

"You Should Have Stayed in Your Room!"¹

**Recalling Rooms: Stories and Architecture in the Photographs of
Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler**

The viewing of photographs and architectural scale models provides a quite specific pleasure, one different from Barthes' existentialist shudder of 'ça-a-été'². This pleasure may depend, first, on the analog character of the photograph (in contrast to the digital images of television and the computer), which - according to the French theoretician JeanMarie Schaeffer - lies in the fact that reality is a physical imprint on the film emulsion.³ The pleasure, on the other hand, could also arise from satisfying one's own playfully mimetic penchant for having a, so to speak, domesticated model of reality at one's command. Both phenomena, the scale model and the photograph, are subject to an economy of visual reproductiveness and respect the authority of the regarding eye. Because these phenomena represent details sliced from an uncontrollable continuum - whether it is 'life', the 'course of time' or 'nature' - they are related to the way a theater functions. In the auditorium, as it were, bent over a photograph or a scale-model, the viewer gets his pleasurable kicks from watching the mechanisms of the performance, the act of imitation and the buildup of perspective that isolate, fixate and manipulate single elements from this continuum.

Such pleasure, however, was regarded with suspicion by the naturalism of the modernist art that dominated the 1950s on into the 1980s. The idea of representation - whether in the form of photography, script or narrative - was a thorn in the side of an art that stubbornly pursued its own 'essence', that claimed to be what it seemed, that regarded its fulfillment to be the exploitation of its medium. The delight in mimesis was seen as trivial, for it contradicted the ideology of originality and uniqueness on which the modernist idea of art was founded. In this context the viewer's whereabouts became increasingly problematic. His existence disturbed the logic of 'l'art pour l'art' as much as the physical presence of the initiating artist impaired the autonomy of his work. While the signature of the artist disappeared from the surface of the picture during the 1950s, a special fate was reserved for the viewer in the 1960s; he was 'activated'. Instead of art's forbidden 'theatrics', Minimal Art set up the mystery of 'participation'.

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, as do other artists of the 90s, know how to 'activate' this mystery to their own purpose, by linking the question as to the location of the viewer with the mechanisms of representation. Like few artists of their generation, they also know how to tie in the (for art) rediscovered narrative potential of photography with the ambivalent allure of models. After they had attracted quite a bit of attention in 1993 with their dioramas, such as *On Loan from the Museum in Us* and *Fox and Hare*, they then in 1994 put on exhibit for the first time a photographic reproduction of a life-size mock-up of a forest path called *Shortcut*. It is based on *Noah's Ark* from 1992, which was a series of three

black and white photographs that show the two artists laboriously putting together a diorama of *Noah's ark*. In *Noah's Ark* they are dressed in the white coats of operators - that is, they operate a device that they are not quite in control of. Like the viewer, the artists can never fully take in the 'original' they are working on. Whether they have invented it all, are copying something already in existence or are executing a given program for an hourly wage is insignificant; in fact, it is a question that cannot even be answered. The artists, as part of an economy of visual reproductive means, are sitting in the same boat as the viewers.

Since then, Hubbard and Birchler have concentrated for the most part on such photographic reproductions of scenes that they construct in their studio, partly with themselves as subjects or with the participation of professional actors. In this way they succeeded in dramatically condensing the epic breadth of the diorama and, instead of the diffuse 'activation' of the viewer, formulated the question as to his physical positioning. In series such as *Falling Down* (1996) and *Holes* (1997) they continued this strategy. Against artificial-looking, technicolor backgrounds, they staged a sequence of incidents that seem to recall old films that one has, in fact, never seen. Like the props that the protagonists let fall, the viewer finds himself in an interpretational state of free fall. All the objects narrate the first stage of a story whose end remains open. The things to which the viewer would like to attach meaning slip just as irrevocably through his fingers as do the cups, shoes and dollar bills from the actors'.

The latest series of their large-scale color prints carries the title *Stripping*. The single shots within the loosely connected sequence show a protagonist in an architectural setting. The title is, as in many of their works, intentionally ambiguous. 'Stripping' can refer to taking off your clothes just as well as to clearing out rooms, scraping off paint and, even in a metaphorical sense, uncovering levels of meaning. In contrast to the scenarios of Jeff Wall, whose work the artists who studied in Canada have built on, Hubbard and Birchler's pictures do not show the spectacular culmination of an action, but rather the moments of ambivalence and transition. While Wall refers to the traditional canons of high art and profits from the effect produced by the reactivation of long suppressed styles such as genre scenes, history painting and landscape, Hubbard and Birchler's work pertains to the trivial culture and the individual memories that elude aesthetic standardization. While Wall's position as an all-knowing, all-seeing creator behind the camera, i.e., outside of the picture frame, is unambiguously fixed in front of the stage, Hubbard and Birchler behave like agents; they appear alternatively before, behind and on the stage and simultaneously assess the overall impression while manually seeing to the details of the scenery. The viewers are not, as in Wall's assemblages, presented with a *fait accompli* and surprised by the effect of the staging, so as to be, in legitimate minimalist tradition, activated yet again. They are witnesses to the construction of illusion. They are close to the action without being in the situation of voyeurs, for the presence of the agents are ever tangible. As if the viewers had arrived too soon and burst in on a rehearsal, it remains unclear if the poses in *Stripping* are definitive, if the scene is complete, if the actors are alone on the stage

or stand in relation to other (unseen) figures. Have they just climbed through the window into the house or are they stealthily leaving it? Are they holding their ear anxiously to the floor to eavesdrop or are they themselves the intruders? Are they entering these rooms for the first time or are they returning to their childhood home? Are they threatened or do they do the threatening? Like the characters in Luigi Pirandello's play, 'Six Characters in Search of an Author', the actors, the props, the backdrops and the title function as elements in countless potential plots whose outcome can neither be fixed by the authors, the actors nor the spectators.

The viewers are supported in their reading of the photographs in *Stripping* by the horizontal and vertical black 'strips', which are the shadowy, unlit front edges of the staging that jut into the picture. The architecture literally becomes the frame. With these strips Hubbard and Birchler have divided the stage architecture into different rooms. As such, they suggest potential 'developments' in time, similar to the barred lines of a comic strip. And last but not least, the strips point to the fictionality of artificially constructed backdrops in the sense of Brecht's epic theater. However, what is at issue for the artists is less allowing the spectator to 'reveal' the mechanisms of illusion in a modernist sense, than showing these mechanisms to advantage in a playful and amusing manner. Which is similar to the way Alfred Hitchcock in his film, 'Rope' (1948), periodically aimed the camera at dark surfaces to 'hide' what was quite visible to the movie-goer - the cuts.

Their photo series make architecture once again the center of Hubbard and Birchler's interest. The almost anonymous authorship of architecture, its constantly changing functions, its exposure to climatic, historical and economic change, as well as the long building process carried out by various agents, makes it a sensitive indicator of history and a highly complex object for the visual arts in the 1990s. We need to recall that, with the exception of environments and happenings, architecture had nothing to contribute to modernist art up into the early 60s. Its artificiality did not sit well with the naturalism of modernist art. It was only allowed to function as the scene for synaesthetic utopias. Ever since, and especially in the recent past, it has resurfaced with all the vehemence of the long suppressed. Its reappearance went almost unremarked, where it has long formed part of the terrain of an altered artistic practice. Like a stage set, it stands in the background and yet imperceptibly affects the actions that go on within it. On its walls, traces of the occupants are preserved as are the imprints of reality on film emulsion. For *Small Town* (1990), one of their first works in collaboration, Hubbard and Birchler installed in a vacant building in a small Canadian town a series of used doors in such a way that an homage was created, so to speak, to Gordon Matta-Clark's 'Open House' - a labyrinth of rooms. In *Contestants in a Birdhouse Competition* (1991/96) the artists started with a photograph from the 1920s showing a group of children with their handmade birdhouses. The two artists then reconstructed these houses from the photo and posed as participants in the contest. They surrendered themselves to the child-like, mimetic pleasure of reproducing something from a photograph and, at the same time, deconstructed the traditional pretense of an artist to be one who

constantly invents, that is, one who stands above the story. And *Noah's Ark*, under closer scrutiny, does in fact not show a ship, but more a giant house, made ready to embark on a voyage.

With photography, Hubbard and Birchler have found a medium that corresponds optimally with their subject. The long drawn-out process of studio construction is countermanded by the rapid mechanical reproductiveness of the photograph. The reduction of the narrative flow to single photographs is balanced by the openness of the interpretive contexts. And the sculptural substantiality of the diorama is countered by the temporariness of the model. The doors have been left wide open.

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1 Franz Kafka, *Der Prozess*,
Frankfurt a. M: Fischer Taschenbuch
Verlag, 1980, S. 8.

2 Vgl. Roland Barthes, *La chambre
claire. Notes sur la photographie*,
Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, Gallimard,
Seuil, 1980, S. 120.

3 Vgl. Jean-Marie Schaeffer,
*L'image précaire. Du dispositif
photographique*, Paris, Editions du
Seuil, 1987, S. 16- 20.