

# Stuart Bailes

## True Lies

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Photography seems to have a split personality; either a truth teller or a fabulist, matter of fact or dissembling. But this is just a pose. If the lies of the latter are plain – a spectrum that begins with pictorialism and ends with photoshopped thighs – this makes them a bit more honest. Documentary claims are the method by which the greatest falsehoods are advanced: the airbrushing of purged apparatchiks from Stalin-era photographs being just one example. But what about the moon landings? The litany of doubt could go on and on. I may be paranoid but this doesn't mean photography's not out to deceive me.

What separates a photographer from an artist who uses photography? If Steichen wanted to temper the otherwise mechanical view from the camera with a kind of subjective gauze, achieved through expressive blurs on the level of image and tasteful – organic – printing techniques, this approach no longer suffices. The greatest fakers of the digital age use all manner of visual confection to go for the consumer jugular. Today artifice has all but completely collapsed into the professional techniques of the advertising and entertainment industries, leaving some leading proponents of photographic 'art' to either concern themselves with ironic quotation of these methods or to reject them completely. In the late 1960s the second approach brought us a deadpan turn towards the scientific roots of photography in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, a concern taken up in the 1980s by Thomas Ruff and others: a wallowing in serial surfeit of 'fact', monotonous details within a modernist grid – so many impassive gazes from pimpled portrait sitters. In contemporaneous contrast with the latter, Jeff Wall began to examine the implications of the photographic image as a staged tableau. In such pictures 'the dismissal of photographic representation's presumption of veracity is expanded onto the real. At stake is not the inappropriateness of photography to depict real objects; it is the real that is manipulated to increase the unreliability of photographic representation.'<sup>i</sup> Such practice is not a final summary or 'laying bare' of photography's true nature. It is, rather, an exploration of its strange powers. If it freezes living subjects, sucking the life from them, then – by reverse alchemy – it can also enliven dead matter, endowing it with organic semblance. In a similar vein, 'if reproduction makes copies out of originals, installation makes originals out of copies.'<sup>ii</sup> In some of Bailes' photographs the frame effects such transmogrification, applying a perspective that almost documents an unreal place through its monocular record of manipulated studio space and nothing else beyond. In the face of such work the viewer perceives the acute tension between these two fields.

The suggestion of reality in an illusion is uncanny – dumb paper surface seeming landscape; the near vision of a cosmos intentionally hobbled by poor materials brought to the cusp of the viewer's belief but no further. Such is the near-scene of *Tent*. Unlike Thomas Demand and Wall, Bailes does not create theatre sets; he creates half-places – near-somewheres. These environments do not obviously contain everyday accoutrements and so the nature of characters or types who might inhabit them is not in question – the trace of social life, psychological drama, politics and economics cannot be found. But while Bailes' sceneography is devoid of historical texture the artist's own activity is brought into question – standing for the play of creation itself, always provisional and rudimentary when set against the riotous colours of life. The grayscale tones hammer this point home, announcing the counterintuitive truth that artistic creation is less a case of embellishing or complicating manifold reality than it is the performance of reduction. Representational images are exercises in simplifying the world; in diminishing complexity.

With *Tent* we are on unstable ground – an illusion that, in material terms, begins with a three-dimensional construction and ends with a two-dimensional record; a double reduction that de-locates the moment of art, distributing it throughout multiple times and spaces – studio, camera, print and viewer experience. The artist puts it thus – 'the object presence of the image is there, before you, but the photograph is always somewhere else.' In pursuing this strategy Bailes plumbs some of the murkiest waters of our contemporary aesthetics, namely, the ascendance of art documentation as opposed to artworks. According to Boris Groys the content of the former is by definition not art; it 'merely refers to art' and 'makes it clear that art in this case is no

longer present and immediately visible but rather absent and hidden.<sup>iii</sup> He continues: 'art documentation is neither the making present of a past art event nor the promise of a coming artwork but the only possible form of reference to an artistic activity that cannot be represented in other way.'<sup>iv</sup> In this manner, Bailes' art is hidden in plain sight.

Bailes' art documentation requires activation through an act of recognition. To interpret the representational content of *Tent* as a half-place, circumscribed by the logic of architecture, is – strictly speaking – unnecessary; a reduction of possible meaning. The artist has furnished little more than a series of visual suggestions. The piece is, in Bailes' words, 'about decision making, it's about deciding to understand or to not understand' the image according to typologies of the built environment. The distributed moment of illusion – he implies – encompasses the interrogation of the image by the audience and, by extension, the viewer's complicity in the production of its lie. This compact is encapsulated in the title of another of his works, *The Informants* – with its implied tension between disclosure and dissimulation. 'I was asking myself, who informs who?', states Bailes. 'Does the picture tell us something, do we tell the picture something, or do we tell ourselves something?'

The visual content of *The Informants* also speaks to an unresolved conflict between surface and depth in photography. The work is a large-scale black and white print of four colour gels normally used in photo-studio lighting, hanging in pairs against an otherwise plain background – their semi-translucent folds overlapping to produce varied tones. Particular points on the curved skein of these forms have come to gleaming crescendo while reflecting the glare of Bailes' actual studio lamp, and in the areas surrounding these white-outs the materiality of the gels has been revealed through minor surface scratches and other imperfections. With this image, that which might cast something in a certain light has been hoisted on its own petard, cast down from the position of gods-eye into the world it would otherwise reveal. No more effortless mediation for this technical object, it has become – in Heideggerian terms – present-at-hand.

Further works by Bailes also feature similarly useless objects. *Ruin Value* is a monolithic cube of weathered concrete set atop the organic contrast provided by grass and varied foliage. Like other images in this vein, such as *The Empiricist* – a picture of a short wooden log propped up against another pile of logs – the message is inscrutable, the visual information clear but everything else obscure. Rather than opening up a narrative vista – a where, when or why – the latter work's title frames the content as pure data. Empiricism is the foundation of scientific practice, and the view that all rationally acceptable propositions are justifiable only through recourse to experience. For an empiricist, quantifiable perception precedes meaning; a case of 'look first then interpret'. The key question for an empiricist is 'how much information is enough to justify a belief?' Visually speaking, the artist's oeuvre re-iterates this query again and again.

Some of the Bailes formal concerns invoke the visual clarity and geometric sensibility associated with Russian Suprematism – in particular, the work of Kasimir Malevich. The latter artist's abstract compositions of suprematons were rooted in his study of aerial photography. The great reduction of the pictorial world to a Black Square, and in later paintings to a collection of geometric forms, was a function of distance – so many fields (of colour/farmland) inscribed on seemingly endless space. Bailes' *Maps* is imbued with this topographic mood. Its vision from above – and not among – the scene, looking upon the actual from a place of remove, produces ambiguity and dis-identification as much as a transparent overview of the content. As with other works by Bailes, this perspective does not facilitate the viewer's immediate recognition of the things photographed; at the moment of encounter detail is subordinated to a schematic. The viewer can only regain the natural texture of the objects through a sustained act of looking – a visual journey that rewards patience with an inkling of contextual legibility. In his subtle orchestration of this process of recognition, by modulating the print so that just enough detail but no more is available – so that the picture unfolds slowly in the mind's eye after it has already been taken in at a glance – Bailes representational discipline approaches an ethic: Recall the postmodern impasse outlined by Baudrillard in *Simulations* – visualized as a Borgesian map of such detail that it comes to cover the whole globe, obscuring more than it reveals. The incessant current of new photographic images and archives – encapsulated by the omnipresent combination of Google Earth and Google Street View – constitutes a slippery surface; total visual control that lapses into a lack of (human) perspective, perhaps best exemplified by a well known wikileaks video(game-style) murder of journalists and civilians in Iraq – an aerial scene on a black and white screen. The challenge, in our times, is to wrench heimlich back from such hyperreality – paradoxically, to put detail back into our photographic culture. If Bailes' images teach us anything, it is that the topographic documentation obscures countless truths.

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<sup>i</sup> Francesco Manacorda, 'Two-Dimensional Sculpture', p.1.

<sup>ii</sup> 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation' by Boris Groys (trans. Steven Lindberg), *Catalogue to Documenta 11* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), pp 108-114.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.