

Taking Pictures on Shaky Ground

(response to Walead Beshty's post on LACMA's Pictures Without Words)

In a most fascinating set of historical and quotational twists and turns, from Barthes to Malevich to Star Trek, Beshty lays out a meandering path that strangely culminates and resonates most profoundly, for me, in the last paragraph – a hope for photographic practice to be found in embracing an in-between space, what German urban planner Thomas Sieverts has termed 'zwischenstadt', literally meaning between the urban and the country. Although I will engage with this notion more later on, it is important to first mine Beshty's thoughtful reckoning with various art histories, laying bare a surprising assumption of a sort of grand theoried master narrative at work in the heart of historical image production. It seems a reflection that leaves us at a loss, singing to institutional choirs and fighting discursive windmills, finding ourselves staring down the nihilistic failure of "this has been" of photography itself.

Beshty is clearly questioning the weight of a heavy-handed history of image making that has informed and molded him and his practice, as it has most of ours who have gone through the professionalizing process of the medium in our various art school careers. However, throughout his essay, there reads a progressive building up of the assumed monumentality of theoried discourse as the dictation of practice as opposed to the supporter of an image making practice. It is this assumption that there ever was (or is) a dictating authority that seems an engaging point to start talking about the chicken and the egg scenario in this schism between theory and practice, a schism that weighs down many contemporary artists I know.

Perhaps the hardest thing to acknowledge is that such monumentality and authority that has dictated art/image historical presumptions is no longer as valid, and that whatever agency there is in the production of photographs must now be claimed at a time more uncertain, theoretically or otherwise, then at any point in our art historical past. Taking pictures on shaky ground is far more difficult than answering the call of scientific, political or theoretical 'truths'. I am not saying, of course, that there aren't elements of these motivations that feed into why we do what we do, but there no longer seems to be such singularity of purpose or passionate hold. Such disappointed relationships and nostalgic nods to a more utopian past have already been explored by the likes of early Sam Durant and described at length in Beshty's article. Finding ourselves embedded in this critical moment in photography with the total dissolution of an assumed 'real', parallels exist with what painting went through with the image in the late 70s and early 80s and the demise of high modernism. Of course, from a contemporary perspective, this past seems grounded and linear, and is edited as needed in an attempt to interpret historical trends among a set of mitigating circumstances. But the question is, after breaking apart what doesn't quite apply anymore, what are the other options available? What is the exit before the last exit?

One "seductive promise" offered by Beshty is that of materialist critique. At certain moments I question if this recent turn to abstraction is simply a retreat into materiality. It isn't totally, of course. A whole world of work that is self-conscious of its medium-ness has burst onto (or been rediscovered) by the scene, with a push towards the concreteness of the material as a possible alternative to the almost existential crisis of representation, institutional critique and postmodernism. Embracing notions of making "pictures more picture-like" is one avenue that image-making has recently tended, from Beshty's large scale photograms and whacked out, x-rayed negatives, to Elad Lassry's use of frames that reference perfectly slick commercial images, to James Welling's long standing dance with photographicness to Eileen Quinlan's smoke and mirrors.

However, what I find more compelling than this self-reflexivity is the direction Beshty turns in his final paragraph, laying out the potential to be found in in-between spaces, describing "infrastructural interstitial zones" that "stand as compromised, indeterminate way stations

between chimerical destinations"; arguing for uncoded and unprocessed space as a momentary place of hope - a potential autonomous zone where authorship and origin are set aside. But how to actualize this?

Along with Deleuze & Guattari, interrogating the potential of these interstitial spaces was mined by the German urban planner and theorist Thomas Sieverts in the late 90s, coining the term 'zwischenstadt', literally translated as between the urban and the country, "between the place as a living space and the non-places of movement." Although Sieverts' premise has an architectural and planning basis, a possible application of the theory resonates profoundly for art-making and writing, and is for me pointedly appropriate to the problematics of photography and its relation to my interests in (the fiction of/violation of) documentary, mapping and its resulting imaginary.

So a critical question presents itself - how does this theoretical or aesthetics space refer or have relation to real space, especially in regards to photography? A recent project exploring the possibility of playing with these ideas (and not just photographically) is manifested with Suddenly: Where We Live Now, a project spearheaded by inspired curator Stephanie Snyder and mischievous bon vivant and author Matthew Stadler. Culminating in a traveling exhibition, public programs and publication (see www.suddenly.org and web.reed.edu/gallery/), the entirety of the project attempts to find "new ways" and "new descriptions that give the landscape where we live an independent identity in the imagination of its occupants," proposing a new engagement to displace traditional binary notions of "the city" and "the countryside". Just as Beshty concludes with momentary openings as possible trajectories away from traditional dialectics of either/or thinking, whether in utopian/apocalyptic thinking or in the political/formalist opposition, Suddenly attempts to unravel the authoritative presumptions of mapping and land use, literally and metaphorically. And perhaps it is here, with such active experiments - as when, in a real-time affair called the Backroom, Thomas Sieverts and Aaron Betsky are in conversation about transitional space as we're all eating gourmet Thai food, arguing about how images and the imaginary function, dripping wet at dusk in the rain, under a temporary structure/autonomous zone in an almost abandoned parking lot a half an hour outside of town a weekend-long symposium about this very question of spaces between - that it is here, when theory is stripped of its monumentality and included in the active and lived construction of meaning, that it can take a more appropriate place as reflector of the artistic condition as opposed to determinant of the artistic act.