



Uta Barth: nowhere near

June 4 - July 12, 2000

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art



untitled (nw 20), 1999, color photographs, each panel 35" x 44" x 3", collection Barbara and Michael Schreter, Beverly Hills, Calif.

### Uta Barth: To Look, at Nothing, with Longing

Let's begin by consulting the evidence, the so-called "facts" that these photographs make plainly visible. So many shots, in this case, of roughly the same view: through a large, gridded window overlooking what is by every indication a back yard. It is a modest, fenced enclosure of lawn mostly, neither especially well-tended nor noticeably neglected, just there; an expanse of patchy green, horizontally bisected by a narrow pathway that leads to another house-like structure, probably a garage. A few foundation shrubs hug the outer walls of the building, but by far the largest part of the foliage on view seems to issue from the other side, overgrowing the fence from the neighboring yard. In the distance, a single tall tree vies for our attention with a pair of telephone poles. It performs a whole cycle of seasonal change, but still fails to emerge a clear winner. This could be the suburbs, a neighborhood, I want to say, like any other.

It is a process of give and take: behind every bare branch that is covered over with leaves, we lose a little bit more of our long-range visibility. The tree is just there, it gets in the way like everything else. But it also keeps time, along with the sun, which creeps from a place behind the lens to right smack in front. This makes for golden afternoons, actual sunbursts flooding the picture with light. Or washed-out and overcast pictures in the morning, as it burns dimly under banks of fog that roll in from the shore (not so far away as it happens, just over a few more rooftops, a few more yards, and there it is, the Pacific Ocean — is this worth mentioning?). A lone palm, sometimes isolated emblematically at the very center of the image, serves to remind us that this is in fact Southern California. Over the approximately half-year long course of this project, it may have grown a few inches; fronds have no doubt been lost and regained, but basically it looks the same throughout.

Occasionally, the distant view becomes blurred, as the focal point is drawn to settle on the window itself, now making out the molding, the glass, the fingerprints and dust that have collected there. Maybe even some drops of rain streaking the surface — but these are an anomaly, as we all know. The weather hardly changes out here, and the plant life mostly follows suit, confirming the Edenic dream (or was that a nightmare?) of perpetual bloom. Nothing much happens in fact, and so we can say for certain that environmental factors alone cannot begin to account for the extreme variation between one picture and the next. This point may be noted with some degree of unease. The sun rises and sets, and then the house lights come on, and the window begins instead to reflect the interior. Now, perhaps even more than before, we are reminded just where we have been all along: not outside but in, inside the dark room, or camera obscura.

*The Greek myth of Narcissus is directly concerned with the fact of human experience, as the word Narcissus indicates. It is from the Greek word narcosis, or numbness.— Marshall McLuhan<sup>1</sup>*

Since her first appearance on the exhibition circuit in 1989, a part of Uta Barth's artistic practice has remained remarkably consistent, registering on the subtlest tactical variations from one show to the next. From the outset, she has sought to mobilize photography in service of a self-reflexive meditation, firstly, on the nature of the medium itself and, secondly, by extension, on the nature of perception more generally. This means that the photographic apparatus is always being considered both "literally," that is, in all its technical specificity as an actual representational device and as a metaphor or analogon for human consciousness — the camera standing in for the mind, and the photograph for its product or thought. This much holds true for her work overall; from the earliest images to the most recent, all are purposefully poised at the intersection of certain artistic and philosophical interests, where every act of representation will necessarily show through to the attempt to somehow determine and articulate the substance of experience as such. Which brings up another consideration, related to the last in that it is comprised of the same two terms, art and philosophy, but now folds them together into that hybrid known as critical theory. Especially relevant in this case is that branch that assumes as its object the analysis of information technology, techniques of surveillance and spectacle. Here, the apparatus is understood neither as strictly separate nor analogous; it is not modeled, secondarily, on the mind, but now operates as the primary model. Whether to our great advantage or detriment, photography is here fit into place as an actual cog in the perceptual system, becoming an active generator of vision, memory, consciousness.

What makes all of these substitutions and confluences possible is a certain pointed congruence between the mechanical and the organic eye, the former reproducing the design of the latter in several crucial respects. The rounded shape of the camera lens, for instance, mimics the eye's own capacity for refraction; the aperture may be dilated or constricted just like our own pupils in accordance with available light; the operation of the shutter recalls the motions of blinking; and so on. In this way we find that the camera closely conforms to Marshall McLuhan's definition of technology in general as an extension of human sense and faculty. But even more to the point is the second part of his argument, the second movement of sense extension, which he goes on to define as sensual auto-amputation. The idea is derived from medical research on the central nervous system, which maintains all the body's parts and organs in a state of general equilibrium by automatically isolating and anaesthetizing, effectively "switching off" those that become excessively stimulated. For McLuhan, this carries some obvious implications for the field of media studies. In the particular case of photography, for instance, he finds that the medium's literally astronomical expansion of our visual faculties is inevitably shadowed by a corresponding depletion in the quality of the vision itself.

A similar concern for the coping mechanisms of the subject under threat of media saturation pervades the writings of the Frankfurt School — among the first concerted attempts to develop a general critique of information. Even Walter Benjamin could sense already by the early part of the last century that a spectacular threshold has been broached and that the general public was shifting en masse into crisis mode, shutting down. Here, also, the response is described as a progressive numbing, almost a sensual de-evolution as our once complex faculties are gradually reduced to the rudimentary condition of, as he puts it, a “shock absorber.” And a very similar fate awaits the world of objects, as the *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* essay suggests. In a sense, these are amputated as well by photography, torn from the fabric of tradition, from their unique position in time and space. That which is most human within them withers away with the aura. In effect, photographic fascination begins with the severing of the essential link — that is, the moment Narcissus no longer recognizes his own gaze in the water.

*Benjamin is here ... He says: when you feel a gaze directed at you, even behind your back, you return it. The expectation that what you look at looks back at you provides the aura ... It is all mysticism in a posture opposed to mysticism.*

— Bertolt Brecht<sup>2</sup>

This might seem like a digression, but it is one that Uta Barth’s work makes as well. The historical evolution of her particular medium, its prior applications in both theory and practice, are taken into account and mapped out as the coordinate points by which she sets her own course. A range of determined positions in this way becomes available — positions to assume, but mostly to avoid or oppose, the overriding sensibility here being one of extreme suspicion and criticality with regard to the image in general. Indeed, one part of Barth’s project consists in an ongoing effort to confound or derail the photograph at the most basic level of referential operation. The early *Ground* series provides still the most direct example of this iconoclastic impulse by ridding the image of its ostensible subject altogether. Here, we can make out a measure of blunt strategy: the way that this vacancy is signaled by focus, for instance, which remains trained on that place where the subject is not, and by the consequently blurred quality of the “remaining” imagery, now forcefully reduced to background status. The work’s title is itself a play upon the missing figure that is its complementary term. And likewise its insistent objecthood, the decision to push the image up from the wall toward that plane generally reserved for painting, thereby emphasizing its mute and opaque flatness, the literal “ground” of the photograph blocking any possible view through the window. Taken separately, these various maneuvers suggest a strict Brechtian agenda, an essentially reductive incentive to break the spectacular spell, but this is not necessarily what they add up to. In fact, we can say for Barth’s work overall that while it appears initially to stake out a quite narrow set of critical parameters, it proceeds almost as a rule to exceed them aesthetically.

*untitled (nw 13)*, 1999, color photographs, each panel 35" x 44" x 3", courtesy Bonakdar Jancou Gallery, New York and ACME., Los Angeles



While one part of her practice stays constant, as I began by suggesting, another part is caught up in a movement, a gradually developing course of action, altogether more intuitive, even experimental, in that its end is not entirely known. It must remain so, in effect, as it is one of the most compelling characteristics of her pictures that they appear not to be looking at, so much as for, something. Viewed collectively, this quality becomes all the more evident. From the single image *Ground and Field* series, to the diptych and triptych formats of the subsequent *Untitled* body of work, to the repetitive photographic outpouring of her most recent project, we may sense a steady intensification of purpose, almost a mounting urgency. As the images accumulate, they also take on a distinctly filmic dimension, and here too one could outline a progression of sorts: beginning appropriately enough with an investigation of the single frame, through a succession of rudimentary zooms, pans and shifts in focus, and culminating in the complexly modulated “long take” of this latest work. Whatever questions of reference persist throughout the *Ground and Field* series are increasingly upstaged by the camera’s own movements in the following works; increasingly, that is, the photographer’s active negotiation of her chosen terrain begins to preclude any possible significance it might hold on its own. Here, a simple glance to the right or left is unfolded into a dense phenomenological drama of shifting focal planes, perspectival realignments and subjective recalibrations. In the space of just two or three photographs, the view is altered to the precise point where the viewer begins to get lost within it.

A very similar ambition compels these most recent images, which might at first seem unlikely considering just what they consist of. It so happens that Barth could not have chosen a more familiar view, this being in fact her own home, her own yard, and exactly that place where her eyes tend most often to rest in the course of her everyday activities. But for this reason exactly it always remains to some extent unseen; more a site for visual pause of distraction, allowing the mind to remain focused on other matters, or to simply zone out. For her, its most salient feature is precisely that it is given. As a subject for photographs, it comes close to representing a complete lack of choice: it is just there where she is, as it were, always already. The view through this window constitutes a kind of blind spot, therefore, a banality so perfect and smooth that consciousness may slip right through without registering a thing.

It is no longer a question of straightforward negation, or withholding some crucial part of the pictorial experience. If this work continues to be haunted by a sense of absence and loss, it is entirely due to its excess in this case — a stubborn proliferation of images that refuse to add up or cohere in any meaningful way. Composed, it seems, on the fly, they do not deliver any sort of composite view, nor any sequence of gradual change over time. Suppressing to the greatest extent possible any signs of continuity, each new picture appears only to wear away more of the local detail, substituting for “sense of place” an experience of almost schizoid ambient flux. Yet, ultimately, this seems to be just





untitled (nw 16), 1999, color photographs, each panel 35" x 44" x 3", collection Neal Menzies, Los Angeles

what Barth is after: to somehow capture that moment of perceptual drift, when vision partly surrenders its object, and even the most tranquil and intimate vistas begin to ripple and waver like a faraway mirage. Staring fixedly into this conscious breach, the image, while maintaining all of its referential clutter, is gradually emptied out, rinsed clean of meaning, and what begins to appear in its place may distantly recall the experience that so fascinated Benjamin. Not aura, obviously, but sharing in its distance and material specificity, its stress on the place and the time, on the act of apprehension itself, and finally its moment of climactic reversal, the way that these various elements function in concert to draw us into the frame and simultaneously spit us back out. Yet in no way does this constitute a corrective, or any sort of nostalgic return. If these pictures manage somehow to gaze back at us, it is precisely because of their emphatic mediation, and not in spite of it. This is a very contemporary sort of gaze, in other words, shoring up its own history and the course of its critical theorizations to wind up both shell-shocked and enervated, glazed-over and welling up with emotion.

*We have, perhaps, a site without an object, a locus suggested by the Homeric verb therkesthai — "to look, at nothing, with longing." — Robert Steiner<sup>3</sup>*

The interface between photography and philosophy can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece, it being well known to thinkers as varied as Aristotle and Euclid, for instance, that light passed through a small hole in a dark room will produce an inverted image of the world outside the opposite wall. However, as Jonathan Crary<sup>4</sup> has pointed out, it was actually between the late 1500s and the early 1700s, with the emergence of the earliest portable cameras, that this principle would be solidified into a "dominant paradigm" for describing the status of an observer vis-à-vis an observed. Crary shows how every subsequent shift in the surrounding epistemological field is registered by this photo-mechanical figure: from the Renaissance, where it provides a means of occult projection, the subject virtually merging with the object of inquiry, to the Age of Enlightenment, where it allows instead for the requisite distance and separation of the two that is the hallmark of the objective study, to the Modern era, where it now becomes a figure of absolute subjectivity, the visual field having been relocated entirely from a place outside the eye to within.

This is a highly concerted movement in theory, as the critical focus is steadily drawn from the world outside, through the camera and toward the observing subject at the other end. It is quite another matter in practice, of course. Looking at photographs, we tend only to see the scene, the figures and objects that once stood before the lens, and all the laws of standard practice only serve to reinforce this impression of immediate presence. It is to their great rhetorical advantage that they are instantly amputated as well from their maker, from the subjective fact of their production, and it is precisely this almost magical power that Barth's own photographs want to challenge. Developing what might be termed a lexicon of abuse — of irregular or unsteady framing, blurred or displaced focus, perspectival distortion, over- and under-exposure, light flares and trails, etc. — she highlights the presence of this evanescent authorial agency, as if by default.

That this type of against-the-grain practice is quickly recuperated as an aesthetic in its own right should surprise no one, yet this aesthetic is neither a concession

nor just a lure in this case, but precisely where the work happens. It is no small paradox that a mishandling of the medium should yield such consistently seductive results, or that these should be so readily confused for a form of pictorialism while in fact aimed toward virtually the opposite end. Quite unlike the efforts of such figures as Alfred Steiglitz or Edward Steichen to coax a range of painterly effects from the inert space of the print, Barth's own work always remains insistently photographic. Much more appropriately, then, we should search for precedents among the Russian Constructivists and the Bauhaus, for instance, both of whom pointedly rejected the use of preexisting models from art in favor of an aesthetic derived directly from the medium itself. Here, the emphasis is on a way of looking that is unique to the camera or as divergent as possible from so-called "normal" vision. Indeed, it might be recalled that this look was initially tied to a program of defamiliarization or estrangement, ostensibly to shock the subject out of the torpor that had taken hold as a direct consequence of modernity, mass culture and kitsch. Due to its technological other-ness, it was thought at this early stage in the game that photography could perhaps jar the routines of perception, releasing vision from the stranglehold of convention and habit, and allowing us to see the world once more anew.

By the time it resurfaces in Barth's own work, however, the photo-eye is anything but alien. Although it was only supposed to deliver a liberating blow to consciousness, it has since taken up residence, blending right in with the rest of the psychic furniture. The pictures that she presently brings to our attention have been in place for some time now, submerged in the collective pictorial unconscious, and if they remain somewhat unnerving it is only because we recognize them as already partly ours. We recognize them, but dimly, and sometimes even less. As though poised on a fulcrum between the known and the unthinkable, the mundane and the mystical, the flawed and the beautiful, everything in them converges upon this moment of drawn-out hesitation, an experience that has finally less to do with any sort of optical innocence than an almost paranoid lucidity as to what is actually happening right there in front of us. No longer in the pictorial depths, that is, so much as that space directly between our own bodies and the surface of the print — that space of extension, projection and the original cut. Drawn through the vanishing point of Barth's backyard, we traverse the whole range of perceptual modalities and subject-to-object relations. We work our way backward until the room, the camera and the mind fall together like Chinese boxes. The apertures line up, and for a moment we see no picture at all, just the conditions that determine and frame it, and the substance within which it begins to take shape.

— Jan Tumlir  
artist and writer, Los Angeles

- Notes: 1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, The MIT Press, 1995, pg. 41.  
2. Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, quoted in Susan Buck-Morse, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, The MIT Press, 1999, pg. 179.  
3. Robert Steiner, *Toward a Grammar of Abstraction*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, pg. 42.  
4. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, The MIT Press, 1995.

Cover: *untitled (nw 8)*, 1999, color photograph, 35" x 44" x 3", the Sadoff Collection, Beverly Hills, Calif.