2003 Third Place Critical Analysis
Disconnect and Self-Isolation in “Tokyo”

Philip-Lorca DiCorcia’s seemingly simple photograph “Tokyo” suggests a sense of loneliness, isolation, or disconnectedness among its human subjects. Because of the ordinariness of the scene, it is easy to imagine that the natural presence of these normal business people alone gives that impression, but, in fact, the deliberateness of DiCorcia’s techniques and camerawork actually emphasizes the portrayal of these naturally-occurring feelings in a way that allows them to be more clearly observed and that gives the scene a certain power of commentary.

DiCorcia makes very clear what portion of the image is within the actual scope of his work. Although an open street is visible behind the office entryway, it is out of focus, and its surface—probably busy with pedestrians and vehicles—is conveniently hidden behind two vans. Using the well-defined rectangular space of the entryway, DiCorcia creates an obvious, finite “stage” which will house the entirety of the “action,” keeping it manageable and easily-comprehendible.

Sharply focused, spotlighted, like the “star” of the “stage,” the woman is the figure who first attracts the curious eye. On first glance, she appears confident and purposeful, firmly gripping the door handle in her hand, ready to enter the building. Any admiration, however, is immediately cut short by the large metal bar blocking half her body. Much of the genius of this photograph lies in camera-positioning, and DiCorcia immediately makes apparent the interplay of character and setting that creates the mood of this piece. Although the woman’s legs are probably frozen in mid-movement, highly suggestive of movement, the doorframe bar covering them mutes the effect and seems to freeze the figure of the woman in place. Likewise, the bar detaches her otherwise decisively straight arm from the more ambiguously postured bulk of her visible body, and she loses some of her air of purposefulness.

The aspect of the “man with the glasses”—the next character in line—markedly contrasts with that of the woman. He stands straight with his arms at his side, his legs barely moving. He is dressed in a silent gray suit. His expression appears subdued; he seems to close himself off to the outside world, withdrawn. Next to and behind him
stand two men, visible only in outline, almost entirely covered by door handles. By now, it becomes apparent: DiCorcia has physically separated his characters with the door frame! Not only are they separated emotionally by their businesslike, self-induced anonymity and inward focus, as evidenced by their expressions, but, from the camera’s point of view they are physically separated as well, further emphasizing their emotional detachment. The two men in back lose their identities completely as they are not only separated from the others but are totally covered by the door handles in front of them.

In light of her surroundings, the lighted woman suddenly appears less determined and more alone. Her expression appears ambiguous, and it looks less like she is entering the door and more like she could, in the context of the photograph, be simply standing or even leaning against the handle. Also, at this point in the viewing, the final character, the man on the inside of the building, becomes more noticeable. In reality, he probably is simply about to exit through the door, but, like the woman’s, his legs—which would suggest the movement of exiting—are blocked, this time simply by camera angle. With only the thinnest sliver of his tilted upper body and turned head appearing in the still life of the photograph, he appears almost like a man looking into a cage of exotic animals, curious about and intent on the spectacle.

The physical separation of the characters by the doorframe combined with the characters’ somber expressions and attitudes seems to contribute to this idea of a cage. Ironically, the “caged” people are on the outside of the office building. Perhaps they are locked into their separate social compartments even before they enter, or perhaps there is some relief on the inside. Obviously, the real-life subjects of the photograph probably did not feel like they were in a physical cage when this photograph was taken, but it is a testament to DiCorcia’s creative skill that he can manage his setting and time his shot to achieve this effect and so effectively physically emphasize the profound emotional separation and lonely individuality of each of his characters.

The emotional effect that DiCorcia creates is fascinating, but equally fascinating is the way he expands the idea of the individual characters’ feelings of disconnectedness to make a statement about the self-centeredness and disconnectedness of urban life in general. If he had simply staged pre-selected human subjects, the photograph may still have inspired the same emotions, but they probably would not be so applicable to everyday life. Instead, DiCorcia captures the random people who walk onto his stage and who could be literally anybody. As random,
anonymous, unidentifiable people filling the broad, general role of “one who works in an office building,” any one of his subjects could be an executive, a secretary or clerk, or even a janitor. Their very unidentifiability makes them easier to identify with on an emotional, human level. These generic people inhabit a generic, business-like setting that to one unfamiliar with Tokyo could be any general area of business. Their isolation becomes the universal isolation of urban workers everywhere.

DiCorcia’s manipulation of camera angle and lighting highlights the emotional expression of his subjects and suggests a theme of urban self-isolation and emotional disconnect. His use of generic, randomly-chosen human subjects and a neutral setting broadens the application of this theme to encompass all large, anonymizing, identity-swallowing industrialized urban centers. In “Tokyo,” a normal, everyday scene seen through DiCorcia’s lens becomes a poignant comment on modern human life.