

Walter Benjamin described aura – that intangible quality that distinguishes an object from its photographic reproduction – as the effect of a thing's 'unique existence'. According to Benjamin, not only do photographs lack their own aura, they destroy the ones objects possess by supplanting a singular presence with a potentially infinite number of copies. But ironically, because what it captures is less the object per se than the unrepeatable instant when the object stood in front of the camera's lens, photography heightens our awareness of the very uniqueness it simultaneously undermines. The medium raises the stakes of uniqueness to encompass the passage of time, and, as a result, the object is not lost just once, as it were, in the shift from reality to representation; it is lost endlessly. Or rather, the moment is lost (along with the object) with every fresh act of perception.

It is precisely this aspect of photography to which Uta Barth draws our attention in *nowhere near* (1999), a series of twenty images of the view out of the artist's living room window, shot over a twelve-month span. As you move from one work to the next, it takes a few minutes before the realization hits: you've already seen those trees, this telephone pole, that particular patch of grass – but from a slightly different angle and suffused with a different shade of light. The rift between the sameness of Barth's subject and the difference of its appearance in each photograph drives home the impossibility of separating the truth of an object from the moment in which it is perceived – and, by extension, of ever grasping a thing in its fullness at any given instant. (Barth reiterates this tension on the level of the work's display by dispersing her series in three concurrent exhibitions: in addition to the New York venue, the work could be seen in a gallery in Los Angeles and another in Stockholm.)¹

The photographs in *nowhere near* are not merely singular; they are resolutely partial. Our access to what lies beyond the window is always to some extent blocked – most often by the window frame itself, which cuts a latticework across the scene. Frequently, this obstruction is compounded by an extremely shallow depth of field, which blurs the background into a haze and renders the specks of dust and dirt on the windowpanes almost palpable. The result is a nagging sense of something eluding our grasp. But what? It's hard to imagine a less compelling subject than Barth's nondescript suburban yard. Hence the *double entendre* of the series' title: Are we looking for something that, although out there, remains at an unbreachable distance, or are we just seeing the nothing that's right there in front of our eyes?

Barth is scarcely the first to assert what might be called photography's 'absence-as-presence', and the window as a metaphor for human vision is so well-worn it runs the risk of cliché. But Barth never crosses that line. By making the window an active (often dominant) element, Barth foregrounds the act of perception, of framing and selection. But the blunt matter-of-factness of her photographs keeps them from feeling contrived. (These windows are clearly physical objects, not just metaphorical statements.) The literalness of Barth's images – along with their banal subject matter and serial logic – align 'nowhere near' with conceptual projects like Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. However, Barth departs decidedly from Ruscha's snapshot aesthetic. Although dispassionate, her photographs are also slow and deliberate. Barth's work is less a retrenchment from the critical terrain staked out by conceptualism than an attempt to augment it with what conceptual art traditionally denies: namely, aesthetics. Barth's work is indeed beautiful, but her ultimate concern is less the power of aesthetics to seduce than its capacity to generate a specific form of knowledge (one that is neither empirical nor conceptual): in this particular case, the knowledge of what it might be like momentarily to inhabit the gap between an object's existence and our ability to pin it down.

1 [Bonakdar Jancou, New York; ACME, Los Angeles; Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm.]