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uta barth

Uta Barth's recent project examines the conventions of photographic presentation. Over the past three years she has created two series, *Ground and Field*, which consist of blurred images generated by focusing the camera on an unoccupied foreground. These unframed, empty images present only background information, implying the absence of subject and referring to the function of images as containers of information. The untitled images of *Ground* show landscapes and interiors and make reference to the compositional conventions of still photography and painting. The images in *Field*, Barth's latest series, mimic cinematic framing conventions in a subtle query of the visual structures that imply movement or activity in the foreground.

Sheryl Conkelton: In each of your series, beginning with your earliest work, you have explored the formal and cultural conventions of image making, drawing attention to problematic aspects encountered in the production of imagery and in the reading/response to it. Your early work was confrontational in its conception and its presentation; I'm thinking about the early photographs of you under an interrogating gaze that were shown at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) as well as the mix of optical illusion, abstraction and photographed vignettes from the Untitled series shown in *Deliberate Investigations* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1989. The *Ground* series is much more seductive (as are the *Fields*). Would you talk about your moving from a somewhat aggressive stance in the earlier series to this more unified and quieter imaging in the latest series, and about the affect on the viewer you are exploring?

Uta Barth: Actually the shift was not dramatic. One body of work literally grew out of the other. The very first "background" images appeared within the groupings you mention, juxtaposed with optical painting, large monochromatic fields of color and other photographs. I became very interested in them and started a separate series of landscape backgrounds which were based on vernacular conventions/snapshot photography of people in front of scenic landscapes. At that time I had made a very conscious decision to produce several projects that were formally quite different yet linked by addressing different aspects of vision, thereby bringing the activity of looking to the foreground as the common denominator. I wanted these three formally and structurally quite different projects to be exhibited simultaneously so it would be evident that the territory of the work was at the point of intersection. Previously people tended to get easily lost by the formal aspects of my work or became preoccupied by reading a certain "politic of the gaze" as the overpowering and singular "meaning," and I wanted to confuse and complicate that reading and shift into larger questions that could cover more territory. At a certain point I felt that the background images, in and of themselves – in a much simpler way – did what I wanted my work to do for a long time: they quite literally inhabit the space between the viewer and the piece hanging on the wall and they do transfer one's visual attention beyond the edges of the picture, onto the wall it is hanging on, into the room as a whole, to the light in the room and even outside again... Their scale and composition is vaguely familiar, reminiscent of other pictures we may know. I am interested in the quietness of the new work and how that allows these associations to be noticed.

Conkelton: The spectator plays a very active role in arriving at/determining meaning for your work. Could you elaborate on that role in terms of what you intend as well as the larger (aesthetic or philosophical) significance of the viewer's participation?

Barth: It seems to me that the work invites confusion on several levels, and that "meaning" is generated in the process of "sorting things out." On the most obvious level, we all expect photographs to be pictures of something. We assume that the photographer observed a place, a person, an event in the world and wanted to record it, point at it. There is always something that motivated the taking of a photograph. The problem with my work is that these images are really not of anything in that sense, they register only that which is incidental and peripheral implied. Instead, there are some clues to indicate that what we are looking at is the surrounding

information. (The images lack focus because the camera's attention is somewhere else. Many of the compositions, while clearly deliberate and carefully arranged in relation to the picture's edge, are awkward, off balance and formally suggest a missing element.) Slowly it becomes clear that what we are presented with is a sort of empty container and it is at that point that people begin to "project" into this space. It begins to read as an empty screen. A second aspect might be that many people relate to the pictures in terms of memory. They are pretty saturated with the formal conventions of portraiture and one has a sense of inescapable familiarity when looking at them. What comes to mind is an entire inventory of other pictures seen. The point of engagement that perhaps interests me the most, though, has to do with one's perceptual reorientation in relation to the pictures when trying to decode the space described. If the "subject" is not fixed within the image on the wall, but instead is indicated to be in front of that, then the "location" of the work hangs somewhere between the viewer and the wall, in that empty space we are looking through. In some images, when you locate the camera's point of focus, you will find it to be that of an extreme closeup. The location of the implied subject is pushed so far forward that it aligns itself with the very place one is standing in front of the picture. So suddenly the imagined "subject" and the viewer are standing in the same place. The dynamic brings to mind one of the traditional questions raised about minimalist art: what has happened to the subject/where is the subject located when you are looking at an empty room or a seemingly blank wall? The answer, of course is that the viewer is the subject in/of this work.

Conkelton: I am interested in the notion of confusion, in its usefulness – even power – as a mechanism that triggers or motivates a viewer's response. I think it relates to minimalism, too, in this way: that minimal art proposes that a viewer relocates her or his self in relation to the object and its space, presenting a confrontation or a confusion of subject and object.

Barth: A certain kind of confusion or questioning is the starting place of confronting much of the work. Certain expectations are unfulfilled: expectations of what a photograph normally depicts, of how we are supposed to read the space in the image, of how a picture normally presents itself on the wall (contained and enclosed by a frame that demarcates the area of interest and separates it from all that surrounds it in the room), etc. This kind of questioning and reorientation is the point of entry and discovery, not only in a cognitive way, but in an most visceral, physical and personal sense. Everything is pointing to one's own activity of looking, to an awareness and sort of hyper-consciousness of visual perception. The only way I know how to invite this experience is by removing the other things (i.e., subject matter) for you to think about. I think all of this adds up to the conflation of subject and object that you are asking about.

Conkelton: I also think that the confusion/relocation of subject is key to the work in terms of actual and discursive spaces that the pieces work in. I am interested in the oscillation of "subject," or more precisely, in the relocation of the meaning between photography's referential, phenomenological aspect and its discursive, ontological aspect. In both the Ground and Field series there are multiple possibilities: to respond to the photographs as images of something, as objects in a room with particular visual and physical relationships, and as critical inquiry into the nature of photographic reproduction and its limits. I see this tension as a site of engagement and power in your images. There is also an effective tension in the relationship of your images to abstract painting in terms of a shared formal character. That is obviously intentional. Is there a particular aspect, whether it is a subversion of expectation or even a reference to past conceptualizations about these media – painting and photography – that is compelling to you?

Barth: I think the relationship to abstract painting exists most in the interiors. I am not sure how intentional this was at the outset of the project, but at a certain point I realized that my process of selecting, framing and composing these photographs which had no central subject shared much of the territory of, and produced pictures that look similar to, certain minimalist, abstract painting. It is an odd intersection of two projects that at a certain point share a similar investigation. I am interested in this intersection and what it may tell us about the relationship of the two. I obviously invite and acknowledge it, by even the titling of the work: "ground" as in foreground/background, but also figure/ground or even the physical material/surface a painting is

made on. I am interested in looking at the interplay between these photographs and particular issues of painting, but I am not using one medium to simply reenact the qualities and characteristics of another. It is not my project to make photographs that "look just like paintings." I think the idea of producing photographs that would simply imitate, mimic or in other ways aspire (implying some odd hierarchy) to be "just like paintings" would be rather problematic and pointless. I know that this is an aside to what you are asking about, but it might be a place to address a related question about all of the Ground and Field pieces which I hear frequently. What I am thinking about is the reading and description of the use of blur in my work as "painterly." I think this is quite inaccurate. Blur, or out-of-focusness due to shallow depth of field, is an inherent photographic condition; actually it is an inherent optical condition that functions in the human eye in exactly the same way it does in a camera lens. It is part of our everyday vision and perception, yet for the most part we are not very aware of it, as our eyes are constantly moving and shifting their point of scrutiny. We do not "see" it unless we make a conscious effort to observe the phenomenon. The camera can "lock-in" this condition and give us a picture which allows us to look at (and focus on) out-of-focusness.

Conkelton: I'd like you to talk about the superficial resemblance of your work to some of Gerhard Richter's efforts: it seems to me (and to others) that Richter is interested in the spectacle of the photographic image of paint and in the reproduction of reproduction, and in the critique of modernism implicit in both these things, whereas your work has always been tied to an investigation of the physiological act of seeing — more immediate, about sensation and allusion; about locating oneself in relation to the work and then to a conceptualization that is not necessarily critique. Would you talk about these ideas?

Barth: I get asked about Richter very often, and while I am a great admirer of his work I am not sure that I can see much, if any, relationship in what we are doing. The comparison is always based on the use of blur, on a similar look to the work. I do think we each end up with this for very different reasons. In my work much of the information in the picture is out of focus because what is depicted in the image lies behind the camera's plane of focus. This has been a device for indicating a foreground, for implying the information not depicted and for lifting that plane off the wall toward the viewer. I think that originally Richter's use of blur came about through creating numerous generations of source material, working from photographs that had been printed in newspapers, then Xeroxed, often repeatedly. The information of the original image became more and more diffuse with each generation and he hung on to the look of that in the paintings, even exaggerating it more. The primary effect of this blurriness in both of our work is that the image becomes generalized, almost generic. Specificity of time and place drop away and one starts to think about the picture, as much as what it is of. I think Richter and I are both making pictures of and about other pictures. I have never been interested in making a photograph that describes what the world I live in looks like, but I am interested in what pictures (of the world) look like. I am interested in the conventions of picture making, in the desire to picture the world and in our relationship, our continual love for and fascination with pictures. I want my work to function on two levels: to elicit the sense of familiarity of looking at an image that has the structures and conventions of a history of picture-making embedded in it, to make you aware of that, and at the same time to shift your attention to the very act of looking (at something) to your own visual perception in that particular moment, in the particular place that you are viewing the picture in. These two things are related.

As far as your question about a "critique of modernism," I think that this critique is so deeply embedded (and embraced) in much of the work that I see being made these days, but it is seldom at the forefront. Maybe it is an argument that has been made, something that we know and work within at this point in time. In looking back it appears that some of the dividing lines between modernism and postmodernism are blurring and some of the areas of investigation that were thrown out are being revisited and rethought. Even thinking about Richter's work, it seems to me that his current painting, in its choice of subject matter, is moving through an archive of what I see as quintessential German imagery, German cultural iconography... I read this as an analysis, an act of collecting and examining, of listing, but not necessarily as a critique.

Conkelton: An important aspect of your work, particularly in the images of interiors in the Ground series, is affected by site-specific installations that recreate the relationship of image and exhibition space. This concern in some way overrides the conceptualization of the images as containers. Do these interiors, in fact, function very differently from the landscapes in the Ground and Field series?

Barth: Yes, I think you are absolutely right about that. The interiors, by sort of laying claim to all of the surrounding space, indite the whole environment, whatever room they are shown in, as part of the work. The project becomes architectural in some sense and, I think, to some degree the space itself becomes the piece and functions as the site of engagement. The Field s are very different in this way. They line up on the wall, in the same scale and screenlike format, spaced irregularly in a way to give the empty wall area as much importance as the actual pieces. They are clearly pictures of other places, outdoor scenes and at best double as a screen within the gallery environment. They are more optical, do not have a static composition of the Ground s, and imply movement both by the camera and whatever activity that is motivating the image. One has a sense of being made aware of one's peripheral vision, of what you see when you turn your head toward something, of what you might see while in motion.

Conkelton: How do you choose your subjects for the individual pictures. Do you have an actual (existing) film image or photograph in mind? Are you working from a typological model (for which you might have a list of types of images that you are trying to exhaust)? Or is it more intuitive and experiential?

Barth: The first images of the Ground series were chosen by seeking out the stereotypical, vernacular, visual vocabulary of what might constitute an ideal scenic or picturesque backdrop. They are almost a listing and reenactment of the most commonly found choices. Most of the images in this series are of nature, some are based on the backdrop conventions of portrait-studio photography – but even there most of the references, while sometimes abstracted, are still of an idealized nature (as in the mottled blue seamless background paper used in yearbook and drivers license pictures to mimic a sunny blue sky). The references to existing images in the interior works become much more subtle. At a certain point of that project, I realized that one of the images I had made (Ground #30) had the exact same proportions, layout of the room and quality of light as that of a Vermeer painting [The Milk Maid , 1658-60] that I had spent much of my life looking at. This was unintentional on my part when I made this photograph, but it seemed that Vermeer was the perfect subtext for this body of work, and as a reference I made an additional image in the series [Ground #42] which included, in the background, the two small Vermeer reproductions I had grown up with in my home. I have obviously spent much time looking at various periods and styles of portrait painting and photography, ranging from the very self-consciously posed to casual family snapshot images. Early black-and-white Hollywood glamour photography is very interesting for example. Many of these images were made on white sets and the information in the background was created purely through the use of light and shadow. The shadows were often cast by objects and simple geometrical shapes arranged to create some kind of compositional balance in relation to the individual posed for the picture, and these objects are not visible in final photograph. Many of the recent interior images I have made consist almost exclusively of shadow information.

Some other pieces are loosely based on observed imagery that has been overused to impart meaning through context: the large bookcase behind the seated interviewee imparts intellectual authority, the woman posed by the spray of cherry blossoms assumes their beauty and fragility...once you become aware of these clichés you see them everywhere, in the pictures of authors found inside book jackets, on the evening television news and interview programs, etc. These are very clumsy ways to assign meaning. I find them amusing and interesting and have used them in several images of my own. The images in the Field series work much the same way. Most are based on some visual device I have observed in a film, but they are not literal recreations of a particular scene. I think I do have certain styles of filmmaking in mind when I go out to photograph. I end up driving around various neighborhoods of the city looking for a place that is general, neutral enough to not interfere or visually compete with what might take place in the foreground...it is kind of like location scouting. It is not random: I am definitely looking for a place that has very particular, "atmospheric" characteristics.

Conkelton: Many of your installations of works from the recent series are predicated on an ensemble of images working within the confines of a particular space, and you are now in fact working on two projects in which you work very directly with a specific space. How do you proceed with a site-specific project in terms of creating or selecting the images that it comprises?

Barth: The 1994 exhibition at domestic setting [a Los Angeles gallery] was the beginning of the interior project and it was a site-specific piece. This gallery existed in an empty house, and many of the early interior images were photographs made in and for this space. Much of the show consisted of photographs that were pictures of the very wall they were hanging on and the series as a whole was designed for that space. I imagined the space as a home and made pieces that would double for the kind of pictures one might find there. Therefore all of the pieces from this series are different sizes and formats. They were hung in small clusters and pairings throughout the house, in corners and hallways, above the fireplace, much as a collection of family portraits and other pictures might exist in a home. When pieces from this project were installed in other exhibition sites like the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, or the Rooseum in Sweden, they still retained some site-specific quality. Most empty corners and doorways do look alike, so when a picture of a corner is moved to a new space it still tends to read as relating to that particular location. Recently I was commissioned by the Wexner Center to make a work based on their exhibition space, which is a very visually assertive building by Peter Eisenmann. I looked at many floor-plans and photographs of the space before I flew out to see it, and when I spent some time inside the galleries I decided that what I wanted to do was not so much reiterate or even address the overt aspects of the architecture, but instead find a way to articulate the space the viewer would occupy in this very spectacular kind of building. I wanted to find a way to redirect the attention. The piece is simple and consists of three very large photographs of two opposing walls in the north gallery. Two images depict the empty exhibition wall and part of the glass work rising above. The third image is of the opposing wall and it includes, at the very edge, a partial view of a pillar which is located in the center of the gallery space. This pillar is the only information that is depicted in sharp focus in these photographs, thereby articulating the center of the gallery space – the place where you might stand to view the art or the building – as the arena of investigation. The end result of the piece is that these three large photographs of empty walls are actually pointing at and describing the center of the room.

Conkelton: What other projects are you working on now that expand the themes we've been talking about or move you in a new direction?

Barth: Looking back, I find all of this work linked by an interest in visuality and perception. Light has been a theme throughout: in early instances it appears as invasive, interrogational and blinding. In more recent images it is atmospheric and all engulfing. My primary project has always been in finding ways to make the viewer aware of their own activity of looking at something (or in some instances, someone.) The highly optical pieces did this in a rather jarring, confrontational way – inviting voyeurism and at the same time hindering or frustrating your ability to see and decipher an image; the current work by straining your perception of things that are barely visible, in some instances depicting pure light itself. For many years now I have been collecting pictures in which the background interests me, sometimes for purely formal and compositional reasons, at other times because the type of location or subject matter or even some odd relationship occurs between background and subject. Mostly I find them in newspapers and magazines and I cut and crop out the section of interest to me and pin it to my studio wall. I have never directly recreated or reproduced any of these found pictures, but have made images based on them. Recently I have become very interested in this collection of small clippings in and of themselves. They have served as source material, yet function in a very interesting way on their own. Most of them include a small section of a figure that has been cut away. They have a shoulder, a hand or part of a face at the very edge, but because of the way I have cut them, the center of the pictures, the place we are trained to look at, is now empty. I am currently working with a small collection of these images which started out as notes and source material and using them in a recently published small sketchbook-like portfolio.

This interview was conducted between mid-August and November 1996.

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