

Walls of Time

‘Just paint what one sees. So, don't "you" paint what "I" don't see.’

Charles Baudelaire

‘Photography. Will oust painting.’

Gustave Flaubert

‘Photography directs our faith to a single and somehow "deliberate" view and at the same time ‘exhausts’ that view.’

Christian Metz

The two books are not actually books. Both were not published until after the death of their authors. Baudelaire's marvellous work of quotations on Belgium, the modern era, and the extinguished gaze - he noted that the eye of a Belgian resembled that of a fried fish; and Flaubert's unfinished and very puzzling novel ‘Bouvard et Pécuchet’, part two of which was to be called ‘Copie’, though the wonderful ‘Dictionary of Received Ideas’ was all that was ever published of it. Baudelaire's fragment ‘La Belgique déshabillée’ (Stripped Belgium) and Flaubert's novel ‘Bouvard et Pécuchet’ look upon the Spirit of the Future as the laughable, bourgeois foolishness of wanting to constantly re-invent the past to comply with the requirements of progress. Both these texts are concerned with the copy as a process which bears the stamp of the present. Baudelaire cut stereotypes on art out of Belgian newspapers, while Flaubert noted down commonplaces in order to prove that the majorities are always in the right and the minorities always in the wrong.

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler carry out their photographic works, constructions, and stagings with a literary sensitivity that justifies linking the beginning of an appraisal of their still young oeuvre with the names of two great figures of the European modern era. In the works of Hubbard and Birchler books assume an importance which is perhaps best compared to the expectation we harbour now and then when leafing through the pages of good books. Without exception, Hubbard and Birchler's photographs are interwoven with the idea of literary construction and photographic deconstruction, whereby that term is used here unequivocally to mean not destruction but an analytical reflection on the thinking of the event, the fall, and the structuring of decay. From *Noah's Ark* (1992) through *Falling Asleep ... Waking up ..* (1994) to *Falling Down* (1996), *Holes* (1997) and *Stripping* (1998), Hubbard and Birchler pursue moments of spatialised time and the principles of its narrative transposition. Hubbard and Birchler are architects not simply because they design rooms for their works and force time in between walls. In the definite longing evident in their photographic series to lay bare the very construction of these rooms, these refuges, as temporal junctures, they also reveal that they are real handicraft enthusiasts.

In the course of his 'Musée imaginaire' André Malraux once remarks that for the observer the reproduction of the artwork necessarily brings with it an intellectualisation of observation. In its capacity to unreel time in the image, photography, rejected as a mechanistic craft, has despatched the viewer in between times - the time of the photographic exposure itself, and the fallen time of the model, ruined by the image. Irked as to which time his gaze should seek to belong, he falls back on himself.

In the series *Stripping* (1998) rooms are divided, and the gazes of the respective protagonists are aimed at a far distant outside. Indeed, the gazes in the rooms of Hubbard and Birchler are veritably directed. Somewhere a judgement must have been reached, at some point or other, at one moment or other, when the idea for the room was conceived, that is to say, when matter and spirit were brought together cautiously. Perhaps it was a sound, a musical notation that gave rise to the gaze. A woman looks out of a room. The room is divided into an inside and an outside. We see her in her green dress, her eyes focused as if expecting someone to arrive or depart - Baudelaire wrote about the armchairs on platforms in Belgian apartments which enabled one to look out into the world, unseen, via a mirror hung at the window. Has this woman just arrived and removed her jacket, or is she holding the jacket in her hand ready to leave the house? Has she pushed back the curtain (how endlessly long the arm is, so long, that the action seems out of reach) in her longing for an event that might take place? Is she exposing herself to a gaze, or is her expectation to be extended towards a possible encounter in the glow of the light? Perhaps it is only the ritual of a gaze that will never leave these rooms, which reminds us of Emma Bovary's eternal longings or Edward Hopper's lonely interiors. So, 'Stripping'. What or who is being undressed, exposed, dismantled, removed, who is being stripped of what? In this series, the women are robbed of the intimacy of a dwelling, almost as if Asmodeus had removed these roofs or Georges Perec had set his 'User's Manual' in this particular living space. But what is also exposed is the voyeurism hinted at in the title of the work; where nothing is to be concealed from our gaze that could be replaced by a fetish, where we are granted views into rooms which already contain their outside as a projection, where the windows are inaccessible either because they put the threshold between inside and outside space into perspective and so provide us with no insight, or else they present an outside that is boarded up, that is where the apparent distance of the almighty narrator, the luciferous eye, is transformed into the proximity of the observer inside which we would have to assimilate a narrative without beginning or end. We fall for it, and are held by the excitement of the fall, the peripety which at any time can be followed by a catastrophe. When Hubbard and Birchler construct other rooms, they represent actions with a particular uncertainty. This representation has little if nothing in common with a 'tableau vivant'. Were one to designate it as a painting or even by the use of that unhappy term of the photographic tableau, then this view would have to deny the very essence of this construction: the transposition of the narrative time of a development beyond the narrative subject into the photographic time of a continuous end. The 'tableau vivant', the living image, is also misleading. An image is represented and the observer is supposed to explain its

mystery, with the consequence, however, as Goethe remarked in his 'Elective Affinities', 'that what is brought about by the presence of the real is not appearance but a kind of anxious sensation'. This sensation, this fear of a proximity which one would prefer to have at a distance in the representation, accompanies every gaze at a photograph, fully aware of the time that has fallen, decayed in it. Let us repeat once again: photography has nothing at all in common with painting, but an awful lot with literature and music. Of course Hubbard and Birchler's representations reflect, but not for the sake of presenting a past, at least not a past that would ever have been granted a present. However, their photographic series do question the logic of representation.

In *Falling Down* (1996) objects slip out of their grasp - fall out of hands. It is not clear whether the hands willingly surrender the shoes, book, money, cup or wig to the fall, or whether they want to protect them from the fall and save them. The gestures would seem to allow both possibilities; we see neither a gaze that follows their fall, nor a floor which would put an end to it. The depth of the rooms is created by means of projections, so that the story is already in the image. The fall itself seems like a delaying moment in the whole dramatic build-up. In photography, the light of time, it is indifferent whether a wig or a person falls. Metonymically, each fall becomes an existential question. Caught up in that instant when, as children, we press the delayed action shutter release and, full of anticipation about what is to come, rush into the camera's field of vision so as to seal our fate in the image, the moment is divided into an arrival and a departure; memory is anticipated in the 'future perfect'. The catastrophe will always have already taken place in the photograph, and we are the protagonists in its re-telling. What falls in the rooms created here falls into the idea of space itself - the coffee cup in the kitchen, the book in the library. Hubbard and Birchler handle the complex network of references as if in each image they were building up a world into which we plunge, although our fall is already contained in the rooms. Indeed, the rooms owe their construction solely to our fall. It would be hard to speak of a tautology, but in the principle of duplication, perhaps even of the copy, the artists have deliberately obstructed our gaze at the transcendental horizon.

The series *Holes* (1997) provides views of physical poses from the strangest angles. Here too we see no gazes. It is the gestures of the glimpsed body fragments alone, especially the position of the hands, that allow us to assume a contemplative or expectant attitude on the part of the people in question, who would seem to have been photographed almost secretly. These 'holes' not only duplicate the photographic principle of photographing from out of something into something, they also disappoint that longing to arrive somewhere beyond through the gaze. Here, man is the mediator in a 'scopic' field. The gaze directed (or should one say 'caught') from a concealed point on a bookshelf meets another bookshelf, or a screen, through torn wallpaper or canvas, etc. What is caught sight of in this way is divided. The 'peephole' is only half filled by a person. The other half throws the gaze back to its origins, as it were; the gaze is returned. In this series Hubbard and Birchler have again achieved a wonderful transposition,

depicting a lack in an almost chaotic abundance. And, as we know, at the roots of the child's need for a substitute is the fear of a lack. The subject that would like to substitute the phallus 'focuses its gaze on something close by' (Christian Metz). Here the hands become a fetish, the photographic perspective a 'mise-en-abyme' of psychological processes of sublimating, locating, and supplementing a loss. These semantically stringent cycles are moved not by the loss of a place but by the staged, photographic marking of that loss as the loss of a place that is psychological, non-localisable. The works of Hubbard and Birchler do not work with illusions that would be due to the most perfect illusionism possible, but with hallucinations that treat loss as if it were sublated in a presence which that loss itself completes.

Despite all their scepticism about this medium of naturalistic imitation, Flaubert and Baudelaire might have discovered in Hubbard and Birchler a spirit that, with a formally intransigent coherence, sent the notion of representation - as the notion of a symbolic springboard into the present - packing. 'Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère!'

Hubertus von Amelnunxen

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