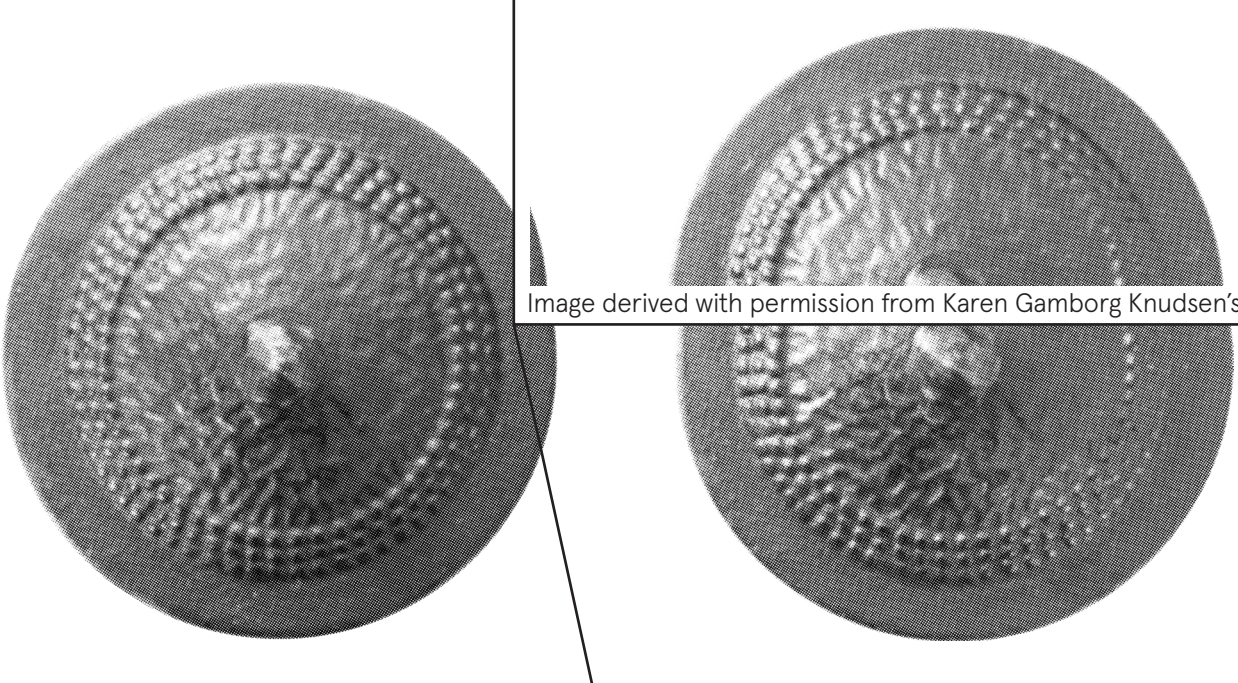


Natural Artifice



By Neil BENNUN

Although this page does not exist, and there are no such things as letters, and you have no optical organs to read this by, I will now lead you to the solution of the problem of consciousness – that is, both the so-called ‘hard’ problem (“By what magic is reality transmuted into mind?”) and every one of the so-called ‘easy’ problems (“Which part of your brain was responsible for imagining that I would actually achieve this?”, for example. “What were you thinking?”)

While I am writing this, and you’re hearing these words in your head, you are in a room holding a piece of paper. You and the room have three dimensions. And since you are no longer the person you were when you began to read it, it is clear that you also have a position in time, the dimension that makes it impossible to concentrate on anything.

Spacetime is a vital principal of the consensus view of reality.

This consensus depends on the uncontroversial belief that ‘reality’ is exterior to the mind and is delivered to the brain and nervous system by the sense organs (all of which are real), and that somewhere, mostly in the brain (which totally exists), representations of reality and consciousness are generated. Consciousness requires these representations of reality in order to be worthy of the name.

Donald Hoffman of the University of California Irvine is a cognitive scientist, and he says the consensus is wrong. Let’s hear him out.

Imagine him here now, a tall, thin suited datum with a scientist’s face. This is what he says. There is no piece of paper in your hand. You do not have a hand. This room has no dimensions. You have no co-ordinates in space-time. None of these things exist.

He is very persuasive. He shows optical illusions and offers evidence from studies of animal perception. But you aren’t convinced at all. “I can see and feel things,” you say. “This piece of paper feels real. It’s definitely in my hand.”

Donald Hoffmann is polite, but he’s heard this objection before. “We didn’t get where we are today by evolving to perceive reality,” he says; “we got here by evolving to survive long enough to reproduce. Look at these computer simulations of trail selection that demonstrate why beetles try and mate with beer bottles and why fish fight t-shirts.”

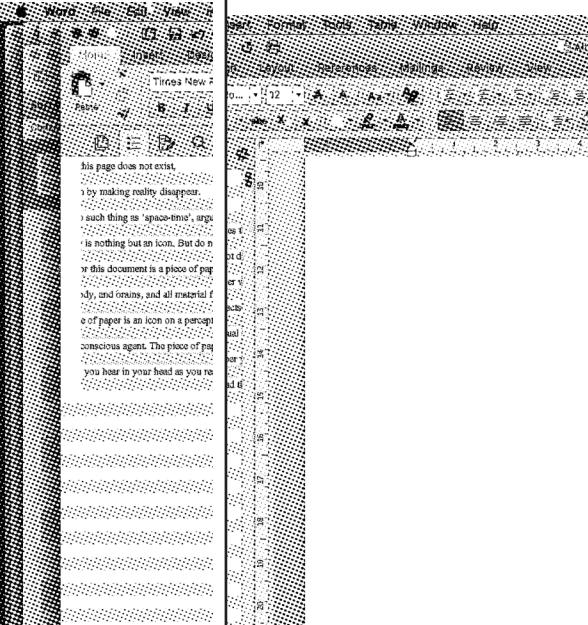
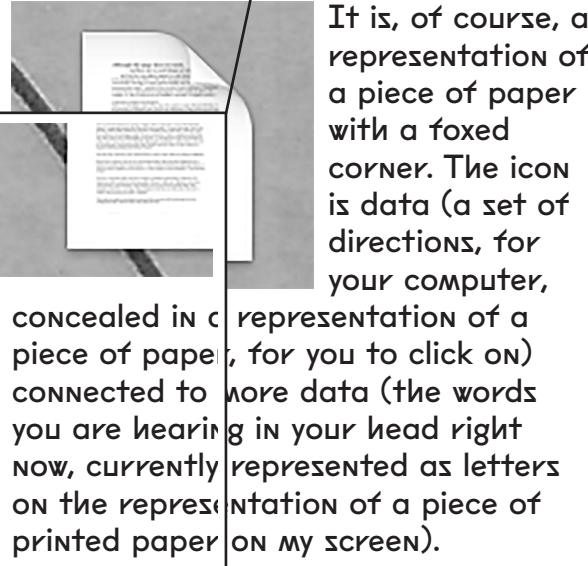
The computer simulations are really persuasive. Fine. Natural selection doesn’t care whether you know what’s real or not. But there’s still the question of what it is one sees when one is seeing.

“Think of spacetime as your desktop,” says Don. “All the objects you can see on that desktop are icons – helpful representations concealing a reality you don’t

really need to understand. Chairs, bodies and all the other public objects are just guides for action offering us the best chances of staying alive long enough to reproduce.”

But if my body is nothing but an icon then I might as well kill myself. You think. It’s you doing the thinking. But Don and I both know what you’re thinking. This doesn’t mean you can just drag your body to the trash and delete it (I explain, paraphrasing Don). You would lose all your work for nothing. Why would you do that?

We take icons seriously – we just don’t take them literally. Look. This image shows a square of my desktop and the icon for the document I’m writing now.



This is what the computer finds when you click on the icon. It is the document I’ve now finished and am editing. Does this look like data to you?

What is (or are) data? Well, I’ve just looked it up. And it turns out that data are just facts. Something to do with reality. Facticity is the certification of an ontological state.

So what does data look like? Has anyone ever seen a photograph of a text file – a place on some stable medium where electrons are arranged in a certain way?

Even if this photograph were possible, it would make an entirely useless icon. If you could read the disposition of electrons you wouldn’t need an icon in the first place, of course, because you’d be able to look at the electrons and read the text and all the metadata, and –

Regardless. In this niche of meaning, the word data itself is a token on a linguistic desktop concealing a tangle of different facts that would only get in the way of action. Who cares about electrons when you’re firing a gun that doesn’t exist into the notional brains of a fictional entity like a zombie? The only thing that matters then are points and health bars.

In this way, argues Hoffmann, the room you are in, and the body or bodies in that room, and the piece of paper you are holding in your hand right now, are icons on a perceptual desktop evolved to allow us to accrue the maximum points (children) and health bars (food and not being eaten by dogs).

And the un-representable, un-photographiable reality these icons point towards, he says, is consciousness.

Consciousness is the ultimate foundational fact, he says. It is not a recent arrival. It is first. It is the only datum worthy of that title. What we’re habituated to calling ‘the universe’ is a system of ‘conscious agents’, entangled at the quantum level, of which you are one.

The piece of paper you hold in your hand is a token of your interaction with other conscious agents. It doesn’t exist, and you are not perceiving it in your brain. “Brains do not create consciousness,” he writes; “consciousness creates brains”. Brains disappear the moment you’re not thinking of them. Just like your body does, when one is asleep, in the retreat to the comparative reality of dreams.

As an artefact of consciousness, dreams are more real than any bed.

The words you hear in your head as you read this are more real than the paper you are reading them from.

These words certify that you exist.

You are welcome.

Don smiles at you with his mouth,

which is an event in a space-time that does not exist (the three spatial dimensions are nothing but a mode of error correction, he thinks, evolved to afford our species the choice of the best action given the best possible intelligence of the environment). But this smile calls for a reaction.

You’re on. This is what consciousness is for. Make something happen.

being atoms in different arrangements. This water, we thought does not make good building material. It is useless for spaceships or jewellery. But it is a substance identical to rock in every other regard. Similarly, the air above it, which lay flat on the water, covering every centimetre of the rock, filled the valley from above. The air was broad and cold and full of atoms. There was a degree of entanglement (atoms of water in the gas and atoms of rock in the water). But principally there was

these temporary accretions of atoms capably reworking on the imperishably neutral rock and water.

Seals, birds and fish. These temporary accretions of atoms breathe the atoms that make up the gas. The gas is called air and its atoms are present in the water.

These creatures breathe. They rework on their thick medium. The effort kills them.

This is the photograph we took of these facts.

Neil BENNUN

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Arsuk Fjord, Greenland (2017). “Murder and Kidnap Men who Profit from Hydrocarbons”.

Thank you to the participating artists and writers for contributing their time, work and ideas. A big thank you to Josephine Fitt of Gallery V1 for making Asger Carlsen’s work available, to Joanna Walker, Eve Gould and Hannah Wilmsen of the Glass Tank Gallery for hosting and supporting the exhibition, to Karen Gamborg Knudsen and Anne Friis for curating and running the exhibition, to John Philip Sage for patiently making sense of this pamphlet. A special thanks to Nat Chard for motivating the ideas behind the exhibition, to Chris Leung for coming up with the title.

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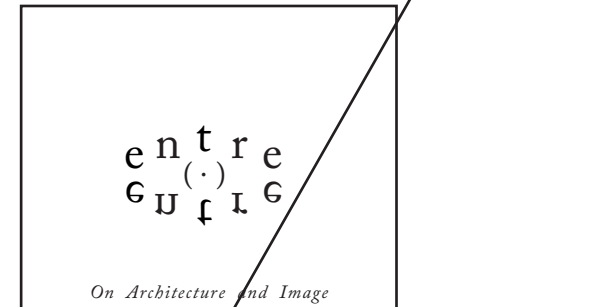
Image derived with permission from Richard Barnes’ Smithsonian Ungulate 2005 (2005)

Natural Artifice is about the truth hidden within illusions and under the skin of visual deceit, it’s about the simultaneously absurd and indispensable reliance on a consistent and trustworthy image of reality.

Natural Artifice is a group exhibition of photographic work exploring how naturalistic representations influence the construction and understanding of reality. The exhibition aims to develop an understanding of what it means when photography has become the vehicle through which we learn about and disseminate knowledge, experience, and aspirations of our shared reality.

Natural Artifice consists of work that taps into a territory where spatial practices and photographic overlap in their engagement with and reliance on finely executed lifelike representations of reality. The Natural Artifice exhibition gives form to an argument where fields that rely on naturalism, such as visual art, architecture photography, or, are proposed to structurally similar and rely on representational strategies. This argument pigment photography is

proposed to have an intrinsic affinity with naturalistic subject matter. The exact nature of this interplay is examined by juxtaposing work that grapples with and subverts the division between reality and fiction, either through the content of the photograph or in the creative and intellectual approach that has led to its creation.



On Architecture and Image

Participants

Richard Barnes (1959) is an American New York-based artist. He contributes with work from ‘Anipal Log’ where he documents the interplay of museum spaces, taxidermy, and natural history habitat dioramas. Barnes uses the simultaneously didactic and illusory plateaus found in natural history museums to explore the culture of display. Contrary to Hiroshi Sugimoto’s diorama series from the mid 1970s, where black and white photographs of habitat dioramas make the spatial illusion they propose even more believable by discarding color information and the revealing depth perception of stereoscopic vision, Barnes shows habitat dioramas in states of transience focusing on their dismantling and maintenance. He is fascinated with the suspension of disbelief and the unspoken contract between spectators and the diorama artists responsible for the exceptional lifelike but artificial landscapes. With his keen eye for the strangeness of killing animals only to reanimate them for display purposes, Barnes focuses on the threshold between the illusion of the habitat diorama and the surrounding reality. This is seen in his photographs where the frame, whether in the form of a freight cradle, an armature or a window pane, both separates and connects the illusion to the reality that surrounds it.

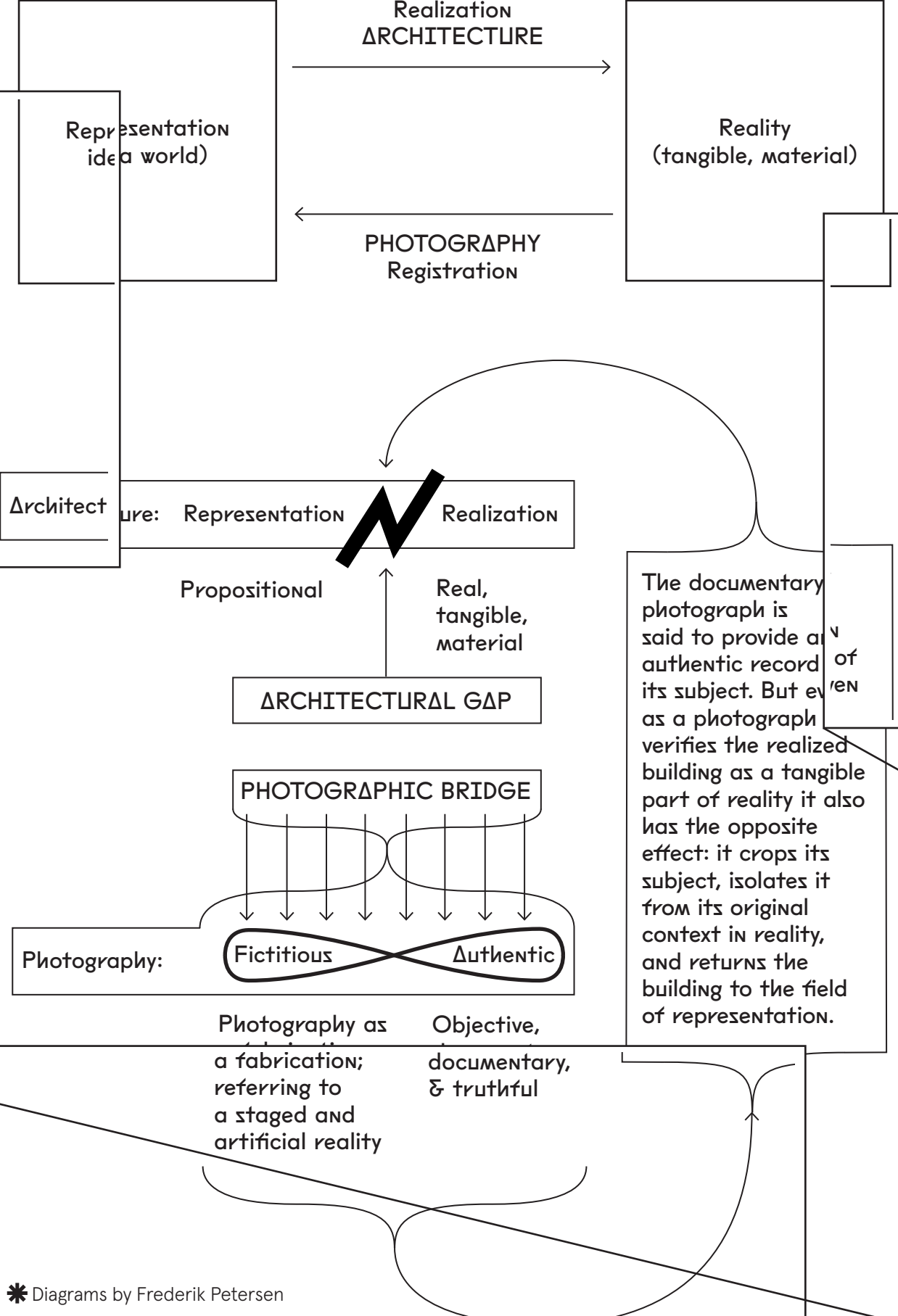
Natural Artifice

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- Richard Barnes
- Louis de Belle
- Neil Bennun
- Asger Carlsen
- Karen Gamborg Knudsen
- Anne Haaning
- Vlatka Horvat
- Mette Juul
- Samantha Lynch
- Karen Miranda-Rivadeneira
- Taiyo Onorato & Nico Krebs
- Claus Peder Pedersen
- Frederik Petersen
- Fosi Vegue

Diagram of Directionality*

In architecture tools of representation are used to develop images of buildings before the buildings are constructed. This chronology is reversed in photography where parts of reality are converted into pictorial representations. Architectural photography is often thought to have a productive share in the development of architecture in the sense that images of the finished work has a generative force in the continued thinking of architecture. The photographic representation can thus be observed to generate something other than repetition.



Louis de Belle (1988) is an Italian photographer and editor based in Milano. In ‘Fallen Dioramas’ (2016) De Belle explored the contrast between domesticity and artificial nature in the form of taxidermed wildlife casually arranged in the recently occupied residence of a private collector. Shown here are photographs from ‘Besides Faith’ which portray the use of lifelike, figurative representations in a commercial religious context. Besides Faith is the result of De Belle’s visit to the Vicenza Koire World Fair for Church Supplies, Liturgical and Ecclesiastical Art, the largest European trade show for religious artifacts. The series offers a detached and ironic look at mundane and profane aspects of the commercial industry associated with religious paraphernalia and, and the people whose livelihoods depend on it. De Belle’s work begs the question whether the catholic tradition for flamboyant naturalistic portrayal using highly detailed figures is part of an unconscious strategy to make the events described in biblical scripture appear with greater veracity, presence and relevance in the absence of their manifestation in reality.

Neil Bennun (1971) is a British author and poet writing for radio, television and computer games. Bennun lives in Norway near the Arctic Circle and is the author of ‘The Broken String: The Last Words of an Extinct People’ (2004). Bennun contributes with the essay ‘Although This Page Does Not Exist’ where he plays with the ambiguity of a consciousness-model that considers it credible to separate representation from reality, through a text that continually undermines the reader’s position and their belief in anything factual.

Asger Carlsen (1973) is a Danish artist living in New York. He contributes with work from ‘Wrong’ where black and white flash lit photographs in the tradition of documentary press photography have their candidness challenged by content that mimes a parallel reality where things have gone astray, yet nobody seems to notice. Ranging from the celebrity culture paparazzi shot across the uneventful corporate handshakes to inexplicable moments that belong to the North American

Domestic and nighttime vernacular snapshot. ‘Wrong’ is fundamentally subversive. Sets of familiar sub genres are laced with double faced protagonists, table tennis ball sized bulging eyes and bodily horrors registered with unemotional persistence that pays off as the internal logic of a believable yet fundamentally foreign world emerges for the spectator. Carlsen’s play with fabrication and staging is executed with a characteristic technical perfection that leaves no detectable seam between the various instances of reality he assembles. In ‘Wrong’ we are implored to consider if our cultural codes are any less strange than the twisted reality we encounter in Carlsen’s images.

Karen Gamborg Knudsen (1978) is a Danish architect and visual artist based in Copenhagen. Gamborg shows a set of photographic drawings that explore domestic life beginning with photographs of the lid of her cat’s iron tea pot. Fascinated with the surface of the image Gamborg uses 3D-modeling software to stretch the texture of the flat photograph until it again becomes photographs of the lid of her cat’s iron tea pot. The photographs surface to manipulate its texture and granularity as if it was the topography of a landscape. The photographic drawings of domestic moments and treasured objects develop through conversions between analog and digital media in iterations of photographing, digitizing and printing.

Anne Haaning (1977) is a Danish visual artist and research practitioner based in Tromsø and London working with 3D modelling, particle simulation software, analog video and photography. Haaning contributes with ‘Half Hidden’, where she explores the intersection of myth and technology in relation to colonial history in the arctic region during the extraction of cryolite for the refinement of aluminium production. Haaning’s work with digital colonialism employs digital media and digital strategies as central tools. In her creative practice the digital is both the instrument and the subject of her work, as she attempts to unveil and make technology transparent through digital means. In ‘Half Hidden’ Haaning ties myth and technology together through the proposition that human commitment to the digital is rooted in the origins of human nature.

Vlatka Horvat (1974) is a London-based Croatian artist who works with installation and photographic source material. Horvat contributes with ‘Monuments’, a series of photographs of her left hand holding domestic props and discarded building parts that Horvat’s camera transforms into portraits of a different scale that suggest

Samantha Lynch (1976) is a Canadian-English US architect, educator and artist based in Brighton. In her essay ‘The Escaping Terrain of a Changing Mirror’ Lynch allows the poetic to cleave a slice of the empirical as she writes of her use of black mirrors to interrogate and question the linear chronology we construct our lives around. Transforming day to night Lynch’s mirrors practically double temporal and spatial aspects of material reality without questioning the irrationality of the act.

Karen Miranda-Rivadeneira (1983) is an American-Ecuadorian fine art photographer based in New York. Her work explores myth, reenactment, and constructed memories. Rivadeneira contributes with a set of childhood memory reenactment photographs from ‘Other Stories’. Tasked with photographing events from her childhood and teenage years that she had no recollection of, but encountered as vivid moments within the mythical canon of her family, Rivadeneira’s photographs are manufactured truths. ‘Other Stories’ is a collection of backwards photographic evidence annotated with the characteristic captions of the family photo album. Similar to most photographs in this category the photographs in ‘Other Stories’ are destined to replace the moments and memories they were conjured from as they become the record not of what happened, but what it is thought to have happened in the collective memory of the family.

Taiyo Onorato & Nico Krebs (both 1979) are a Swiss artist duo based in Berlin. Onorato & Krebs’ work transforms buildings and spaces through surprisingly simple analogue interventions specifically tuned to the photographic medium and the privileged viewpoint of the camera. They contribute with a compilation of their large format publications from ‘Raise the Bar’, as long as it Photographs and Lighting Tree.

Claus Peder Pedersen (1966) is a Danish architect and photographer. Pedersen’s work is characterized by a sensibility for composition and a fondness for absurd juxtapositions encountered among unremarkable leftovers in construction sites and scattered city matter. His sharply composed scenes and precise cropping of reality infuse the deliberately desaturated aesthetic of architecture photography with a subtle irony unfamiliar to the genre. Pedersen contributes with a series of nighttime photographs from the harbor near his home, a place he has documented over several years as it developed from an industrial to a residential zone.

Frederik Petersen (1979) is a Danish PhD. architect and photographer living in London. Petersen’s work investigates the ideologically charged use of photography in the scientific collections, religious museums and the entertainment industry. ‘Wax Rubber’ skin shows wax figure tableaux that appear to disseminate historical and scientific facts in accordance with the conventions of the natural history science display consensus, but upon observation are revealed to be well-crafted for faith based ideologies. ‘Obamas’ juxtaposes the portraits of Barack Obama, president of the United States as he appears in works around the world. The works ask if local political variations can be seen to manifest in the portrayal of Barack Obama.

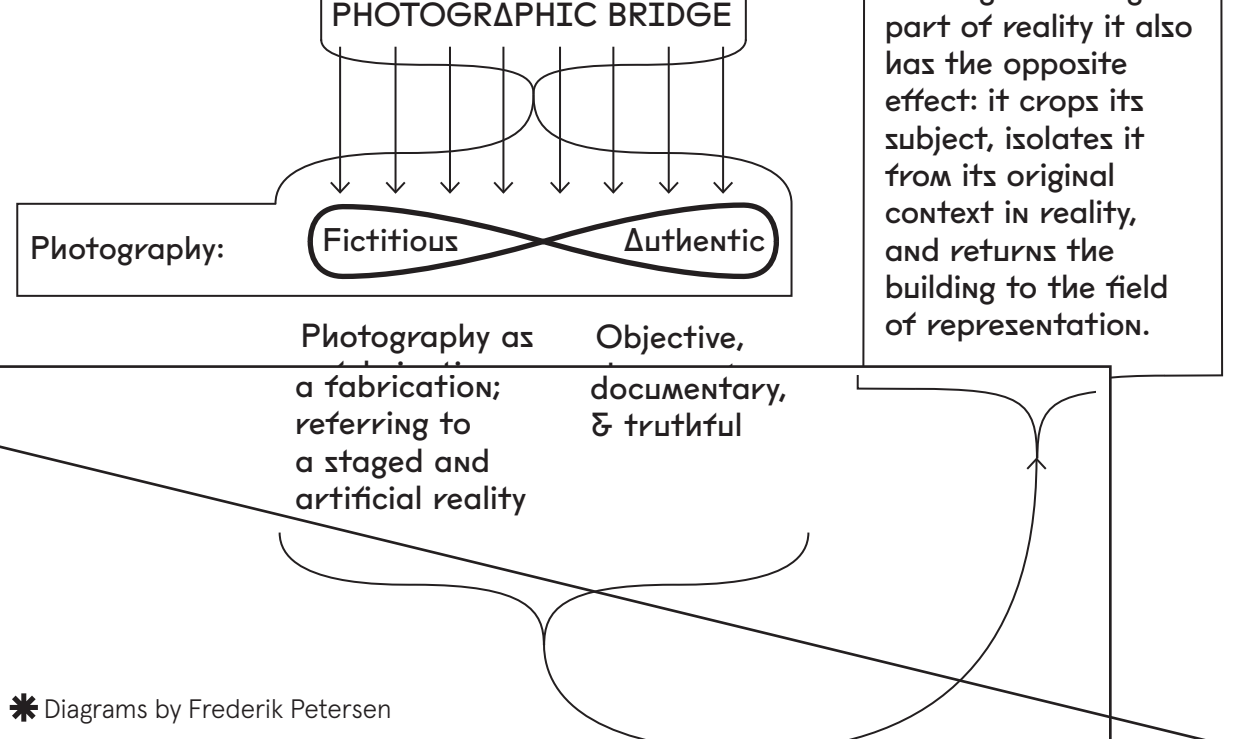
Fosi Vegue (1976) is a Spanish Photographer and Art Historian living in Madrid. Vegue is a founding director of the Driano Visual Lab School of Photography. He has published several photographic books, including ‘XXIX’ that explores the construction of desire in a play between fantasy, voyeurism and abuse in relation to sex workers in Spain. Vegue contributes with ‘Y vio Dios que era bueno’ (‘And God Saw that it Was Good’). In Vegue’s work a long lens is used to isolate sections of the ground in a generic city square. Involuntarily agents become erratic actors as they stray across Vegue’s rectangular

square. The camera acts as a stationary eye impatiently waiting for something to activate the spatial depth it records. Vegue’s cropping and isolation of reality combined with a careful sequential framing creates a record of moments where the photographer’s role as an observer is overtaken by his capacity for actively interpreting and assembling discrete and incongruous events as if they were connected.

Mette Juul (1977) is a Danish photographer, curator and educator. Juul’s photographs of rural landscapes where human infrastructure and small buildings manifest inconspicuously centrally in the frame stem from careful observation, curiosity and a sense for the quietly spectacular in the unremarkable. Dedicated to the composed palette of film photography the strangeness in Juul’s photographs stem from the way the human-made buildings appear have earned their right to belong to the landscape, at the same time as their scale and the fragility of their hastily assembled components contradicts the permanence traditionally associated with architecture.

Diagram of Cyclic Exchange*

Where architecture is a fabrication, representation and reality uses its fictitiousness in a staged record of both a truthful and stylized indeterminate of its subject. Photograph makes it a relationship to reality and an architectural candidate to bridge the gap between representation and reality.



The Escaping Terrain of a Changing Mirror

By sam Lynch

Underground, in the silver of the corridor’s mirror, ten years have passed. The time, both a memory and an observation, has been embedded within it the thin shadow of an approaching body (...from around the corner, that perpetually close and present space, a stretch of anticipation – that kind of place that, at times, can even follow you up the stairs...). And, perhaps beyond reason, on this day (and in this moment of my memory), I am moved by the concentrated time held distant in that mirror’s surface – a slippery time that transpires the once familiar network of subsurface passages. Yet it the slow curve (such a ubiquitous form) of the mirror’s skin that allows me to see within it a different kind of time? Or the continuous unfolding of its nearly perfect geometry? Could it be the counteraction of rhythmic footfall by the quickening gait of that interlocking reflection? Or the clash of neighbouring worlds separated only by the impossibly thin curve between? These questions did not come at the time, only the following sentence: “That mirror – it has another time in it.”

From the cut of the figure’s body through the pipe-encompassing walls – reawakening and reforming from so long ago a silent moment of an event – came the conjuring of two different times at the very same time. I write this now as a reflection – to create backwards the fold in the page. I remember the corridor in the mirror and I make my own.

Different, changing. I make mirrors, again and again. Most of the new mirrors are black. Some are red. I wear them. I lose them. I take them on holiday. I admire them. I ruin them. I find them now in other places, offering different times at the very same time – multiple times at once. Admittedly, I am sometimes so engrossed in a film that I find myself reading a wall-mounted clock in the background of a shot, or the flash of an actor’s watch, as if they can tell me the time. But these differing things brought about by my mirrors are not like the kind that come from playing a film in a room (the time of the murder vs. the time I left pause), nor are they like the two times that begin and end a photograph. They are two times that are simultaneously, experientially real – a doubling of the present. They do not have a sequential relationship. I can see these two times understood as multiple (double) if they are indeed both the present – are they not then the very same? The common notion of the present as a single condition gets a little shaken perhaps, but there is no need for only one present: my mirrors multiply.

To address how slippery even the singular can be, in his essay ‘A New Refutation of Time’ Jorge Luis Borges writes:

I suspect, however, that the number of circumstantial variants is not infinite: we can postulate, in the mind of an individual (or of two individuals who do not know of each other but in whom the same process works), two identical moments. Once this identity is postulated, one may ask: Are not these identical moments the same? Is not one single repeated term sufficient to break down and confuse the series of time? Do not the fervent readers who surrender themselves to Shakespeare become, literally, Shakespeare?

This collapsing of temporal continuity reconfigures past and future like the ceaseless pattern of rain on the lake. Borges’ experience of time denies succession and my mirror does too: two moments can be present – two presents can be experienced. And neither present of the mirror denies comes before or after the other. The conjuring is not of two times that are identical (as in Borges’ refutation), although each are unfolding at the same time, but of two presents that are different from one another. They speak to the weather and the weight of the horizon in their own way. The flash of a bird out of the thinnest of air comes and goes with no direction. Sunlight upon the road gives way to an impossible tangle of darkness that yields into night. Twilight and dawn are interchangeable, as are North and South. Sometimes, even, there are three suns in the sky. It is from the shared presence of these multiple times that the crucial part of the conjuring arises.

The conjuring. The crux. The conjuring involves the intended activity of observation. I sink into the metaphorical posture of the embrace – the mirror and I out on the town, alone in my room – in conversation, in silence. The crux – to remain in this relationship. To sustain surprise, to feel unsettled, to anticipate the disturbances.

It is not the concept. It is the slipperiness that sustains. The creative value of this engagement is the dynamic reseeing of the comfortable – the essential pleasure

of the unknown drawn out through the irresolvable nature of the experience. This reseeing becomes an embedded field, both material and temporal. To sustain the irresolution in a constellation of research (this heterogeneous field), that is as nonlinear as its content, activates the space between familiar and abstract – a space which falls between sentimental nostalgia and the eyesless black (or a red so red it’s wet) of the fetish itself.

The poetic craves a slice of the empirical – a waxing edge to gnaw. Distortions of external and mirror worlds fuse and overgrow, and I begin a procedure – to tend the beauty of this

– its dome-like shape eventually too tempting for those striding architect students (gluey fingers searching out the secrets of Buckminster Fuller). I was in Italy, like in a dream, when the mirror was found again by a neighbour – buried in a skip. And now (across the sea), with new cracks and seams, its home is the perpetual night of a place called Diffraction Unlimited.

Sam Lynch, Autumn 2017

[1] In philosopher Henri Bergson’s text Duration and Simultaneity he describes the primary essence of simultaneity as the experiential ability of consciousness to follow more than



Image derived with permission from Vlatka Horvat’s Monuments (2019)

dissection! Even the calculations elude. Measuring grid-like, mapping the territories – one finds only more of an escaping terrain. Between the black of the surface and the mirror of sky is another space. It is neither upon nor beneath, neither reflection nor substance. It is the space in which the bird is at bay and the void – the space that contracts the very liquid of my eye.

I see these mirrors now in the horizon of sea beyond my window. The silver mirror no longer resides in that subterranean corridor

one flow of time at once (pp. 34–37).

[2] Jorge Luis Borges “A New Refutation of Time” in Time, ed. Amelia Groom (London: Whitecattle Gallery and MIT Press, 2013), 151.

Groom, Amelia, Maria Abramovic, Giorgio Agamben, Emily Apter, Karyn Archey, Augustine, Mike Bal, et al. Dms. Edited by Amelia Groom. London: Whitecattle Gallery and MIT Press, 2013.

Bergson, Henri. Duration and Simultaneity. Translated by Leon Jacobson. Manchester: Cinnamon Press Limited, 1999.

2018 5pm — 7 pm

Exhibition dates Jan 23 — Feb 19th

9 am — 5pm, Mon to Fri

Glass Tank Gallery

Oxford OX3 0BP

www.entrentre.org/11.html

From Obamas. Frederik Petersen (2018)