of Contemporary Arts – <http://www.bbk.ac.uk>  
Science Museum – <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk>  
Tate – <http://www.tate.org.uk>

Selected from hundreds of images, *General Assembly* consists of eight photographs representing three basic categories: nature, the domestic and the built environment. According to such categories, Westbrook collects and organises images that are edited in postproduction to a point of what she calls 'clinical neutrality.'<sup>1</sup> Logos, brands, markers and emotional inflections are avoided or removed. Framed away from a narrative, the resulting images are both direct and ambiguous. There seems to be a desire to achieve signification by reaching out towards a broader symbolic resonance that associates the photographs according to the authority of communicable yet somewhat 'useless' or unsatisfactory labels. The gold, mirrored glass building which houses the offices of an insurance company, for example, has had its large signage edited away. As a generic professional building, its enforced decoding serves to strengthen its position within a generalised typology of corporate edifice. Westbrook has called this resulting tendency towards categorisation – *nature, domestic, the built environment* – 'the power of general assembly.' Her statement that the photographs are 'neutralised (edited) to their dispassionate core so that they may function more like words or cues than stories' suggests an economy that brings us, perhaps uncomfortably, to the use of stock photography – a commercial sector that, with its reliance on seemingly arbitrary labels to organise its vast stores, is so often the foil to artistic production. Across Westbrook's categories, specific landscapes and subjects may lack the human traces, formal abstraction, subjective judgement and individual sentiment that is typically delivered in curated art, but ultimately they register a differently configured sense of familiarity.

The two 'nature' images perhaps most pointedly suggest the notion that Westbrook's photography is also an attempt to negotiate *against* a blandness that is already there, all around us. The first image shows a tiger standing with an almost affected pose on a small mound in the centre of the frame. With its mouth open and its tail curled, the animal seems almost doctored into place amongst an inharmonious landscape that, with its common and sparse boreal vegetation, reveals the animal's captivity. The second image depicts a paint-by-number landscape painting deposited without explanation on an unkempt turf and lit consciously with artificial light. The means by which the captive animal and the tacky oil painting are approached by Westbrook make strange two orthodox genres of *mise en scène*: the modern zoo and the traditional landscape. According to some accounts, these traditional methods of putting nature into composition have lost their cultural relevancy. The degree to which the advancing technology and commercial distribution of digital and stock photography have affected this change and the way in which the emotional currency of photography is itself changing are two issues that underpin the anxiety evoked by Westbrook's 'cleaned up' work.

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotations: Jessica Westbrook, e-mail messages to author, 27 May & 7 September 2008.

**Westbrook Bio**

Jessica Westbrook is an artist working with photography, video, motion, semiotics, language, and information design. Her projects explore desire by examining cultural cues that have the capacity to register the contradictory aspects of everyday visual culture. Westbrook received her MFA from Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and has exhibited internationally with shows in the USA, China, Sweden, Spain and Portugal.