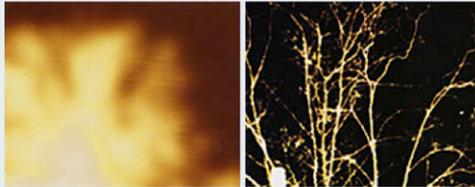


**Spanning Time:
A conversation with Uta Barth**



Uta Barth, Untitled (Ground Nr. 9)
1992-93, Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

In terms of contemporary photography, Uta Barth occupies a unique artistic position. The photographer's often blurry images of trees, streets, and empty spaces are less concerned about documenting her environment or saying something about herself. On the contrary: Barth eliminates every clear hint that could relate something about the theme or story of her photographs. Instead, she poses a far greater challenge to herself in truly attempting to see. Cheryl Kaplan spoke to the Los Angeles-based photographer about her work.



Uta Barth, Untitled (02.12), 2002,
Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

In the film *Buffalo 66*, the actor [Vincent Gallo](#) has just left prison. We see him hopping a bus, then looking out a window. Before we know it, he's sitting behind the wheel of someone else's car in a parking lot, not moving. Minutes go by like hours... even the girl sitting next to him wants to know what he's doing. At last he snaps: "I'm spanning time, just spanning time."



Uta Barth, Untitled (00.1), 2000
Deutsche Bank Collection

"Staggered and discontinuous time" starts and stops in [Uta Barth's](#) photographs. She splendidly isolates the familiar and then re-activates what's been set apart through photographic sequences. Images add up and diminish, forming trial separations that are at times diagrammatic, at times scaled to catch a sideways glance.

Unlike film and most photography, Barth purposefully eliminates as many references to the world as possible. Most discussions of her work have been about her blurry images, but there's a lot more to it. Barth's work is not about photographic style. Her interest in "unmotivated or undirected looking" is plainly the opposite of the constructed or staged narratives made famous by [Jeff Wall](#) and [Sam Taylor Wood](#). Oddly, narrative in photography has often reinforced the medium's dependence on realism and the social. A dependence that might be linked to the public's experience of photojournalism, the personal snapshot, and the need to indicate one's place in the world.



Uta Barth, Untitled (act 4)
from the series "...and of time", 2000,
Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

Barth asks: "Do you think we can only know things by comparing them to other things?" Her question strikes at one of photography's long-standing conflicts: its ability to transcribe reality. Encouraging the viewer's instinct to slowly and steadily look, Barth escalates the viewer's relationship to the external world often by depriving the viewer of the things they look for first: objects and identifiable locations and the tell-tale signs of the author. Her interior shots have the feeling of an exterior world and her shots of landscapes are viscerally internal. What's normally felt as public gradually deteriorates into the private, and what's normally felt as private equally re-organizes itself to be felt more publicly.

Barth allows the viewer to idle. It is in this idling that intimacy unfolds along with a way of looking that lets you span time.

Uta Barth was born in Germany and grew up in California. Her works have been shown at the [Guggenheim Museum](#) in New York, the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#), Los Angeles, and the [Tate Modern](#) in London. One of her works from the Deutsche Bank Collection can also be seen at the bank's London headquarters. She has been teaching at the [University of California](#) in Riverside for the past 18 years.



Uta Barth, Untitled (act 1), from the series "...and of time", 2000,
Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

Cheryl Kaplan: *Why is anonymity important in your photographs?*

Uta Barth: Well, I don't want the work to be about me, so I carefully edit out autobiographical information. In 1998 I made a decision to only make photographs in my house because I wanted to find another way to empty the subject out of my images, to separate meaning and subject. Seeking something to photograph made no sense anymore, but I still had to point the camera somewhere, so I point it at what's familiar and everyday that it's almost invisible. I don't want to become the subject I've tried so hard to erase.



Uta Barth, Untitled (aot 2), from the series "...and of time", 2000
Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

That means slowly re-training the public.

By photographing what's invisible to me, and repeating it endlessly, hopefully it becomes clear that something else might be happening other than describing my home. I point the camera at things I stare at day after day while talking on the phone, sitting around, or waking up. When editing negatives for a show, I take out anything with "stuff" in it, because it instantly grabs attention. Shoes on the floor, clothes, letters and objects on my desk immediately construct a narrative and identity of the person, and there you have it: I'm the subject. So, I diligently erase myself from the work.

I'm reminded of Rauschenberg's famous drawing "Erased de Kooning". Despite Rauschenberg's erasure of de Kooning's drawing, its ghost is still there.

(Laughing) Nothing asserts the de Kooning more than the act of erasing it.

Your work contains a removal before it's even shot.

The images from *Ground* are based on conventions of portraiture. I was interested in how background information provides the context for thinking about the person in the photograph and I wanted to look just at that. The background is carefully chosen to tell us something about the sitter. Look at portraits of authors on dustcover jackets. If they're men, most likely they're sitting in front of a bookshelf. This assures us they're smart. I'm not interested in the idea of absence; I'm interested in the container left behind.



Uta Barth, *Ground* Nr. 41, 1994,
Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

When did you first form your concept of looking?

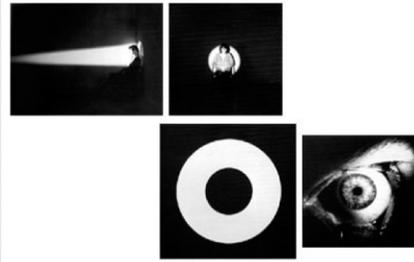
In the late 80s I began making work that named vision as its primary content. They were compilations of images about looking and being looked at, surveillance and interrogation images that rendered vision as invasive. To break up or collapse a potential narrative, they were paired with painted *Op Art* graphics. The patterns made it hard to focus and created visceral optical effects. I wanted you to become self-conscious of the activity of looking. The first out-of-focus images I made were part of these configurations. They were an attempt to create a similar, yet opposite optical problem.

Your work challenges the viewer's rote response to photography as either documentation and evidence or a moment of beauty.

I try to not give most of the things expected of a photograph. It leaves people a bit confused when they first encounter the work, and interesting things happen in the process of figuring them out.



Uta Barth, *Ground* Nr. 47, 1994, Courtesy Uta Barth,
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, ACME, Los Angeles



Uta Barth, Untitled Nr. 1, (detail) 1989

Why has photography been consumed with the subject as opposed to looking?

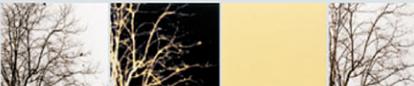
[Greenberg's](#) modernism asks each medium to embrace its most inherent characteristics; for painting it's flatness. I think [MoMA](#) asserted that photography's essential characteristic should be its ability to describe the world. They embraced social documentary as photography's primary vehicle. Since MoMA was the first American museum to have a photography department, art-photography here has largely been defined by their terms. In Europe, the medium's task is typology. You can see it in the [Dusseldorf School](#). But to me both of those positions feel so claustrophobic.



Uta Barth, Untitled (06.4), 2005,
Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

Your most recent series contains images of a flower. What is the flower series based on?

A passage in a [John Berger](#) novel that's stuck with me for twenty years about looking at a glass of lilacs on a mantel. He's puzzling out what he's seeing: the light and reflection in a mirror, trying to figure out an illusion and sorting it out step by step. The flower series was a bit scary. It's the first body of work in 15 years with a central subject and it's not just any subject, but a completely clichéd and culturally trampled one. To me the images are about light and time. They're some of the slowest images I've ever made. Hopefully, no one will believe them to be a reverie about flowers.



Uta Barth, Untitled (02.5), 2002,
Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

How do you choose and develop the sequences?

The structure of *white blind (bright red)* is to move from the objective view of the outside world through the deterioration of subjective after-images or retinal fatigue and then to return again to the straight view out the window. It's what you see with your eyes open and then closed. Every sequence returns to an image almost identical to its start, the whole piece wraps around the room as a continuous loop. Frontal or isolated presentation doesn't make sense for someone interested in peripheral vision. The piece I'm currently working on is an inverse of that. Virtually all of the images in the piece are what happens with your eyes closed and sequences are only occasionally interrupted by a "straight" view.

When was the first time you used peripheral vision?

In the *Untitled* series from 1998. These images were made whenever something would catch my attention and make me turn to look back. The pieces were structured as double-takes, that's how the diptychs came about. The decision to photograph in the house is also about peripheral and ambient vision, which is another way to think about the [figure/ground relationship](#); there's no focal point.

The color in your photographs is often highly saturated or pumped up, like in cinemascope film. Especially recently, your colors have become even more searing.

Those images are pretty much blood red and reenact optical after-images seen after staring into the light. At first, you're still registering the blood through your eyelids and everything is a flash of red. After a few moments, the after-image becomes the opposite color of what you've looked at. The color receptors in your eyes have been exhausted by prolonged overexposure to one color. Color in this work is not really made up, it's given to me by the view and my interest in blinding bright light.



Uta Barth, *White Blind, Bright Red*, installation view, 2002,
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

Why does narrative annoy you?

Narrative holds out for a certain inevitability, it places deep faith in cause and effect. Narrative is about reconstructing a chain of meaningful events based on a known outcome. I'm curious about visual art that's about the visual. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* is the title of [Robert Irwin's](#) biography. Originally, it was a line in a Zen text. Narrative in art makes us think about all sorts of interesting things, but it derails the engagement with a visual experience.



Uta Barth, *Field Nr. 19*, 1996,
Courtesy Uta Barth, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York,
ACME, Los Angeles

Narrative asks for interpretation, for us to make meaning or sense out what we're looking at. Narrative seems a quick and easy diversion from the more difficult challenge of actually trying to see.

[Henri Cartier Bresson's](#) concept of the "decisive moment" is never anything you'd want to come anywhere near –

(Laughing) Only in his work, but you're right, never in mine.

Uta Barth's responses (c) 2006 Uta Barth

UTA BARTH: CHERYL KAPLAN 2/2/06

Final version with images at <http://www.db-artmag.de/2006/2/e/1/421.php>

SPANNING TIME: A conversation with Uta Barth and Cheryl Kaplan

In the film *Buffalo 66*, the actor Vincent Gallo has just left prison. We see him hopping a bus, then looking out a window. Before we know it, he's sitting behind the wheel of someone else's car in a parking lot, not moving. Minutes go by like hours... even the girl sitting next to him wants to know what he's doing. At last he snaps: "I'm spanning time, just spanning time."

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Barth allows the viewer to idle. It is in this idling that intimacy unfolds along and a way of looking that lets you span time.

I spoke with the artist in Los Angeles over several weeks. Born in Germany and raised in California, Uta Barth has also been teaching at the University of California, Riverside for the past eighteen years.

CK: Why is anonymity important in your photographs? Why neutralize or eliminate the biographical?

UB: Well, I don't want the work to be about me, so I carefully edit out autobiographical information. Still, people try to construct the identity of the author. In 1998, I made a decision to only make photographs in my house because I wanted to find another way to empty the subject out of my images, to separate meaning and subject. Seeking something to photograph made no sense anymore, but I still had to point the camera somewhere, so I point it at what's familiar and everyday that it's almost invisible. I don't want to become the subject I've tried so hard to erase.

CK: That means slowly re-training the public.

UB: I'm told the brain processes vision like a motion-detector; it only turns on when there's a change in the map. By photographing what's invisible to me, and repeating it endlessly, hopefully it becomes clear something else might be happening other than describing my home. I point the camera at things I stare at day after day while talking on the phone, sitting around or waking up. When editing negatives for a show, I take out anything with "stuff" in it, because it instantly grabs attention. Shoes on the floor, clothes, letters and objects on my desk immediately construct a narrative and identity of the person, and there you have it: I'm the subject. So, I diligently erase myself from the work and at the end of a lecture, a woman tells me it was so interesting to hear me talk about the work because I was nothing like she imagined. She imagined someone impeccably dressed, who ironed shirts all day and was a devout Catholic because my house was so neat in the pictures and red made her think of church. (I was wearing jeans and a crumpled shirt and had said things that identified me as not Catholic.)

CK: I'm reminded of Rauschenberg's famous drawing *Erased DeKooning*. Despite Rauschenberg's erasure of DeKooning's drawing, its ghost is still there.

UB: Nothing asserts the DeKooning more than the act of erasing it. (Laughing)

CK: Your work contains a removal before it's even shot.

UB: The images from *Ground* are based on conventions of portraiture. I was interested in how background information provides the context for thinking about the person in the photograph and I wanted to look just at that. The background is carefully chosen to tell us something about the sitter. Look at portraits of authors on dustcover jackets. If they're men, most likely they're sitting in front of a bookshelf. This assures us they're smart. (((use *ground 41*-bookcase image here))) I'm not interested in the idea of absence; I'm interested in the container left behind.

CK: When did you first form your concept of looking?

UB: In the late 80's I began making work that named vision as its primary content. They were compilations of images about looking and being looked at, surveillance and interrogation images that rendered vision as invasive. To break up or collapse a potential narrative, they were paired with painted Op Art graphics. The patterns made it hard to focus and created visceral optical effects. I wanted you to become self-conscious of the activity of looking. The first out-of-focus images I made were part of these configurations. They were an attempt to create a similar, yet opposite optical problem.

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CK: From August Sander to the Bechers.

UB: Exactly. But to me both of those positions feel so claustrophobic.

CK: Your most recent series contains images of a flower. What is the flower series based on?

UB: A passage in a John Berger novel that's stuck with me for twenty years about looking at a glass of lilacs on a mantel. He's unpuzzling what he's seeing: the light and reflection in a mirror, trying to figure out an illusion and sorting it out step by step. The flower series was a bit scary. It's the first body of work in 15 years with a central subject and it's not just any subject, but a completely clichéd and culturally trampled one. To me the images are about light and time. They're some of the slowest images I've ever made. Hopefully, no one will believe them to be a reverie about flowers.

CK: Your photographs delete chronology and narrative, so the result challenges the viewer's point of entry from an external vantage point to an internal one. A switching happens that's also in your installations where repeated images cause the

viewer to back-track. I'm reminded of a project by the filmmaker Michael Snow called *TAP* which was a "still sound movie."

UB: That's an amazing piece; it does all the things we're talking about. It's a still photograph about time and sound made by a filmmaker. Everything in it opposes what it's about.

CK: Snow describes two conflicting forces: stillness (implying silence) and sound (implying movement). Your work contains a parallel tension between permanence and transience.

UB: I was transfixed by Snow's works, *Wavelength* and *Empire*. I started thinking about silence and staring. Silence is the "ground" to sound. Stillness is the "ground" to action.

CK: What's the difference for you between duration in film vs. duration in still photography?

UB: The filmmaker determines duration for the viewer. In a photograph, the viewer chooses the amount of time they spend looking. I'm coercing things by repeating the same view, but that's not the same as having the film do the looking for you.

CK: Chris Marker's film *La Jetee* is composed of still photographs.

UB: Perfect example! When I started making images about duration and prolonged looking, the obvious thought was film. The Lannan Foundation offered to fund it, but I kept procrastinating. Finally I realized I didn't like the way film controls the viewer and determines viewing time. I wanted to figure out how to make still images still. But I have to confess I'm still thinking about making a film.

CK: How have your installations changed? Have you seen Fra Angelico's monks cells in Florence? The sequences are amazing.

UB: I've never been to Florence. Do the images wrap around or is there one central image? I would love to see them!

CK: The San Marco images appear in each cell but change from room to room. There's a continuity even though the subject matter jumps.

UB: I've never thought about this association, one of my very favorite places is the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Giotto pre-dates Fra Angelico by a hundred years and it has a similar structure. I love the intimacy of the space. It's not frontal and images wrap around the room. I love that it's an environment, not a room with an altar. It's similar to how I think of my work as installations and not individual pieces.

CK: How do you choose and develop the sequences?

UB: The structure of *white blind (bright red)* is to move from the objective view of the outside world through the deterioration of subjective after-images or retinal fatigue and then to return again to the straight view out the window. It's what you see with your eyes open and then closed. Every sequence returns to an image almost identical to its start, the whole piece wraps around the room as a continuous loop. Frontal or isolated presentation doesn't make sense for someone interested in peripheral vision. The piece I'm currently working on is an inverse of that. Virtually all of the images in the piece are what happens with your eyes closed and sequences are only occasionally interrupted by a "straight" view.

CK: When was the first time you used peripheral vision?

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CK: The color in your photographs is often highly saturated or pumped up like cinemascope film. Especially recently, your colors have become even more searing.

UB: Those images are pretty much blood red and reenact optical after-images seen after staring into the light. At first you're still registering the blood through your eyelids and everything is a flash of red. After a few moments, the after-image becomes the opposite color of what you've looked at. The color receptors in your eyes have been exhausted by prolonged overexposure to one color. Color in this work is not really made up, it's given to me by the view and my interest in blinding bright light.

CK: You've intentionally diverted or delayed the viewer's response time.

UB: I don't know that I've ever articulated the strategy of creating a diversion. If you repeat something often hopefully you're led to think something else must be going on other than description. I try in every way I know to slow everything down.

CK: Why does narrative annoy you?

UB: Narrative holds out for a certain inevitability, it places deep faith in cause and effect.

CK: That often eliminates complexity and contradictions.

UB: Narrative is about reconstructing a chain of meaningful events based on a known outcome. I'm curious about visual art that's about the visual. *Seeing is*

Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees is the title of Robert Irwin's biography. Originally, it was a line in a Zen text. Narrative in art makes us think about all sorts of interesting things, but it derails the engagement with a visual experience. Narrative asks for interpretation, for us to make meaning or sense out what we're looking at. Narrative seems a quick and easy diversion from the more difficult challenge of actually trying to see.

CK: Henri Cartier Bresson's concept of the "decisive moment" is never anything you'd want to come anywhere near—

UB: Only in his work, but you're right, never in mine. (Laughing)

[NOTE: Uta Barth's responses only © Uta Barth 2006.]
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