

# [ The Incoherent Light ]

Perspectives on Photography

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## Uta Barth: The Density of Light



Photography is shaped to the measure of perception, which means that it fails in many of the same ways as our experience of the world, adding in turn failures of its own, both practical and historical, errors in judgement or expectation. But the medium does not stop at "reading" the brute fact of a particular subject, seen at a particular moment – rather this is merely where it begins and the work of Uta Barth has been concerned with, above all, these material complexities of vision; what she has made of them is at once a poetics and an interrogation. Barth has turned photography against itself, positions are exchanged and (perceptual) certainties undermined. Her most insistent theme has been to question the means by which photography makes the world visible to us, to elegantly probe its limitations. In fact, these are key to its seductive illusion of presence – leaving only the density of light and time.

Although her work is remarkable for its understatement, Barth has never been less than rigorous in her treatment of the visual as a site of engagement, even of instability or outright conflict, however cogently expressed. Most often this seems to happen on the level of perception itself, where our experience of the image is reflected back on to the conditions of that encounter, the very terms by which we deal with a photograph as an object and an experience. Even knowing that a picture is not at all "transparent" we generally treat it as such, but the first objective of Barth's work is to reject that standard of photographic meaning, its seeming transparency, and to construct instead a material dialogue around the expectation that a given photograph carries with it, the implicit thread of narrative possibility that is, in many ways, an artefact of the process. Barth operates at the threshold of photography, revealing the complex ways in which it can be seen to evoke – and negate – the materiality of perception.

### About

The Incoherent Light is a journal of contemporary photographic practice, written and edited by Darren Campion.

Most clearly beginning with the related projects *Figure and Ground*, though consistently present in even her earliest work, the embodiment of a perceiving subject emerges as the main focus of Barth's practice. The effect is to destabilise the photograph itself, which is rendered here not as a static object, but as a point of exchange between different registers, material and perceptual – we see, then, the space within the photograph, its imagined dimensions. Barth shows how the photographic process contains several implicit positions, which she adroitly manipulates in order to expose how they determine the "reading" of a photograph. Barth's work addresses that fundamental dissonance between the world as it is and the world as we see it, the chasms of perceived experience. This is extended to other areas of the photographic process as well – the main correlate of space being, of course, time, and its fluidity, which seems antithetical to our notion of what photography does.

These more recent works have extended the familiar idea of a singular visual "instant" into a serial approach, where the slightest variations become magnified – photographic time is revealed in all its illusive artificiality. But just as the space of a photograph is the analogue of lived or real space, so too does the notion of "time" in Barth's work correspond to our (bodily) experience of it, where duration is understood as a continuous flow, yet is also subject to unexpected distortion, moments of ellipsis. Temporal coordinates are undermined in the same way that spatial ones are, their boundaries spreading only to the frame, fragile constructs that, when under pressure, will reveal the fiction that holds them together. Barth's uses this sequential pacing to show moments before and after – time is seen as any number of interstitial dimensions, in the same way that "space" is determined by the experience of it. Their values are essentially reactive.

In Barth's work space is porous and time elastic; dimensions interpenetrate and their mutual uncertainties are everywhere apparent. But these categories are not without differentiation either, as the space that she has taken as her subject varies from the public to the domestic and her treatment of them shifts accordingly, between different registers for how they are used or encountered. Her interior photographs posit a more subtle relationship between these variables than an intentionally blunt materialism, whereby the daily rhythms of natural illumination fuse with how we perceive the space they occupy – the observer is not directly seen, but everywhere implied, as the still centre of this drama, written by light in space. Barth is describing forms of perception that move from the liminal, standing right at the edge of visual experience – or even beyond it, to the everyday spaces in which we actually live; the presumption of coherence at their centre is just as unfounded as at the margins where they begin to fray.

The aim of this work has consistently been to elaborate on the apparently stable contours of visual experience, patiently redefining the territory that they cover, but a sort of fundamental anxiety shadows this excavation of the medium and, indeed, may be one of its core values. The speculative character of Barth's practice depends on how closely the conditions of photographic seeing parallel those of our perceived experience, in so far as we make a whole world from what is, at best, a partial view; seeing through the camera actually creates its subject, just as we are the frame that "creates" the world around us. There is a sense of estrangement that arises from the disconnection of a concrete visibility from the chance to locate meaning in some narrative sustained by the images – instead, we gain an awareness of the optical as a dynamic process or even as a kind of dialogue with the world, not merely a passive encounter.

It is in this way that Barth reveals the deep contingency of vision – her work is at once an expansive restatement of how we ordinarily see and a refusal of the certainties that are said to constitute photography in itself.