THE DISPLACEMENTS OF LYNNE ROBERTS-GOODWIN

Critics have repeatedly remarked on the "strong political undercurrent" in Lynne Roberts-Goodwin's subtle imagery of geopolitical landscapes.[1] Spanning sites such as Northern Cyprus, Syria and Death Valley, USA, these are pictures that only hint at the burden of incommensurable faiths, geo-economic divisions and ethnic conflicts that mark the regions she documents. The muteness of Roberts-Goodwin's minimalist style intentionally denies the viewer a frame of reference that is otherwise typical of the photo-essay: a genre that her work critically reflects on and distances itself from.[2] The disappearance of didactic captions that narrate, contextualise and give meaning to the photograph, and more radically, the refusal of a singular climactic moment in exchange for seriality and fragmentation, are only the first signs of the 'aesthetics of displacement' that characterize the art of Roberts-Goodwin.

Geographical Displacement

The grid of photographs in *More Than Ever* (2014) comprises only a fraction of Roberts-Goodwin's atlas of geographical displacements. A montage of spatial dislocations—Death Valley, Buffavento and so on—that mobilize an uncanny, defamiliarizing effect. Seemingly familiar iconographies (the mountainscape, the desert, the horizon line) are presented at varying altitudes and in seemingly repetitious shots breeding a sense of disorientation, navigational failure: a constantly searching gaze.

Pictorial Displacement

One of the most distinguishing effects of Roberts-Goodwin's work is its capacity to elicit a sense of a displacement. We are never quite able to immerse ourselves in her image space. The stubborn flatness of photographs such as *A Change of Plan (Salt Plain 11)* (2014) and *Buffavento 26* (2012) disallow the viewer's gaze to enter the pictorial space. There is a buffer zone, a zone of resistance—indeed a boundary—between the viewer and the image.

Such an aesthetic is symptomatic of aftermath, or late, photography.[3] This is a photographic genre characterized by blank, seemingly vacant imagery, which does not offer the viewer the usual visual and symbolic cues to which we are accustomed in documentary photography. In aftermath photography, as Ulrich Baer has observed, "The landscape's imagined depth—where experience, imagination, and memory may be projected and contained—vanishes into abstracted inhospitable terrain."[4] The photographic genre elicits a sense of estrangement, an awkward relationship between viewer, place and history.

Displacement of Form I (Aftermath Photography)

Aftermath photography finds its precedents in Roger Fenton's images of the Crimean War from the mid 19th century (as seen in the iconic, *Valley of the Shadow of Death*) and Alain Resnais 1955 film *Night and Fog*, which takes as its subject matter the abandoned concentration camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek. While these works form crucial precedents for aftermath photography, the genre did not properly emerge as a consistent documentary paradigm until the 1990s. This period sees, for example, Mikael Levin and Dirk Reinartz's photographs of sites formerly occupied by Nazi concentration camps, and Luc Delahaye and Paul Seawright's landscape photographs of Iraq and Afghanistan in the wake of recent conflicts. Capturing the aftermath of war, and other forms of violence, such imagery is distinguished by its picturing of vacant and/or ruined landscapes, or what David Campany astutely articulates as "the trace of the trace of the event."[5]

The historical conditions for the emergence of aftermath photography as a consistent paradigm of art are inherently interconnected to the perceived redundancy of photography and its capacity to capture the live event. This is a capacity which, since the 1960s and the emergence of the Portapak camera, has increasingly been passed onto video and television.[6] This sense of redundancy has intensified with the advent of mobile video cameras on mobile phones and the increasing presence of amateur footage in the news cycle (an iconic and early example in my lifetime is the footage of the Rodney King beating in 1991, another obvious example is 9/11). Leaving the task of transmitting the "decisive moment" to video, today, the aftermath photographer arrives belatedly to the event.[7] By turning their lens to the scene of aftermath, such photographers aim to avoid the aesthetics of the spectacular news media image because they know that such banal images cannot be readily subsumed into the news cycle. Indeed, many aftermath photographers are former photojournalists who now choose to only show in the museum.[8]

Circumventing the ephemerality, topicality, and for some, the fetishization of the image of human suffering in the mass media, the image of aftermath which is exclusively shown in the museum or gallery reads as something closer to a "monument" than a "moment."[9] As Campany argues, aftermath photography "is often used as a kind of vehicle for mass mourning or working through."[10] In part, this is due to the perceived role of the still photograph in an era dominated by the moving image. "The still image", argues Campany, is increasingly "thought of as being more memorable than those that move."[11] The mnemonic value of stillness—as an antidote to the fleeting gaze we lend to the constant cycle of images disseminated in the news media—only became apparent, understandable and truly desirable in the presence of the moving image.[12] Perhaps this is why in spite of the thousands of hours of video footage of 9/11, Joel Meyerowitz has argued with regard to his aftermath photographs of Ground Zero that, "I felt if there was no photographic record allowed, then it was history erased."[13]

Stillness, and a persistent mode of looking, is of course central to the work of Roberts-Goodwin. And as her works show, one of the paradoxes of aftermath photography is that, in its attempts to embrace the aesthetic of stillness it adopts and plays with aesthetic tropes of cinema: the time-lapse and (after Bazin) the long take.

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The still, large-scale (monumental) and often-panoramic images of aftermath photography may manifest as gestures to memorialize, to freeze time, against the mobility and anomie of the news-cycle. However, the genre's claims to possessing a commemorative function cannot be so easily attained. While acknowledging the uses of the contemporary aftermath photograph as a form of commemoration, many critics have questioned the ethics and aesthetics of the genre and its relations to the event it documents.[14] Their concern is that the aesthetics of aftermath photography creates too large a distance between the viewer and the atrocities it traces, in effect abstracting the event. That is, through the aftermath photograph, the "danger" or horror is kept at bay by the image's aesthetic and temporal distance from the event.[15] Failing to produce a confrontation with the brutality of the events that are the focus of aftermath photography, these images, argues Sarah James, make the event "dangerously unreal, strangely theatrical, detached, inhuman."[16] The image's "coolness"—as opposed to the zealousness of humanist documentary photography for example—and its seeming banality or abstraction means that the events remain "ungraspable"—it presents itself as a "dreamlike landscape."[17] As such, if the aftermath image has been catalysed to document catastrophes and instigate mourning, we must ask, argues Campany, whether "mourning by association becomes an aestheticized response."[18] "There is a sense in which the [aftermath] photograph, in all its silence, can easily flatter the ideological paralysis of those who gaze at it without the social or political will to make sense of its circumstance."[19] In other words, he asserts, the aftermath photograph falls prey to the very same problems of reification it has attempted to circumvent through avoiding the fleetingness and spectacle of video or the decisive moment: it institutes, "a world beyond our own comprehension, [… and so] it is a reified as much as rarefied response."[20]

Subsequently, for such critics, the experience and aesthetics of aftermath photography are akin to the sublime—that is an experience that is incomprehensible, beyond acknowledgement and assimilation. "There is something about the scale and resolution of most museum photography that trades on the sublime" observes Julian Stallabrass.[21] This is a sublime of pictorial data allowed by medium and large-format cameras, such as those used by Roberts-Goodwin, on which high quality large-scale printing is contingent.[22] But the aftermath photograph also presents a mathematical sublime—which refers to the notion of ungraspable magnitude—and a dynamic sublime—which refers to the notion of ungraspable force. In aftermath imagery we encounter, for example, the mathematical sublime via the oft used panoramic view which conjures the 'epic' landscape and the dynamic sublime via the representation of blown up or destroyed buildings (the former evident in the work of Roberts-

Goodwin and the latter evident in the work of her contemporary Paul Seawright). The sublime, as critics of aftermath photography articulate it, has the potential to present a threat to the subject physically and on the level of the imagination, impeding "our rational descriptions of the world and our powers over it:"[23] the terror, for example, of the force of war machinery. However, they argue, since in aftermath photography the viewer is too far distanced from the horror of the event—we see for example the vacant landscapes but not the bodies—in knowing that the threat is virtual rather than actual, we experience pleasure rather than pain. That is the pleasure symptomatic of the sublime that derives from encountering grand horror while remaining safe from its clutches.

Displacement of Form II (The Sublime)

Certainly, in Roberts-Goodwin's photographs we encounter some such elements of the aesthetic sublime. Boundless, infinitely expanding horizon lines and stunning epic landscapes occupy *A Change of Plan (Burnout)* and *A Change of Plan (-85.5m)* (both 2014); and in *as the sky FALLS through five fingers* (2012) we encounter an enormous mountaintop swallowed by a dark ominous sky. Even the raven—from the *Think The Mountain* series (2012) shot at Buffavento—signifies sublime gothic terror, something supernatural, unknown.[24]

But such imagery is never presented without complication in the art of Roberts-Goodwin. In her landscapes, the Romantic undercurrents of the sublime are merely hinted at. Refusing the aesthetic category's quintessential panoramic view and sweeping vistas, Roberts-Goodwin sieves through her imagery selecting "awkward" shots, and/or cropping formally "perfect" pictures, for display.[25] Strange perspectives of the mountain ranges are offered, the view is often obfuscated by fog, and the horizon line is awkwardly positioned toward the bottom of the image, as opposed to being in line with the viewer's gaze. The ravens are similarly framed in an unconventional manner. Their heads and wings escape the image's frame. All we are left with is glimpses of their bodies, and forms of flight as a means to emphasize the avian species' unique gestures. These images reflect the artist's embracement of experimentation with form through which she eschews entrenched conventions. That is, the conventions of the aesthetic sublime and conventional literary, cinematic and even ornithological representations of the raven as an anthropomorphized satanic and predatory being (which carries its own sublime, terrifying affect).[26] By experimenting with form, Roberts-Goodwin opens up a space through which to experience the world—and more precisely visual culture—anew and from unexpected, disorientating perspectives.[27] Her strange and alienating imagery moves us, the viewers, to engage its content—its iconographies and histories—from a differential position. It is this experience of alienation, of discomfort—of being distanced and displaced from what is familiar—that defines the work of Roberts-Goodwin.

Displacement of Form III (Post-Documentary)

Through all its efforts to estrange the viewer we may ask whether the art of Roberts-Goodwin bears another critical function. That is, to address the limitations of photography as a catalyst of knowledge and test its capacities for communication (indeed, interpellation). To put it in another way, does the silence of Roberts-Goodwin's photographs, particularly her vacant landscapes of Death Valley, Syria and Northern Cyprus, offer a critical account of the politics of photography, and more precisely aftermath photography?

Photography, as Roberts-Goodwin knows, is in transition. In an era where photographic naturalism and the veridical "photo-document" have been under question for almost three decades (and only intensified with digital technologies), the medium has had to relocate its position during what may be described as the end of photography (perhaps not too dissimilar to earlier, and on-going, debates about the death of painting). This is not to suggest that the circulation of documentary photography has ceased, but rather that we have seen the emergence of an inherent distrust of the genre.[28] These debates have largely been advanced by contemporary art discourse as opposed to practitioners and theorists of photojournalism, as evident in the watershed exhibition Documenta 11, and of course, the decision of former photojournalists such as Luc Delahaye to only show in the museum. This may be a sign of what John Roberts has identified as "an intellectual regression" in documentary culture, which sees the circulation of imagery of historical events in magazines and newspapers without the need to critically engage photographs: to bear sustained modes of looking or actually engage with the historical contexts out of which they emerge.[29] The easily recognizable signifiers and categories of mass disseminated documentary photographs—"ethnic conflict", "Arab uprisings"—allow for quick consumption and identification without the need for further engagement. Such imagery beckons and invites the viewer to identify with it based on an assumed common entry point to history. That is, the history and icons that are assumed to be common knowledge in our era.[30] The capacity of documentary photography to address the viewer in such a way is completely, and intentionally, negated by Roberts-Goodwin. Her refusal of common signifiers as an entry point into historical events activates the documentary photograph's otherwise dormant viewer to scan the barren landscapes, to observe the vanishing points of history and question the limitations of photography.

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[1] See: Tracey clement, "Lynne Roberts-Goodwin and her latest projects", *COFA* 18 (Summer, 2007): 4–5; Uros Cvoro, "The Choice of Random Acts," *Random Acts*, (Sydney: Sherman Galleries, 2006), np; and Victoria Lynne, "Disappearing Act", *Disappearing Act,* (Sydney: Sherman Galleries, 2005), np.

[2] Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, interview by author, 3 June, 2014.

[3] See for example: Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002) 61-87.

[4] Ibid., 65.

[5] David Campany, "Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of 'Late Photography'" *The Cinematic*, ed. David Campany, (London and Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2007) 185-186.

[6] Ibid., 185-93.

[7] The notion of the "decisive moment" derives from the theories of Henri Cartier-Bresson. For an analysis of the "decisive moment" in relation to aftermath photography and the post-documentary turn more broadly, see: John Roberts, "Photography after the Photograph: Event, Archive and the Non-Symbolic," *Oxford Art Journal* 32 no. 2 (2009): 281-298.

[8] This is discussed in Campany, "Safety in Numbness," 185-93. For a critique of the kinds of large-scale, monumental photographs that characterize aftermath photography and their presence in the museum see: Julian Stallabrass, "Museum Photography and Museum Prose." *New Left Review* 65 (September-October, 2010): 93-125.

[9] David Campany, *Photography and Cinema*, (London: Reaktion, 2008), 44.

[10] Campany, "Safety in Numbness," 192.

[11] Ibid., 189.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 185.

[14] See: ibid., 192-3; Sarah James, "Making an Ugly World Beautiful, Morality and Aesthetics in the Aftermath," *Memory of Fire: The War of Images and Images of War*, ed. Julian Stallabrass (Brighton: Photoworks, 2008), 12-15.

[15] Julian Stallabrass, "Rohan Jayasekera and Julian Stallabrass in Conversation About *the Sublime Image of Destruction,*" http://www.scribd.com/doc/34876318/Rohan-Jayasekera-Questions-and-Answers, accessed 25 May, 2013.

[16] James, "Making an Ugly World Beautiful," 15.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Campany, "Safety in Numbness," 192.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 193. Similarly, James argues: "In courting the sublime, it does not ever 'press too close' to the real human face of war." James, "Making an Ugly World Beautiful," 14.

[21] Stallabrass, "Rohan Jayasekera and Julian Stallabrass in Conversation About *the Sublime Image of Destruction*," np.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] While this reading of the raven stems from the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, it has consistently been advanced by a range of cultural outputs: photographically one of the most interesting examples is Fukase Masahisa's *Karasu* (*Raven*) series (1976). For an analysis of the series see: Philip Charrier, "'Becoming a Raven': Self-Representation, Narration, and Metaphor in Fukase Masahisa's 'Karasu' Photographs," *Japanese Studies* 29, no. 2 (2009): 209-234.

[25] Roberts-Goodwin, interview.

[26] See for example: Anne Hyde Greet, "Édouard Manet and his Poets: The Origins of the Livre de Peintre," *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 34, no. 4 (1980): 311-332.

[27] This is perhaps not unlike John Baldessari's *Wrong* (1966-68), see: Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Rightness of Wrong (1996)", *Failure,* ed. Lisa Le Feuvre (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 33-36.

[28] See: Roberts, "Photography after the Photograph: Event, Archive and the Non-Symbolic," 282-87.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.