

Lynne Roberts-Goodwin *closeup at a distance*
Kronenberg Wright Artist Projects, September 2016

closeup at a distance presents a dialectical spatial opposition that unfolds over photographic and video works and engages with the aftermath of human action on Earth's topography. In keeping with Roberts-Goodwin's interest in trade routes, colonisation, migration and cultural displacement, the works traverse geopolitically contested locations at two extreme points of elevation: the Dead Sea and the Himalayan Mountains.

The Dead Sea, at the lowest elevation point on Earth, is a salt lake made famous by its waters that are largely absent of life and are highly buoyant enabling tourists to float aimlessly. The feeling of stillness experienced by floating in the almost motionless water is condensed in the series *dead calm*, with their intensely flat and disorienting surfaces. The artist was drawn to this ever-changing landscape, as a contested site of desolation, sublime beauty and conflict, to work with a team of environmentalists. Roberts-Goodwin researched and photographed the landscape as akin to engaging with a ruin aesthetic, established in the western tradition as sites of contemplation on humankind's past achievements. Here, the images of stillness belie the ongoing environmental destruction and human conflict over settlement rights that continue along its banks that lie between Palestine and Jordan.

dead calm distance 100 and *101*, taken from elevated points on the opposing banks of the occupied territories and Jordan, are images not only of stillness but of endless time that is seemingly embedded into the very pigments of the prints. To look at these photographs is to look into the vast unknowable space of time and history recalling Walter Benjamin's musings on the decay of the aura. In illustrating his concept Benjamin turns to what he refers to as the aura of natural objects, "to follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch."¹ Aura's decay, according to Benjamin, rests on the increasing significance of the masses to get closer to things both spatially and humanly, and their desire to assimilate a thing's uniqueness as a reproduction such as a postcard or a magazine that one might find in the possession of an armchair traveller. Time and space seem to unravel in these photographs; and in one image a technology tower hovers on an islet in the bottom third

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility (Third Version)*, 1939, *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, volume 4 1938-1940, Edmund Jephcott et al eds. (Cambridge Mass. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 255.

of the picture and what appears to be frothy waves are indeed salt deposits formed over eons of endless time.

The Dead Sea research undertaken by Roberts-Goodwin also encompassed studying archival photographs from the Library of Congress Matson Collection in Washington, a rich historical source for images of the Middle East. The majority of the archive's 23,000 glass and film negatives and photographic prints depict Palestine from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, many taken by the American Colony Photo Department. This photo studio serviced the large tourist trade documenting Middle Eastern Culture from the end of the Ottoman Empire to the Palestinian Exodus in 1948.² Roberts-Goodwin has selected a number of these images depicting the landscape from an oblique aerial view and etched the negative image into aluminium plates forming a reversal of sorts. Presented in a grid formation the photographs can be read across and through time, space and history with a myriad of narratives forming in the interstices between the images. Tales of migration, colonisation, tourism, industrialisation, erosion and archaeological finds flow across the surface of the grid as a woven historical map of human conquest and destruction.

elevation is conceptually positioned against the *deadcalm* series and takes us to a high altitude located at the end of the Himalayan Mountains on the border of China and Vietnam. The video comprises two layers composited together, one being of the last river that flows from the mountains at Ha Giang, the other at the altitude of the last mountain range. This conflation of image and place establishes a non-place that is interrupted by sounds of the water flowing, birds chirping and wind blowing all that one expects to hear and sense in such remote locations. Woven through these mesmerising aural treats are sounds of urban life, motorbikes, planes and cars that interject and create a sense of dislocation and disorder.

Through these works Roberts-Goodwin critically explores the conditions of human mobility and colonisation of these extreme locations as sites of displacement, slippage and alienation. They disrupt and interrupt our understanding not just of time and history but what it is we see and what it is that photographs do. As fragments of lives lived and places encountered, photographs, much like their creators, traverse the globe and migrate into postcards, memoirs, archives and as reproductions in newspapers, magazines and on screens. Much like Benjamin's aura or Hito Steyerl's wretched screen

² Barbara Bair, 'The American Colony Photography Department: Western Consumption and "Insider" Commercial Photography', *Jerusalem Quarterly* 44 (2010): 28–38.

photographs flow through time and space, like the Jordan River flowing into the Dead Sea or the rivers of the Himalayan mountains, depositing their debris like cast-out memories along the shorelines of history.³

Donna West Brett September 2016

³ Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press/e-flux journal, 2013).