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**'Of Other Spaces' – An Analysis of Visual Representations of Peripheral Socio-Cultural Space in Contemporary America**

**Joel Sternfeld's *Hart Island* series**

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**Michelle Jubin**

**MA (Hons) History of Art, University of Glasgow, August 2004**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis proposes to investigate the manner in which the visual representation of socially marginalised or 'hidden' space in contemporary America relates to the spatial theory and power/knowledge discourse in the work of Michel Foucault, and in particular Foucault's paper *Des Espaces Autres/Of Other Spaces* (1967). This thesis will specifically relate this theoretical base to representations of such 'heterotopias' in Joel Sternfeld's *Hart Island* (1998) series of photographs.

Sternfeld's documentation of Hart Island provides an opportunity to problematise contemporary photographic critical discourse in relation to Foucault's treatment of space, notions of the mirror-gaze, and the surveillance function. The intangibility of represented space offers the foundation upon which to deconstruct such stigmatized 'real' spaces within the wider socio-cultural canon.

## **Footnotes**

All publications are cited in full when first used in each chapter. Thereafter, only the author's surname, date of publication and page number are cited.

## Acknowledgements

*'Putting things in compartments, boxes or shelves gives one a sense of organization. Sometimes, indeed, it is necessary to move things from box to box and from shelf to shelf in the reorganization process, and at times reorientation is required. Labels are also necessary, and it may be that the first idea for a label sticks – or that it does not.'*<sup>1</sup>

This thesis is dedicated to my tutors, Honourary Reader Juliet Kinchin and Dr. Debbie Lower, and for my good friend Dr. Dominic Paterson who supported me beyond the call of duty, and convinced me to unpack books from moving boxes and just get this written. I also wish to gratefully acknowledge my supervising tutor Dr. David Hopkins who provided invaluable guidance.

I am indebted to the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK who awarded me a full fees-and-maintenance grant for this M.Phil.

Sincere thanks go to Joel Sternfeld who kindly spent time in his studio in New York discussing his work with me. Mr. Sternfeld requested that this conversation was not recorded in any way; hence I am unable to reproduce its contents. It was still a hugely illuminating few hours for which I am very grateful.

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Employment at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum has allowed me to see some of the best modern and contemporary photography exhibitions possible, both at the museum and in New York generally. I am thankful for this fantastic opportunity, and for the patience of my colleagues and senior supervisor during my writing up period.

Thank you Adele for letting me use the Aye Simon Reading Room for some peace and quiet towards the end, and to Georgia who studied there too.

Thank you Austin for allowing our spare room to become my study for so long, and to Bee for never getting sick of hearing me talk about this project.

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Porter, 'Photographis Interruptus', *Camera*, No. 11 (November, 1977), p5.

## **Introduction**

### **'Of Other Spaces' -- An Analysis of Visual Representations of Peripheral Socio-Cultural Space in Contemporary America**

#### **Joel Sternfeld's *Hart Island* series**

A journey to Hart Island reveals fragments of history that have never been woven into the fabric of American life. The story extends to a full spectrum of historic events from mothballs to mythic. The story of the potter's fields in New York is not a singular history. It is a collection of stories which co-exist in a city with an ongoing tradition of Diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

Hart Island is a 40-acre mass of land located off the eastern shores of Manhattan, New York, opposite City Island and the Bronx in Long Island Sound. Currently owned by the Department of Corrections of New York City, the island has been used for the past 150 years as a potter's field, an indigent burial ground for the five boroughs of New York City. Four days a week, prisoners from nearby Rikers Island travel on a morgue boat loaded with uniform pine coffins destined for burial in mass graves on the island. Over a series of three years in the early 1990s the photographer Joel Sternfeld traveled on this boat and visited the island, usually on a monthly basis. Sternfeld recorded elements of what he encountered using a large format camera, heavy apparatus that involved minutes setting up before a picture could be taken.<sup>2</sup> There is a history, or there are histories, that may be traced through the visual canon of photography describing conceptual and physical landscapes of the *other* within contemporary American society. Specifically relevant to this thesis, there are veins within photographic representation concerning death and the alterity of its surrounds that may be excavated and inspected genealogically. Joel Sternfeld's *Hart Island* (1998) presents one such opportunity, a series of work that has until this point received no academic art historical

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<sup>1</sup>Joel Sternfeld and Melinda Hunt, *Hart Island* (New York: Scala) 1998, p28.

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted by M. Jubin with Melinda Hunt, July 2006.

attention, or indeed any notable critical inspection. This exploration of 'other' landscapes represented in the photograph (defined in this thesis through Foucault's notion of *heterotopia*) necessitates a parallel deconstruction of the ontological framework that occupies the space between photograph, photographer, subject and viewer. Therefore, the chapters that follow will attempt to problematise both *the space of the other* inherent to the visual images engaged with in this paper, and the *other space* that exists within related discourses. To successfully break down the performances of knowledge and power within representations of other space, we must trace not only 'the "essence" of [this] history, the historicity of history, but [the] "history" of [this] "essence".'<sup>3</sup> In this way, a discrete vocabulary may evolve in tandem with a theoretical application of histories of the *other* to the photographs under scrutiny in this thesis.

*Hart Island* consists of ten introductory collage pieces - photographs bordered by archival burial records - followed by forty-four colour photographs. Sternfeld's photographs are titled simply and factually with a description of place or space accompanied each time with the month and year of the photograph. All the photographs were taken between October 1991 and March 1994. Sternfeld's collaborator on the series, Melinda Hunt, is responsible for the collage pieces (1992 - 1998) and the accompanying catalogue essay. Hunt continues to work with the island and its inhabitants, and has just completed a documentary film about Hart Island, *The Hart Island Project* (2006). While it is the space of the photographic representation that is primarily under investigation, the importance of Hunt's writing in relation to Sternfeld's images is significant and plays a fundamental role in their interpretation, as text does throughout his practice. However, it is Sternfeld's photography that lies at the critical core of this thesis.

From the initial research proposal to the present methodologies and analysis established through the following chapters, this thesis has set a clear brief: the deconstruction of Joel Sternfeld's photographic series on Hart Island in terms of the representational depiction of

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1982, p59.

socially mediated other space. This status is reinforced on multiple levels: the pervading subject of death represented in the series; the absence of an historical understanding of the island space (there has been little scholarly research on either Sternfeld's involvement with the island, or an academic appraisal of the island from a sociological or historical perspective<sup>4</sup>); and the mechanisms of control. These mechanisms are both defined by the representations of prisoners, numerically indexed mass grave sites and the geographical isolation of the site, and the notion of photographic meaning functioning as a strategy of power-knowledge. Hart Island's initial place on the outer edges of the city suggests not only a geographical 'othering', the movement of cemeteries away from the living. Through representation, Sternfeld acknowledges the distinction between what is recorded in a society's cultural memory, what is not, and what exists in a state of purgatory, semi-erased. Melinda Hunt states in her introductory essay to the book,

the burial records from the nineteenth century contain full names, causes of death and countries of origin. ...by 1955, the causes of death for children are uniformly listed as "confidential". By 1970, the category "cause of death" is left blank.<sup>5</sup>

The medium itself - the apparatus of camera-machine, the manipulation of shutter onto light-sensitive material - has long been associated with death. Roland Barthes describes the photograph as a space in which death is confirmed not once, but twice. Referring to 'historical photographs' he states, 'there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die'<sup>6</sup>. Barthes makes a clear distinction between the agency of death (the *punctum*) in the space of 'historical'<sup>7</sup> photographs, and in the space of contemporary images where he argues it becomes diluted and dissipates through mass-production. For Barthes, the

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<sup>4</sup> Hunt reinforces this in her introductory essay stating, 'in New York City, the combined nine potters fields have close to one million burials. An immense amount of history is associated with these places. Yet, there is almost no institutional or academic interest in the public cemeteries,' Sternfeld & Hunt (1998), p20. There is a substantial body of amateur history on the New York Department of Corrections website ([www.correctionshistory.org](http://www.correctionshistory.org)). There is also a short essay, *Graven Images*, by Dr. Rebecca Scott Bray of the Department of Human Services, Melbourne, Australia, which discusses the sociological aspects of the *Hart Island Project*.

<sup>5</sup> Sternfeld & Hunt (1998), p25.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill and Wang) 1982 p96.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes (1982), p 96.

essential force of death becomes binary when its 'reality' is known outside of the photograph, assured by the age of the image and not the bodies within it. What though of Sternfeld's photographs of the potter's field, a contemporary vision of death made binary also by the prisoner killing time (or Time) digging graves? The extent these landscapes of death, the subject of the camera, engage with notions of truth, reality and constructed identities and geographies remains dependent on the particular route mapped through this rich terrain. During a two-hour interview for this thesis, Sternfeld was cagey about his work, unwilling to allow the meeting to be recorded on tape or through notes. The result was an excruciating wish to develop the conversation to the fullest tempered by trying to grasp fundamental aspects of process and practice that Sternfeld discussed. Throughout, Sternfeld insisted upon the idea that any meaning ascribed to his work occurred in the hands of the viewer. In the minimum four or five minutes it takes Sternfeld to set up his camera and take a photograph, a dialogue is silently set and lies in wait for the viewer to vocalise. In his introduction to the Tate museum's collection of essays on Jeff Wall, Craig Burnett suggests a similar idea in relation to Wall's *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947* (1990). Burnett states that the photograph 'hooks the viewer in with its strange, shadowy beauty ... does the doll express Enlightenment ideals such as reason and progress, does it tell a few infantile jokes, or is it Jeff Wall talking about his own work? Because it is silent, the picture can speak with all these voices, but it is up to the viewer to come up with a script.'<sup>8</sup>

Notions of death, the 'other' and the power structures inherent to any socio-geographic space compete with ideas that resist definition in theoretical or linguistic terms already wrought, either through their multiplicity or their formlessness. Fundamentally, the main 'protagonists' of this documented place remain either faceless (the confined dead) or nameless (the prisoners performing the burials) or both (the invisible, decomposing corpses inherent in the Sternfeld's landscape depictions). Bataille's description of the *informe* and its appropriation by Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alain Bois to suggest the *abject* does battle with the systems of power, knowledge and control implied through the operation of this island as a state-owned space,

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<sup>8</sup> Craig Burnett, *Modern Artists: Jeff Wall* (London: Tate Publishing) 2005, p7.

and the application of Foucault's *heterotopia* as its descriptor. The 'other' is legitimised through the method of presentation – a book, an exhibition, the museum catalogue – and once again, meaning and definition are constructed where they once were resisted. Formlessness and the will to form compete for representational space. Are we witnessing a universalizing of Barthes *studium* and *punctum*, where finite and infinite meaning cancel each other out to produce exactly nothing at all? The heart of this argument, and one that must be explored in tandem with Sternfeld's work in relation to histories of the visual in this thesis, is the absence of a critical vocabulary of photography that can articulate contemporary movements and developments. A discussion of Sternfeld's *Hart Island* must therefore contextualise his work through a history of his conceptual framework (death, the other and landscape) in conjunction with a wider photographic canon and contemporary critical discourses on photography. This will be the project of the initial chapter, drawing on artist records at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and journal sources to trace a history of Sternfeld's engagement with othered American spaces. In the post-postmodern critical landscape of technological representation, photography performs increasingly as a self-reflexive mechanism. Photography moves from connotations rooted in objective truth and scientific realism, through art photography, through the concerned lens of the documentary and photojournalism to the concern of its own existence as an assimilated contemporary art medium. The historical implications of the Conceptual movement (and particularly photoconceptualism, or the Conceptual approach to photography) are especially important to consider in relation to Sternfeld's practice, not least because of the relation of image to text in his work.

Chapters Two and Three will establish five theoretical concepts as points of departure for a unique and specific vocabulary with which to describe Sternfeld's work. In abbreviated form, they are: the notion of other space within visual representation; the identification of binary oppositions that evolve from this other space, and the exploration of this in the work of Georges Bataille; the idea of a space in-between these polarities, or as Melanie Klein discusses, a *fissure*; Foucault's rationalisation of the manner in which power and knowledge

are related; and finally, the function of 'truth' in the production of the 'other'. This framework will then serve as a basis for the exploration of key ideas of documentary 'truth' and its relationship to histories of the death and the other in the final chapter.

Chapter Two will take as its starting point Michel Foucault's seminal 1967 lecture *Des Espaces Autres (Of Other Spaces)* and frame *Hart Island* in terms of a postmodern exploration of the relation of power and knowledge structures employed in the creation of space, geographically, physically and, eventually, photographically. This chapter will explore this concept of *other* in relation to Sternfeld's series through Michel Foucault's writings around the notion of *heterotopia*. The identification of connections between these concepts functioning as chronologically contingent, and thus constantly subject to change, link to Foucault's rationalisation of history as specific, rather than a teleological or totalising entity. It is these two fundamental Foucaultian concepts - the notion of specific 'histories', and the constructed nature of the relationship between power and knowledge - that act as a theoretical springboard in this chapter. The critical performance of the gaze within the space of this discourse will be problematised through Lacan's notion of the mirror function, Freud's conception of the uncanny 'double' created in the mirror's reflection and Bataille's juxtaposition of the socio-cultural sites of *musée* and *abattoir*. Critical histories must be problematised shoulder-to-shoulder with visual histories of photography. This paper must, essentially, move beyond its initial theoretical consideration of Foucault and *Des Espaces Autres* in order to provide an original basis for discussion, and a signpost for future research beyond this thesis. In order to address the representation of the 'other' within the visual canon of photography the language used to describe this medium must be scrutinised to the same extent as any formal, iconographical claims made of this series.

Chapter Three will further explore the notion of binary oppositions presented by Bataille. Through Bataille's dialectic a space *in-between* may be identified in conjunction with Melanie Klein's conception of the *fissure* as the site in which power operations are enacted. Thus,

Sternfeld's representations of Hart Island may be deconstructed in this site, and the history of the photograph as a cultural entity may be problematised similarly to Bataille's treatment of the slaughterhouse site and Foucault's genealogies of institutional birth. While Foucault's model initially provides a suitable platform upon which to investigate a photographic series that clearly defines the space it represents as both specific and other, it is also problematic. The extremity of founding a critical position for this thesis based entirely on Foucault's mode of thought, itself entirely specific, is inadequate. However, there is limited space in which to formulate both the methodology for creating a theoretical critique that specifically addresses this paper, and then to implement such methodology in a successful deconstruction of Sternfeld's work. To recognise, as Sarah James stated in a recent edition of *Art Monthly*, that photography lacks a current and vital theoretical backbone is essential throughout this thesis. Therefore, the final chapter will appropriate this new space opened through Bataille and Klein in order to deconstruct a specifically American conception of the documentary as it relates to Sternfeld's portrayal of death and the other on Hart Island. Chapter Four will extrapolate the initial notion of heterotopia, engaging with a *heteropolological* deconstruction of Sternfeld's photographs, essentially positioning the series as a mapping of visual coordinates within the American socio-cultural landscape. This methodology allows a newly spatial history of the photographic other, while continuing to acknowledge Sternfeld's enterprise as inherently tied to strategies of power-knowledge.

Ideas of cultural and social mapping will be explored as well as the notion of classification of the body through the photograph, a perpetuation of the anthropological and ethnographic photographic surveys of the other. The island has always maintained a reformatory and rehabilitative aspect to its status as an institutional landscape. The first workhouse on the island in the mid-nineteenth century separated children from adults and provided a sanctuary of sorts for older boys who would otherwise have been incarcerated in one of the main penitentiaries in New York City. Such ideas exist latently within the substructures of Hart Island from the gridding and numbering of coffins to aid exhumation, the mapping of human

existence in the Department of Correction archives through to the geographical ties to social institutions marked as other. As Hunt states, 'each of the eight potter's fields [before Hart Island] retained [a] relation to the prisons, workhouses and poorhouses of their time.'<sup>9</sup> With the constant flow of human bodies through these places, such other spaces become reminiscent of Bataille's description of the purification rituals associated with the constant movement of bodies through the museum on a Sunday afternoon. The idea of this other space, the unique role the island heterotopia fulfills in the movement and the recording of human existence and its being and passing resonates with Sternfeld's representation of Hart Island.

As photographer, Sternfeld selects from these multiple strata of Hart Island to create a history of the island based on personal knowledge he has accrued. His approach to landscape is as a repository of information, soil imbued with cultural memory that is guaranteed an immortality of sorts through the photograph, and further dissemination when viewed. Each engagement with *Hart Island* is a metaphorical spreading of ashes that inscribes the landscape with a memorial function. Pertinent reference to the work of contemporaries and predecessors will be made throughout the thesis in order to better contextualise Sternfeld's practice. In Stephen Shore's *Grassy Key, Florida* (1977) or Bill Arnold's *Landing in Los Angeles* (1978), the concern for the arrangement of the environment, the grid structures that order nature and the placement of architectonic elements underscore the absence of the human body. Even when represented, figures remain inherently fugitive in these landscapes, consumed, decaying or invisible. Sally Mann's photo-book *What Remains* (2003) aligns the death of a beloved greyhound pet with the violent suicide of an escaped prisoner on her farmland property. Mann uses similar large format techniques to Sternfeld (although hers are more firmly situated in nineteenth century methods), serving to monumentalise both the life and death of her dog with the death of an unknown 'other'. The escaped convict is described as 'just a kid after all, my son's age, bled out in the milky light', the photograph of the site of death framed by the wooden beams of Mann's front porch. The representational juxtaposition of Freud's

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<sup>9</sup> Sternfeld & Hunt (1998), p8.

*heimlich* and *unheimlich* illustrates the conclusion that the final chapter, and this thesis, hope to reach: that the relationship between photographer, viewer, subject and photograph reveals the site of the heterotopia as a space located within familiar geographies. Post 9/11, Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, the process of viewing, making and taking photographs, and the deconstruction of the inherent knowledge and power operations that operate within these processes, position othered socio-cultural spaces as part of the everyday, part of every space.

*In the spring of 1978 I received a Guggenheim Fellowship to continue a series of street photographs. But the award and the possibilities it created encouraged a change in my work. All at once it seems as if the entire continent, every region, every season and every photographic means were within reach. In time the thematic structure of a new body of work emerged. Although I was only 33 years old, I had the sense of being born in one era and surviving to another. The photographs which I made represent the efforts of someone who grew up with a vision of classical regional America and the order it seemed to contain, to find beauty and harmony in an increasingly uniform, technological and disturbing America.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Wolf Gallery, New York, 'Joel Sternfeld: American Prospects', *Press Release and Bibliography* (October 16<sup>th</sup> 1984)

## Chapter One

### Disturbing America: Image and Alterity

*The dominant moral voice, if you will, of Sternfeld's color photographs is, I think, aptly expressed in the dictum of modernist architecture: "God is in the details". If we as a country were more sensitive, more perceptive, more attentive to the minutia of our cultural landscape, America might be a better place to live, or at least that is what Sternfeld's work seems to imply.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Starenko, 'Three Americans: Photographs by Robert Adams, Jim Goldberg and Joel Sternfeld', *Afterimage*, (October, 1984), p14.

Joel Sternfeld's work undeniably addresses details inherent to the environments he photographs, but can his photographic gaze, as Michael Starenko contends, be construed as fundamentally moral or concerned? This chapter will discuss the ways in which Sternfeld's photography engages with the peripheries of America's socio-cultural landscape, and the manner in which his framing of these places manifests a consciousness of 'other' space. Sternfeld's photography occupies the space of the documentary tradition and the anonymous 'concerned' gaze while simultaneously continuing certain painterly traditions of narrative detail and the trope of artist as storyteller. Where fellow New Color photographers focused on detail to invoke 'the people' or 'the place'<sup>3</sup> - the banal and everyday ephemeral existence of life in contemporary America epitomised by Stephen Shore's roadside pancake stacks and William Eggleston's iconic tricycle [figure 1] - Sternfeld utilises detail to underline the specific nature of the space he photographs. For the most part, his subjects in *Hart Island* remain anonymous. Yet it is because these bodies are usually unseen, because they are hidden rather than just forgotten or derelict, that Sternfeld's representations of them negate the general and the mundane. It is appropriate that Joel Sternfeld's photographic approach was initially described in the language of modernism (both by Starenko and in his own artist statement) for the history of photography parallels the oscillation between forms of realism and forms of abstraction that defined Modern art. Sternfeld's oeuvre exists on this precipice, depicting real and (over)familiar details alongside the romanticised and disturbingly abbreviated American sublime. In Sternfeld's case, the 'sublime' becomes uncanny, othered, through its location underground - 'In New York, the overhead viewpoint is curiously peaceful and nostalgic - the beautiful vista rather than the sublime ... the sublime vista is subterranean - the No. 6 train approaching Fourteenth Street station through the gloom, eyes on fire.'<sup>4</sup> Post-war emblems of dystopic reality (the disturbed, uniform, technological elements he describes above) underline Sternfeld's engagement with the notion of sublime in his homeland: the space race, the growth and subsequent fixation in popular visual culture of seeming suburban normalcy. These brave new spaces created new vantage points and new peripheries, areas that Sternfeld hungrily captures in series such as *American Prospects* (1987) [figure 2]. The 'in-between' sites, the space of the other, present an opportunity to

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<sup>3</sup> Walker Evans describes in a letter to a friend in 1934 this essential focus of early twentieth-century documentary photography: 'People, all classes, surrounded by bunches of the new down-and-out. Automobiles and the automobile landscape. Architecture, American urban taste, commerce, small scale, large scale, the city street atmosphere, the street smell, the hateful smell, women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay, the movies, evidence of what people of the city read, eat, see for amusement, do for relaxation and not get it. Sex. Advertising. A lot else, you see what I mean.' Walker Evans quoted by Alan Trachtenberg *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang) 1980 p244.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Gopnik, 'A Walk on the High Linc', *The New Yorker*, (May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2001), p44.

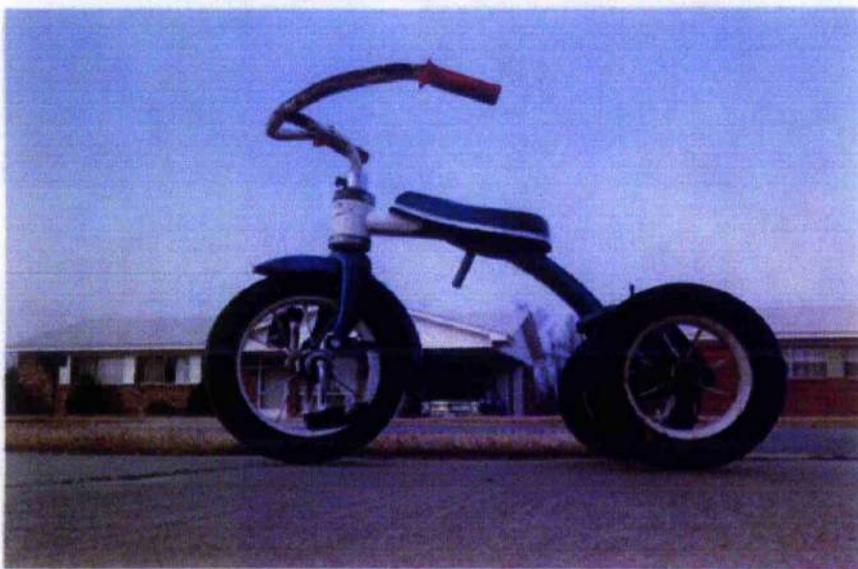


Figure 1. (above) Stephen Shore, 'Trail's End Restaurant, Kanab, Utah' from *American Surfaces* (1972);  
(below) William Eggleston, 'Tricycle, Memphis' (1969-71)

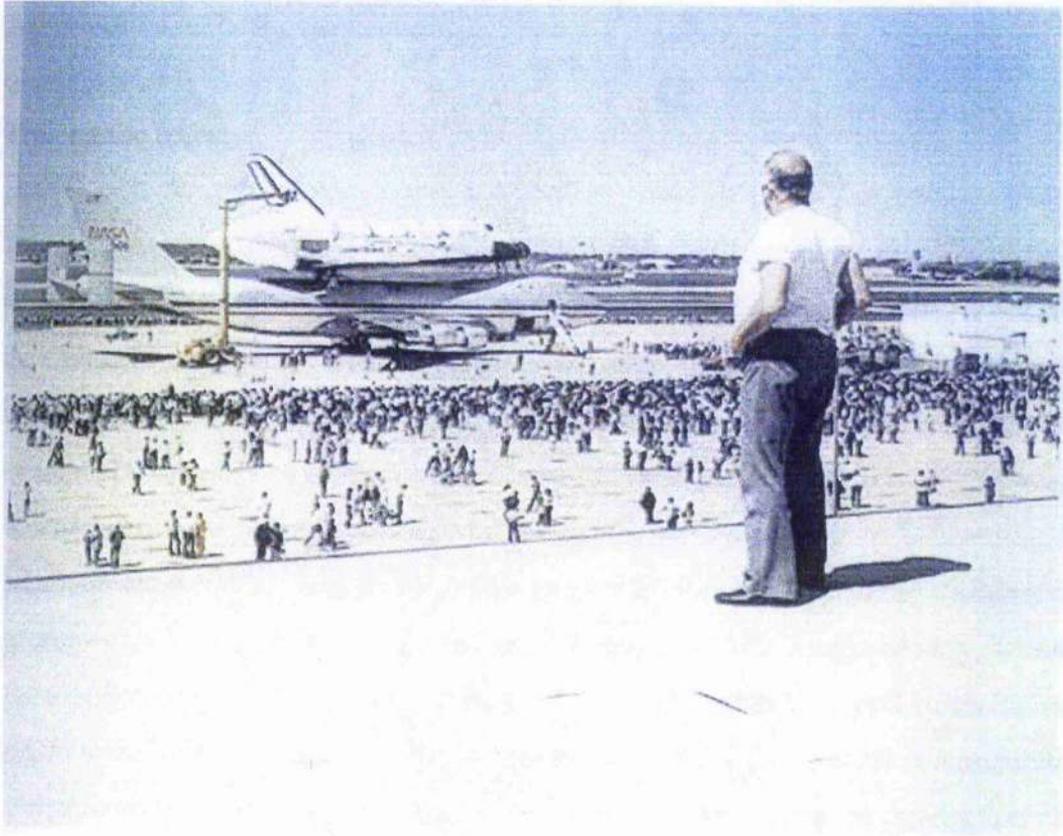


Figure 2. Joel Sternfeld, 'Morton Thiokol Rocket Testing Facility, Promontory, Utah' from *American Prospects* (1989)

photograph the social margins where quiet ruin and creeping industrialisation meet, either literally in *Campagna Romana* (1992), Sternfeld's painterly record of the countryside surrounding Rome, or more metaphorically in the portraits of prisoners on burial detail in the series focused on here: *Hart Island*.

### Tracing the edges

This 'in-between' state forms the basis of his first exhibited photographs in the early 1970s, strobe-lit shots of transitioning bodies on rush-hour street corners in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. This early series emphasises the subjects' bodies not just in space, but also *in relation* to this state of space: liminal, contingent. As this early series suggests, Sternfeld's photography operates at the point where memory and memorial intersect: the 'event' his camera records has always passed, whether death, natural disaster or human act. It is nature (both landscape and human) that remains steadfastly unchanging in the wake of these occurrences, and this is the point at which Sternfeld's shutter snaps, slowly, deliberately. Like all photographs, the resulting image offers an opportunity to reflect on the moment now past, to seize it and examine it as historical artifact. Sternfeld's artist statement above links the first localised series of 'rush-hour' works he made with a visual conception of his country as 'regional' and his medium as the key to engaging with and bridging the spaces in-between these sites. The common link throughout his practice is the entirely *specific* nature of his photography – his preoccupation with the details mark Sternfeld as both a photographer concerned with narrative, and an author scoring stories with images.

The photographer and his work contradict the postmodern climate of their infancy and the anti-aesthetic urge for text to separate art from artist and art from depiction. Jeff Wall stated retrospectively that 'the reduction of art to the condition of an intellectual concept of itself was an aim which cast doubt upon any given notion of the sensuous experience of art.'<sup>5</sup> Where Vito Acconci commands a disembodied self to photograph every second step and Stephen Shore dictates a shutter snap every city block traveled, Sternfeld is not afraid to engage with the human and phenomenological when setting the parameters for his photographs. He is a narrator of volumes in American history that no one has yet cared to

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art', *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960 – 1982*, ed. by Douglas Fogle (Minnesota: Walker Art Center) 2003, p41.

p44. Wall continues, 'replacing a work with a theoretical essay which could hang in its place was the most direct means toward this end ... it was the proposal of the final and definitive negation of art as depiction.'

catalogue. Sternfeld's documentation of human interaction with the surrounding environment and the volatile, uneasy relationship between man and the natural world is his overarching concern as a photographer. The natural world and its incarnation as othered space is expressed by Sternfeld in his description of the High Line in New York when he states that 'the abandoned place is the place where seasonality resides.'<sup>6</sup> This might be a common point of departure for many photographers but for the manner in which Sternfeld employs text in relation to his images, forcing renewed or extended perceptual interactions those who view his work. It is the specific detail of the titles, or accompanying catalogue essay that often demarcate the 'other' inherent to his work. Text is used as a foundation for photographic impetus (news stories, current affairs and hidden folkloric tales) and this relationship is made concrete when words reemerge after the fact as accompaniment to an image in books or displayed beside exhibited works. While his titles usually only describe geographic location and full date, there is always a short artist statement included at the end of the viewing process that briefly explains his motivation for any particular series. Catalogue essays and curatorial statements, where they appear, rarely seem to pinpoint this epicenter of creative focus in the same way these short excerpts can, and do. The viewer is never left unaware of the intention behind Sternfeld's photographs. Unlike a more direct news image however, conclusions are never easily drawn as Sternfeld creates photographic subjects that have yet to be viewed outside their 'othered' territories. In a 1980 journal article Andy Grundberg describes Sternfeld's photographs as following in the tradition of 'Walt Whitman, Huck Finn, Jack Kerouac and Robert Frank', his journey (that would seven years later result in these photographs and others collected as *American Prospects*) 'inspired by the seasonal books of Edwin Way Teale'.<sup>7</sup> It is telling that Grundberg (who provides the introduction to the 1994 reissue of *American Prospects*) lists four writers and only one photographer in this description, highlighting both the importance Sternfeld places on the relationship between text and his images, and positioning him in the company of great journeymen poets rather than solely within a photographic tradition. Sternfeld uses text not in place of depiction, but to describe this state of negative representation, his act of imagining the other through photography. A year later Grundberg again considers Sternfeld's approach to a contemporary culture struggling to settle. 'Given the myriad anxieties that haunt us today ... it is not surprising that catastrophe, disorder and discord should become topics in contemporary

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<sup>6</sup> Joel Sternfeld quoted by Gopnik, p45.

<sup>7</sup> Grundberg, Andy 'Inhabited Terrain: Joel Sternfeld's American Landscapes', *Modern Photography* Vol. 44 No. 3 (March, 1980), p82.

photography. What is confounding is that they should make an appearance in photographs that cause us to smile as frequently as they cause us to shudder.<sup>8</sup> Sternfeld's subject matter often nods to earlier documentary photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange who demonstrated, through their pictures taken for the Farm Securities Administration during the Depression that catastrophe, that disorder and discord have been alive and well for some time in America [figure 3]. However, Grundberg highlights Sternfeld's manipulation of the uncanny as a humorous device, an observation that the few others that have written on his work have neglected to make. It is perhaps easier, and certainly more comfortable to ignore this tendency to blend the familiar (usually landscape motifs that speak to the work of his contemporaries) with details that elicit humour or pathos, problematising Starenko's earlier characterisation of Sternfeld's work containing a 'dominant moral voice'. *Near Akron, Ohio, May 1983* nods to the banal (or Banal), but the backdrop of suburban commuter-belt estate homes is interrupted by the tragic-comic gesture of the man in the foreground holding forward a too-small child's bicycle for inspection. Like *Canyon Country, California, 1983* [figure 4] where the figures of a father and daughter sit in static unity, the normalcy of the scene is subverted by the details (in this case, the squashed genitalia of the father effected by his shorts) that suggest limitations, a curtailment rather than fulfilment, and an awareness of frustrated potential in the mundane. This uncanny element is repeated as figures are continually set *against* rather than within the landscape. They are alternately both at home and unsettled, in the relief of the in-between where the nucleus of the city dissipates and meets the beginnings of the natural world. Sternfeld distances himself from his subject – there is usually a 'foreground' – and yet paradoxically negates Walker Evans' 'disinterested eye.'<sup>9</sup> In this manner, he traverses boundaries between fellow contemporary New Color photographers, genres that rely on textual setting such as documentary and photojournalistic practice, the aesthetic of popular culture and the tradition of photographers who have acknowledged the history of Western painting in their work. Again, Sternfeld's self-analysis of having survived between two eras is suggested, a dialectic surfacing between 'modernist' attention to detail and a postmodern rejection of the author. Similarly, it is his focus on 'other' landscapes, and the unknown and unseen that exist between these oppositions, that forms the central concern of his work. This chapter will situate Joel Sternfeld's practice within the confines of his own production. While external influences will be cited

<sup>8</sup> Grundberg, Andy 'The Incredible Commonplace', *The New York Times* (October 25 1981), p33.

<sup>9</sup> In a note included in a reissue of *American Photographs* Evans stated, "The objective picture of America in the 1930s made by Evans was neither journalistic nor political in technique and intention. It was reflective rather than tendentious and, in a certain way, *disinterested*." Trachtenberg (1980), p253.

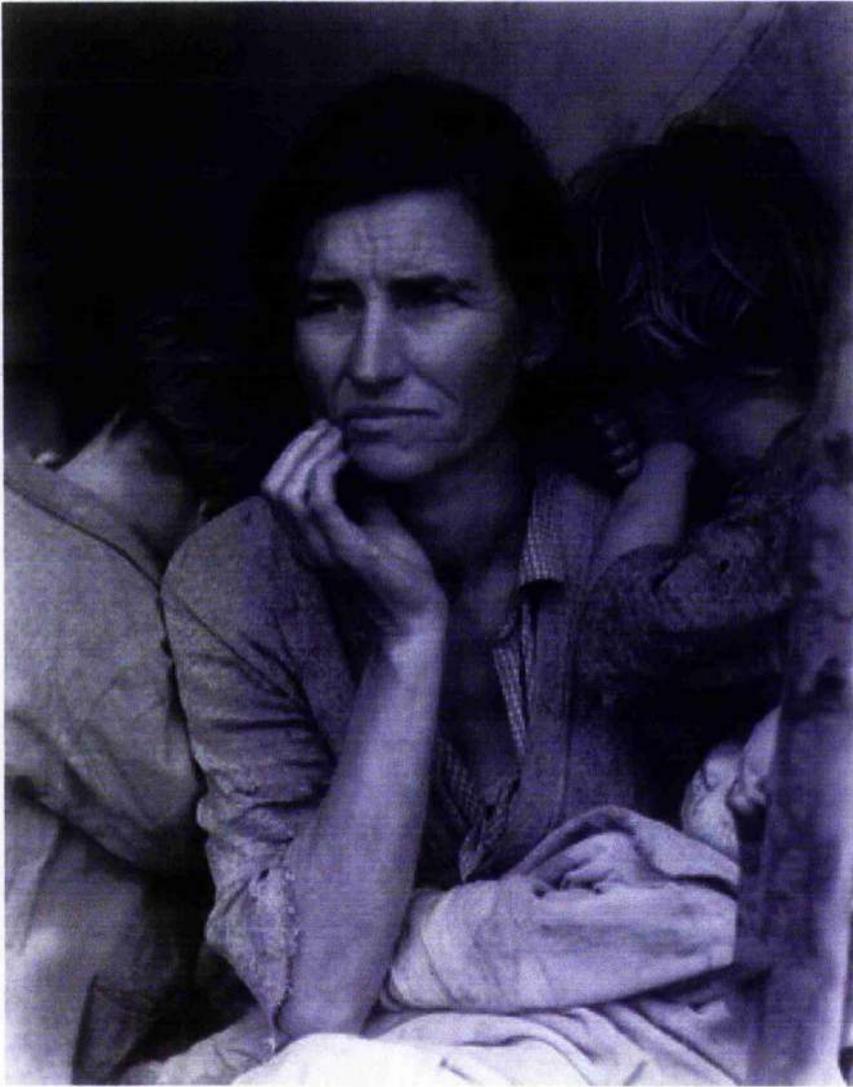


Figure 3. Dorothea Lange, 'Migrant Mother' from *Farm Services Administration Photographs* taken during the Great Depression, 1936

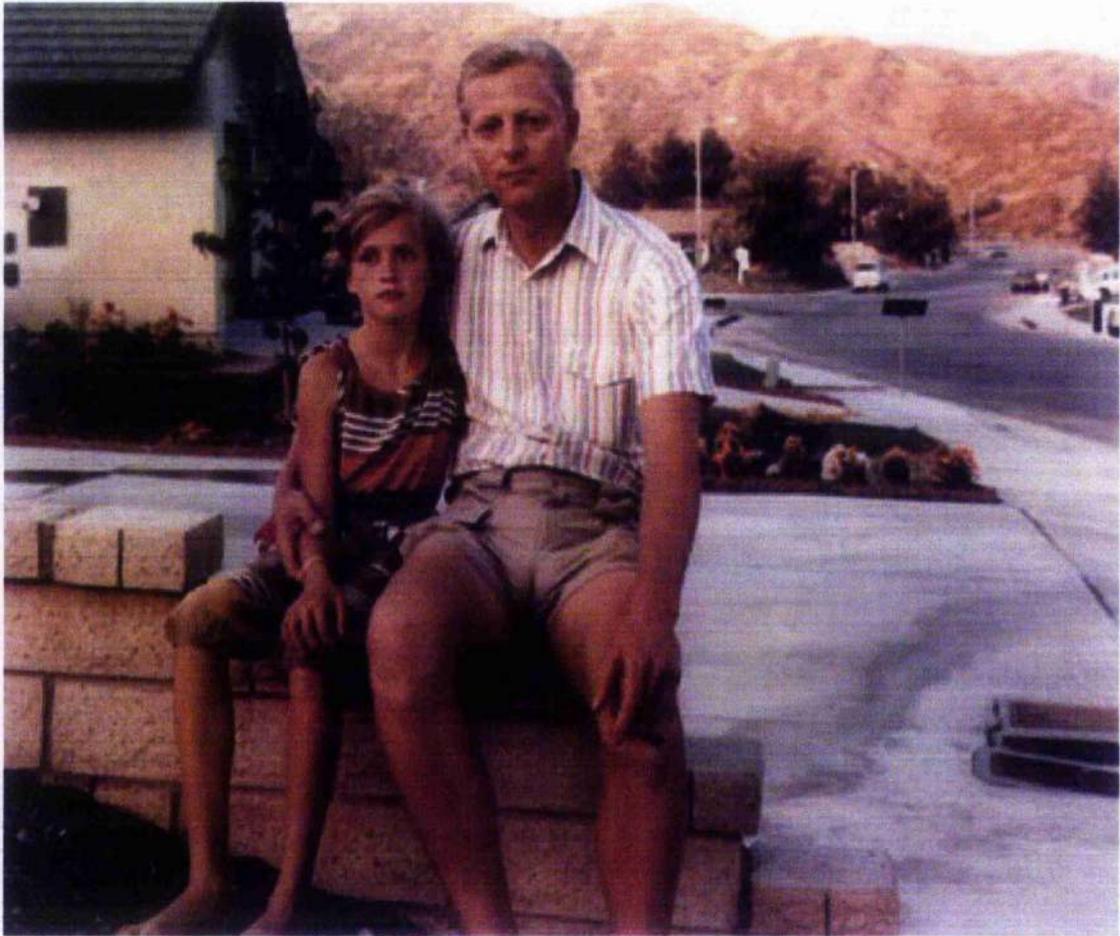


Figure 4. Joel Sternfeld, 'Canyon Country, California, June 1983' from *American Prospects* (1987).

superficially in this chapter, following chapters will discuss in greater depth his practice within a larger historical and theoretical context. This primary chapter will explore Sternfeld's collection of photographic essays spanning three decades with emphasis on his portrayal of the 'other' within American visual culture. The focus of this chapter's exploration, and indeed this thesis as a whole, lies in a detailed analysis of one series in particular: *Hart Island*.

### **Early practice: the 'New Color'**

It is necessary to situate the *Hart Island* series within the landscape of photographic history that preceded its making, and which defined the making of Sternfeld as a photographer. Sternfeld began his practice as a colour photographer in the late 1960s, a decade when the use of colour prints was viewed still by many as subversive and in competition with collecting trends that favoured black-and-white Modernist work. Sternfeld said of the early days of colour images,

I think of that time as the early Christian period in color photography ... if you met another color photographer, you wanted to get together in a basement and discuss it. I can remember a gallery person saying to me, "Why are you working in color? Black and white is so natural." Color photography was seen as somehow subversive.<sup>10</sup>

His genesis as a photographer of peripheral American spaces occurred at a juncture where the medium of photography assumed new forms and discourses. Like almost every young photographer of the 1970s, Sternfeld's path was defined in part by the exhibition and acquisition trends of the Museum of Modern Art's photography department and its chief curator John Szarkowski. The seminal 1976 solo exhibition of William Eggleston's photography (*Eggleston's Guide*, curated by Szarkowski) endorsed the authenticity of colour photography and demonstrated a major institutional support of the medium for the first time, a direction sealed two decades later in 1995 when MoMA acquired the complete set of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*.<sup>11</sup> However, in contrast to Eggleston's solo show, MoMA's

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<sup>10</sup> Joel Sternfeld quoted by Vince Aletti, 'Flashback', *Art + Auction* (February, 2004), p71.

<sup>11</sup> To contextualise: 'In light of the subsequent auction prices for individual prints from the series, the acquisition was a steal. Made in the last years of the '70s, the "Film Stills" have little in common with the seemingly deadpan but intensely engaged and politically astute work that defines the decade, but MoMA's high-profile purchase helped to focus attention on undervalued photographs of that era.' Aletti, p71.

artist record for Sternfeld dated April 20<sup>th</sup> 1979 shows that at this stage in his photographic career he was unrepresented by a gallery and had yet to have his work acquired by either a public or private collection.<sup>12</sup> The descriptor 'New Color' was crystallised by an exhibition of the same title curated by Sally Fauclaire at the International Center of Photography in 1981. This initial contingent of colour photographers who took America as their subject matter in the 1970s led, predictably, to a widening use of colour photography over the ensuing three decades. It is only now that retrospective consideration of such work and its impact on the history of photography has begun to be fully analysed. Reviewing both *The New Color* exhibition at the International Center for Photography (in which Sternfeld was included) and a solo show of Sternfeld's work at Daniel Wolf gallery, both in New York in 1982, *Artforum* suggests that the sheer volume of photographers adapting to working in colour made clarifying the field problematic.

The real problem [Fauclaire] had to face in putting together *The New Colour* was not these preeminent figures [Eggleston, Meyerowitz], however. It was the deluge of photographers who have come after them ... the field has been burgeoning – at times it seems to be exploding – with young photographers.<sup>13</sup>

If the field was expanding, it was perhaps less to do with new technologies than an institutional acceptance of color, and increased interest in its dissemination through exhibition, catalogue and journal form. Frustration with the manner in which the curator had thematically devised the show – 'the more I looked and read, the more indistinguishable the two categories ['Color Photographic Formalism' and 'The Vivid Vernacular'] became'<sup>14</sup> – can be read not only as ill-defined curatorial intentions but the non-existence of a history and set critical vocabulary on which to base such an exploration. The role connoisseurship has played in precipitating rising commercial (and therefore critical) interest in this 'early Christian' era of colour photography was expressed recently in *Art + Auction*:

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<sup>12</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Photography Artist Record for Joel Sternfeld.

<sup>13</sup> Colin J. Westerbeck "The New Color" International Center of Photography', *Artforum* (January, 1982), p101.

<sup>14</sup> Westerbeck, p101.

The 70s is close enough to our own time to be meaningful, but there's just enough distance for people to feel they're making informed assessments. So it's inevitable that material from that era should be recontextualised and focused on.<sup>15</sup>

Writing twenty-five years earlier in *Camera* on an early series of Sternfeld's colour works Allan Porter articulates the impossible task of formulating a history without the necessary perspective of distance. He states, 'to acknowledge an existing movement and to enlighten the reader on its developments is considered intellectual criticism. To predict a movement when only the seeds are planted and the mentors are either dead or semi-retired is sometimes critical suicide.'<sup>16</sup> Interestingly however, the contemporary contextualisation of New Color photography has taken a doubly retrospective turn. It is through the work of the following generation of photographers, and the New Realist School in particular, that the history of New Color has begun an articulation of its own history. Consciousness of the contemporary Düsseldorf triumvirate of Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky has provided impetus for a genealogy tracing back through their teachers Bernd and Hilla Becher, who bought a number of Stephen Shore's works in the 70s and 80s through Berlin photography dealer Rudolf Kicken. Shore's exhibition of colour works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1971 (the first solo show the museum gave to the work of a living photographer) was a smaller, earlier precursor to Eggleston's survey at MoMA. That Eggleston's exhibition has often been designated as the originating 'root' of Color within the art historical canon is contested by the ICP's Director of Exhibitions Brian Wallis, who terms it 'a flash point, rather than a starting point.'<sup>17</sup> This is significant in highlighting the still-emerging nature of the history of this particular period in photography, and its close ties with contemporary practice that problematise historical distance. The teleological connection between New Realism and New Color is underscored by Aletti who suggests that 'a significant turning point in his [Shore's] career came in the spring of 2000, when a show of his 70s color landscapes opened at 303 Gallery in Chelsea soon after an Andreas Gursky exhibition closed across the street at Matthew Marks. The juxtaposition was fortuitous and instructive.'<sup>18</sup> Kicken opened his own gallery in Berlin in 1974, established a connection with the Light Gallery in New York (where Shore had shown repeatedly in the 70s and 80s) and

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<sup>15</sup> Aletti, p68.

<sup>16</sup> Allan Porter, 'Photographis Interruptus: Mark Cohen, Joel Sternfeld, Larry Fink', *Camera*, Vol. 56, No. 11 (November, 1977), p5.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Wallis, Exhibitions Director at the ICP in conversation, April 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Aletti, p71. Aletti continues, 'before the show at 303, Shore hadn't appeared since 1995 at Pace/McGill. But he had exhibited extensively in Europe, beginning in 1977 with a show the Kunsthalle in Dusseldorf.'

exhibited a survey show of American colour works in 2001, the year after Shore showed at 303 Gallery. Kicken explains to Aletti that the contemporary buyers of American New Color works are the same people buying 'Struffsky' and Becher photography, 'collectors of paintings and photo art who realised there is a history to this work. What's happened is that the classic photo market and the conceptual photo market are meeting, and Shore and those guys are catalysts.'<sup>19</sup> This genealogy, established first through photographers themselves, collectors and institutions, then finally those who write photography's history, posits Sternfeld's contribution as one of 'those guys'.

Alan Porter's essay accompanies the series of eight published 'rush hour' photographs by Sternfeld taken between 1977 and 1978, a series that Aletti contends (wrongly) were exhibited for the first time at Lühring Augustine Gallery in New York in early 2004. In fact, Sternfeld exhibited works from this series at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in an exhibition titled *Larry Fink and Joel Sternfeld: Photographs: October 23- November 29, 1981*. These early colour photographs demonstrate a flattened picture plane as Sternfeld's lens is located directly within the crowds it documents. Harried pedestrians in New York and Chicago charge past as Sternfeld illuminates them with artificially bright flash apparatus and presses the shutter (photographs taken in Philadelphia are omitted in this earlier exhibition catalogue, although it is not clear if they were part of the exhibition itself). The resulting images are close-cropped figures weaving diagonally across the frame, half-glimpsed faces, startled expressions for some subjects while others appear to be completely ignorant of the photographer's lens. The paradox lies in the apparatus Sternfeld employs, a large format 8x10" camera.<sup>20</sup> The camera's sheer physicality, heavy and awkward to move and lift, and the time it takes to load with film negates the ephemeral 'snapshot' quality of these photographs and the apparent informality with which Sternfeld treats his subjects. Porter terms Sternfeld's photography, and similar work by young artists of his generation as demonstrating 'camera vision', an interest in

a vision which only the camera can purvey ... can only be recorded on some memory system such as the film ... a spontaneity that creates an image without relying on the

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<sup>19</sup> Aletti, p74.

<sup>20</sup> Grundberg clarifies the technical apparatus: 'The camera is a wooden Wista, his lenses are 240mm and 360mm Schneider Symmars and a 300mm Kodak Anastigmat, and he uses Kodak vericolor films. His negatives are enlarged on Ektacolor paper to a size of 13 1/2 x 17 in.' Andy Grundberg, 'Inhabited Terrain: Joel Sternfeld's American Landscapes', *Modern Photography*, vol. 44, no. 3 (March, 1980), p.82.

historical, sociological or psychological considerations of the image portrayed ... there is no design or formula in the construction of the image, but a complete reliance on chance and coincidence.<sup>21</sup>

Porter's problematic choice of vocabulary reflects themes inherent in both Barthes conception of the *death of the author* and the associated implications of Conceptualism, especially in photography, where the impetus for the photograph was chance itself, an anti-depiction. The language Porter utilises reflects its own historical moment as does his understanding of Sternfeld's photographic processes and practice, the very connection that Porter's logic attempts to deny. The trope of photographer as adjunct to camera and photograph had already been explored through the use of photography as a scientific or institutional method of classification from the late nineteenth century onwards, and the further association between camera as objective machine and photographer as 'disinterested eye' has been well documented. Porter likens this series of Sternfeld's work to Abstract Expressionism and Action Painting, styling them as anti-representational, devoid of narrative or 'interior message' – a pure image. The capacity of photography to occupy either extreme of the spectrum – pure objectivity of the image versus subjective storytelling – will be analysed and rejected in the following chapter. Such analyses necessarily confront photography's critical vocabulary as an historically determined narrative, indicated not least by Porter's use of the discourses of contemporary painting to critique Sternfeld's photograph methods. However, the accompanying artist's statement by Sternfeld included at the beginning of this chapter suggests a clearly defined and deliberate narrative beneath the compositional elements of the photographs, pointing toward elements that would precipitate his engagement with the American 'other'. Porter does acknowledge this element, although recognises it as embedded in formal technique, concluding,

'In contrast to the seductive display of colour and choreography, the pop-out effect created by strobe and the spatial disorientation it engendered, seemed to bear a metaphoric relationship to the feeling of malaise characterizing American life in 1976.'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Porter, p25.

<sup>22</sup> Porter, p16. Sternfeld elaborates, 'in the summer of 1976 one could see a dazzling colour phenomenon-a day-glo, acrylic palette non-existent before this decade. Studies in the physical and perceptual properties of colour quickly formed and dissolved as intersections were crossed and commuter trains caught.'

## Reproblematising the photographic canon: history as methodology

Considering Szarkowski's influence on late twentieth-century photography, it is appropriate that it was in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that Sternfeld first showed his work in a larger institutional setting (the International Center for Photography still in relative infancy at this stage). A review of *Three Americans: Photographs by Robert Adams, Jim Goldberg and Joel Sternfeld* (1984) further underlines MoMA's influence in shaping the New Color movement, and the continued debate over the role of colour photography. Starenko, writing in *Afterimage*, cites *New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer's suggestion that the museum's photography department '[is] almost the only department of the museum which currently plays a leadership role in judging and codifying new works ... but the taste ... is so specialized and often so wayward and self-reflexive that there are times when one wishes that it, too, would go back to showing mainly the classics'.<sup>23</sup> The author defines such 'classics' as Sol LeWitt, Cindy Sherman and William Wegman, acknowledging that these artists were once newly 'contemporary' themselves. The residue left by Conceptual artists such as these on theoretical modes of interpretation, then implemented in contemporary discussion of Sternfeld's then-emerging generation is important to highlight here as the first of many critical fractures associated with contextualising his work. As has been suggested previously, the weight of Conceptualism and its implications for photography, and the related postmodern discourses germinating in the 1970s, formed a backdrop for Sternfeld's practice. Geoffrey Batchen highlights two other exhibitions at MoMA, both in 1970, that have important implications for this investigation: *Photography into Sculpture* and *Information*, the museum's first survey of Conceptual work. Szarkowski's preoccupation with defining what the photographic medium *was* met the work of a generation of emerging artists who were intent on re-presenting precisely what it *was not*. There is no neat distinction between these heterogeneous groups. As Batchen highlights,

American Art photography was in fact continually being ruptured from within ... conceptual practices of various kinds have always been rife within the photographic community.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Starenko, p23.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, 'Cancellation' in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960 -- 1982*, ed. by Douglas Fogle (Minnesota: Walker Art Center) 2003, p177.

Although it will be argued that a re-evaluation of these discourses and practical paradigms is necessary in order to successfully engage with his work, for now it is enough to acknowledge that Sternfeld's Hart Island series can certainly be fruitfully discussed in relation to other artists who worked within a specifically American canon of postmodern photography, and have come to recent prominence for their relation to specific sites of social and cultural alterity or entropy (Gordon Matta-Clark's engagement with downtown New York as an 'open-air studio' is particularly rich in comparison). Wall's contention that photoconceptualism's anti-aesthetic turn instilled a 'new negative sense' in the medium offered new parameters within which to engage with the notion of absence, the ephemeral or the other in a manner removed from the modernist heroicisation of Walker Evans a generation before. Writing in 1970, Lawrence Alloway describes this negative turn and its new possibility thus: 'one of the uses of photography is to provide the coordinates of absent works of art ... documentation distributes and makes consultable the work of art that is inaccessible ... the documentary photograph is grounds for believing something happened.'<sup>25</sup> The Conceptual foundations of Land Art spatialised its subsequent documentation, allowing the represented space geography akin to the natural landscape. Sternfeld takes the Conceptual concern with American *surfaces* and connects it to the relationship between photographer, viewer and subject, with the experiential, phenomenological activity played out upon, within and in between the traditional pictorial boundaries that delineate these surfaces.

In recent years an increasing number of American photographers have taken as their subject the quality of life in America ... This new work, exemplified by the photographs in *Three Americans* is not necessarily directed by programmatic political stances, but rather individual intuitions about where our problems lie.<sup>26</sup>

Recent critical writings on Jeff Wall have suggested in his work the same inherent (and implicitly moralising) modernist tendencies that Michel Starenko links to the work of Joel Sternfeld in the 1980s. In the latter case, it is within the initial tentative context of an exhibition review in *Afterimage* that Sternfeld's work is discussed in terms of his 'attention to the minutia of our cultural landscape'. This sentiment is echoed within contemporary retrospective consideration of Wall's production after his involvement with the Conceptual

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<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Alloway, 'Artists and Photographs (1970)' in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960 - 1982*, ed. by Douglas Fogle (Minnesota: Walker Art Center) 2003, p20.

<sup>26</sup> Starenko, p14.

movement ended in the early 1970s. This tendency to return to what Charles Baudelaire characterised as ‘the fugitive, fleeting beauty of present-day life, the distinguishing character of that quality which ... we have called *modernity*’<sup>27</sup> identifies a remaining, unresolved concern within a critical landscape bound by postmodernity. A reevaluation of the accepted relationship between photography and discourse following the strict parameters of the Conceptual movement is part of the project of contextualising Sternfeld within a history of contemporary photography that is itself formative. In the same way the move towards abstraction made by the neo-Impressionists migrated from formal conceit to self-reflexive gesture, the postmodern abstraction of art from artist (the action photography of Vito Acconci or Victor Burgin accompanied by instructive text [figure 5]) provoked a turn against the purely formalist photographic performance. Sternfeld engages with elements of the negative, without negating the figure, either as subject or author, giving credence to subjectivity within the geographic document, a possibility for both textual and pictorial aesthetic. Upon winning the Citigroup photography prize in 2004, Sternfeld stated, ‘photographs have always been authored ... with a photograph, you are left with the same modes of interpretation as a book. You ask: what do we know about the author ... the subject?’<sup>28</sup> It is within this critical landscape that Sternfeld’s photographs explore the terrain of the other.

### **Defining the other**

In an age where mass dissemination of images is increasingly possible through the internet, and the proliferation of digital imaging technologies cheaply available to large audiences, the unknown and unseen have become eroded and redefined. The medium itself becomes ever-more democratic and part of everyday visual and cultural parlance. Photographs of places, people, things previously undocumented are now sites of routine discourse and in turn this phenomenon becomes the subject of artists (Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman) who explore this frantic visual production through their own photographs-of-photographs. Therefore, when a site remains unknown, unseen by contemporary culture, it becomes a curiosity, something made valuable because of its alterity. Hart Island is such a space, and Joel Sternfeld’s

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<sup>27</sup> Craig Burnett, *Modern Artists: Jeff Wall* (London: Tate Publishing) 2005 p7.

<sup>28</sup> Sternfeld, Joel quoted by Charlotte Higgins, ‘False Witness’, *The Guardian* (March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004) <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1165870,00.html>> [accessed August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006].

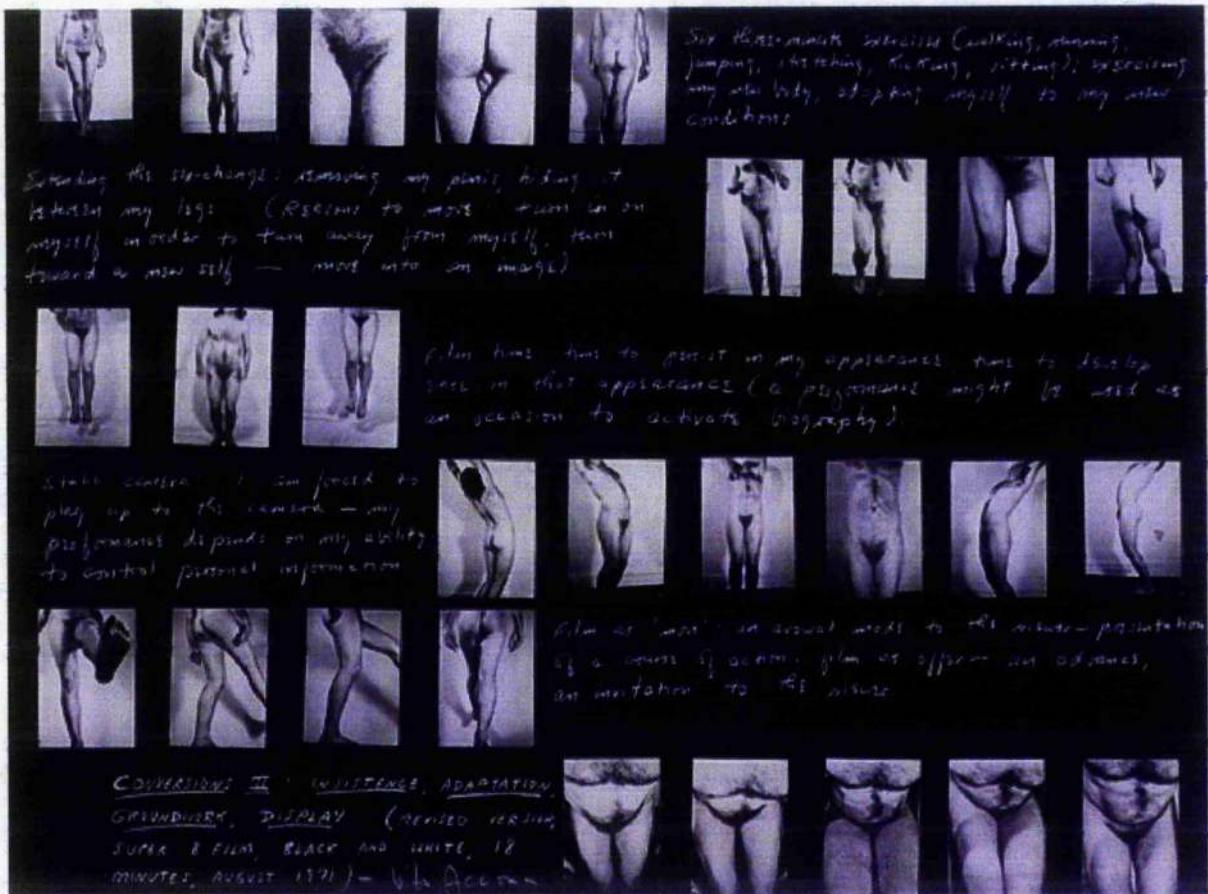


Figure 5. Vito Acconci, 'Conversations II: Insistence, Adaptation, Groundwork, Display' (1971)

photographs of this site function both as a demarcation of its otherness and a herald of entry into a collective cultural memory.

Joel Sternfeld's *Hart Island* series is situated currently at the midpoint of his published artistic production, shot between 1991 and 1994, first exhibited in 1997 at The Lower Eastside Tenement Museum, New York and collected in book form in 1998. That Sternfeld chose to exhibit the Hart Island photographs at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum is significant. The museum's mission focuses on 'the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a gateway to America', and in a sense this series provides a point of entry to contemporary experience of Diaspora in New York City. Sternfeld's seven other major projects have all concluded with the publication of a bound series – *American Prospects* (1987), *Campagna Romana* (1992), *On this Site: Landscape in Memoriam* (1997), *Stranger Passing* (2001), *Treading on Kings: protesting the G8 in Genoa* (2002), *Walking the High Line* (2002) and *Sweet Earth: experimental utopias in America* (2006). In each case, the series are composed over several years before final presentation, sometimes through exhibition and always in book format. Indeed, Sternfeld views the book as the definitive method of collection and display of his work, involving the viewer in an interaction that can take place outside of the museum or gallery space and therefore allow for greater freedom of interpretation.<sup>29</sup> As an artist, Sternfeld has existed until very recently on the periphery of the institutionally acknowledged contemporary scene mirroring the relationship between his photographic subjects and the wider socio-cultural environment. His work has certainly been collected by major museums and has been exhibited as part of inaugural exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art twice: first within the re-hang of the Steichen Galleries following expansion in 1984 and then again after the renovation of the museum in 2005.

Yet scholarly analysis of Sternfeld's work remains scarce, more often limited to his better-known series *American Prospects* and *Stranger Passing*. This may be due in part to the debt these photographs in particular owe to the documentary tradition ingrained in the American subconscious, pioneered by Timothy O'Sullivan, Walker Evans and more recently Jeff Wall, master chroniclers of American landscapes. Sternfeld acknowledges in his choice of subject matter the significant role landscape photography has played in the formation of narratives and the collective understanding of American life. Lush, large format, high-resolution images

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with the artist conducted by M. Jubin, July 2006.

are part of the common visual vocabulary of photography in the current climate, as are subjects that center on an experience designed to leave the viewer feeling unsettled by the familiar-turned-uncanny. Photographers of the late nineteenth century were the cartographers of their nation, recording images of the Western frontier in a manner that twentieth century photographers have responded to, continually searching for new topologies to document. However, Andy Grundberg rightly distances Sternfeld's approach from direct comparison with predecessors stating, '[he] has no romance going with the dispossessed, as Evans, Frank and so many other photographers have had.'<sup>30</sup> Material written on Sternfeld's work in the context of the New Color movement and wider histories of photography (especially the documentary tradition) often positions him – thoughtlessly, conveniently – as an understudy to more commercially successful photographers, in particular Stephen Shore. As explored above, Shore has enjoyed a success, both at the beginning of his career and a recent resurgence, which has for the most part eluded Sternfeld (commissioned in 2006 to write the entry on Shore for a Phaidon photography publication that he was not to be included in).<sup>31</sup> The current exhibition of Shore's work at the International Center of Photography, *Biographical Landscapes: The Photography of Stephen Shore 1969-79* collects early conceptual work, found images and selected works from two American landscape surveys, *American Surfaces* (1972) and *Uncommon Places* (1982). Viewing this exhibition, important in its attempt to map a history of early colour work, the difference between Shore's focus on 'classical regional America' and Sternfeld's engagement with this tradition is highlighted. In the late 1980s Sternfeld makes the distinction himself:

It's been very fashionable to focus on the weakness and banality of America ... but what I wanted to say is that it's also a very exciting and fascinating place. I vowed that I was going to stay as broad as the country and my interests. So you've got pools and dams and the space shuttle and tennis and punks and maids and a farmer on the banks of the Mississippi.<sup>32</sup>

Sternfeld presents this broad and initially superficial surface, paralleling in some measure Shore's approach, the equilibrium disturbed only when the viewer chooses to inspect the photographs more carefully. It is frustrating that many critics and chroniclers of Sternfeld's

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<sup>30</sup> Grundberg (1981), p33.

<sup>31</sup> Joel Sternfeld in interview with M. Jubin, July 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Joel Sternfeld quoted by Michael Berryhill 'Prospects': Promise and pain in the USA', *USA Today*, (April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1987), p26.

work have so closely positioned the two photographers, using the same tools to describe Sternfeld's work as they have for Shore's, thus merely caricaturing certain of his works. Sternfeld's well-recognised photograph *McLean, Virginia, December 4 1978* [figure 6] from the series *American Prospects* has been variously described as the depiction of a news event, the recording of a fireman's indifference to a house fire raging behind him and the representation of a modern-day Nero plucking pumpkins in the glow of flames. Douglas Davis describes 'a farmhouse on fire, an event to which an indolent fireman buying a pumpkin seems utterly indifferent.'<sup>33</sup> Numerous critics and writers have chosen this photograph in conjunction with *Approximately 17 of 41 Sperm Whales which Beached Near Florence, Oregon, 1979* and *Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, June 1979* [figure 7], to provide a convenient summation of Sternfeld's engagement with the contemporary American landscape. However, following an article in *Newsweek* reviewing an early exhibition of the *McLean* photograph (before the publication of *American Prospects*) a letter to the same publication a few weeks later suggests that one of Sternfeld's better known photographs has been continually misrepresented. A resident of McLean suggests that,

the house in question was vacant; no lives or even property were in danger, as the fire was prearranged by the owners in concert with the McLean volunteer fire department ... the man looking over the pumpkins was only off shift, not "indifferent" to danger.<sup>34</sup>

*McLean, Virginia* is one of the only photographs of Sternfeld's that is written about in any significant detail in the archive of materials on his work. His Hart Island series merits a one-sentence mention in a handful of journal articles and, as a series of work, has received no critical analysis in any substantial academic or public form. There are no traceable materials from any of the four exhibitions of the *Hart Island* series (in New York, the UK and twice in Germany) further than an exhibition invitation or review. The island has been photographed once before by the New York City Department of Corrections for an internal information pamphlet, *A historical resume of potters field*, published in 1967 [figure 8]. It is therefore possible to view both the photographs Sternfeld produces, and the artist himself, as inherently fugitive within the critical landscapes that bind them. Unlike contemporaries, Sternfeld includes no self-portrait in any published or exhibited work.<sup>35</sup> He is as unseen as his subjects,

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas Davis, 'A Call to the Colors', *Newsweek*, (November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1981), p116.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Jonnard, 'Letters Page', *Newsweek* (December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1981), p11.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Stephen Shore includes *Self-portrait, New York, March 20, 1976* in *American Surfaces* and Jeff Wall has made a number of self portraits including *Double Self-Portrait* and *Picture for Woman*, both 1979.



Figure 6. Joel Sternfeld, 'McLean, Virginia, December 1978' from *American Prospects* (1989)



Figure 7. Joel Sternfeld, 'Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, 1982' from *American Prospects* (1987).

a self-made 'other'. Sternfeld's status as 'hidden' has certainly been tempered in the decade that has passed since the publication of *Hart Island*, not least because of growing interest in his continued artistic production instigated by the booming market for photography of the last thirty years, and his representation now by major galleries (including New York's Luhring Augustine). However, he remains a semi-peripheral and under-analysed figure. Sternfeld follows an established visual tradition to the extent that his oeuvre depicts an index of cross-country pilgrimage, but he is careful not to tread too firmly in the steps of his predecessors. His detailed approach seeks a categorical comprehension of his subject rather than a superficial engagement with what is viewed. Shore's photographs of Amarillo, Texas, made by the artist into vividly coloured postcards and then left as a trail in the wake of his journey across America, certainly connect with the humorous element Sternfeld employs [figure 9]. Tourists mistaking Amarillo for Anywhere, USA in main street gift stores is not only amusing but acts as a self-reflexive comment on Shore's own use of the banal and homogenous elements of American landscape in his photographs. Indeed, Walker Evans muses similarly on the use of landscape as an anonymous motif in a letter to a friend in 1934: 'An American city is the best ... I might use several [cities], keeping things typical.'<sup>36</sup> *Hart Island* offers similar familiar landscapes that could well make postcard fodder were it not for the decay lurking closely under their surface, and the attached texts confirming this element. His claim to a broad base of reference is cut short often, as described previously, by the specific nature of his subject and the depth of detail included. As Grundberg contends, '[Sternfeld's] photographs build meaning by accretion, as if they were chapters in a novel ... primarily the accretion involves the repetition of certain motifs.'<sup>37</sup> Straightforward appropriations of pop culture references (Eggleston's tricycle) are eschewed in favour of a method depiction that prioritises the subtleties of landscapes in the throes of decomposition. In contrast to the grand narratives of traditional landscape photography, his photographs champion quite opposite elements of the natural world - discontinuity, the awkward, the *unnatural*. The camera records and captures the environment, but even when coupled with the presumed dominance of viewing, it is never certain that man (either subject or viewer) will triumph. Sternfeld's use of high-resolution high colour photography paradoxically, and internationally, often obscures what his images ultimately point to. *After a Flash Flood, Rancho Mirage, California July 1979* [figure 10] and *Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, June 1979* (one of his most well-known photographs) both employ saturated, darkened tones

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<sup>36</sup> Trachtenberg (1980), p244.

<sup>37</sup> Grundberg (1981), p82.



*Coffins of infants and limbs are unloaded by inmates at burial site. These are lined up in alphabetical order and interred at foot end of the trench.*



*Morgue wagon is then moved to other end of the trench, where inmates remove the rough pine coffins of deceased adult to be interred.*

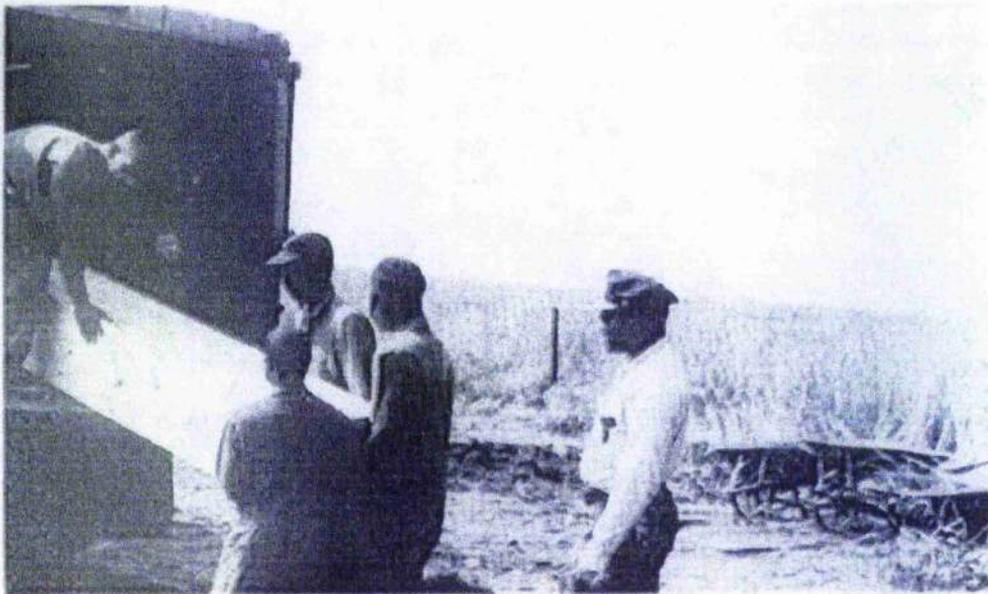


Figure 8. A page from 'A historical resume of potter's field 1869-1969' depicting the Hart Island burials, *New York City Department of Corrections Archives*

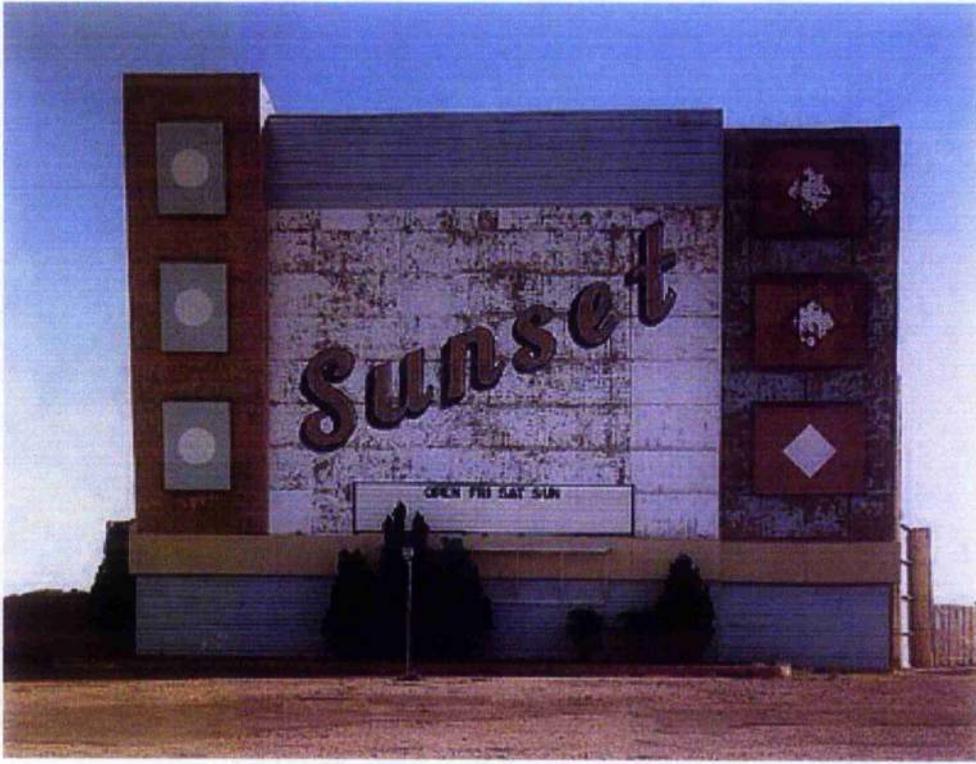


Figure 9. Stephen Shore, 'West Ninth Avenue, Amarillo, Texas, October 2 1974' from *American Surfaces* (1972)

to camouflage the protagonists (junked cars, exhausted elephant), leading the viewer's eye instead to the landscape first – the high horizon line and sky encroached on by tree tops, the cars obscured by rich earth, the elephant's form hidden by a similarly grey pool of water on hot tarmac. The effect is one of *tromp l'oeil*, the viewer performing a double-take and reaching continually further inside the photograph to sift through ever-emerging details. In both photographs Sternfeld employs a favourite motif, that of a well-established distance from his subject, resulting in a large area of foreground in the photograph. What is on first inspection an image tied to the documentary tradition (and photojournalistic enterprise) through the reportage quality of his subjects and the photographs' titles Sternfeld chooses, takes on a painterly quality in its detailed response to subject matter. The images unsettle, and demand closer inspection, exactly the opposite of the direct, truncated, and necessarily succinct mode of earlier documentary modes that also evolved from the newspaper story (the photographs of Lange or Walker in *Life* magazine).

With *Hart Island*, Sternfeld carries this disjuncture between appearance and reality a step further, creating what will be termed later in this thesis the *in-between*, a critical space where the reciprocal performance of viewer, photographer, subject and photographic object can be deconstructed. For the moment, what I wish to highlight in this chapter is the detailed quality of Sternfeld's photographs, and the clearly deliberate intention of the artist to fracture the viewers experience through an insistence on continually 're-looking'. As Anne Tucker notes in her catalogue essay for *American Prospects*, 'one almost always notices the sweep of the horizon first, and then something or someone in the lower half of the frame.'<sup>38</sup> Like the mimesis suggested by the bird's bodies set against grave markers in *Geese nesting on Cemetery Hill, April 1992* [figure 11] or the edge of a coffin pushing against the corner of a retaining wall, the pivotal elements are peripheral, buried. The representations are subtle, the information accumulated gradually, never fully. Sternfeld does not provide an aggressive narrative. If Jeff Wall's work is now being spoken of in terms of a continued dialogue with unresolved issues of modernity, Sternfeld's photographs can be described as a rearticulation of this conversation, an attempt to reproblematised the techniques of history painting that Wall employs as a critique – hierarchy, scale, presentation, grand-narrative historical references and the internalized inclusions of self-portraiture.

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<sup>38</sup> Anne W. Tucker, 'American Beauty in Atypical Places' in *American Prospects*, Joel Sternfeld (New York: Steidl Verlag) 1994, p81.



Figure 10. Joel Sternfeld, 'After a Flash Flood, Rancho Mirage, California, July 1979' from *American Prospects* (1987).



Geese nesting on Cemetery Hill, April 1992

Figure 11. Joel Sternfeld, 'Geese Nesting on Cemetery Hill, April 1992' from *Hart Island* (1998)

Sternfeld remains aware of classical source materials, and takes this subject as his focus in *Campagna Romana* where he records with his camera what centuries of painters have sketched on the Grand Tour: the ruins of the Roman countryside. This series of work is perhaps closest to *Hart Island*, and both are strongly indicative of Sternfeld's fascination with the unnoticed between the boundaries, both physical and phenomenological, of contemporary culture. The press release for his exhibition of *Campagna Romana* at Pace/McGill describes the space photographed as, 'desolate ... the area [has] remained unpopulated for 1400 years – a no-man's land haunted by its past.'<sup>39</sup> That the exhibition occurred just as Sternfeld began to photograph on Hart Island is significant. The photographs of these two locations in particular map geographies that reflect Sternfeld's experience as onlooker as much as they correspond to his subject's lives as lived. Even as these images appropriate stories belonging to another person or place, the realisation of these narratives in the form of a photograph can only occur as far as Sternfeld can see. The cultural memory of these spaces remains silent; his documented remembrances remain muted, unless the viewer stops to read the text or the extended titles that accompany the image. Even then, although the photograph is saturated with connotations there is a finite capability in retaining, communicating and re-presenting this knowledge as meaning. As described previously, the disconnect between the actual circumstance of Sternfeld's photograph of *McLean, Virginia* and the significance assigned to this space after the event attest to the unstable relationship between photograph and memory, or, notoriously, 'truth'. This space between memory and memorial within a represented landscape can be framed in terms of postmodern discourses of text and the image, a contention that will be explored fully in the next chapter. In terms of formal subject however, Sternfeld's choice of these othered zones resonates with the work of Jeff Wall and painterly traditions of the late nineteenth century (Courbet's Realism, Manet's portrayal of the edges of the modern city). As Richard Lacayo contends, Sternfeld's preoccupation with 'the semi-developed region between city and countryside [is] the kind of not quite urban, not quite rural zone that was seized upon by the French impressionist and postimpressionist painters as the quintessential tilting ground between civilization and the natural state.'<sup>40</sup>

Coupled with the recurring motif in his work of images of decay or, quite literally in *Campagna Romana*, of the fragmented periphery of a social structure this 'tilting ground'

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<sup>39</sup> Press release for the opening of *Campagna Romana*, September 12<sup>th</sup> – October 19<sup>th</sup> 1991 at Pace/McGill Gallery, New York.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Lacayo, 'Lovelorn Tracts, Minced Wilderness: Jousting with the Landscape in Joel Sternfeld's America,' *Time*, (April 20, 1987), p84.

becomes the archaeological site where the other can be excavated through his representations. The visual and linguistic elements of Sternfeld's work combine in images of *other spaces*, located in the visual motif of the ruin: 'for the Renaissance, the ruin was first of all a legible remnant, a repository of written knowledge.'<sup>41</sup> The notion of ruin takes on multiple forms that transcend the formal or entirely visual. Artistic practice has engaged with the detritus left by US foreign policy intervention (and indeed, has often been part of these policies). Recognition of such work has certainly crept back onto U.S. soil and into American consciousness within the trope of the 'other' on the periphery of socio-cultural landscapes on both sides of its borders. Sternfeld's photographs have not escaped portrayal in a political light. The press release issued for an exhibition of *American Prospects* highlights his awareness of contemporary socio-economic events (such as the mass unemployment in America in the winter of 1981-2), and the capacity for such events to define his photographic subject. The statements notes that 'during the late Regan years, Joel Sternfeld photographed an aspect of the American people with a sensitivity to what happened to them and their lives during this period of selective economic prosperity.'<sup>42</sup> In his acceptance speech as recipient for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize for Literature, Harold Pinter couches the status of truth, and its construction politically, socio-culturally and visually in contemporary American society, in geographical territories that lie outside of its mapped borders: Nicaragua, Guatemala, Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq. His list continues, and suggests the dialectic continually (and, Pinter argues, deliberately and subversively) created in the post-war, postmodern era between 'them' and 'us' – America and the 'other'. Photography inhabits the territory of the 'real' in a manner that no other medium included within the canon of artistic expression has similarly colonised. This existence between apparition and representation has made the notion of truth an inherent factor in its reception in contemporary culture. In particular, the documentary genre (and related genres such as photojournalism) have exploited the association of 'truth' with knowledge of a subject and power relations attached to this relationship, suggesting within the socio-cultural a socio-political impulse. The capability of photography to produce representations with an inherent 'truth' value is a contested notion, and one that will be deconstructed in the following chapters. However, this dichotomy is important to note in relation to the production of meaning as knowledge of the contemporary other *within* the

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<sup>41</sup> Brian Dillon, 'Fragments from a History of Ruin', *Cabinet Magazine*, Issue 20 (Winter, 2005/06).

<<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/20/dillon.php>> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> August 2006]

<sup>42</sup> Pace/MacGill press release *Joel Sternfeld: American Prospects* (October 19<sup>th</sup> through November 25<sup>th</sup> 1989). 'Not intended to represent a cross section of this nation's public, the photographs in the exhibition present portraits of the people who have, for the most part, had their consciences altered and priorities changed as a result of Ronald Reagan's time spent in the White House.'

American cultural landscape represented in *Hart Island*. This other is defined as phenomenological, experiential, as the shifting parameters of Sternfeld's lens respond to memory, memorial and the acknowledgement of a fractured American visual consciousness.

At the confluence of memorial and memory, the photograph provides a site in which to repatriate certain historical moments erased from consciousness. The recent exhibition at El Museo del Barrio in New York, *Los Desaparecidos (The Disappeared)*, underlined the role photography plays not just in documenting the effects of ruin within social landscapes (in this context, through military kidnappings, torture and execution) but the photograph's representational status *as* ruin, gravestone, absent monument. Marcelo Brodksy's photograph of the Rio de la Plata in Argentina (the 'silver river') stands as one such photographic monument, a representation of the mass grave the river became over three decades of military rule in Argentina [figure 12]. Part of the *Good Memory/Buena Memoria* (1997) installation, *Into the River* memorializes the absent or 'disappeared' of Argentina, whose bodies were drugged, flown over the river and dumped to drown after being imprisoned and tortured. *Artforum* explores a similar idea when reviewing Sternfeld's engagement with site and place, noting that 'these fundamental absences serve to create an enormous presence, establishing the photographs as silent, meditative memorials.'<sup>43</sup> The uncanny *lack* of the bodies and landscapes represented in *Hart Island* are inherently political in the power relations they both suggest and embody, and Sternfeld's acknowledgment of the deliberate choice of photographic frame (35-degrees out of 360) highlights this.<sup>44</sup> The relation to institutions that Sternfeld implies visually (photographs of prison buildings and workhouses on Hart Island, the ruins of ancient Rome) and the more direct references he makes through accompanying text (whether his own words or a catalogue essay) are deliberate, and form a series of investigations made within the parameters of an inherently 'American' eye and, for the most part, within American borders. Even when reflecting on the two series shot outside the U.S. (*Campagna Romana* and *Treading with Kings*) Sternfeld considers them in terms of how they have affected his experience of fundamental themes he is exploring in his own country. 'When it came time to photograph again [in America], I found it difficult to see the landscape as I had seen it before.'<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> A.M. Holmes, 'Haunting Grounds: Joel Sternfeld's Crime Sites', *Artforum*, Vol. 32, No. 7 (March, 1994), p80.

<sup>44</sup> Higgins (2004).

<sup>45</sup> Joel Sternfeld, *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam* (San Francisco: Chronicle Press) 1997, afterword.



Figure 12. Marcelo Brodsky, 'The Companions/Los Compañeros' (1996) from the *Good Memory/Buena Memoria* installation (1997), in which the Rio de la Plata photograph *Into the River* was also included.

Like the morbid fascination that follows an automobile wreck, necks crane to view the *other* space that exists as simultaneously public and semi-shrouded. The reference to a car wreck is not mere metaphor. Sternfeld's brother died in this manner, a fact he references in the afterword to *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam*. As part of this series he travels to Fair Oaks, California to photograph the gravesite of Cari Lightner, run over by a drunk driver in 1980. Sternfeld discusses the experiential foundation for this particular image – 'being here has particular meaning for me; my brother Gabriel was killed in an automobile accident. In my mind, I have associated her death with his.'<sup>46</sup> A few lines later an inscription on another gravestone reads 'our boy' and 'I remember my father crying "my boy, my boy" for my older brother Andrew who died of leukemia when he was eleven and I was ten.'<sup>47</sup> Personal experience of death inextricably underscores Sternfeld's preoccupation here with the other site of the graveyard. Personal memory of fraternal death links to public memory of death, now buried, and the resulting photograph of Lightner's grave resurrects both. The photographic site reveals this grave as both public and private, commemorated and forgotten, hidden, lost within a mass of similar memorials, yet singled out by his lens. Death, and the in-between, othered afterlife of the dead founded on memories, resonates in Sternfeld's contemporary creative consciousness. On the photography weblog of University of Rochester professor James (Jim) Johnson's *Notes on Politics, Theory and Photography*, an anonymous initialed comment is left after a post describing the recent death of Johnson's fourteen-year-old son Jeff.<sup>48</sup> The correspondence between a story of someone's death, memories of the dead and artistic practice converge again in the present, this time through the intangible medium of the internet. Joel Peter Sternfeld (J.P.S.) revisits the deeply personal connection between his experiences and his motivations for making and taking photographs. Sternfeld used the verb 'to survive' to describe his genesis and existence as photographer, and it becomes profoundly apt in the context. It seems almost indelicate to reprint this exchange of such intimate memories, and yet this underscores Sternfeld's practice directly: to make public through the photograph zones that have been shrouded either by social convention or deliberate construction. Forcing the confrontation of personal memory engenders a reflection, a remembrance that challenges the peripheral location of such events passed and forgotten.

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<sup>46</sup> Sternfeld (1997), afterword.

<sup>47</sup> Sternfeld (1997), afterword.

<sup>48</sup> Dear Jim, I came across your blog for the first time tonight. I am an artist thinking about (and googling) the political implications of a photographic archive. I felt my heart sink when I read about Jim [sic]. Early in life I lost two brothers: one to leukemia, the other in an automobile accident. One of most remarkable human behaviors I have witnessed was the recovery my mother made from these losses-she loved her sons as deeply as a mother can-and yet she went on to lead a remarkably productive-and joyous life. May it be so for you. JPS. Joel Sternfeld quoted in *Notes on Politics, Theory and Photography* (April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007) <http://politicstheoryphotography.blogspot.com/> [accessed June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007].

Photographing that which we regard as other, belonging only to someone else and reframing these moments as images in which we participate implicates us in their performance of memorial, perhaps even momentarily the process of grief. The other is enervated, resurrected posthumously through the eyes of a living, breathing, viewing audience, commemoratively and voyeuristically in turn. For the living, death is always dialectically placed as other. Inaugurated biblically through Judas' blood money, the mythical history of the potters field resonates with Sternfeld's interest in sites invested with the memory of human stain. Sternfeld's engagement with the othered space of Hart Island is an extrapolation of this fascination with shifting modes of memory upon American soil. It would indeed be facile to suggest these seminal life experiences to be the only, or even the main impetus behind Sternfeld's photography. However, his awareness of the complexity of the environment that surrounds him goes beyond tendencies of contemporaries to phenomenologise the superficial as a postmodern urge to remove traces of the human. Although his genesis as a photographer may incorporate elements of late 1960s Photoconceptualism, his vision is not, as Tucker wrongly contends, similarly detached from human life, emblematic of 'cool, almost clinical documents of the 1930s made by Walker Evans', or fixed upon the New Topographic movement which she (problematically) pronounces as the resultant contemporary successor of Evans' generation.<sup>49</sup> Sternfeld's presence and that of his subjects, if not entirely tangible, is felt, bringing with it notions of responsibility, culpability and a refusal to completely depoliticise or neutralise the contested sites he photographs. Construction of meaning is realised through the viewer, and it is this relationship between subject and subjectivity, other space and the viewing body, that the following chapter will assume as its project.

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<sup>49</sup> Tucker (1994), p83.

*The Stranger par excellence ... drawn to the surface of himself by a social personality silently imposed by observation, by form and mask, the madman is obliged to objectify himself in the eyes of reason as the perfect stranger, that is, as the man whose strangeness does not reveal itself. The city of reason welcomes him only with this qualification and at the price of this surrender to anonymity.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault 'The Birth of the Asylum' in Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation* (London: Routledge) 1989, p237.

## Chapter Two

### Defining the Stranger

*Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations that invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work. Its function as a mode of cultural production is tied to definite conditions of existence, and its products are meaningful and legible only within the particular currencies they have. Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Tagg (1993), p 63.

## **Enacting power through representation; the consequences for *Hart Island***

The preceding chapter outlined a deconstruction of Joel Sternfeld's photographic representation of Hart Island, defining his engagement with the notion of other space in formal and historical terms. This chapter will explore the theoretical framework that supports these historical parameters, defining the photographic site of *Hart Island* in terms of the heterotopia (other space) and discourses of power explored by Foucault in *Des Espaces Autres (Of Other Spaces)*. It is within the anti-teleological institutionalised spaces described above by John Tagg that the photographic construction of 'other' identity in *Hart Island* leaves trace. The biblical description of 'the potter's field, to bury strangers in ... the Field of Blood' (Matthew 27:3-4) that concluded the first chapter meets Foucault's *stranger par excellence* in this space. This chapter will define opposing conceptual and geo-physical polarities within Sternfeld's work and through them, will identify the critical vocabularies surrounding his practice. The relationship between object and text, between image and narrative, will be defined as the primary binary oppositions from which the 'birth' of Sternfeld's history as a photographer, and thus this specific series of photographs, emerges. This chapter will problematise the relationship of truth to the photograph, and the role ideas of truth play in the formation of this 'other'. In particular, the latter section of this chapter will lay the foundations for the third chapter of this thesis to trace a genealogy of the descriptor 'documentary'. This deconstruction will explore discourses that position photographic 'truth' as a constructed phenomenon rather than a priori knowledge in order to reproblematised notions of knowledge and power embedded in the photographic act and resulting representation. It is imperative to acknowledge the necessity for a reinterpretation of the use of the 'documentary' descriptor in conjunction with both Sternfeld's work, and the wider contemporary photographic canon. In this manner the notion of the photograph as document will be radically reinterpreted, suggesting newly relevant parameters within which notions of truth and 'the real' operate as fluid concepts, allowing the notion of the documentary within photography simultaneous empirical and phenomenological values. Within these Foucauldian 'institutional sites' Tagg gestures to, this re-energisation of photographic vocabularies will support analysis of Sternfeld's portrayal of Hart Island in terms of his engagement with other space and othered bodies.

It is important to note two considerations at the beginning of this chapter: the first, that, in line

with Foucault's conception of specific histories, this exploration will focus on the model Foucault employs to trace the birth of certain social institutions and appropriate it in the specific description of other space and paradigms of power and knowledge evident in Sternfeld's work. The model proposed is therefore initially Foucauldian and will use his methodology as a conceptual genesis for the birth of this particular chapter. However, this method of deconstruction will necessarily also engage with contemporary discourse on visual space, evolving a vocabulary specific to this exploration of Sternfeld's photography; secondly, that in investigating the construction of certain photographic spaces, and socio-cultural factors influencing the transmission of power and knowledge within these spaces, we must be aware that the essential foundation for this exploration, this thesis, and the methodology it uses, are constructions themselves and therefore this paper itself inherently constitutes a comparable act of institutional power.

### **The theoretical 'Other'**

As a medical term, heterotopy describes the displacement of an organ or other body part to an abnormal location. In his 1967 lecture *Des Espaces Autres (Of Other Spaces)*<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault discusses the idea of *heterotopia* in terms of site and space. In this paper, Foucault presents the heterotopia as the dialectic *other* of a whole, unblemished space – the utopia.

First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place ... they present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.<sup>4</sup>

Foucault views the heterotopic space as a counter-site to his description of utopian space, a 'space outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality'<sup>5</sup>, a sentiment that Melinda Hunt echoes in her introduction to *Hart Island* when she states that the island is 'a place outside of all places.'<sup>6</sup> As if to indicate this dialectic between place and non-place from the very start, Sternfeld's series of photographs is contextualised in

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<sup>3</sup> This paper went on to become an article published in 1984 in the French journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continué*. The paper was originally given as a lecture by Michel Foucault to a group of architects from the *Cercel d'études architecturales*. Foucault first used the term heterotopia in the preface to his 1966 book *The Order of Things*, 'taking it to illustrate the boundaries of the imaginable, the area in which our thought encounters objects or patterns that it can neither locate nor order.'

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias', *Diacritics*, No. 16 (Spring, 1986), p25.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault (1986), p26.

<sup>6</sup> Sternfeld & Hunt (1998), p7.

book form with a map of Greater Manhattan, showing Hart Island circled in the upper right-hand corner [figure 1]. This action situates the island as a geographically 'real' place in the mind of the viewer, and acknowledges that the photographs themselves form an extension of this cartographic enterprise. Melinda Hunt suggests that, for the living, 'a journey to Hart Island generally takes place in the later years of life when people are more inclined to reflect and sort through the fragments of their personal histories.'<sup>7</sup> The island exists not only as a geographic site but also within the realm of memory and the specific myth of personal origin. Hunt's statement resonates with Foucault's description of 'heterotopia' (both real and mythological) and thus establishes the island as an 'other' space. Her idea is particularly relevant on two levels: the notion of history existing in fragments around or within the site of heterotopia; secondly, the notion of this movement of human existence through 'other' space as part of an historical condition. The fragmentary nature of the island's history correlates with Foucault's initial mapping of the manner in which the heterotopic space functions.

I believe that between utopias, and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror I see myself there where I am not, an unreal, virtual, space ... the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position I occupy...it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.<sup>8</sup>

The length of the excerpt from *Des Espaces Autres* is justified here by the relative importance of Foucault's statement to the fundamental framework of this exploration. The representations in *Hart Island* as photographic space and of Hart Island as site are both 'absolutely real' (geographic, material) and 'absolutely unreal' (reliant on memory and myth). Foucault's heterotopia thus relates to Sternfeld's photographs and the fragmentary nature of the history they capture through this idea of a mirror, of reality that ends up the shadow or other of what it draws from. The notion of shadow immediately points to critical discourses that connect death and the photographic act (not least Roland Barthes) and these will be attended to further on in this chapter and in the next. Here, it is first the relationship between

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<sup>7</sup>Sternfeld & Hunt (1998), p8.

<sup>8</sup>Foucault (1986), p25.

the viewer and the viewed subject that will be deconstructed, for it is Barthes link between death and the Author that supports the self-reflexive mirror. As George Baker suggests,

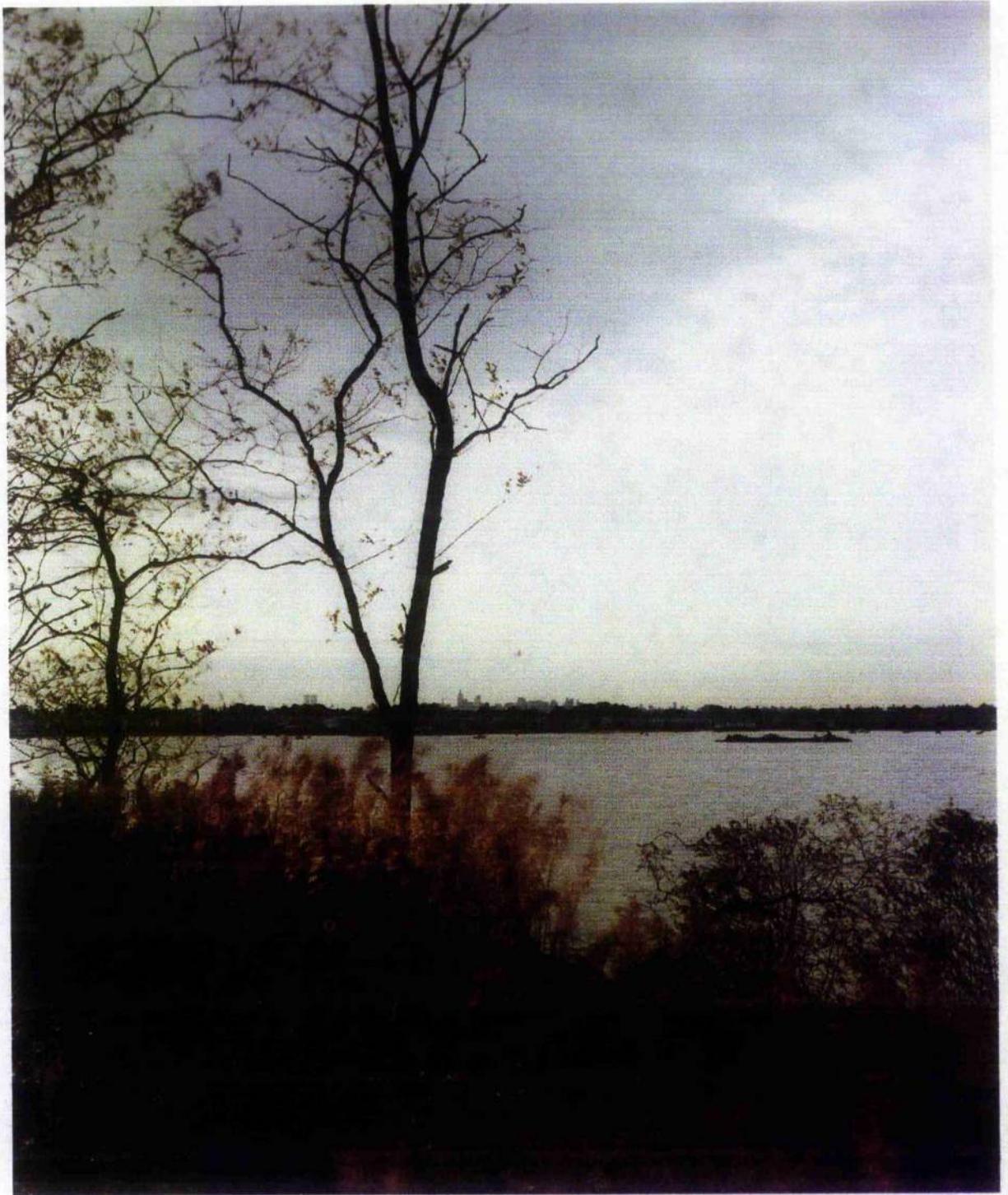
photography's inherent indexicality does serve to link referent and signifier in a direct, physical way ... [at the same time however] this indexicality results in a severing of the connection between photographic "author" and product: in any photograph, the object depicted has impressed itself through the agency of light and chemicals alone, inscribing a referential excess beyond the control of the creator of any given image.<sup>9</sup>

If the photograph represents othered space, it presents the viewer with a mirror in which they see 'a short of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself'.<sup>10</sup> The other of the mainland is represented as a backdrop to the captured images of the island, just as the othered lives of the island's inhabitants relate to those who end up viewing the photographs either in the book or the museum, or even, as Sternfeld does, through the lens. Sternfeld begins his series on Hart Island with an unusual reference to himself as viewer, *Joel Sternfeld, Looking south towards City Island and Manhattan from Hart Island, November 1992* [figure 2], contemplating the island site in relation to outside geographies. It is important to this study of other space, whether conceptual, representational or geographic, that such spaces are not read as a separate teleological entity but as a factor in describing history itself, as actively self-reflexive in the manner of the mirror. In the context of this study, the term *other space* is infinitely multifaceted in a similar nature to the fragmented existence Hunt describes. In emphasising the broken and disjointed environment within which they have worked, Hunt highlights the fact that this othered collection of spaces within spaces is united only in the relationship they share with the socially excluded – the history of the potter's field goes hand-in-hand with that of the poorhouse, mental health institutions, penitentiaries and homeless shelters. Foucault justifies the manner he explores the history of certain ideas, concepts or institutions with a similar reference to fragmentation. At a roundtable lecture in 1978, reprinted in a collected volume of his essays on power, he stated 'my books aren't treatises in philosophy or studies

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<sup>9</sup> George Baker, 'Photography between Narrativity and Stasis', *October*, Vol. 76, (Spring, 1996), p76. Baker continues, 'often compensated for by excessive claims for "objectivity", any consideration of the nature of photographic meaning has to reincorporate the subjective dimension in turning to photography's ability to be read.' Harold Pinter talks of this relationship between author and subject in terms of theatre, an interesting comparison in light of the inherent act of performance associated with photography and power. Pinter states, 'it's a strange moment, the moment of creating characters who up to that moment have had no existence ... the author's position is an odd one. In a sense he is not welcomed by the characters. The characters resist him ... they are impossible to define ... so language in art remains a highly ambiguous transaction, a quicksand, a trampoline, a frozen pool which might give way under you, the author, at any time.' Harold Pinter, 'Pinter v the US: Nobel Prize acceptance speech', *The Guardian G2*, (December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005) p10.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault (1986), p25.



Joel Sternfeld, Looking south towards City Island and Manhattan from Hart Island, November 1992

Figure 2. Joel Sternfeld, 'Joel Sternfeld, looking south towards City Island and Manhattan from Hart island, November 1992' from *Hart Island* (1992)

of history; at most, they are philosophical fragments put to work in a historical field of problems.<sup>11</sup> Both statements support a conception of history as anti-teleological, and both indicate these fragments are used as tools 'put to work', synthesized in an infinitely variable chain to construct specific histories (the personal histories Hunt describes, the genesis of institutions Foucault traces). In the history of the other, it is the condition that keeps it as 'other' – fragmentation, incoherence – that also delivers an opportunity to problematise this condition historically.<sup>12</sup>

### **Dialectical 'truths' and the mirror-gaze**

This initial dialectic Foucault proposes between utopia and heterotopia presents the semiotic model of binary opposition as a useful and appropriate tool with which to deconstruct Sternfeld's photography. The descriptors of New Color photography and Narrative photography, in-between which Sternfeld's work has historically been placed, suggest an opposition between text and image, sign and signifier, and a methodology for locating mythical loci of *truth* within this fragmented photographic identity. Sternfeld's photographic interpretation of the hidden island site provides multiple 'binaries', describing formal oppositions such as shade and light that point to larger conceptual themes such as the sublime landscape, and man's relation to his environment. In turn, these oppositions highlight conceptual frictions in the spaces between known and unknown, the living inhabitants of this space and those dead. The relationship between the viewer and the representation or the representation and the space it purports to depict form multiple and ever-changing pairings and theoretical tensions. Once identified, such polarities may be construed as 'truths' to be set in opposition in order to expose the artificiality of their claim to this description. At once both 'real' and 'reflected', the mirror as the space in-between these entities indicates a new space for discourse on the other within Sternfeld's portrayal of Hart Island.

The relationship between the opposition of the viewer and the bodies viewed in Sternfeld's representations can be pursued through Foucault's notion of the mirror and Lacan's thoughts

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<sup>11</sup> James D. Faubion, ed., Michel Foucault Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3 (London: Penguin) 1994, p 224.

<sup>12</sup> The emphasis here is on the idea of movement within space, and fragments of this space (the notion of fragments supporting the idea of an in-between area) as complicit in power operations. Diken's exploration of Foucault, Bentham and the exercise of power within space through the production of a 'void' or 'absence' links to Klein's notion of the *fissure* later in this chapter. See Bülent Diken, 'Zones of Indistinction: Security, Terror and Bare Life', *Space & Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 3, (August, 2002).

on the formation of the self through the *mirror stage*. Indeed, Foucault draws heavily on Lacan in a 1966 paper broadcast on French radio, *Le corps utopique (Utopian Body)*, where he references Homer's use of the word 'body' as interchangeable with 'corpse', highlighting the significance of this for discourses on the body and spatial paradigms. Foucault states,

it is the mirror and it is the corpse that assign a space to the profoundly and originally utopian experience of the body. It is the mirror and it is the corpse that silence and appease, and shut into a closure (for us now sealed) this great utopian rage that dilapidates and volatilizes our bodies at every instant.<sup>13</sup>

If the mirror acts on behalf of both sites, the utopia can be defined initially as colonised by the viewer, and the heterotopia by the viewed other in *Hart Island*. Initially, at least, sovereignty and its associated power implications reside in a site outside the island. At the moment of initial recognition, the formation of the 'self', one views in the mirror both the sense of the whole he becomes and the fragments of the subconscious he rejects and submerges.

Contemplating these photographs, the viewer is forced to revisit this developmental moment and reexamine their perception of 'self'. The viewer's own 'truth' of existence is exposed as a constructed, imperfect, as these fragments of history viewed in the photographic mirror are recognised as part of a subconscious or submerged knowledge – 'it is thanks to them, thanks to the mirror and thanks to the corpse, that our body is not pure and simple utopia.'<sup>14</sup>

Viewing the unknown engenders a reflection of the flux between the polar oppositions of 'normal' and 'other', 'mainland' and 'island', 'living' and 'dead'. The viewer becomes involved in the mirror function, slipping from the safety of the norm as the distance between himself and the viewed subject is collapsed. Put simply, Sternfeld's photographs expose the sovereignty of the viewer in relation to the other as mutable, unstable. Other space is predicated on, and is therefore essentially inseparable from the space that claims to exist apart from it. Within the act of viewing we see both we are and what exists latently within us, what we may have become.

Both Lacan's mirror-phase, acting out a fascination with the reflection of oneself both perfectly whole and completely fragmented, and Barthes notion of the mirrored camera lens

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<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault 'utopian body' in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press) 2006, p233.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault (2006), p233

shutting to create the posthumous shock to a moment in time, suggest a particularly morbid fascination between self and the other in this specific mirroring. There is an excitement in viewing a subconscious echo of one's repressed 'self' or alter ego apparent in the 'mirror' or photographic representation. Images of death are directly indicated in Sternfeld's work - through the coffins and graves photographed and text that describes Hart Island's main function as a potter's field -- and on further levels through the representation of prisoners, bodies codified as socially dead. These images act in the viewing mirror as a visceral *memento mori* that has not only the power to shock and reinterpret the viewer's own conception of mortality, but to excite the viewer, and to sexualise or fetishise this excitement in the narcissistic pleasure derived from manipulating the fear of death within this in-between site of the mirror. Foucault again references Lacan's *mirror stage*, concluding his essay with a gesture toward this fetishistic gaze reflected in utopia/heterotopia of the mirror, and the presence of the other in this process. He states,

to make love is to feel one's body close in on oneself ... against the lips of the other, yours become sensitive. In front of his half-closed eyes, your face acquires a certitude. There is a gaze, finally, to see your closed eyes ... this is why love is so closely related to the illusion of the mirror and the menace of death. And if, despite these two perilous figures that surround it, we love so much to make love, it is because, in love, the body is *here*.<sup>15</sup>

The 'posthumous shock', Barthes' description of the death of the moment following the camera's shutter, only serves to intensify this feeling, as do the multiple associations of mirrored presence and absence. A level of aesthetic pleasure parallels anxieties that surround the concept of death. The reality of this death is enacted not through the viewer's body but through the other within the altered space of the heterotopia. Like rubbernecking motorists at the site of a car wreck, there is a certain enjoyment derived from seeing fragmented images of death without involving one's own corporeality. The geographical movement of potter's fields to the outskirts of the city by those who map the boundaries of the modern city also precipitates this act of self-preservation (itself achieved through an historical shift of power).

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault (2006) p233. Julia Kristeva points to this notion in her essay *Strangers to Ourselves*, stating 'also strange is the experience of the abyss separating me from the other who shocks me ... confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel 'lost', 'indistinct', 'hazy'. The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other.' Julia Kristeva, 'Strangers to Ourselves' in *Strangers: The First ICP Triennial of Photography & Video* (2003), p125.

Death is fetishised in the reflexive moment of viewing through the othered hinterland of the mirror, where the boundaries and possibilities of its enactment are still subject to the viewer's gaze. Ownership of the represented subject and the actions (or memory of actions) associated with this subject occurs outside the photograph itself, in the realm of the gaze. The other, and the represented geography it inhabits, is appropriated into the space of the viewer, simultaneously negating its status as other through repatriation, and reinforcing this other status through allowing the role of narration to occur outside of its boundaries.

The mirror therefore produces a 'double' (Freud) of the viewer through which a vicarious experience of death *in* the other can be mediated. The idea of playing out experience through othered bodies in order to preserve one's own is explored by Heather Love in a recent *Grey Room* article, *Living (and Dying) in the Other*. Love references Charles Baudelaire's prose poems *Paris Spleen* (1869) and Nicolas Roeg's cult film classic *Don't Look Now* (1973) as she investigates the manner in which an artist or subject, and subsequently an audience, engages with the othered body as a site in which to enact the fear of death or social alienation (often posed as a living death). In *Windows* (the title itself connoting ideas of framing, viewing and mirroring) Baudelaire observes a forlorn woman through his window and invents a history for her. Further poems engage with similarly defenseless bodies, appropriating them for his artistic ends. Power is condensed in the act of looking and manipulated through the viewer (the poet) who remains able to move freely while 'others such as the poor, widows and blacks are stuck where they are. Those who are most beaten down by the social order are available as objects for the poet's identifications, but they do not perform such acts themselves.'<sup>16</sup> Love references Baudelaire's simultaneous fascination and casual, almost disinterested consumption of the fragmented and dispersed nature of the other, a trope already explored previously in the writing of Hunt and Foucault. The othered body is constantly subject to a surveillant gaze: in the case of Baudelaire, the gaze allows the poet to remain in control of his status as a complete body while interpreting and vicariously experiencing the body of the peripheral other;<sup>17</sup> in Roeg's film the gaze of the two main protagonists, a married couple recovering from the death of their daughter, is trained on two older widows they spy over dinner while holidaying in Venice [figure 3]. As Love states, 'the spectacle of these

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<sup>16</sup> Heather Love, 'Living (and Dying) in the Other', *Grey Room*, No. 24 (Summer, 2006), p 17.

<sup>17</sup> 'The poet is an emotional squatter, someone who needs to suffer in the other because he cannot suffer in his own person, and this practice wears a body out. The other is forced to bear the burden of representing the poet's own losses on her person. She has not only to represent herself (bearing the signs of her social inaiming or disqualification), but she also has to represent the poet. She manifests his losses, bearing his tortured soul *in* and *on* and *as* her body.' Love (2006), p19.



Figure 3. Film still depicting Laura (Julie Christie) and John (Donald Sutherland) in Nicolas Roeg's 'Don't Look Now' (1973)

frumpy, exposed odd women exerts a powerful attraction. The more unnatural these old girls seem, the more natural John and Laura feel themselves to be.<sup>18</sup> Viewing the images of othered bodies on Hart Island as a mirrored 'double', the photographer and the consumers of his images perform the role of poet/John/Laura as they interpret and appropriate the unknown in order to locate death outside of their own body.<sup>19</sup> However, as the primitive conception of the self passes from the initial Lacanian formation in the mirror to a fully-fleshed mortal body, the 'double' becomes an uncanny element.<sup>20</sup> Viewing this double, the other, Love argues that 'you realize your kinship with that which is at once inhuman, less than human, and already dead.'<sup>21</sup> Again, as Foucault notes, for Homer, the 'body' and the 'corpse' are one and the same. Thus, the distance between the poles of utopia, heterotopia and the space of the mirror traversing the space in-between is once again suggested as constantly mutable and subject to collapse, as is the relationship between subject and viewer and their equal frailty in the face of Death.

The idea that Hart Island, and its status as a site of heterotopia, participates in the act of denying settlement or encouraging a constant movement within its boundaries, links to this trope of the *mirror gaze*. The site of the mirror provides both the link in-between, and the space in which transmission occurs between the sites of supposed safety occupied by the viewer (and in part by Sternfeld also) and the site of the other. Fittingly therefore, Foucault concludes in his *Des Espaces Autres* paper with the image of a boat. He revisits this metaphor again in *The Birth of the Asylum in Madness and Civilisation* (1961), although in this case it is specifically the boat as the 'ship of fools' [figure 4] denying the settlement of the mad and similarly socially excluded in the heart of any community. Foucault states,

the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself, and at the same time given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel...the ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilisations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Love (2006), p 20.

<sup>19</sup> 'Freud considers the relation between the fear of death and representation. He writes: the "double" was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an "energetic denial of the power of death"; and probably the "immortal" soul was the first "double" of the body.' Love (2006), p22.

<sup>20</sup> 'From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.' Love (2006), p22.

<sup>21</sup> Love (2006), p22.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault (1986), p25.



Figure 4. Hieronymus Bosch, 'The Ship of Fools' 1490-1500. (Oil on panel, Louvre; Paris, France)

The morgue boat that brings the truck carrying the dead and the prisoners to bury them to Hart Island, the boats that brought and still bring immigrants to the outskirts of America and the ships of fools that Foucault references in his discourse on madness and social operations of power, define this 'otherness' simultaneously functioning as a heterotopic space itself (the boat as other space) whilst in a constant state of flux and movement towards the island landscape of the 'other' too. For Hunt, Hart Island denies this settlement, perpetrating the idea of movement, of homelessness or alienation as a state of the other (in conjunction with the notion of fragmentation as an essential condition as discussed earlier in this chapter). In doing so, she describes the very conditions of every body, living or dead, that gain access to the island. The photograph that follows Sternfeld's 'view' and sets the stage for *Hart Island* spreads across a double page, showing a shoreline with no port of entry and large sign (Prison! Keep Off!), firmly positioning the island as 'closed in on itself' [figure 6]. Of note here is Joel Snyder's investigation of the relationship between photographic representations of landscape and power operations, where Snyder references in particular Timothy O'Sullivan's pictures of the American West in the 1860s. Snyder describes these photographs as 'pictorialized "No Trespassing" signs' that are employed not to preserve a wilderness as much as present what still remains unseen [figure 6]. For Snyder, these landscape photographs 'mark the beginning of an era – one in which we still live – in which expert skills provide the sole means of access to what was once held to be part of our common inheritance.'<sup>23</sup> Yet it is important to note that Foucault advocates these spaces as necessary for society - 'In civilisations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage take the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.' Therefore, this other space of the heterotopia, what we may presuppose to be already secret and the result of policing unwanted elements of society to the outskirts, beyond city limits, subverts the power operations that attempt to define its own position as other. The island remains as a negative monument to this 'unsettlement' or 're-settlement' of what the mainland is not willing to contend with, the wish to remove death from proximity to everyday life. This subversion or contradiction is inherent to Sternfeld's portrayal of the island also, the idea that his photographs function as a ruin or absent monument already established in the previous chapter. His photographs both remove the otherness of Hart Island to an extent through representation and then exhibition and dissemination of these images. Yet at the same time, Sternfeld clearly seeks to portray this

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<sup>23</sup> Joel Snyder, 'Territorial Photography' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. By W.T.J. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1994, p200.



Figure 5. Joel Sternfeld, 'Shoreline of Hart Island facing Long Island Sound, November 1991' from *Hart Island* (1998)



Figure 5. Timothy O'Sullivan  
'Black Canon, Colorado River from Camp 8, Looking Above' (1871)  
Albumen print.

# DOCUMENTS

**DOCTRINES  
ARCHÉOLOGIE  
BEAUX-ARTS  
ETHNOGRAPHIE**

**1**

Magazine illustré  
paraissant dix fois par an

D<sup>r</sup> CONTENAU, L'art sumérien : les conventions de la statuaire. — Paul PELLJOT, Quelques réflexions sur l'art " sibérien " et l'art chinois à propos de bronzes de la collection David-Weill. — Josef STRZYGOWSKI, " Recherches sur les arts plastiques " et " Histoire de l'art ". — Georges BATAILLE, Le cheval académique. — Carl EINSTEIN, Aphorismes méthodiques. — Carl EINSTEIN, Pablo Picasso : quelques tableaux de 1928. — Michel LEIRIS, Notes sur deux figures microcosmiques. — Georges LIMBOUR, Paul Klee. — Georges Henri RIVIERE, Le Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro. — Jean BABELON, L'Évangéliste de Saint-Lucia. — Hedwig FECHHEIMER, Exposition chinoise à Berlin. — André SCHAEFFNER, Igor Stravinsky.

PARIS. - 39, rue La Boétie.

Prix : 15 fr.

Figure 6. Frontispiece for an issue of *Documents* (1929-1930). Georges Bataille produced fifteen issues, dubbing the publication 'a war machine against received ideas.'

otherness, and in doing so reinforces it.

The binary oppositions Sternfeld's photographic series offer radiate from his central concerns of space and place in ever-changing pairings. The space of the mirror between these binaries is both created by these oppositions and a necessary part of the framework that supports these concepts, and thus the space where power is played out in the act of viewing. It is from investigation of this liminal 'in-between' and the gradual construction of a vocabulary to describe this investigation that the topographical features of this space may be mapped, and thus the journey from the known to the unknowable may begin. The fragility of the relationship between binary oppositions suggests that these polarities do not exist as fundamental and universal 'truths', but are socio-cultural constructions that are determined by their relationship to history and used as a discourse of power. Within this argument, it becomes clear that through the deconstruction of such binaries, it is possible to also deconstruct the discourses of power common to the space of the represented 'other'. Richard Bolton indicates the photograph's capacity to create 'an *illusion* of neutrality ... meaning [is] established through interpretive conventions that exist outside of the image ... these claims to nature must be taken apart ... [in order to] develop an understanding of meaning as a contest, created out of opposition and negotiation.'<sup>24</sup> It is with these contradictory pairings in mind that it is pertinent to consider Georges Bataille's oppositions of *musée* and *abattoir* in his dictionary of subversion and transgression, *Documents* (1930).

### **(Re)positioning the Other in *Hart Island***

Bataille's relevance to the study of Sternfeld's photographs of Hart Island is described well by Neil Leach when he states that 'the images of horror and obscenity in Bataille's writing play a crucial role as strategies of transgression within a world dominated by social norms and established hierarchies.'<sup>25</sup> As argued before, in representing this space photographically Sternfeld is in part challenging its very 'otherness'. Two of Bataille's entries for the unfinished *Documents* dictionary [figure 7] - the slaughterhouse and the museum - are relevant in explaining the importance of binary oppositions as a valid theoretical tool with which to explore Sternfeld's work. Bataille contends that the slaughterhouse, now a site of exclusion and otherness, is inextricably linked to the museum, a modern site of attraction

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Massachusetts: MIT Press) 1989, pxii.

<sup>25</sup> Neil Leach *Rethinking Architecture: a reader in cultural theory* (London: Routledge) 1997, p42.

through the opening of the Louvre as a public museum after the execution of the French nobility by the guillotine. The slaughterhouse has roots in religious sacrifice but has also gained negative connotations of death, the unhygienic qualities of blood and gore, and the specialized activities of the butcher that society dictates should be carried out behind closed doors. Again, this othering of a social performance (butchering meat, burying bodies) correlates with a geographical movement, that of the cemetery positioned further and further away from public view.

Bataille states that ‘nowadays the slaughterhouse is quarantined like a boat with cholera aboard’<sup>26</sup> mirroring Foucault’s idea of the ship of fools moving by water from town to town with the human waste that society deems peripheral and othered through disease, madness or plain unseemliness. Foucault uses the metaphor of the ship to illustrate the wandering existence of the socially excluded at an historically specific moment, and the metaphor can be extrapolated and adapted to Sternfeld’s photographs. Foucault describes the movement of the madman in the space between the centre and the edges of society, or in Bataille’s terms, the *musée* and the *abattoir* - ‘he has his truth and his homeland only in that fruitless expanse between two countries that cannot belong to him...[traveling] across a half-real, half-imaginary geography.’<sup>27</sup> These ideas describe the limbo of the ‘in-between’, the exclusion zone of the ‘other’, and the shifting state that exists through this space between two polar oppositions as Bataille sets up between the museum and the slaughterhouse. The ‘half real, half imaginary’ landscape references Foucault’s earlier description of the space in-between utopia and heterotopia – the mirror – that is both ‘absolutely real’ and ‘absolutely unreal’. If the museum exists as the ‘lungs of a city - every Sunday the crowds flow through the museum like blood, coming out purified and fresh’<sup>28</sup> then the slaughterhouse is the antithesis of this middle-class weekend cleansing ritual. Sternfeld’s photographs occupy, and are consumed, in the space in-between these concepts. His photographs provide a space of visual representation where those who are geographically pushed to the edge of society in a multiplicity of ways are repatriated through the museum, the book, into the eye-line of the individuals and groups within the ‘norm’. Within the process of exhibition, within this ‘synchronic postmodern space, we go back and forth from the power of the place to the place

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<sup>26</sup>Denis Hollier *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (London: MIT Press) 1992, p xiii.

<sup>27</sup>Stuart Elden *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History* (London: Continuum) 2001, p 124.

<sup>28</sup>Leach (1997), p22.

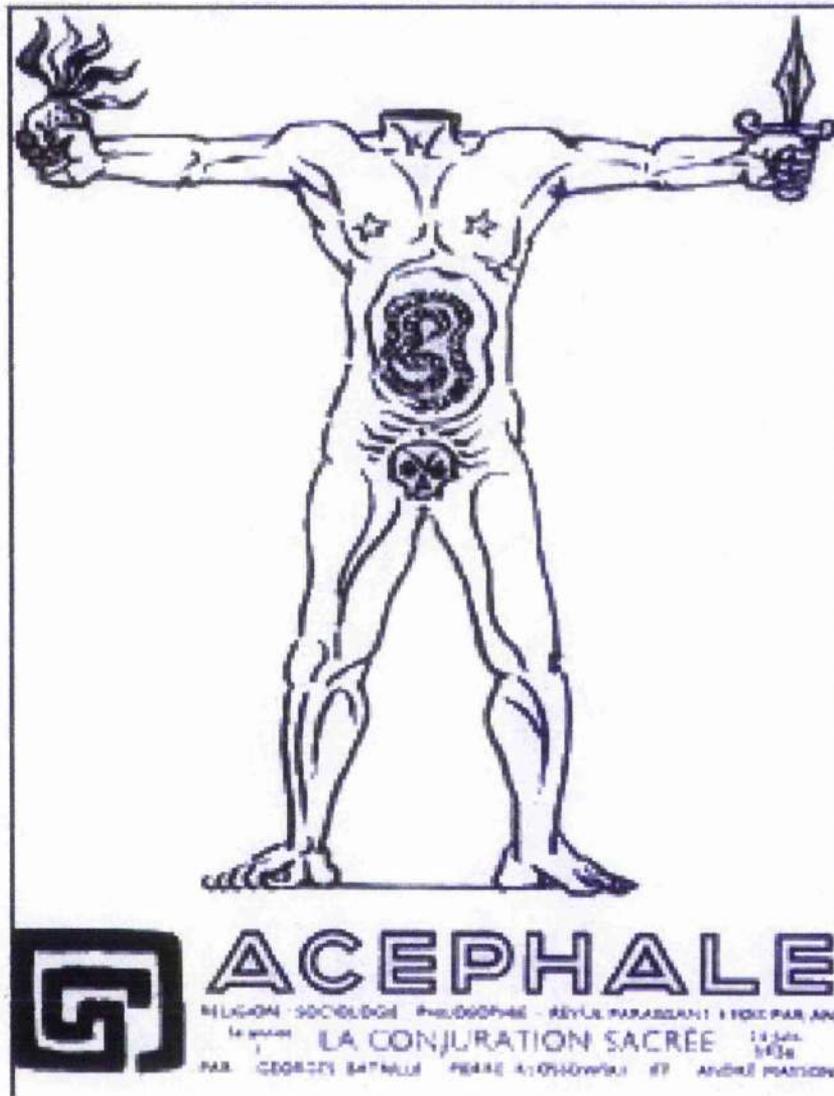


Figure 7. Frontispiece for the journal 'Acéphale', of which four issues appeared between 1936 and 1939. Drawing by André Masson.

of power.<sup>29</sup> The metamorphosis of acts made peripheral and marked as 'other' by the socio-geographical space they inhabit, into coded objects of spatial representation through Sternfeld's photography, is a carefully rendered performance. His work participates in this cleansing process through the disalienating (Foucault) experience of exhibition in the museum space of a socially un-representable and unknown geography, and the connotations of inclusion and social control the architecture of the museum represents further underline this. However, the very people who operate these discourses of power undertake the process of viewing this represented space and they retain the constituting means of power - construction of knowledge through language. As Foucault makes clear, meaning is historically contingent and the other (the madman) only 'has his truth' in the in-between. The 'curse' of the slaughterhouse 'terrifies only those who utter it', and this speech remains the preserve of the viewer and not those who are represented.

Discussing the critical reception of his study on the relation between society and the mentally ill, and the formulation of a history of madness and psychiatric institutions, *Madness and Civilization: a history of insanity in an Age of Reason* (1961), Foucault describes how his writing operates in a site in-between the teleological and phenomenological. An awareness of Foucault's meditations on his methodology is thus useful here.

*Madness and Civilisation* functions as an experience, for its writer and reader alike, much more than as the establishment of a historical truth ... what it says does need to be true in terms of academic, historically verifiable truth ... yet the essential thing is not in the series of those true or historically verifiable findings but, rather, in the experience that the book makes possible. Now, the fact is, this experience is neither true nor false. An experience is always a fiction: it's something that one fabricates oneself, that doesn't exist before and will exist afterward.<sup>30</sup>

His statement is usefully applied when tracing a history of the other defined by the language of documentary tradition, and recognises the other and othered space as constructed in-between the polar sites of 'truth' and 'fiction'. Through the identification of power operations within Sternfeld's representations it is possible to describe the manner in which they function

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<sup>29</sup> Alessandra Bonazzi, 'Heterotopology and Geography: A Reflection', *Space & Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (February, 2002), p43.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Rabinow, ed., *Michel Foucault Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1* (London: Penguin) 1997, p121.

in the construction of socio-cultural truths that served to define Hart Island as the 'other', the heterotopia that is at the essential core of this deconstruction. Foucault's exploration of the historical relationship between madness and space is relevant to the study of Sternfeld's photographs in the manner Foucault exposes the constructed nature of social discourses of truth, and thus power. This allows a theoretical space to exist where the mechanics of the spatial construction of the other on Hart Island through social 'truths' (such as the concept of madness, institutions, social death and decay) can be problematised. In *The Birth of the Asylum*, four stages in the process of constructing 'madness' are identified, the final being the identification of the medical doctor, psychologist, or 'wise man'.<sup>31</sup> In the case of this study, it can be argued that Sternfeld to some extent mediates between the exclusion space of the island and the 'normalised' space of the city in the manner the doctor creates a relationship with the patient and the world outside the institution. Foucault states, 'His [the doctor's] presence and words were gifted with that power of dis-alienation, which at one blow revealed the transgression and restored the order of morality.'<sup>32</sup> Foucault's reference to morality here ties to the value-laden moral framework projected onto Sternfeld's work by multiple critics and writers as cited in the previous chapter. In the same way, Sternfeld's work both normalises a previously unknown space through representation in his photographs (and their installation in institutions *within* normalised space such as the gallery and museum), and reinforces to some extent the opposition and disjunction between the space they now inhabit and that which they portray. The socio-cultural complexity that the viewer of Sternfeld's photographs brings to the action of engaging with his work adds yet another dimension to this metaphor and instigates the origin of a multiply-dimensional oppositional matrix of ideas that supercedes the notion of simple binary pairs. In his introduction to *Madness and Civilisation*, David Cooper illustrates the cultural baggage the viewer brings to reading and constructing meaning in Sternfeld's work, using the specific example of madness.

Foucault makes it quite clear that the invention of madness as a disease is in fact nothing less than a peculiar disease of our own civilisation. We choose to conjure up this disease in order to evade a certain moment of our own existence - the moment of disturbance, penetrating vision into the depths of ourselves, which we prefer to externalise into others. Others are elected to live out the chaos that we refuse to

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<sup>31</sup>[From] silence, to recognition in the mirror, to perpetual judgment, we must add a fourth structure peculiar to the world of the asylum as it was constituted at the end of the eighteenth century: this is the apotheosis of the *medical personage*.' Foucault (1989), p256.

<sup>32</sup>Foucault (1989), p260.

confront ourselves. By this means, we escape a certain anxiety, but only at a price that is as immense as it is unrecognised.<sup>33</sup>

These are bodies identified earlier in conjunction with Baudelaire and Roeg, representational embodiment of our own anxieties and fears performed *outside*, in the other.<sup>34</sup> The manner in which Bataille contends that the museum is born out of the slaughterhouse and the manipulation of what is socially acceptable to see and remain unseen finds traction within *Hart Island*. The wasteland of the unwanted dead and the unwanted living that bury them is the slaughterhouse on which foundations this series of photographs rest. This site exists both within the confines of the canon of previous representations of 'American life and death', and subtly snakes outside in representing a space that is almost never seen by anyone outwith the institutional space his work portrays. Foucault's exploration of madness and the space of the institution pose these sites as historically determined, and thus discourses of power rather than a priori Kantian 'truths' in either geographic or representational senses. Cooper illustrates how these power/knowledge relationships function within society to suppress elements of human experience that are deemed inappropriate and are consequently located on the edges of that society. The discomfort associated with madness, or indeed any behaviour that operates outside the 'norm' (itself reliant on what it delineates as the 'other' for its own existence) is, for Cooper, 'a moment of disturbance, of penetrating vision.' The idea of vision as inherent to the process of othering suggests that Sternfeld's depictions of Hart Island operate on mutually contradictory levels, both relieving the alienation of the heterotopia to a certain degree while at the same time reinforcing, as the doctor does to the patient in Foucault's discussion, the existence of the insane 'other'.<sup>35</sup>

### **Viewing Fear and Power in Other Spaces/Other Bodies**

This chapter has argued that Sternfeld's photographs operate within a discourse of power

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<sup>33</sup>Foucault (1989), pviii.

<sup>34</sup>'Social others provide opportunities not only for vicarious living but also for vicarious suffering. That is, marginal subjects pressed into service not only to enable fantasies of mobility, escape, or transfiguration but also precisely as signs of loss, fixity, and diminished being. Stigmatized social others serve a function not unlike that of the immortal soul, as Freud describes it; they offer an insurance policy against death and more precisely, against a *social death* understood to be characteristic of specific social groups but in fact experienced much more widely. Paradoxically, these figures ward off such losses by embodying them.' Love (2006), p23.

<sup>35</sup>'Thus while the victim of mental illness is entirely alienated in the real person of the doctor, the doctor dissipates the reality of the mental illness in the critical concept of madness. So that there remains, beyond the empty forms of positivist thought, only a single concrete reality: the doctor-patient couple in which all alienations are summarized, linked and loosened.' Foucault (1989), p263.

themselves, of the type that Foucault characterises in his history of madness. Viewing is structured as an act of visual anxiety, of fear that is transferred to the process of divining meaning and knowledge in the photograph. Foucault describes Samuel Tuke's early nineteenth century insane asylum created by the Friendly Society near York.<sup>36</sup> He focuses on the manner in which fear of madness perpetuated by a 'normalized' society is mediated by the 'reasoned' speech of the doctor until the patient takes on responsibility for his own actions of insanity. Foucault states, 'fear appears as an essential practice in the asylum...these terrors surrounded madness from the outside, marking the boundary between reason and unreason.'<sup>37</sup> Thus this fear is performed as an act of power by social bodies outside the asylum and is transmitted into that space first by constraining the madman then contrasting this with the ability to move freely if certain social boundaries are observed and upheld. Like Baudelaire in Paris, it is the observer, the surveillant gaze that invested with the movement of power. This self-reflexive action of observation in order to moderate actions as an acceptable version of the 'self' seems a synthetic or artificial return to the Lacanian mirror stage discussed earlier in this chapter. Instead of the reflection of oneself in the mirror however, it is a socially constructed blueprint that the madman must view in order to mediate between his experience of his 'self' and that the manner in which society wishes him to perform. His performance too is based on a fear instilled by the remembrance of constraint and the guilt associated with the 'reason' for this medicalised constraint enacted as an operation of social power upon him. The consumption of Sternfeld's photographs exists in the space between the self-reflexive action of the internally fragmented madman and perceived wholeness of those who view this madness and perpetuate fear in order to operate control. As Foucault states,

In classical confinement, the madman was also vulnerable to observation, but such observation did not, basically, involve him; it involved only his monstrous surface, his visible animality; and it included at least one form of reciprocity, since the sane man could read the madman, as in a mirror, the imminent movement of his downfall ... both deeper and less reciprocal.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> 'Tuke created an asylum where he substituted for the free terror of madness the stifling anguish of responsibility; fear no longer reigned on the other side of the prison gates, it now raged under the seals of conscience.' Foucault (1989), p234.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault (1989), p233. 'Fear appears as an essential practice in the asylum...these terrors surrounded madness from the outside, marking the boundary reason and unreason, and enjoying a double power: over the violence of fury in order to contain it, and over reason itself to hold it at a distance ... Tuke created an asylum where he substituted for the free terror of madness the stifling anguish of responsibility; fear no longer reigned on the other side of the prison gates, it now raged under the seals of conscience.'

<sup>38</sup> Foucault (1989), p236.

The notion of representing bodies as evidence of social power has been practiced through the photograph to document the prisoner and the madman in nineteenth-century histories of the institution, a history Alan Sekula traces in his essay *The Body and the Archive*. In the figure of the Acephal [figure 8], Bataille's antithetical headless version of Leonardo's Renaissance Man, parallels can be drawn with the faceless bodies Sternfeld portrays in *Hart Island*. The role of fear that Foucault describes in the creation of a genealogy of madness is based in a similar fragmentation of the body, the same process of becoming 'non-whole' the viewer experiences in the other. Foucault speaks of erasure of the physical self in *Utopian Body*, a theme that Sternfeld records on Hart Island (and which ties to Marcelo Brodsky's notion of 'becoming disappeared'). The body exists in pieces which can only be synthesized through looking in the mirror – 'the back of my skull, I can feel it, right there, with my fingers. But see it? Never ... I might catch it, but only in the ruse of the mirror.'<sup>39</sup> Fundamentally, this process of decomposition occurs *within* and *from* the body in the same manner that the heterotopia and utopia spring from the same site. The construction of *Hart Island* generates from the same place that exists as opposite, these binaries that define it as other created through the socio-cultural operations of fear, absence, and terror of the unknown. Bataille describes this moment in his realisation of the Acephal.

Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of innocence and crime; he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of the Sacred Heart in his right. He is not a man. He is not a God either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.<sup>40</sup>

Bataille sexualises this fragmented, headless being, covering its genitalia with a death mask. Similarly, Foucault describes a death mask that 'exists in a utopia made for erasing bodies – the land of the dead in ancient civilisations. 'What is a mummy after all? Well, a mummy is the utopia of the body negated and transfigured. The mummy is the great utopian body that exists across time.'<sup>41</sup> The photograph performs as a monument, as enactment of embalming time and providing a representational quality for the anonymous subject. Sternfeld's

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault 'utopian body' in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*, ed. by Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press) 2006, p231.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldberg, eds., *Encyclopædia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press) 1995, p14.

<sup>41</sup> Foucault (2006), p220.

[fig 8]

photographs of coffins containing the stillborn and miscarried, the indigent, and bodily fragments of amputated limbs are mirrored in the form of the Acephal.

Foucault fetishes the anatomizing nature of the mirror and the 'menace of death' as the space in-between which the body is constituted, is *here*, even though this constitution may bear more resemblance to the Acephal than Lacan's *faire corps*. Thus the fragmented space in-between the viewer and the representation, and the space in-between the camera lens itself and the space and bodies it views, is the site for discourse, vocabularies, meaning to evolve, mutate, fragment and rebuild. It is the site in which power is enacted through photographic representation. This allows the argument proposed at the beginning of this discussion in conjunction with Foucault's *Birth of the Asylum* (that these values are socially constructed and therefore historically determined and multiple) to form a vocabulary that can adapt to its historical situation - in this case, Sternfeld's photographic series. The discourses that exist in within these spaces offer the possibility to perform various roles as viewer, subject, photographer, and to spatialise these relationships through their historical moment. It is therefore necessary to deconstruct this matrix *in-between* further, the project that the next chapter will undertake.

*The third major step in the sequence on which torture is built occurs in the translation of all the objectified elements of pain into the insignia of power, the conversion of the enlarged map of human suffering into an emblem of the regime's strength. This translation is made possible by, and occurs across, the phenomenon common to both power and pain: agency<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1985, p56.

## Chapter Three

### New vocabularies in Klein's fissure, the space *in-between*

*The specific aesthetics of documentary photography lie in the fact that the language of aesthetics is always available to rescue documentary from itself, that is, from its own truth claims.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah James, 'The Truth About Photography', *Art Monthly*, No. 292 (Dec-Jan, 05-06), p10.

The previous chapter established the relevance of the theoretical formulation of binary concepts to the project of deconstructing Sternfeld's representation of Hart Island. The mapping of the space *in-between* these oppositions leads to a new site in which the power relations inherent to photography and its reception may be mapped with particular reference to Sternfeld's *Hart Island* series. The gap between binary oppositions represented in Sternfeld's work is the space in which the 'other' or 'unknown' operates and is operated upon. It is the space in which the other becomes *bodily*. It is now pertinent to discuss the space *in-between* these points as a site within which current photographic terms and their associated histories may be problematised and new vocabularies may be formed. It is the space in which, for example, the *documentary* may be dissected. The work of Melanie Klein refers to a similar concept of 'in-between' space as a *fissure*, which she links to the operation of power. Discussing Klein's thoughts on the operation of power, knowledge and its correlation to violence within society (as before, power is positioned as an act of social play using an 'other' body as vessel), Lyndsey Stonebridge notes Klein's use of a 'space in-between'. She states,

authority in Klein belongs neither to the caprice of the super-ego nor to external legislators, but resides in what Phillips calls the 'fissure' between the shapes that the phantasy gives to the world and those elements which both constrain and incite it - contingency, time, death and negativity.<sup>3</sup>

This reflects the ideas already explored within Bataille's writing, that operations of power exist *in-between* binary pairs, residing in the movement between two polarities rather than invested in one or the other of these oppositions. Where Klein opposes 'contingency, time, death and negativity', Bataille uses the slaughterhouse and the museum. It is not the slaughterhouse, 'cursed and quarantined' or the 'dead surfaces' of the paintings housed by the museum that control the 'authority' that Klein speaks of. Rather, Bataille describes the ceaseless flow of the people through the museum (the exercise of social purification against the remembrance of their tie to the slaughterhouse) as the ever-shifting nucleus of power. This suggests that it is between the two polarities of slaughterhouse and museum, within Klein's 'fissure', or the space *in-between*, that social operations of power are truly mapped. In Bataille's words, 'the play, the flashes, the stream of light described by authorized critics

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<sup>3</sup>John Phillips & Lindsay Stonebridge, eds., *Reading Melanie Klein*, (London: Routledge) 199, p81.

occur within the crowd.’<sup>4</sup> This references the emphasis on movement also already highlighted in Melinda Hunt’s introductory essay earlier in this chapter. Power moves within this fissure rather than remaining static in opposing conceptual or geo-physical entities, the movement of the crowds acting as both instigator and disrupting force. Discussed previously, Foucault’s *Birth of the Asylum* also finds a home in Klein’s writing. The super-ego and the external legislators quoted by Stonebridge compare to the patient and the doctor described by Foucault, and extend to the performers within Sternfeld’s photographs - the ‘external’ viewers who ‘legislate’, wielding social power through their concentrated gaze. As already suggested, Sternfeld, or at least his lens, is part of this legislating gaze, referencing the contradiction of his complicity in alienation of those he represents as much as disalienation (Foucault) through representation. What Klein makes clear is that the identification of this fissure goes hand in hand with the identification of power operations invested within this space, as opposed to within the bodies that bound it. It is therefore possible to argue that, as power emanates from knowledge, that itself is constructed from socially produced ‘truths’ (of which the photograph is one such truth), the mechanics of this equation lie in this ‘other’ in-between constituted by the performances acted out, by the photograph’s capacity for *subjectivity*.

The operations of power within a social circumstance rely on the ebb and flow of the crowds between two poles. This movement is never-ending and always unique in character, and thus so too are the operations of power that exist between the points they traverse. Their movement dictates the environment of this space in-between and the plotting of this movement is subject to the specific steps that are traced at any one chronological and historical moment. This liminal space ultimately behaves self-reflexively, its existence being the foundation of the vocabulary used in the end as its own descriptor. It becomes in semiotic terms sign *and* signifier, the symbol and meaning in simultaneous opposition and symbiosis. Setting Klein’s fissure as the centrifuge, the fringes of this space become more complex than simple binaries. Rosalind Krauss points to the model of the semiotic square as the epitome of such self-reflexive action, a model where ‘once any unit of meaning is conceived, we automatically conceive of the absence of that meaning, as well as an opposing system of meaning that correspondingly implies its own absence.’<sup>5</sup> The other site or other body is

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<sup>4</sup>Leach (1997), p54. This space of the crowd becomes ‘a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of the shock, [Baudelaire] calls this man *a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness*.’ Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ in *Strangers: The First ICP Triennial of Photography & Video*, ed. by Brian Wallis (New York: Steidl/The International Center of Photography) 2003, p107.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Krauss *The Optical Unconscious* (London: October, MIT Press) 1994, p189.

inextricably tied to its opposite, not because of their opposition, but through a shared root or foundation that located both in the *same* site, analogous to the performance of appropriation and repatriation occurring simultaneously within the same actions of viewer or photographer. These actions are, as Krauss' semiotic model underlines, linguistic, to be 'uttered' (Bataille).

As indicated previously, Baudelaire positions the other as forever an inactive participant in this spectacle. Ultimately, is the other body destined to remain inert within the photograph, a receptacle or vessel for the author/viewer's fantasy? In a process that phenomenologises the objective 'real' implied by the documentary mode, Stonebridge uses the term fantasy with reference to Klein as a descriptor to denote the projection of individual narratives onto the photographic subject. Hal Foster similarly explores this paradigm between artist, viewer and subject (*the informant/ethnographer paradigm*) and its relationship to reality/the real.

Previous paragraphs of the chapter indicated a continuing problematisation of 'truth' and the 'real' - with specific reference to the photograph as document - within the *in-between*. Foster critiques Roland Barthes assertion that 'wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer preserve it as an image, wherever he links language to the making of things ... myth is impossible.'<sup>6</sup> In the context of this paper, Barthes statement relates here to the positioning of Sternfeld's photography within a tradition that has been historically equated with the 'real', and the location of his work within the power relations inherent to language and the creation of meaning. Foster reproblematises Barthes statement, suggesting that

often this realist assumption is compounded by a *primitivist fantasy* [Foster's emphasis]: that the other, usually assumed to be of color, has special access to a primary psyche and social processes from which the white subject is somehow blocked ... in some contexts, both myths are effective, even necessary: the realist assumption to claim the truth of one political position or the reality of one social oppression, and the primitivist fantasy to challenge repressive conventions of sexuality and aesthetics.<sup>7</sup>

The positioning of the documentary as implicit in the production of *myth* negates the possibility of either the medium itself (representation or text) or the interpretation of this

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<sup>6</sup> Hal Foster *The Return of the Real* (London: October, MIT Press) 1996, p174.

<sup>7</sup> Foster (1996), p175. Alan Sekula also references this imagined 'primitive core of meaning' attached to the descriptor of 'documentary'. Sekula states, 'the power of this folklore of pure denotation is considerable. It elevates the photograph to the legal status of document and testimonial. It generates a mythic aura of neutrality around the image.' Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. by Vicki Goldberg (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press) 1988, p445.

medium, and of the other, as 'real'. Representation of Hart Island will always exist in the mythical in-between, buttressed on one hand by the search for an objective 'real' portrayal of a social site, and on the other by an inability to ever truly *know* this space or the represented subjects. This is the legacy that the history of photography has left documentary practice to wrestle with.

### **Photograph, Document, Myth**

The complexity attached to any definition of documentary is particularly appropriate to discuss when applying the term to Sternfeld's images. The conflation of fact-based and pseudo-objective photojournalism with the aesthetic leaning of art photography have become conflicting components of the contemporary understanding of what 'the documentary' in photography constitutes. The Life Library's *Documentary Photography* defines the practice in 1972 as, 'a depiction of the real world by a photographer whose intent is to communicate something of importance – to make a comment that will be understood by the viewer.'<sup>8</sup> In a more contemporary reading, the relationship between 'art' and 'photography' must be understood in the context of this study in terms specific to Sternfeld's practice.

Photoconceptualism in America was concerned with 'anti-photography' at a time when European photography, its practice seismically disrupted in the decades that preceded and followed World War II, was still defining a positive engagement with the medium.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, Sternfeld's early years as a documentarian were marked by specifically American parameters for the photograph - 'the absorption of photography into art by American conceptualism was aimed at the critique of the traditional art object and painting's unique gesture.'<sup>10</sup> The Glasgow Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Human/Nature* (2005)<sup>11</sup> paired four of Sternfeld's images from his *Landscape in Memoriam* series with images by Thomas

<sup>8</sup> Robin Lenman, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2005, p173.

<sup>9</sup> Stefan Gronert states, 'In the United States there was, despite some internal disruptions, a continual engagement between art and photography, so that by the early twentieth century the latter had become an established sphere of artistic activity. European art photographers, by contrast, experienced a deep rupture in the 1930s. The careers of such recognized pioneers as August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch were brought to an end by National Socialism. Karl Blossfeldt and Aenne Biermann died in the 1930s and remained forgotten into the 1970s.' Stefan Gronert, 'Alternative Pictures: Conceptual Art and the Artistic Emancipation of Photography in Europe' in *The Last Picture Show*, ed. by Douglas Fogle (Minnesota: Walker Art Center) 2003, p86.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah James, 'Back in the USSR', *Art Monthly*, No. 302, (Dec-Jan, 06-07), p13. Sarah James began this discussion a year earlier in the same publication, *Art Monthly*, where she stated 'The dialectic between formalism and historicism, and the difference between American and European variations is perhaps most apparent in documentary photography. In America, as Rosler has stressed, documentary has been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or a programme of politics, as is the well entrenched paradigm in which a documentary image has two moments.' James (Dec-Jan 05-06), p10.

<sup>11</sup> *Human/Nature* February 9<sup>th</sup> – April 30<sup>th</sup> 2005. The link between this exhibition title and the 1975 *New Topographics: photographs of a man-altered landscape* is important to note in the repetition of a similar dialectic.

Joshua Cooper, Andy Goldsworthy and Sebastião Salgado. It is Salgado that Weston Naef, curator of photography at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, singles out in *Photography: a cultural history* when attempting to define contemporary photographic practice of documentation [figure 1]. He states Salgado is 'an artist, using photojournalism as the vehicle for his art', a comment the book's editor Marien disputes, contending that Salgado 'has repeatedly maintained that he is not an artist but a documentarian.'<sup>12</sup> There is an inherent friction between the objective status accorded the act of photography through its mechanical qualities, and the aesthetic choices and visual history the camera and photograph are inextricably subject to. Salgado describes how, as photographer, he engages with multiple 'real' sites, endowing his photographs with a geographical value, coordinates or 'a vector connecting the different realities of people around the world.'<sup>13</sup> The acknowledgment of this conflict negates the possibility of a completely neutral gaze through the lens of the camera, and thus problematises Sternfeld's own suggestion that his approach to the photographic subject is 'perceptual, not conceptual'.<sup>14</sup> The fact that access to the island is heavily restricted and that permission to photograph individuals featured in the series was sought highlights that this was no quick 'snapshot', as does his heavy apparatus and the length of time Sternfeld spent visiting the island over a period of three years. The legacy of Evans' 'disinterested eye'<sup>15</sup> is hard to shake entirely, yet to state that his work is merely the result of looking, and not actively viewing is clearly problematic. The myth of being able to engage on a completely objective level is one that Sekula terms as 'shielded by a bogus ideology of neutrality.'<sup>16</sup> The act of attaching meaning or a 'gaze' to the viewing process is a performance Sternfeld has indicated that he wishes to remain impervious to, leaving this process for the audience to enact in the museum. Using the descriptor of 'documentary' in conjunction with the Hart Island series is appropriate not just as a stylistic indicator, but because of the way the term is active in its reflection of the 'other'. As Grundberg states in *The Crisis of the Real*, the documentary is attached to 'an obsession with what one might call the Other ... in short, the tendency of the documentary photographer has always been to define its subject matter as whatever is foreign to the photographer.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Prentice Hall, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.) 2006, p400.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Light, *Witness in our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers* (Washington: Smithsonian) 2000, p97.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Sternfeld, quoted from email correspondence with M. Jubin.

<sup>15</sup>Indeed, Walker Evans was at such pains to point this out that he used this phrase in his inscription for the 1961 reprint of *American Photographs*.

<sup>16</sup>Marien (2006), p407.

<sup>17</sup>Andy Grundberg, *The Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography since 1984* (New York: Aperture) 1985, p196.



Figure 1. Sebastião Salgado, 'Untitled' from the *Serra Pelada Mine series*, Brazil (1986)



Grave of the first New York City child to die of AIDS and be buried on Hart Island, March 1992

Figure 2. Joel Sternfeld, 'Grave of the first New York City child to die of AIDS and be buried on the island, March 1992' from *Hart Island* (1998)

While Sternfeld's photographs stake an elegant claim upon the reality of unknown bodies and unseen spaces in contemporary America, the *primitivist fantasy* ignited by the viewer is impossible to deny. It is fruitful to investigate the designation of museum or gallery space as a specific site in which the dialectic between which the repatriation and reinforcement of the other takes place through the performance of this myth-fantasy. It is the space in which the poet-narrator (Baudelaire), the owner of the viewing gaze, operates. Considering the ubiquitous 'whiteness' of such space (on multiple levels, literally, metaphorically and demographically) points again to the 'whole' body as a benchmark within which the heterotopic other is constructed. Foster's demarcation of experience based on colour is echoed (again, with a geographic emphasis) by Grech when he states that 'exclusionary discourse draws particularly on colour, disease, animals, sexuality and nature but they all come back to the idea of dirt as a signifier of imperfection and inferiority, the reference point being the white, often male, physically and mentally able person.'<sup>18</sup> Bataille's middle-class museum goers actively participate in, and perpetrate, the construction of the other through their own conception as 'real' bodies. White walls, whether literal or metaphorical, act as the backdrop for Sternfeld's photographs in this institutional setting, creating binary oppositions between the institution of display (the museum) and the correctional institutions on the island. The hygienic quality of the former space is set against the disease of the island space, manifested by the portrayal of the grave site of a childhood AIDS victim buried on the island [figure 2], Hunt's mention of the island's history as a quarantine area for those who contracted yellow fever in the nineteenth century, and the social disease of the living bodies, incarcerated and contaminated by their proximity to this sullied landscape. Throughout the series, Sternfeld's lens is concentrated on the land, the dirt that remains after man's intervention. Here, Foster's 'white subject' may indicate a broader trope of the museum visitor, engaging with both real and fantastical elements of representation in a performance that connects 'the transgressive potential of the unconscious [Lacan's mirror stage] with the radical alterity of the cultural other.'<sup>19</sup> The medical definition of the heterotopia as the displacement of grey matter into the cerebral white matter links this colour demarcation of 'white' and 'non-white' in a circular motion back to Foucault's definition of other space in a distinct and *bodily* manner.

Within the museum space, there is a violation of the other body as various scenarios are acted

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<sup>18</sup> David Sibley *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London: Routledge) 1995, p14.

<sup>19</sup> Foster (1996), p175.

out upon it and within it at the viewer's will. If for no other reason, the proliferation of images of the body within contemporary culture ensures this violation subconsciously through the relative normalcy of projecting and modeling we are encouraged to enact through visual representations (advertising, television, magazines) on a daily basis. It is not a stretch to equate this outward performance with a moderated form of torture, a dramatised and aestheticised brutality upon the other body. The surveillant gaze has the power to bruise. As Sontag states, the photographer is as implicit in this performance as those who view his product:

There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.<sup>20</sup>

For Sontag, viewing implies an act of power, knowledge of the other (extracted at gunpoint) that allows the photographer to possess, and then kill. It is not suggested that Sternfeld's motive for photographing the landscape of Hart Island and its occupants is malign, or even 'murderous' (quite the opposite). Sontag's assertion is problematic. She remains confused as to whether the camera remains outside of the power implications of the photograph itself, or whether it is involved in the role the representation plays as aggressor.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the disconnect between the photograph (and by extension the photographer, if we are considering the camera an 'arm' or weapon) as forcefully appropriating its subject, and the representation moving the subject or site from unseen other to a mark on cultural consciousness lies at the heart of this exploration. What is being presented: appropriation or an effort to repatriate the other? Fear and anxiety operate in both directions. If the photograph can act as monument, it may enact power also – as Bataille contends, 'monuments obviously inspire good behaviour and often even genuine fear.'<sup>22</sup> What is certain is that there is no such thing as a disinterested gaze. The other is formed and unmade, simultaneously negated and reinforced, by the

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<sup>20</sup> Sontag, Susan quoted in Aphrodite Désirée Navab, 'Re-Picturing Photography: A Language in the Making', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 35, no. 1 (Spring, 2001), p72.

<sup>21</sup> 'Sontag cannot make up her mind about the fantasy or reality of the camera as gun. Every time she admits that there is no actual death, she goes on to describe all the kinds of killing photography does: that it violates, steals, and murders all at the same time. By collapsing the distinction between reality and fantasy, Sontag reaffirms the fantasy as reality.' Navab (2001), p72.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldberg, eds., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press) 1995, p35.

photographic act. The method of photo-collage Gordon Matta-Clark used to record his architectural sculpture-interventions are interesting to compare here. Anne M. Wagner explores Matta-Clark's claim to 'very real' sculpture in her essay *Splitting and Doubling: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Body of Sculpture*. Like the opposition proposed within Sternfeld's photography, Wagner suggests that Matta-Clark's gesture 'both cleaves and restores what is a charged and isolated social sphere.'<sup>23</sup> Matta-Clark photographs his finished work, now regarded as both whole and in fragments, and splices these photographs back together. The photographs, as in *Splitting* (1974) and *Office Baroque* (1977), exist as both a *negative monument* to the act, and an act of restoration [figure 3]. The photo-collages simultaneously suggest place and yet disorient the viewer through the uncanny details: a missing corner, a glimpse of the basement from three floors up, a jagged skylight cut through several walls [figure 4]. Like Sternfeld's photographs, there is an element of fantasy at play here.

Never has a domestic domain been more thoroughly anatomized; never did its restoration seem more willfully dreamlike, a more fragile effort to reassemble a (scarred) whole ... who would have thought a building's matched parts could suggest a story of genesis?<sup>24</sup>

Assembling a site through multiple documents not only presents the possibility to recognise its inherently fragmentary nature, and to exploit this as photographic death. Wagner also implies a beginning, a birth or the moment of a creation narrative, negating Sontag's supposition (repeated *ad infinitum* in the history of photography) that the photograph enacts death. One can 'make' as well as 'take' a picture. The act of photography, and the power invested in this performance, continues to contradict the position it has been forced into by teleological interpretations of its own history. Like Matta-Clark's photo-collages, Sternfeld's representations of Hart Island are responsible for the making *and* unmaking of the other – 'the new logic they offer is irrational and familiar, nightmarish and reassuring.'<sup>25</sup> Rachel Whiteread takes on this project of negative monument two decades later with *House*

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<sup>23</sup> Anne M. Wagner, 'Splitting and Doubling: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Body of Sculpture', *Grey Room*, Vol. 14, (Winter, 2004), p36.

<sup>24</sup> 'Yet equally striking about the range of Matta-Clark's montaged reorderings is the contradictory wishes they reveal. For every twinned and symmetrical image, with its emptying assurances, there is an alternative assemblage that stresses wild logic and vertiginous rupture ... *Splitting* transposes those subtle formalist rehearsals [of Frank Stella] into a kaleidoscopic disorientation of places we know.' Wagner (2004), p40.

<sup>25</sup> Wagner (2004), p40.

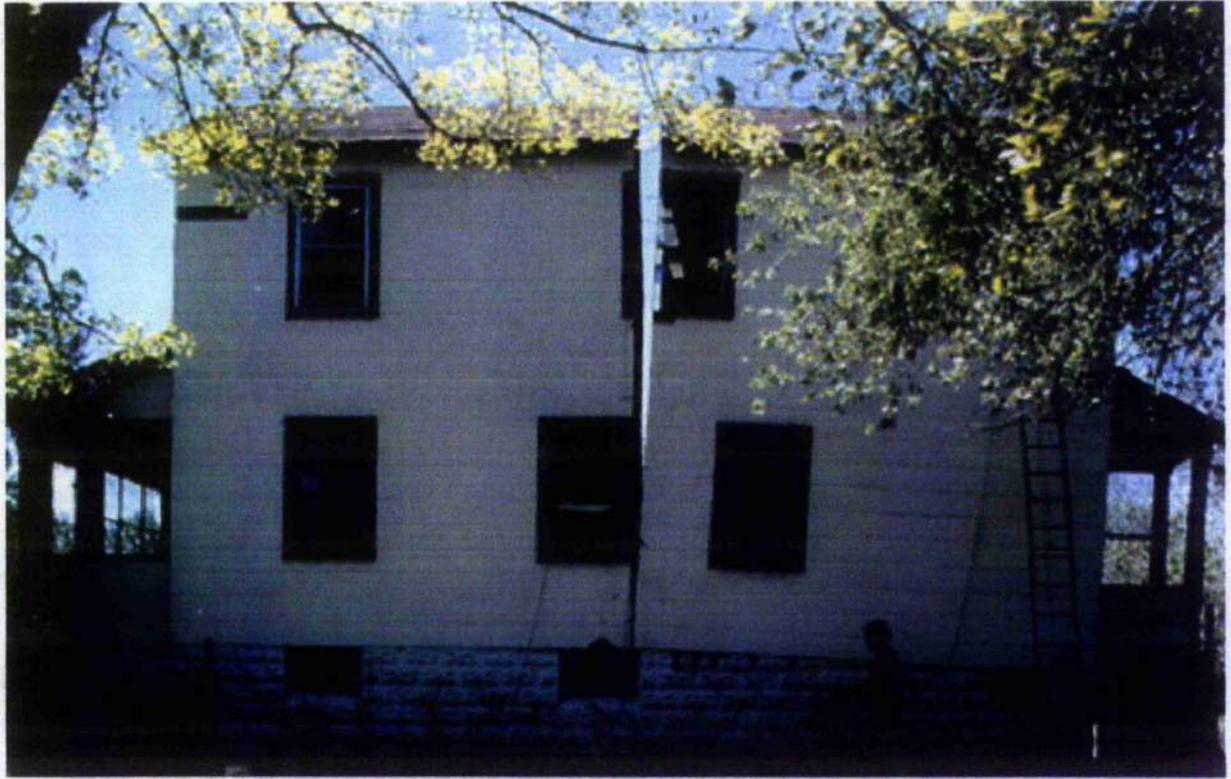


Figure 3. Gordon Matta-Clark, 'Splitting' (1974).  
322 Humphrey Street, Englewood, New Jersey.

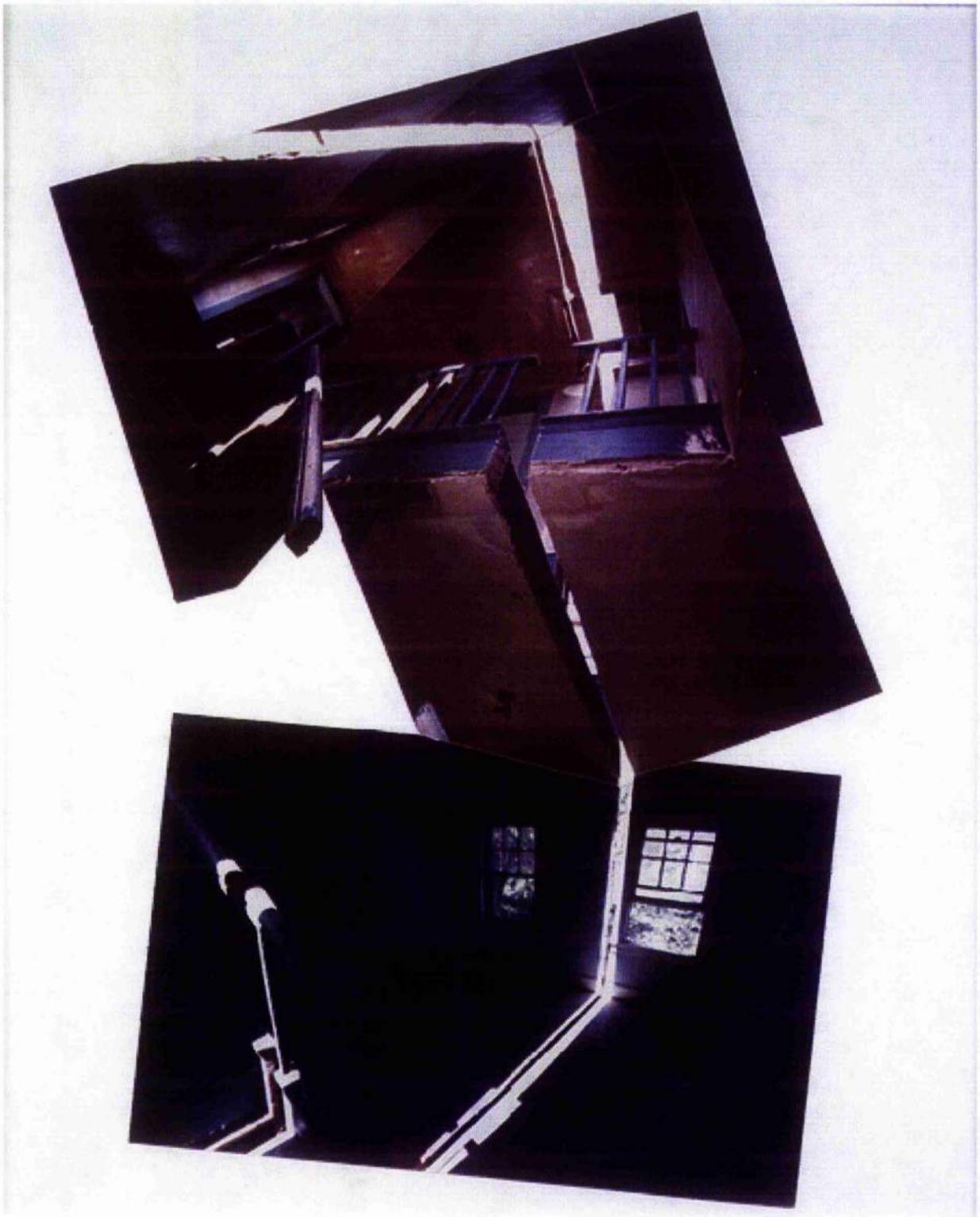


Figure 4. Gordon Matta-Clark 'Splitting' (1974). Chromogenic prints mounted on boards.

(1993), the largest scale work in a series of sculpture installations that act as a monumental death mask of the domestic space or object they describe [figure 5]. Whiteread used the concrete cast of a Victorian terraced home to make a negative sculptural volume. The resulting *House* stands as a testament to absence, and the impossibility of adequately or totally representing lack. Like Matta-Clark, the work is documented and remembered photographically, *House* having been demolished three months after its creation. Angela Dimitrakki discusses the work and the manner in which its photograph exists both 'inside' and 'outside' itself, a sense transferred to those who visited the site.

That this amounted to a violation of the real object may not be initially self-evident. But it comes into sharp focus when one thinks of Nabokov's glum hero, Humbert Humbert, whose wish was to turn Lolita's body inside out so as to love its interior.<sup>26</sup>

The performance on the othered body or other space is not defined solely in the negative. The 'violation' does not always carry connotations of malign violence, even though the act may inflict a measure of pain. However, while Sternfeld does not pose his camera as a weapon intentionally, it is necessary to deconstruct the power and knowledge implications of the medium he uses to portray Hart Island.<sup>27</sup>

As previously discussed, the documentary mode Sternfeld works within carries with it the weight of language connoting a relationship with the 'real'. This relationship is imperative to recognise when articulating the spaces between the viewer and the viewed subject, the museum institution and new sites for critical discourse. Navab distinguishes between the 'mystical language' of the photograph that ties its production to an a priori sense of 'real' and the 'violent terminology', the enactment of this 'real' as a form of power over the represented subject. Her distinction is an important one here, as it positions the act of looking as fundamental in declaring the photograph a contested site of reality rather than the document itself. Navab contends that the photograph 'enjoys no privileged relationship to reality. The

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<sup>26</sup> Chris Townsend, ed., *The Art of Rachel Whiteread* (London: Thames & Hudson) 2004, p117.

<sup>27</sup> 'The ideas of contemporary critics of photography such as Sontag, Berger, and Barthes, which are echoed by practitioners in the field have a powerful grip on how we view the medium today. As the discussion of the early responses to photography illustrates [see full article], there is little that is new in these contemporary responses. All betray a belief in photography's privileged relationship and responsibility to reality.' Navab (2001), p76.

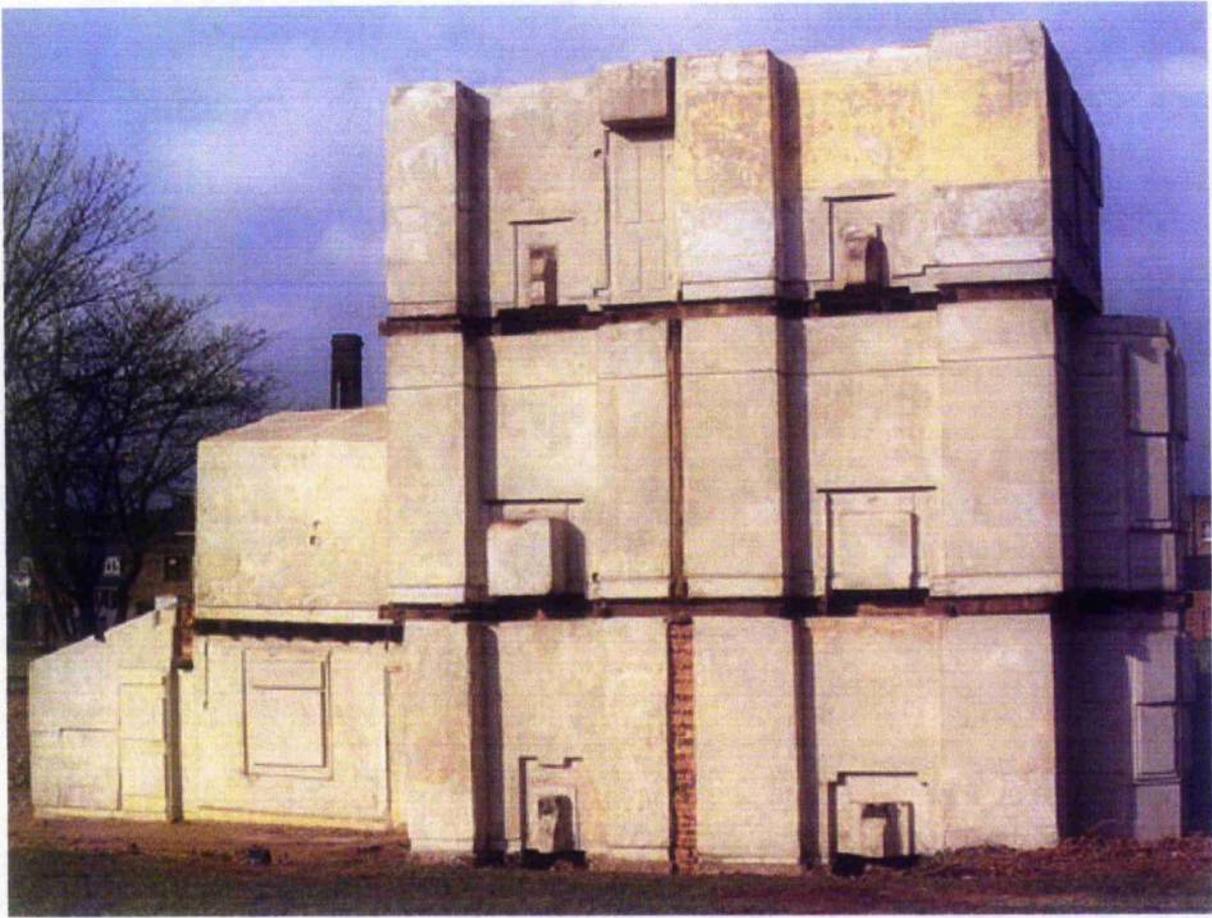


Figure 5. Rachel Whiteread, 'House', (25 October 1993 – 11 January 1994), Grove Road, London E3.

photograph is tied to the 'real' in as many ways as different viewers can construct it to be.<sup>28</sup> Barthes also ties the documentation of 'real' (what he terms a *reality effect*) to the mode of reception, which in the modern world arrives in the form of 'the development of the realistic novel, the private diary ... the historical museum, the exhibition of ancient objects and the massive development of photography.'<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Crary quotes Barthes here as he traces the genealogy of sites of reality through the trope of the panorama in the nineteenth century [figure 6]. Through 360-format, and sometimes the inclusion of historical 'artifacts' that tied the experience ever-closer to the 'real' event or landscape, the panorama presented a total immersion in the real that relied on the viewer consuming it in fragmented stages, paradoxically revealing its nature as an effect of reality. Hunt echoes this experience, writing of spending time looking at the Chinese art collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and stating, 'I think of Hart Island as a self-contained landscape with elements coming and going much as in a Chinese scroll. I also consider scroll paintings to operate much as a film where you pan across a scene or zoom in to a particular area as well as experiencing a story developing over time.'<sup>30</sup> Victor Burgin explores this relationship between moving and still image (arguably, the condition of the panorama) and the process of the viewer constituting meaning in his essay *Diderot, Barthes, Vertigo* (1986), pointing to 'the film scenario [as] simply an expansion of a series of moments, 'condensations', which distill for us a series of recurrent fantasy moments.'<sup>31</sup> It is therefore not solely, or even inherently the photographic process itself that acts as the conduit of power, but the resultant process of looking, of making and unmaking, that constitutes meaning as knowledge of the photographic subject and the reflected self.

### **Making and unmaking the photographic self**

Elaine Scarry's exploration of pain and its enactment as a form of power, *The Body In Pain: the making and unmaking of the world*, provides a link between the ideas outlined in the preceding paragraphs: between Sontag's notion of the camera as a weapon; Navab's contention that there is a vocabulary from the inception of photography to the present that

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<sup>28</sup> Navab (2001), p80.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Crary, 'Géricault, the Panorama and Sites of Reality in the early Nineteenth Century' *Grey Room*, No. 9 (Fall, 2002), p21.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Melinda Hunt conducted over email, September 2006. Victor Burgin explores this relationship between moving and still image, and the process of the viewer constituting meaning in his essay *Diderot, Barthes, Vertigo* (1986).

<sup>31</sup> Victor Burgin *Una Exposición retrospectiva, Fundación Antoni Tàpies 6 Abril - 17 Junio 2001* (Barcelona: Antoni Tàpies Foundation), p19.

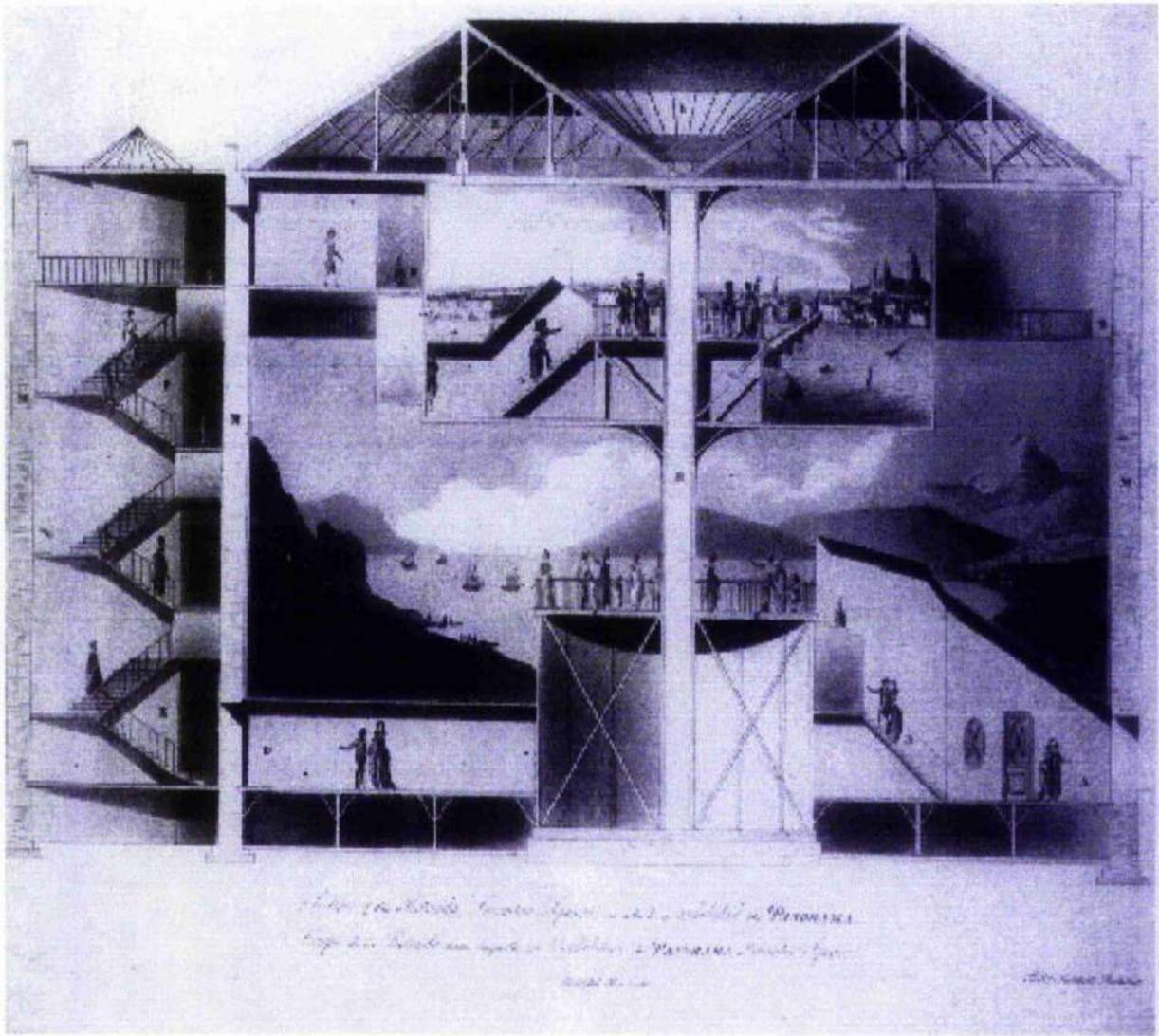


Figure 6. Robert Barker's Panorama-Rotunda in Leicester Square, London. Aquatint by Robert Mitchell (c. 1802).

supports Sontag's comparison as a fundamental mechanism of the documentary mode enacted through violence; and Foster's siting of this discourse between reality and fantasy. Scarry discusses the body both in the guise of a weapon,<sup>32</sup> and as a receptacle of pain inflicted by others through torture. She highlights particularly the use of language as a necessary element of this performance (as Navab does when equating the history of the documentary with an aggressive, performative voice)<sup>33</sup> claiming that,

Nowhere is the sadistic potential of a language built on agency so visible as in torture. While torture contains language, specific human words and sounds, it is itself a language, an objectification, an acting out ... it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually ... contained within the boundaries of the sufferer's body.<sup>34</sup>

In the same way that Scarry describes a language built on agency, performed power, the history of the documentary exists through its performance as a representation of an essential truth. There is not just an interpretive vocabulary to historically describe the act of viewing the photograph, as there is one for torture. The act of viewing itself constitutes a language and equates with the process of torture in its location of pain outside the viewing body, enacted for aesthetic gratification. It is this performance that exposes the power play at work in the creation of represented space, and specifically the heterotopia. As Sternfeld's subjects are for the most part silent, language remains the preserve of those *outside* the represented space. Their voice comes in the form of three prisoner statements included by Hunt in her introductory essay; the dead are unable to contribute further than the burial records kept by the Department of Corrections. The curatorial shaping of both these sources is impossible to deny, referencing again the institution of the museum or archive (the secondary site of the other/Hart Island as it exists in the photograph).<sup>35</sup> As Scarry points out, this makes visible the power relations that up until the moment of the photograph coming into being have remained unknown and unseen. Scarry continues,

'The physical pain [of torture] is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality

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<sup>32</sup> 'Although a weapon is an extension of the human body (as it is acknowledged in their collective description as "arms"), it is instead the human body that becomes in this vocabulary an extension of the weapon.' Scarry p 67

<sup>33</sup> 'Exaltation of form ... necessitates a debasement of matter ... photographers will hunt objects as cattle, taking their skins and leaving them to die by the roadside.' Navab (2001), p70.

<sup>34</sup> Scarry (1985), p54.

<sup>35</sup> 'The written or tape-recorded confession that can be carried away on a piece of paper or on tape is only the most concrete example of the torturer's attempt to induce sounds so that they can be broken off from their speaker ... and made the property of the regime.' Scarry (1985), p49.

of “incontestably real” on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used.<sup>36</sup>

Viewed in the context of this study, as outlined above, Scarry’s statement links to the ‘real’ of the documentary mode as legitimising the narrative position of the viewer. When Scarry states that the regime of torture is fundamentally unstable, she gestures to Foucault’s ‘regime of power’ and the manner in which the individual’s means of vocalizing their experience is controlled through the process of torture. In effect, the pain experiences inflicted by the torturer assume control of the descriptive function of the voice (or photographic meaning) rendering the experience of the individual being tortured paradoxically wordless and silent. In contrast, through actions performed on the victim’s body, the torturer controls the cerebral and aural qualities of this interaction.

The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it. It is in part this combination that makes torture, like any experience of great physical pain, mimetic of death; for in death the body is emphatically present while that more elusive part represented by the voice is so alarmingly absent that heavens are created to explain its whereabouts.<sup>37</sup>

Scarry describes various methods of torture where the voices of others in pain are played to the potential victim, or where the cries he makes himself are moderated and shaped by the actions of those who cause them. The notion of a narrative of experience, of meaning ascribed or shaped not by the immediate recipient but by those who administer action bears interesting comparison to the relationship of Melinda Hunt and Joel Sternfeld’s vocalisation of experience on Hart Island. Hunt supplies a text to the catalogue of images in book format and continues to work on the *Hart Island Project*. Her text fundamentally acknowledges the other voices of the island through prisoner statements and the archival records used in her collage pieces. The control of such narrative, and the manner in which description, language and discourse functions as knowledge (and thus power) when applied to the photograph, makes Sternfeld complicit in the formation of a narrative voice. It is not suggested that what

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<sup>36</sup> Scarry (1985), p67.

<sup>37</sup> Scarry (1985), p49.

motivates Hunt or Sternfeld is the desire to torture, yet it is important to recognise that the representations they offer are mediated, open to the possibility of violating and violation. Scarry suggests that such narratives can perform in both (or either) subjugating and liberating descriptive roles. The Tate Modern used the phrase *cruel and tender* to title their 2003 survey of Anglo-American documentary photography, referencing Lincoln Kirstein's 1933 observation on Walker Evans' 'tender cruelty'. The aphorism is still pertinent. Sternfeld's work may seek to portray that and those which were formerly unrepresentable, but ultimately his photographs still struggle to wrest the language of control embedded in the realm of the viewer, rather than those who are viewed. Do the bodies on Hart Island remain the *stranger par excellence*? The narrative of such representation is certainly presented by Sternfeld as the photographer, but it is interpreted by the viewer in the performance described above – through the mirror and the recognition of a 'double'. Thus, within the postmodern framing of Sternfeld's work as an example of a Foucauldian heterotopia (and post Barthes *Death of the Author*) 'the disappearance of an author, an originator, a creator, as living being, seems to be an ultimate insurmountable form of 'other'-ing'.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, as this power is recognised in the performance of the viewer, his gaze upon the photographic subject and the enactment of pain or 'otherness' outside his own body, the 'regime of power' (Foucault) played out in this exchange (and thus the gaze itself) is exposed as unstable. The 'real' of the museum, the catalogue, the document is as rooted in myth as the represented other.

### **Landscape as panorama: the reality effect**

Sublimation of this myth comes in the form of a vocabulary of the space as yet unspoken, and this is where the fissure, the notion of cleaving open an established form, reveals the other as a 'negative monument'. To conclude this chapter it is worth coming full-circle and considering the shape of the 'real' within photographic explorations that parallel the initial framework of postmodernism begun with Foucault and *Des Espaces Autres*. The self-reflexivity of the space *in-between* that Bataille introduces and Klein and Krauss expand upon reflects the description that Jeff Wall gives of the Conceptual photographers of the 1960s and 1970s (linking back through Matta-Clark to the initial exploration of photoconceptualism in Chapter One). In his essay *Marks of Indifference: aspects of photography in, or as, Conceptual art (1995)* Wall states,

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<sup>38</sup> John Grech, 'Living with the Dead: *Sharkfeed* and the Extending Ontologies of New Media', *Space & Culture*, Vol.5 No. 3 (August, 2002), p212.

Conceptual art played an important role in the transformation of the terms and conditions within which art-photography defined itself and its relationships with the other arts, a transformation which established photography as an institutionalized modernist form evolving explicitly through the dynamics of its auto-critique.<sup>39</sup>

Wall suggests that conceptual photographers, using techniques in the vein of photo-journalism and reportage, moved through the pseudo-reality of mere depiction. They relied instead on description to carry the photograph as an artwork - 'art objects were art in name only, not in body, form or function.' This reliance on a vocabulary separate from that of art history, a vocabulary that sustains the photograph whilst remaining separate from it, mirrors the vocabulary that this project seeks to describe the heterotopic space. Additionally, the removal of an author as implicit in the construction of the other (and the authorial function of producing this vocabulary) corresponds to the documentary's claim to transparency as an indication of the 'real' quality of the resulting representation. Wall also recognises, and goes on to explore in further detail, the contradictory nature of the photograph purporting to be a 'truthful' reflection of reality and the incompatibility of representing space as inherently other through this medium. Klein suggests that the manner in which we distinguish between 'phantasy' and 'reality'<sup>40</sup> is the manner in which we identify knowledge and then construct truth. This mirrors the binary oppositions that have already been identified as a key theoretical tool in this study. For Foucault, knowledge operates as a form of power, and thus Klein's correlation between oppositions, the notion of a fissure and knowledge locates Wall's problem with the photograph – the fact that its social power relies on the myth of objectivity embedded in the medium. This recognition allows the possibility of specific histories to be drawn from Sternfeld's work, not only of the photograph, or the actual site of the represented island, but of the critical discourses that surround and articulate these ideas within this identified *space in-between*.

Klein's statement also points to Krauss' operation of the semiotic square, and its relation to *form*. In *The Optical Unconscious* Krauss draws on the image of Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* [figure 7] as she makes the distinction between *gesture* and *matrix*, objectivity and

<sup>39</sup> Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art' *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960 – 1982*, ed. by Douglas Fogle (Minnesota: Walker Art Center) 200, p32.

<sup>40</sup> 'This issue is less one of insides versus outsides than of the outside-in-the-inside ... I acquire knowledge not of the outside world but of the disparity between phantasy and objects.' Phillips & Stonebridge (1999), p97.

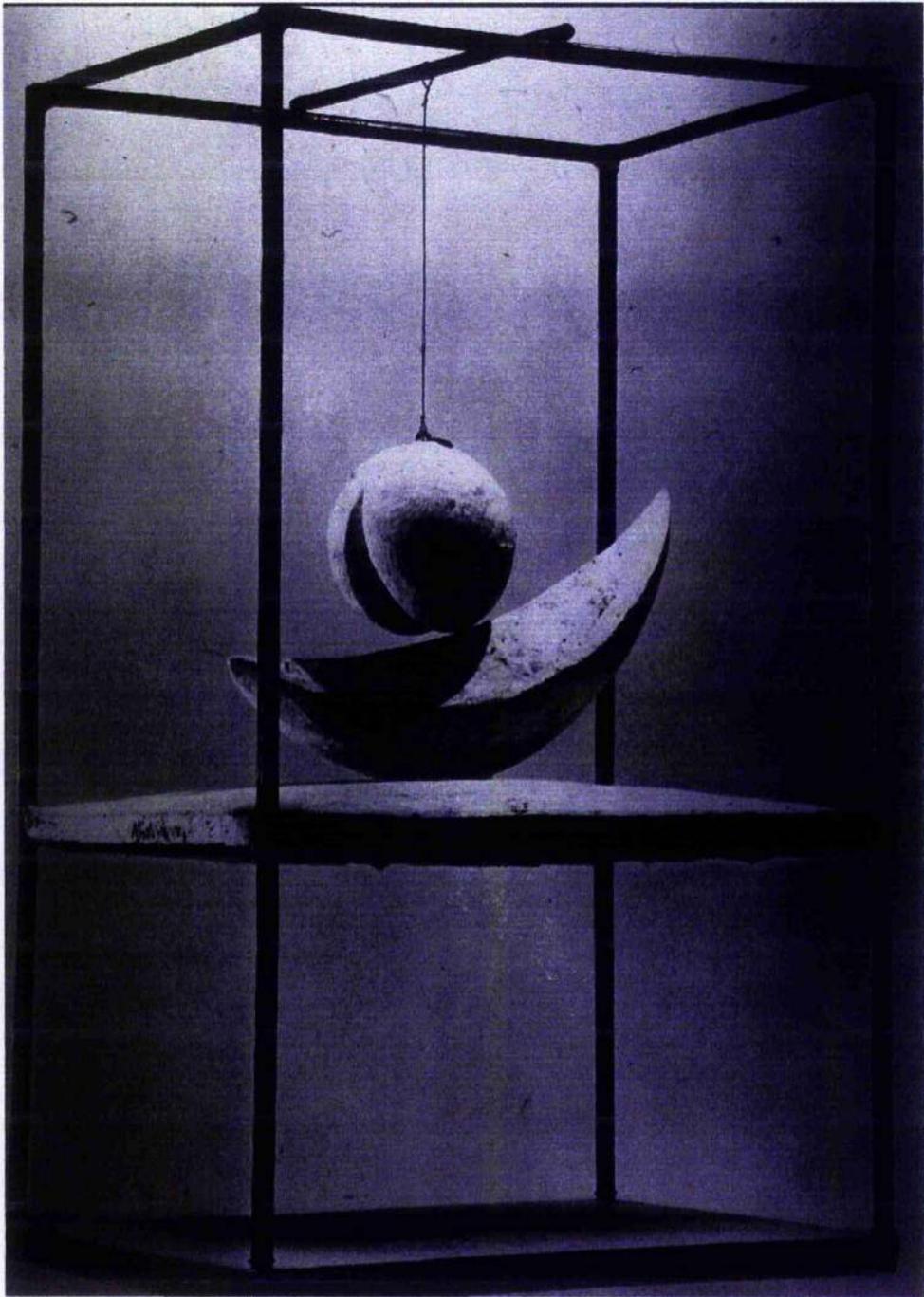


Figure 7. Alberto Giacometti, 'Suspended Ball' (1930-1931).

subjectivity.<sup>41</sup> The *grid* is produced at the intersection of these two concepts, acting in this case in the space of the photograph.<sup>42</sup> Krauss notes, 'if the grid's system constructs 'form' within the general condition of synchrony, the deconstructive work of *Suspended Ball* is to formalise its production of the *informe* by placing diachrony at the heart of the system: the rhythmic beat the action of which is disruption, disarticulation, dysmorphia.'<sup>43</sup> Like Matta-Clark's cut, this negates the assertion that viewing the other allows us to project pain outside of our viewing body as a mechanism of defense or preservation. The fissure Klein describes and Matta-Clark makes suggests the space in-between disrupts the notion of form as inherently real and recognises its opposite anti-form, the *informe* (Bataille's *Acephal*). Thus, the relationship between whole and fragment is predicated on an interaction that cannot prize the viewer or photographer as omnipotent power. Far from Baudelaire's vicarious voyeur, the viewing process initiates 'a disorienting physical journey with sufficient intimation of danger to wrench the experience out of art's normal realm of consoling spectacle'.<sup>44</sup> The privileged position of the viewer is not so, as through their performance of doubling, through enacting the processes of torture described by Scarry and Love, they are forced to comprehend Sternfeld's project as repatriation even while they appropriate the bodies he represents. Is there a conclusion to this process? Foucault's conception of power, and the space *in-between* that the previous paragraphs describe, dictate that this process of display and consumption of Sternfeld's images remains both an act of appropriation and reinforcement of otherness in tandem with an act of exposing the mechanisms that engender this procedure in order to critically engage with the social operations of power that locate Hart Island as other in the first instance. It is therefore the history of death of the other represented in the photographic landscape – whether through decomposition, neglect or entropy - that forms the link between the actions of truth and power within other space and upon othered bodies. In Foucauldian terms, the final institutional thread to be traced in this section's exploration must be the history of death in the photograph, and specifically, where this is associated with the other in *Hart Island*.

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<sup>41</sup> While gesture registers the artist's bodily and psycho-sexual energy, matrix is far less emotive; its intellecto-conceptual approach is to the object rather than the subject of the linear field—whether canvas, paper, or plaster wall.' Rosalind Krauss, 'LeWitt's Ark', *October*, No. 121 (Summer, 2007), p112.

<sup>42</sup> 'The grid is a tool, an abstract viewing device, or lens through which to read the environment and develop strategies for inhabiting it.' [www.aestheticmanagement.com/grid.html](http://www.aestheticmanagement.com/grid.html)

<sup>43</sup> Rosalind Krauss *The Optical Unconscious* (London: October, MIT Press) 1994, p192.

<sup>44</sup> Wagner (2004), p37.

*An artist is not merely the slavish announcer of facts. Which in this case the camera has had to accept and mechanically record.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> John Baldessari 'An Artist Is Not Merely the Slavish Announcer 1966-68' in Sylvia Wolf, *Visions from America: Photographs from the Whitney Museum of American Art 1940-2001* (New York: Prestel Publishing) 2002, p63.

## Chapter Four

### Assembling the fragments of death: index and archive

*Photographic art practices have continued to proliferate in the last decade, yet we have not witnessed an analogously rich growth in photographic theory. No new paradigm of thinking about photography has emerged. Past theoretical truisms have little significance in today's context, but continue to erode those characteristics that were once so fundamental to the medium, such as agency, history and meaning.<sup>2</sup>*

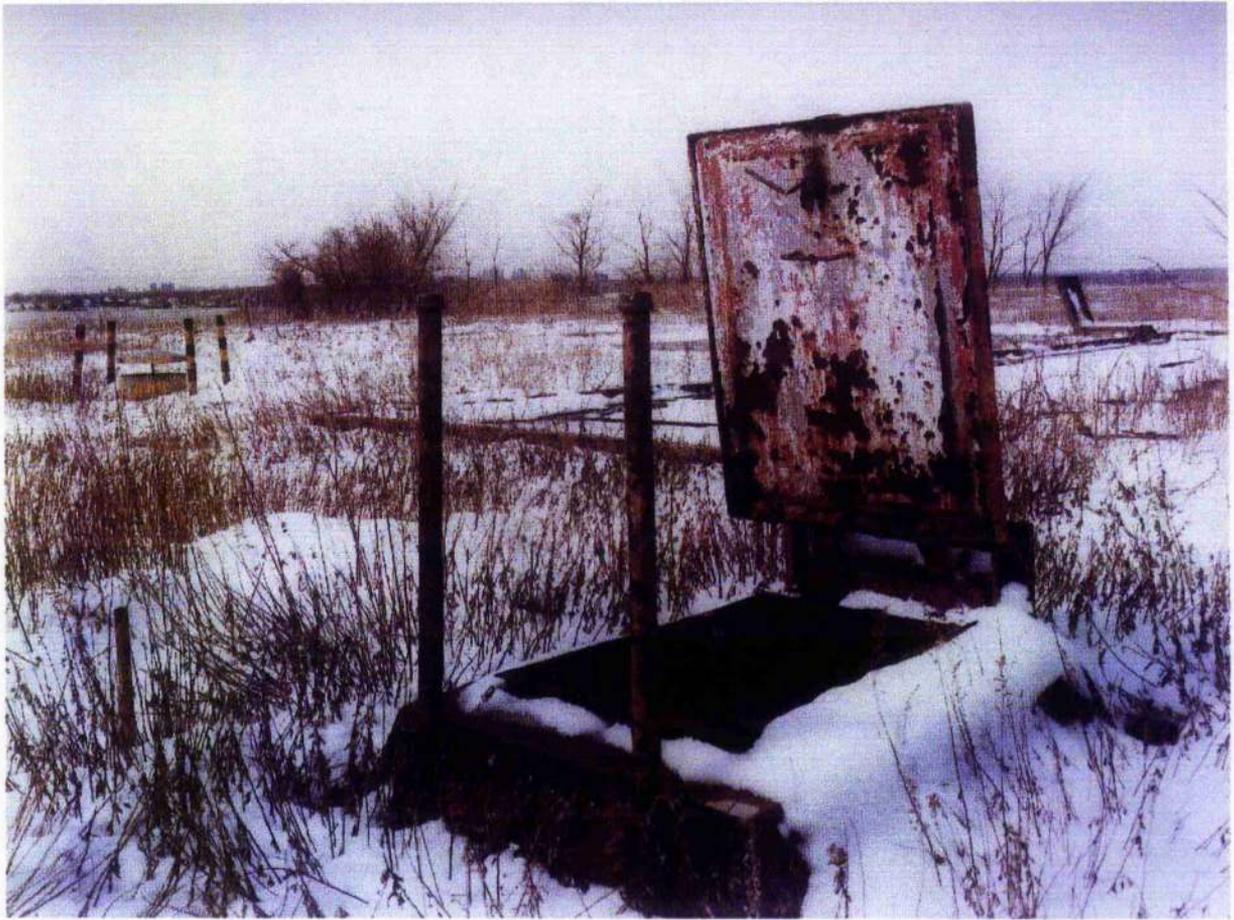
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<sup>2</sup> Sarah James, 'The Truth About Photography', *Art Monthly*, No. 292 (Dec-Jan, 05-06), p7.

While Sarah James makes a valid and necessary point, one that the preceding chapters have acknowledged, discarding 'past theoretical truisms' denies the catalyst that propels photographic representation, the conception of its history and its power to act (agency, meaning) within socio-cultural spaces: namely its self-reflexivity as a medium. It has been established that the photographer is no scientist, yet the burden of 'truth' that photography carries is still to be successfully negotiated. This is as much due to the medium itself as it is to its history. New technologies engender rapidly changing boundaries of discourse where the sole link remains the notion of the photographic negative. Photographic theory is similarly often more sure of what it is not, compromising its ability to firmly occupy a contemporary position outwith this negative. The previous chapters have mapped the formal and historical landscape of Sternfeld's *Hart Island* series, and, through Bataille and Klein, have articulated the site of the *in-between* as a theoretical space in which to reproblematised existing photographic descriptors and terms of value. Conscious of its contingency on the specificity of historical forms, this methodology allows for new discourses on the representation of the other, and other space within these representations. This chapter will link these previous explorations to the notion of the photograph as a geographic entity, the idea of Sternfeld as cartographer, and the spatialisation of the photograph as a geo-historic entity.<sup>3</sup> *Hart Island* exists fundamentally as a series of photographs that express topographies of death in contemporary socio-cultural peripheral space. The series charts the process of cleansing death through the indigent whose bodies remain unclaimed twenty-four hours after their death; through those in a state of semi-permanent living death as prisoners; and in the obsolete cultural ruins of Nike missiles and open prison facilities [figure 1]. The representational language Sternfeld draws upon articulates multiple experiences of social entropy. Death is represented through the abandoned buildings populating the island site; through the rusted monuments to a history of institutional experimentation; through the bodies of the prison workers and the Department of Corrections officers; and not least through the grave markers, grave pits and unclaimed dead buried in the landscape, their bodies literally complicit in the making of the dirt, as it is in their unmaking. Thus the island site functions as both index and archive,

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<sup>3</sup> 'Spatialisation as a term puts space at the centre of the arguments on dialectical relations between power, knowledge, discourse, and representation and inserts space into social thought and imagination. In doing so, it helps us to explain the manner in which social and spatial relations are mutually inclusive and constitutive of each other and how society and space are simultaneously realized by thinking, explaining and making social actors. This entailment in spatialisation connects mental and material space with spatial metaphors/symbols of the social.' Berin F. Gür, 'Spatialisation of Power/Knowledge/discourse: Transformation of Urban Space Through Distinctive Representations in Sultanahmet, Istanbul', *Space & Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (August, 2002), p237.



Abandoned Nike missile base, February 1992

Figure 1. Joel Sternfeld, 'Abandoned Nike missile base, February 1992' from *Hart Island* (1998).

with Sternfeld's photographs becoming coordinates that map this peripheral topography. Through that map, Hart Island exists as a site both unknown, *aterritorial*, and yet constituted, cemented fragment-by-fragment, photograph-by-photograph. Hal Foster notes that 'an archive is neither affirmative nor critical per se; it simply supplies the terms of discourse. But this "simply" is no small thing, for if an archive structures the terms of discourse, it also limits what can and cannot be articulated at a given time and place.'<sup>4</sup> In *Hart Island*, this process of constitution is achieved, paradoxically, by tracing a genealogy of death and disintegration, a process closely aligned with the enactment of power as described in previous chapters. It is with the death of photographic truth, long established but articulated afresh in the initial chapters of this thesis, that the truth of socio-cultural death, and the ensuing process of othering may claim a vocabulary.

Moving further than the creation of an indexical relationship based purely on an aesthetic motif (the 'filing system' approach that Alan Sekula traces in *The Body and the Archive*) the return to the archive in the case of contemporary photography is fundamentally a cultural impulse. It is an attempt to spatialise photography's history which, divorced from a linear conception of time, invests the photograph with a geographic value.

[the photograph is] more than mere memory with all its distortions and embellishments; it presents past time and past light in its eerie otherness ... in photography, history lies like a corpse in the grave, awaiting resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

Death has historically been part of the public realm, the guillotine or gallows a conscious part of existence until the early twentieth century, and the graveyard central to the community, hand in hand with the Church. People were born and died at home and the meat they ate was slaughtered within the domestic sphere. Past this point, in Western society, the fear of contamination moved graveyards beyond city walls, peripheralised the function of the abattoir and ensured that executions became presided over by smaller, closed audiences. Death, whether natural, diseased or enforced became ostracized through fetishisation until it existed on the outskirts of society.<sup>6</sup> Foucault states in *Des Espaces*

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<sup>4</sup> Hal Foster, 'Archives of Modern Art', *October*, Vol. 99. (Winter, 2002), p81.

<sup>5</sup> P Dudley Andrew, ed., *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography* (Texas: University of Texas Press) 1997, p24.

<sup>6</sup> 'In our time, nonetheless, the slaughterhouse is cursed and quarantined like a plague-ridden ship. Now, the victims of this curse are neither butchers or beasts, but those same good folk who countenance, by now, only their own unseemliness commensurate with an unhealthy need of cleanliness, with irascible meanness, and boredom.' Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldberg, eds., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press) 1995, p73.

*Autres* that 'during the nineteenth century, the shift of cemeteries towards the suburbs was initiated. The cemeteries then came to constitute no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place.'<sup>7</sup> Like the displacement of an organ that describes the heterotopic condition, the cemetery shifts from status as 'heart' and becomes a victim of an obsession with social hygiene and the masking of death begun in the Victorian era.<sup>8</sup> Again, this has less to do with an essential 'truth' (that death is unclean) and everything to do with social and historical conditions, namely overcrowding preventing decomposition occurring in existing graveyards. The obituary is perhaps the only public signifier of death that has remained relatively untouched, reserved for the noteworthy and the funeral home, for those who can afford burial or cremation. Historical notions of death have therefore cemented the cemetery space as an 'othered' site. However, as Vicki Goldberg states, documenting death has traditionally focused on the event itself rather than the place it occurred in.

The sites of human tragedies had been marked for commemoration at least since tradition settled on the place where Christ was crucified. But artists cared more for the events, whether holy or secular, than for their locations – they painted crucifixions infinitely more often than the hill of Golgotha, just as they preferred martyrdoms or the death of generals to a quiet spot that once saw blood.<sup>9</sup>

It is therefore unusual that Sternfeld's documentation often works in exactly the opposite manner. Sternfeld's engagement with the landscape in *On This Site: landscape in memoriam* is explored in even greater depth in *Hart Island*, where the friction between site and event are magnified through the situation of the burial space as outside, othered. Scarry's exploration of pain as an act (torture) mirrors Sternfeld's description of *On this Site* as a study of violence and its effects in and on the American landscape [figure 2]. It is the spatial ramifications of the act that they both trace. As Krauss contends of Bataille's deconstruction of the slaughterhouse as a social site, 'it is not violence as such that interests ... but its civilized scotomization that structures it as otherness.'<sup>10</sup> Dislocation, the idea of non-place, is contingent on the existence of the site itself from which it claims alienation,

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias', *Diacritics*, No. 16 (Spring, 1986), p25.

<sup>8</sup> 'The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass ... it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.' Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (London: Penguin) 1972, p17.

<sup>9</sup> Vicki Goldberg, 'A Baedeker to America in an Age of Anxiety', *The New York Times* (February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1994) Section 2, p34.

<sup>10</sup> Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books) 1997, p46.



Figure 2. Joel Sternfeld, 'Central Park, north of the Obelisk, behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 1993' from *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam* (1996). The photograph depicts the site where Jennifer Levin's body was found on the morning of August 26, 1986. She was murdered by Robert Chambers in the early hours of that morning.

and the relationship between these two entities is described through the performance of the artist and viewer. In the case of *Hart Island*, the site (the island) and the photograph (the representation of this non-place/othered space) chart a specific history of the birth of the other in Sternfeld's work through the trope of death.

## Identifying a Vocabulary of Power Operation within the Fissure

### Mapping I: Warburg

Previously, the discussion of the space in-between, using Bataille's exploration of the *musée* and *abattoir*, highlighted the contradictory nature of Sternfeld's photographs. They at once both cleanse those represented from social stereotype, and thus social power operations, and yet within the same performance they reiterate and strengthen the coded gaze of the viewer. This cyclical pattern is mirrored in the repetition of entropic motifs within the photographic series. The titles themselves draw attention to the shifting seasons, and the land that is used and reused (graves are re-ploughed to be filled again every twenty five years). Warburg's notion of the *engram* offers a model for tracing the history of certain representational motifs and, in this case, a genealogy of representations of death on society's periphery. Warburg worked on the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a collection of photographic reproductions of different representational practices, between 1925 and his death in 1929 [figure 3]. The series (totaling over one thousand images) sought to spatialise history by mapping social memory through representational gesture or motif. His project is indicative of an ethno-anthropological fascination realized through photography in the early twentieth century, manifested in projects such as August Sander's *Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts* (*Citizens of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*) collated by Sander through the 1920s and 30s [figure 4], and survey exhibitions such as Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* exhibition at MoMA in 1955 [figure 5]. Throughout *Hart Island*, forms such as grave markers mirror tree trunks, motifs that are then repeated in the *Abandoned Nike missile base, February 1992* and in the obelisk erected by prisoners in the 1950s. Each successive use of the land is marked by an abandoned monument, which in turn is then documented photographically. The photographs become part of the process of memory, impacted in this specific instance by the fact that, for the viewer, the photograph is both the means of knowing and remembering, the space only ever experienced through representation. As Benjamin Buchloch notes of Warburg's project,

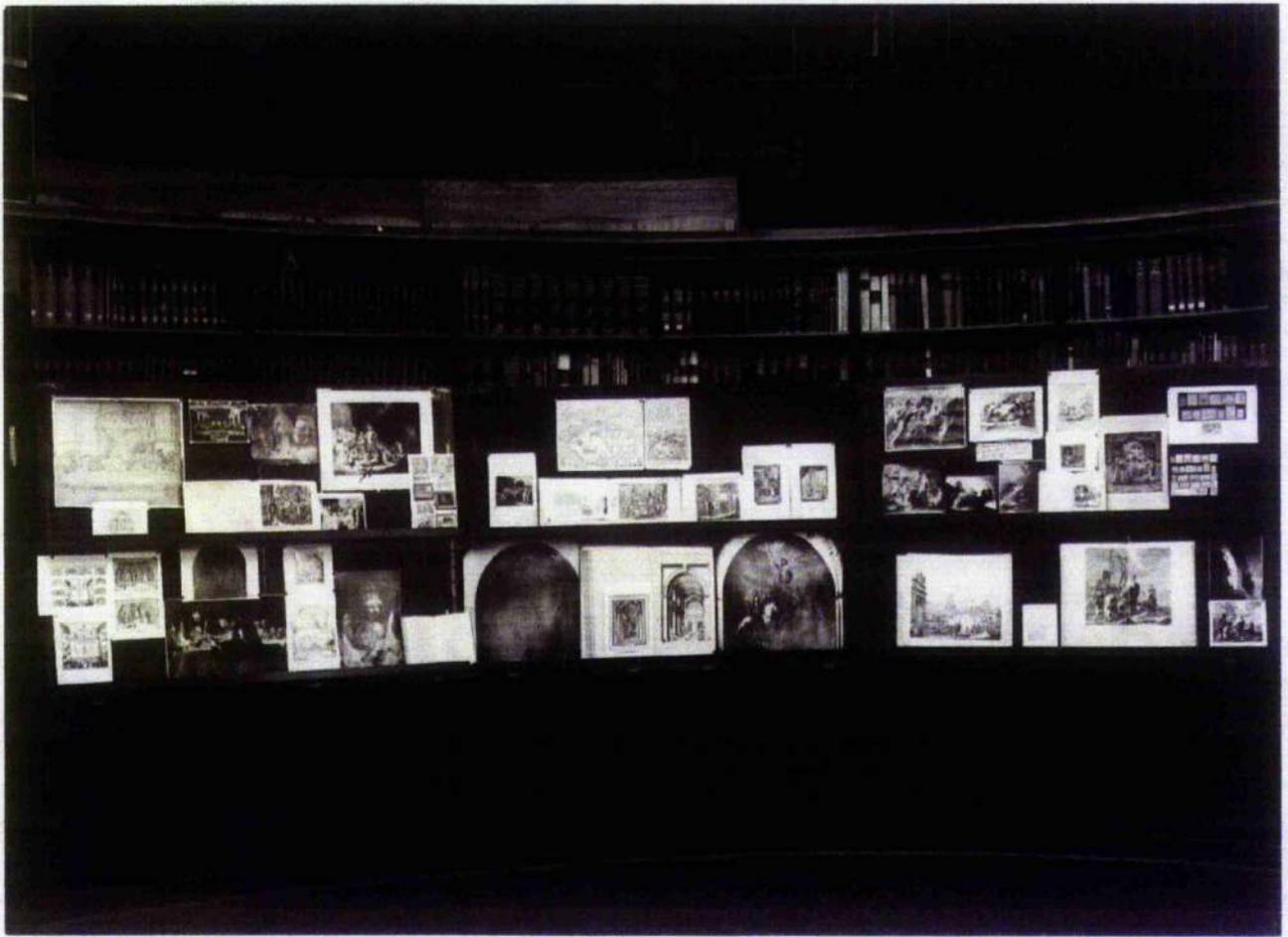


Figure 3. Aby M. Warburg, 'Mnemosyne-Atlas (1924 – 1929). Mnemosyne-Atlas, Boards of the Rembrandt-Exhibition, 1926



Figure 4. August Sander, 'Hod-Carrier, Koln-lindenthal, 1928' from *Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts* (*Citizens of the 20th Century*)



Figure 5. *The Family of Man*, Curated by Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art, New York  
(1955)

'the telling of history as a series of events acted out by individual agents is displaced by a focus on the simultaneity of separate but contingent social frameworks and an infinity of participating social agents.'<sup>11</sup> The idea of power operating through motifs that have been repeated until they become coded as cultural memory combines Warburg's exploration of the 'signs' of classical antiquity with a semiotic exploration of the photograph as a represented space. Representation itself can function as a site for the operation of power within a specific socio-cultural moment. In its condition of repetition, Warburg's *engram* can be contrasted to the slaughterhouse and the museum, circumstances that Bataille sees as repeated through history. The manner in which this identification and classification of repeated motifs garners each image, and each of the 'signs' within these images, cultural meaning supports the idea of a spatial vocabulary around Sternfeld's photographs. In the same manner that Warburg built his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a 'vocabulary', or library of signs and their meaning can be derived through the study of Sternfeld's work. This in turn begins the process of describing the 'other' space, the heterotopia.

The signs inherent in Sternfeld's work - the cemetery landscape, the prison worker, the gravestone - all have precedent in the same way that Warburg suggests symbols of classical antiquity have functioned. Indeed, Vicki Goldberg describes his work as 'a Baedeker to America in the age of anxiety, fear and moral crisis.'<sup>12</sup> These *engrams* exist as vehicles of cultural memory, surpassing mere archaeological excavation through their documentation and becoming involved in a process of remembrance through their presentation. Thus, the same 'types' that are used in, for example, a Ford Maddox Brown painting can also be found in Sternfeld's representations. These repetitions can then be used to create the basis of a visual vocabulary, contradicting the idea that this 'other' space must remain nameless. We recognise fragments of ourselves when we view a photograph precisely because of this link to our own archive of visual memory. Where Maddox Brown heroicises the navvies working at the forefront of the scene he depicts in *Work* [figure 6] Sternfeld punctuates his representations of the landscape of Hart Island with contemporary prison workers. Both the navvies and the prisoners function as a 'type', and the precedent allows Sternfeld's work the foundations of a cultural heritage and meaning to attach to his depiction. The geography of Hart Island remains susceptible to perpetual shift but Warburg's notion of *atlas* points

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloch, 'Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas': The Anomic Archive', *October*, No. 88 (Spring, 1999), p129. Buchloch continues, 'The process history is reconceived as a structural system of perpetually changing interactions and permutations between economic and ecological givens, class formations and their ideologies, and the resulting types of social and cultural interactions specific to each particular movement.'

<sup>12</sup> Goldberg (1994), p34.



Figure 6. Ford Madox Brown 'Work' (1852-65) Oil on canvas.

toward the indexical function of Sternfeld's photographs, and the possibility of archive or memory articulated through *motif*.

## Mapping II: Benjamin

In *The Dialectics of Seeing* Susan Buck-Morss addresses Walter Benjamin's colossal Arcades Project, an undertaking that compares to the fragmented visual map of Warburg's atlas, although on a far greater scale. In terms of the specific, Foucauldian treatment of 'history' that this thesis attempts to use as a foundation for the exploration of Sternfeld's work, Susan Buck-Morss' description of Benjamin's Arcades project is of interest. She describes it as 'a "Copernican Revolution" [that] completely strips 'history' of its legitimising, ideological function...its cultural contents are redeemed as the source of critical knowledge that alone can place the present into question.'<sup>13</sup> Like Warburg, Benjamin envisaged history as mapped through iconic cultural motifs rather than a strictly teleological or chronological series. It can therefore be argued that it is within the negative spaces left around this tangible cultural content that is, for Benjamin, the source of knowledge itself that the unknowable 'othered' space of Sternfeld's photographs finds its space of discourse. The *in-between* that Klein and Bataille articulate corresponds to the atemporal distance between historical icons or fragments.

If we extrapolate this notion of Sternfeld's work being located in the negative space of Benjamin's discourse on the meaning of cultural content, it would be appropriate also to invert Benjamin's thoughts on 'origin' for comparison. Itself an historically loaded term, and one that is exploded in any Foucauldian exploration of ontological structure, the idea of 'origin' in Benjaminian terms is superseded by the actual process itself of creation and destruction. Traditional notions of a history are thus disallowed by instilling the material constructions linked to this history with greater importance than an identifiable beginning or end. Indeed, the linear form traditionally associated with such a history is also denied as the importance of material culture points toward Foucault and the evolution of histories founded on specific socio-cultural moments. Benjamin sees the 'origin' as 'that which emerges out of the process of becoming and disappearing.' In terms of the negative space of discourse surrounding Benjamin's suggestion, a new ontology within which to describe

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Buck-Morss *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press) 1991, p43.

the represented space of the unknown can be tentatively formulated by reversing this so that the notion of the 'origin' is evolved from first 'disappearing' then 'becoming'. In this sense, the idea that the space represented exists in the reality of an 'othered' heterotopic space before it is photographed and 'becomes' is allowed for. Quoting Buck-Morss again, 'in the dialectical image, the present as the moment of revolutionary possibility acts as a lodestar for the assembly of historical fragments.'<sup>14</sup> Buck-Morss is referencing directly Benjamin's statement that 'while the relation of past and present is a purely temporal one, that of has-been [das Geswesene] to the 'now' is a dialectical one: it is iconic, not temporal in character.'<sup>15</sup> This notion of dialectic again reinforces the use of binary oppositions as a tool with which to explore photographic space, and the spatialisation of its own history. In conjunction to Warburg's ideas of the *engram* and the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which introduce the space of cultural memory and parallels the semiotic bent of identifying the sign, Benjamin offers a movement toward Foucault's conception of specific histories.<sup>16</sup> In turn, Klein's identification of a space within which these histories may function parallels Bataille's description of the manner in which power operations exist and condition this space. As Stuart Elden suggests,

In [a Heideggerian] reading [of Foucault] the notion of genealogy is recast as a historical ontology, which is framed as a critique of the present. In Foucault's work, this Heideggerian notion is described as a history of the present. Here, with the emphasis on the importance of space, it is redescribed as a *mapping of the present*. Such a mapping of the present is a spatial history, rather than a history of space.<sup>17</sup>

The space within which discourse functions *in-between* representation is able to be mapped in the Foucauldian sense, outwith the traditional and formalised linear omnipotent origin. It is only by treating *Hart Island* outside of the historical sub-structures that conspire to term this space peripheral that a free discourse on its cultural relations and implications can be achieved. Sternfeld's history as a photographer, and the relationship Sternfeld constructs between text and image, begins between the formalist practice of the Conceptual and

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<sup>14</sup> Buck-Morss (1991), p44.

<sup>15</sup> Alex Coles, ed., *The Opic of Walter Benjamin*, Vol. 3 (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited) 1999, p102.

<sup>16</sup> 'For both Benjamin and Warburg the inherited dominant model of cultural history was governed by the Enlightenment notion of linear progress ... in contrast, both Benjamin and Warburg were attempting to transform this dominant notion of history. Instead of the narrative of historical development one finds the idea of a cultural space, in which metaphors of vision become prominent.' Coles (1999), p103.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Elden *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History* (London: Continuum) 2001, p6.

Minimalist art movements of the 1960s and a decade later through postmodern discourse of Foucault and a new generation of post-structuralists. The articulation of the site of Hart Island as other space relies on connotations of death, entropy and alienation – all socially-constructed circumstances rather than a priori conditions, used as factors to maintain its status as ‘other’. McFadden describes the dialectic constituted between place and ‘other’ space in the work of Walter De Maria (which can also describe the concerns of other artists of this period such as Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre and Victor Burgin who often used photography to document as part of their practice):

dislocation is, after all, constituent to any condition of site ... grounded in a sense of a particular place and situation, a sense of the here-and-now, site also immediately draws attention to its elsewhere. The relationship between the two—site and its dislocation—is in and of itself a “time-space jump” and had wide-ranging ramifications for the spatiotemporal conditions of art in the 1960s, because as artists turned their attention to site, they also confronted growing forms of dislocation.<sup>18</sup>

It is perhaps unsurprising then that the descriptive vocabulary of large-scale Earth Art, Land Art and environmental sculpture corresponds to the project of articulating the represented space in a photograph. As Matthew Rampley highlights, ‘the shared discourse of spatial loss in Benjamin and Warburg ... suggests the centrality of spatial metaphors to their conceptions of history and of cultural critique.’<sup>19</sup> MoMA’s *Photography as Sculpture* exhibition in 1970 is worth citing again here as an important acknowledgement of contemporary discourses that posed the photograph as an *object* versus the more traditional formalist approach of Szarkowski, Steichen and Beaumont Newhall. The collapse of distance, the literal loss of space that both Benjamin and Warburg equated with the advance of the modern world parallels the collapse of the space between the viewer and the representation explored in the previous chapter. The photograph as geographic entity and a descriptive vocabulary of mapping is thus legitimised.

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<sup>18</sup> Jane McFadden, ‘Toward Site’, *Grey Room*, No. 27 (Spring, 2007) p 37

<sup>19</sup> Coles (1999), p97.

## Document as map

As already established, the practice of photography has long wrestled with articulating its relationship with the notion of *truth*. Used by science for cataloguing disease and deformity, by penal institutions for recording the physiognomy of the delinquent population, and described in objective terms as mechanical apparatus, the camera is in opposition with the photograph itself. The 'truth' of representation in this medium is a contested notion: the idea of 'truth' as a construction, formed through systems of power operating within specific circumstances is the paradigm within which the previous chapter began to explore Sternfeld's *Hart Island* series. The use of *documentary* implies a truth, and connects to a specific history of practice that, as the preceding chapter also demonstrated, Sternfeld's work has been tied to. In writing the history of photography in contemporary terms, and locating and defining the nature of the other present in Sternfeld's depiction of Hart Island, re-problematising what is meant by the term documentary is vital. In this instance, the document becomes map and truth takes on a geographic value. The descriptor documentary denotes objectivity, the transmission of information,<sup>20</sup> a connotation reinforced through use of the medium for scientific and surveillance purposes, and its description in terms of a 'neutral vision' or a democratization of knowledge. John Szarkowski defines a post-World War II understanding of documentary practice in his catalogue essay for the *New Documents* (1967) exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. The statement is particularly significant because of Szarkowski's position as tastemaker, highlighted in the previous chapter through his role as curator of the seminal 1976 William Eggleston color photography show at MoMA and Szarkowski's position as Chief Curator at the same museum.<sup>21</sup> He states,

Most of those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago ... made their pictures in the service of a social cause ... to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right ... A new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it ... What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 'The medium was integrated with Western notions of empiricism, especially its core belief that knowledge should be based on disinterested observation, not personal opinion.' Marien (2006), p23.

<sup>21</sup> Sternfeld's artist archive at MoMA, NY includes several opening invitations to John Szarkowski.

<sup>22</sup> Keith F. Davis, *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital* (New York: Harry N. Abrams) 1995, p395. Mary Walker Marien describes the manner in which early-twentieth century documentary photography consolidated

Szarkowski perhaps oversimplifies the movement away from earlier modes of documentary practice, and certainly fails to acknowledge the deliberately styled and apolitical condition of certain practices of 'documentary' practice. His statement highlights the need for redefining the use of 'documentary' as a contemporary descriptor. However, his assertion points to a conception of its use as a term near the beginning of Sternfeld's practice, and to the site in which Sternfeld operates, between the factual and the phenomenological. Here, mapping the history of the 'other' and othered space within the photograph means acknowledging the death of the connection between objectivity and the photograph. The map *Hart Island* articulates is not empirical, scientific. There is no accurate measure as space is demarcated by the *in-between*, a negative and mutable value. Taryn Simon's *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007) indicates a contemporary atlas in the vein of Warburg, with a specific concern directed toward mapping the unknown *within* American borders. *Hart Island* is a precursor to this preoccupation with articulating interior boundaries. This inward turn is itself nothing new, springing from the traditions of a country still discovering its own geography in the mid and late nineteenth century through the Geographical Survey photographers. Recent photographers have reacted to current entrenchment in mandating similar boundaries abroad, from the Cold War, through Vietnam and now in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Simon states, her work came out of 'a critical time in American history where America was seeking secret sites outside of its borders, whether it be weapons of mass destruction or to understand different cultures. I wanted to look inward during this important time ... and find these secret sites within our own borders.'<sup>23</sup> Simon emphasises the geographical nature of her photography not only in terms of the parameters she placed on her project (*within* the American landscape), but through formal motifs that highlight this mapping. She describes *Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility*<sup>24</sup> as a lynchpin image in her series because of its resemblance to the outline of the United States [figure 7]. Simon's *The Innocents* (2003) project also explores the idea of repeated visual motifs and the function memory plays in connecting history with represented space. *The Innocents* plays on photography's role in othering through physiognomic classification in its use to convict (wrongfully in the cases Simon follows) criminals in American

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from a more general understanding of documentary practice: 'in a broad sense, all non-fictional representation, in books or in images, is documentary. But during the 1930s, when the word 'documentary' came in to wide usage, its meaning was more limited ... a blend of Modernistic style and realistic subject matter, aimed at educating the public about the experience of hardship or injustice.' Marien (2006), p 463.

<sup>23</sup> Charlie Rose interview with Taryn Simon at [www.charlierose.com](http://www.charlierose.com) (March, 17, 2007) [accessed May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007].

<sup>24</sup> Full title: *Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility Cherenkov Radiation Hanford Site, U.S. Department of Energy, Southeastern Washington State.*

penitentiaries who then face execution on death row [figure 8]. Simon describes the cases she followed, stating that

many of these were cases of misidentification ... a photograph repeats itself multiple times and eventually the photograph replaces the memory of the perpetrator ... it was this amazing site where you could see the power of a photograph ... where it could actually, in the end, end someone's life.<sup>25</sup>

Simon's subjects, now exonerated of the accused crime and released from prison, are taken either to the crime scene or the scene of their arrest. For many, this is the first time they have seen these places, having never committed the act for which they were convicted. Simon photographs them here, a site which she claims epitomises 'the layers of truth and fiction which [are] so much a part of photography.'<sup>26</sup> Deconstructing the relationship of site and event in this way offers a Foucauldian perspective of a specific history drawn from fragments, a process that Alexandra Bonazzi terms *heteropology*. The confluence of Simon's postmodern action, and its reference to unknown spaces both represented and real, posits the space of the heterotopia as 'a sort of compass that geographers could reuse to redraw their maps, to rediscover the logic of these forms that remain hidden behind the tabular forms of modernity.'<sup>27</sup> It is these tabular forms, the positioning of 'truth' in relation to photography, that are put to work historically through the descriptor *documentary*, a process that Simon and Sternfeld redefine by employing it to map the heterotopia photographically. Their work reveals the document as a disruption of these forms through the Stranger and his socially enacted death.

### **Mapping the representation of death within *Hart Island***

There is no moment more final and truth-laden than that of death. In Sternfeld's work, the photograph acts as the site of contemporary commemoration for that which has passed, a document that surpasses the selective function of memory to become instead an insistent memorial. The intersection of these three concepts – truth, death and document – forms the topography of *Hart Island*. In order to propose what meaning these terms might convey in this specific context, an acknowledgement of their genealogical roots within the history of

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<sup>25</sup> Charlie Rose interview, *ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> Charlie Rose interview, *ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> Alessandra Bonazzi, 'Heteropology and Geography: A Reflection', *Space & Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (February, 2002), p43.

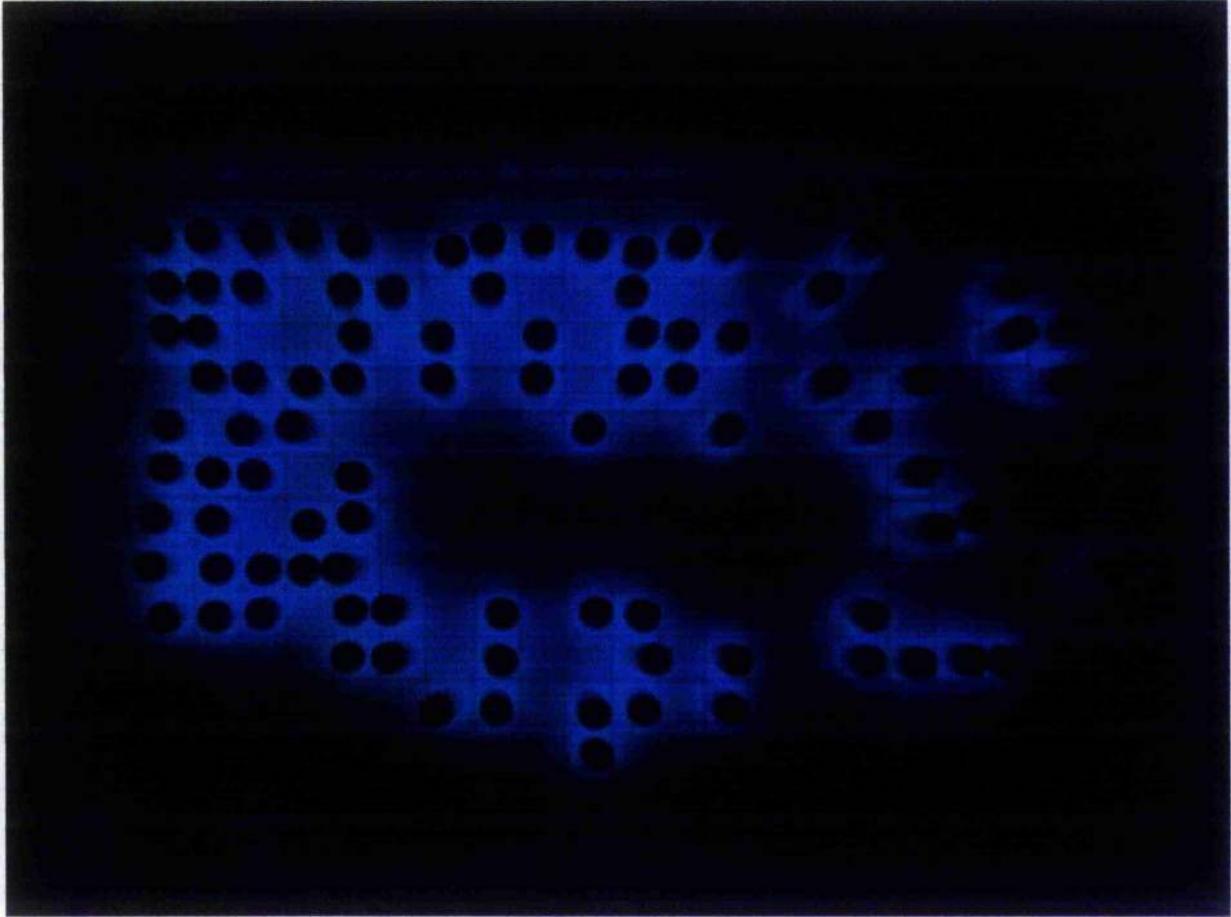


Figure 7. Taryn Simon, 'Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility, Cherenkov Radiation, Hanford Site, U.S. Department of Energy, Southeastern Washington State' from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007)

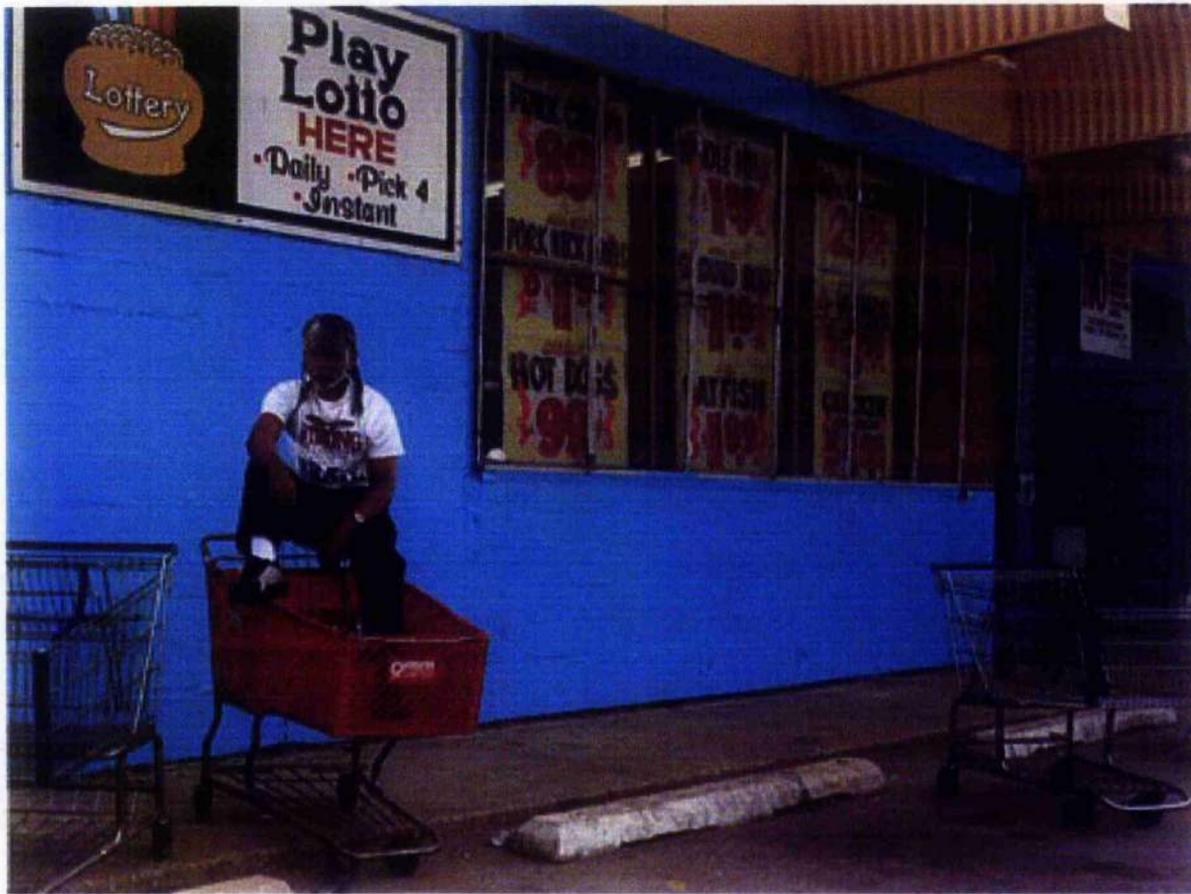


Figure 8. Taryn Simon, 'Ronald Jones, Scene of arrest, South Side, Chicago, Illinois Served 8 years of a Death sentence' from *The Innocents* (2002)

photography and a re-problematisation of their engagement with contemporary photography is necessary. An historically-contingent genealogy of 'truth' can be traced through Sternfeld's representations. The notion of truth in the connotations attached to the documentary element of his work (and the exposure of the objective or disinterested gaze as myth) was initiated in the previous chapter. Through this identification of the 'truth' value of Sternfeld's work, the constructed nature of the photograph as an element of knowledge disseminated through the medium of institutions (the museum exhibition and the exhibition catalogue) and individuals (the viewer, the subject) was explored in the previous chapter. Here, the final project of this thesis is to pose the death of such truth as the origin for new vocabularies to describe the project of documenting the other. This may be achieved through mapping the trope of the unblemished and self-renewing qualities of the natural landscape on Hart Island, and through the notion of 'evidential' truth as located in the history of photographing the institutionalized and peripheral in society. The process of mapping a history around Sternfeld's particular series of work is tied to the notion of visual knowledge as socio-geographical power. Demarcating boundaries through visual representation corrals unknown landscape. Through acknowledging the fact that the photograph exists *as* history as well as *within* history (and even arguably denying itself an historically unique moment [Benjamin] through reproduction) the necessity of pursuing its deconstruction as an element through which social power and knowledge operate is decided. As Tagg states, 'The ways in which photography has been historically implicated in the technology of power-knowledge, of which the procedures of evidence are part, must themselves be the object of study.'<sup>28</sup>

The birth of photography signifies the genesis of the representation of death in this medium, and the tie between death and the other. When Hippolyte Bayard posed for a photographic self-portrait as a drowned man in 1840, his was perhaps the first in a tradition of recording death through the camera lens [figure 9]. The melodramatic romanticism of the artist feigning death (on the back of the image Bayard penned a third-person account of the suicide, describing a body unclaimed at the morgue) pierces the photograph's claim on reality. As Amelia Jones points out, Bayard could not have made the photograph had he actually drowned. Bayard was the 'other' to his successful contemporary Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, and his self-portrait acts as an evolutionary point for an ontology of the

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<sup>28</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press) 1993, p65.



peripheral or 'other' performance of death in the photograph. The sleeping, posed quality of the portrait is indicative of the idealised memorial pictures of the dead, particularly children, which became popular in the nineteenth century. However, Bayard's blackened face and hands point further in the direction of the contemporary portrayal of death Sternfeld undertakes. Themes of decomposition, the body having been left unclaimed and the idea that this death has occurred through the marginalisation of the body in life in Bayard's self-portrait parallels Sternfeld's work. Jones links this example to perhaps one of the best-known portrayals of death in public in western visual culture, that of Christ on the Cross. The notion of an outcast, the religious or mythic figure of Christ in, or close to, death traverses the divides of time, culture and geography. The seventeenth century Spanish painter Jose de Ribera depicts Christ on the cross in c.1620, placing emphasis on textual reference in his depiction of the ecstatic figure of Jesus [figure 10]. Ribera's inclusion of an eclipsed sun references biblical sources (including the Book of Matthew) that suggest we are looking at Christ at the exact moment of his death, and the use of four nails indicates knowledge of the treatise on painting written by Francesco Pacheco in 1649. This historical depiction of the death of an outcast repeated throughout the canon of visual history (and the basis of every survey of Western visual art) is mined for its iconographic significance in the socio-cultural context of Therese Frare's photograph of an AIDS victim in *Final Moments* (1991). Rather than Ribera's propaganda for the Spanish Counter-reformation, legitimized by contemporary treatises, Frare's representation of death through disease is branded with the Benetton graphics, used as part of their advertising campaign in the early nineties [figure 11]. Both representations depict an interpretation of death as the 'truth' of this experience, either through the use of text, medium or institution. Sternfeld photographs the dead bodies buried on Hart Island as they arrive in their coffins, the more distressing aspects of this fact cloaked in pinewood like Ribera's idealized portrayal or the sheen of the advertisement that will mask Frare's portrait. However, within the act of viewing the effect of the mirror shatters these barriers and we feel *there*, just as Sternfeld's photographs exert a geographic pull. The last moments of Christ, and the final moments of the AIDS patient are equated through visual similarities. Frare's protagonist, in his distressingly emaciated and pained state, bears a recognisable likeness to the depiction of Christ on the cross rendered by Ribera. Both figures publicly share their moment of mortality (Christ, it is suggested in the Bible, also goes on to share his immortality days later). As Jones suggests (and as Freud gestured to in his conception of the uncanny double), we are aware of our own mortality through the representation of the corpse. She



Figure 10. Jose de Ribera, 'Crucifixion' (c. 1620). Oil on canvas.



Figure 11. Therese Frare, 'Final Moments' (1991), as used in the Benetton advertising campaign.

suggests that, 'it is the unavoidability of the human subject's ultimate absence and fundamental instability that the image is now purveying – and *as a condition of representation (and life) itself*.'<sup>29</sup> Frare's photograph rests on an immense body of contemporary literature and journalism on the hyper-politicised topic of AIDs and HIV, this sensitivity exploited by a multinational corporation for advertising impact. It might be argued that Ribera's painting of Christ, His mystical qualities emphasised in order to enable closer personal communion between worshipper and the son of God, serves the Catholic church in much the same manner. The textual knowledge-power that these images are invested with (the Bible, the Benetton logo) serve paradoxically, like Bayard's suicide note, to reveal 'the diseased body's sordid humanness, its imminent demise' – the corporeality of the viewer, and the fallibility of the viewing body in the mirror constructed by the representation.

Sternfeld's conceptual 'act' of documentation seems less concerned with instigating change (as Rosler's politicized photo-montage [figure 12] or Frare's portrait does) although it functions as a mirror in a manner similar to elements of the New Social Documentary genre. Sternfeld's photographs are always linked to text, but this information remains fundamentally non-didactic. What makes the portraits in the Hart Island series so powerful, whether they are of the prisoners, or a 'portrait' of the dead in a pine box [figure 13] or of the landscape itself, is the same element Demos highlights in Jacir's series, that of the negative portrait.<sup>30</sup> The facelessness of the bodies buried on the island is reinforced by the descriptive language used in a 1965 New York City Department of Corrections summary of penal institutions in the city. Hart Island's population is described as 'social rejects, aged and minor family and traffic offenders ... the geriatric, the bowery bum, the lame and the infirm.'<sup>31</sup> These photographs are the first likenesses of the unknown of Hart Island. Indeed, in this respect they are 'genuine' or 'original' representations of the kind Walter Benjamin disputes possible in the age of mechanical reproduction. Their 'aura' remains, on some level, intact. The photographs of prisoners have all the attributes of the classic single portrait or group composition, and can be identified with as such by the viewer. However, the latter portraits of the dead and the cemetery space connect with the viewer on a

<sup>29</sup> Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, (London: Routledge) 2006, p47.

<sup>30</sup> 'The documentation of bare life ... can only take place *negatively*, that is, indicated through the lacuna, blurs, and blind spots that mar the image.' T.J. Demos, 'Life Full of Holes', *Grey Room*, No. 24 (Summer, 2006), p77.

<sup>31</sup> The text continues to describe the island's inhabitants thus: 'the old-forgotten-senior-citizens of the community, whose principal crime is that of being old.' Anna M. Kross, *Progress Through Crisis 1954-1965*, (New York: The City of New York Department of Corrections) 1965, pp.167-168.



Figure 12. Martha Rosler 'Red Stripe Kitchen' from the series, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*. (1962–72). Photomontage.



Florence Leo, February 1992

Figure 13. Joel Sternfeld, 'Florence Leo, February 1992' from *Hart Island* (1998).

psychological and emotional level, triggering memory of death and the fear of the unknown, or becoming the unknown themselves and thus acting like a mirror of their subconscious thought. Grundberg suggests that,

Dealing as [the portrait photograph] does with what seems an irreducible essence of individuality, it can be seen as the last frontier of the genuine, a border of resistance to the depredations of the déjà vu ... portrait photographs seem able to speak to us directly, without any interference from our accumulated cultural baggage.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike Ribera's Christ, Sternfeld's subjects are not idealised. Subtle emphasis of colour, such as the highlighting of an aquamarine pair of socks and an awkward, boxy jacket removes the possibility of an elegiac elegance in this particular representation of the other. The mirror that is created in the viewing process of his work allows for a 'moment' to be created that had previously been unknown and unarticulated. This moment is the memorial to the other, the movement that remains after life has expired, after the grave has been dug and filled, after the island has been left at the end of the day. Sternfeld indicates the uncanny 'other' of what he views through discordant comparison of the unseen island space and the 'moment' of intrusion and exposure. In the portrait of Vicki Pavia the colour of the woman's ochre coat and aquamarine socks seem artificial when contrasted with the somber greens and browns of the landscape [figure 14]. The flowers she lays in memorial highlight the starkness of the bare trees in the background. Her sneakers seem too white against the freshly turned dirt. Throughout *Hart Island*, Sternfeld alternates between cropping in very close and maintaining distance, using several photographs in succession to build a visual experience of a small amount of space, or one visual theme. His lens is trained from inside the island's boundaries, and therefore can recede only so far. Westerbeck suggests that the distance Sternfeld maintains from his subject, creating a visual field that immediately suggests narrative through scale alone, 'makes his photograph into a peripheral view of an already peripheral event.'<sup>33</sup> In many of the photographs, objects are tantalizingly cut off and left to the imagination of the viewer to construct or finish. A piece of machinery is cropped short, trees are shorn of heads or limbs, poles are mysteriously cut off midway, leaving us to wonder what they support, or have supported at one time. The portrait of

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid Andy Grundberg, *The Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography since 1984* (New York: Aperture) 1985, p200.

<sup>33</sup> Colin L. Westerbeck Jr., "The New Color," *International Center of Photography*, *Artforum*, (January, 1982), p101.



Vicki Pavia, whose baby was buried on Hart Island, on a specially arranged visit, March 1994

Figure 14. Joel Sternfeld, 'Vicki Pavia, whose baby was buried on Hart Island, on a specially arranged visit, March 1994' from *Hart Island* (1998)

Vicki Pavia contains a glimpse of the only monument on the island, a towering obelisk, in front of which stands a far smaller white Madonna where the visitor has laid her bouquet. The woman ignores both, instead staring off to the left of the camera, and again leaving the viewer with the feeling that there is still an unknown or unrepresentable part of this 'other' space that is only connected with by actual physical experience of the island. The tightness of the composition and the selection of elements through taut cropping create a sense of claustrophobia that signals the previous populations the island has contained, and the unseen bodies that populate it below the surface. Hunt states that 'Hart Island seems to function as a mirror of the larger society. That is what interests me as an artist ... I was interested in Hart island as a place removed from the time and space of New York City.'<sup>34</sup> Like Melanie Klein's *fissure* explored in the previous chapter, it is the space Hunt describes in which meaning is produced. Meaning occurs in the acknowledgement of this otherness and the reaction to this understanding in the act of self-reflexion it produces in the mirror-function of the representation. If 'in photography, history lies like a corpse in the grave, awaiting resurrection'<sup>35</sup> then this binary moment of recognition and self-recognition is Hart Island's shock into the world of the living.

The diffuse, misty quality of light captured in several of the photographs, most notably the image of a mass grave for children<sup>36</sup> [figure 15] has an almost gothic, painterly treatment of its subject. The ghostlike and partially obscured bare trees in the background connote the winter season while the sharpness of the metal retaining wall that holds the already-buried in place highlights the exposed corner of two pine coffins. The juxtaposition of the wood that has grown naturally on the island, and the wood that is soon to decompose and join this organic existence correlates with the inference of season made in the titles of Sternfeld's works and the associated cyclical process of birth, life and death that have occurred in such heightened succession for the young bodies who are buried there. The blurred quality of these pictures contrasts with the sharper imaging devoted to the representation of architecture on the island, and to the recording of individual objects or grave markers. However, the strong shading and patterning of shadow that often results from these photographs denotes an attempt by Sternfeld to render the claustrophobic intensity of the unknown and to frustrate a directly voyeuristic engagement with his images. The inclusion

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<sup>34</sup> Interview conducted by M. Jubin with Melinda Hunt, June 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Tagg (1993) p24.

<sup>36</sup> Photograph from Hart Island series: *Infants' and children's coffins are held in place in a partially filled grave by a temporary retaining wall, Potter's Field, November 1991*



Infants' and children's coffins are held in place in a partially filled grave by a temporary retaining wall, Potter's Field, November 1991

Figure 15. Joel Sternfeld, 'Infants' and children's coffins are held in place in a partially filled grave by a temporary retaining wall, Potter's Field, November 1991' from *Hart Island* (1998)

of shadow serves also as a constant reminder of the still-unseen dead who are already interred, and again links to the idea of a double or stand-in, both for the absent body and the mirrored reflection of the viewer.

Every photo is a specter and a corpse, a haunted chamber and a crypt, each inextricably commingled in the other, doubled like the double aspect of the funerary remembrance of the dead in the Homeric age – the psyche of the dead one and the dead one's gravestone in the cemetery.<sup>37</sup>

The notion of the 'shadow of death' references the gothic of the 'underworld' or 'otherworld' that is heightened by the sense that what is viewed is in some way forbidden territory. Like the aversion to light that is an essential element in macabre representations of horror-phantasy, such as *Nosferatu*, the manipulation of light and shadow in Sternfeld's work ensures this undercurrent. However, while the inhabitants of this nocturnal world cannot have their image made, in photographing Hart Island, these connotations and fetishisms associated with death and burial rituals are to an extent denied.

### **Repositioning the Other**

Family snapshots, single-use cameras and the age of digital representation have made the practice of photography widespread and its transmission impossibly fast. The online journal *Space & Culture* discussed the execution of Saddam Hussein through the medium of the cell phone video, hazy representations of a dictator taunted through his last moments reintroduced the notion of public gallows to many in an unprecedented manner: visual imaging capacities that made the world complicit in an instant. Suddenly, or perhaps just only recently suggested through the growing capacity for widespread image distribution, the photographic canon is firmly populated by the 'other', as the irony of post-postmodernism dictates that this is where the median experience lies after 9/11. Even more disconcerting is the immediacy felt by the viewer – we are directed back to Warburg's *engram*, Simon's 'memory' of a crime, Sternfeld's genealogy of death. This is not a repetition of the

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<sup>37</sup> Alan Cholodenko, 'Still Photography?', *Afterimage*, (March-April 2005), p10. The shadow is also marked as a spatialising device that ties the photograph to the project of heteropology. 'The shadow belongs to the twilight zone, the world of liminality, of deviance and impurity; it is the figure of the in-between. The shadow emerges when light encounters an obstacle as it spatializes its being-in-the-world; the shadow marks that other side of the object, its unconscious, to speak with Freud. Its darkness hides all secret fears and desires. The shadow marks nonbeing, the nothing that is no thing, form which all sense emerges.' Joost van Loon, 'Social Spatialisation and Everyday Life', *Space & Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (May, 2002), p91.

postmodern trope of representation as construction, although this idea is still relevant. It is not just the speed at which experience and knowledge can be transmitted either, or the shared capacity, the thought that one could also document in the same way that promotes unease quite separate from the subject matter. All of these contingencies link back to the suggestion that we recognise our own body, our own corporeality in the representation and thus our role in this process. The boundary between the familiar and horror is continually collapsed – there is no ‘us’, there is no ‘other’. Experience of the photographic document is disorienting, challenging our ability to decide which side of the boundary line we exist on (and effectively dissolving the possibility of this distinction). Just as Scarry located Sontag’s camera-weapon as an extension of the photographer’s body, new technologies implicate the viewer as well as the maker of the image.

There is an intimate quality to their [a cell phone] use and this makes the Saddam execution video chilling to anyone who has made a cell phone video. We see the video from the maker’s perspective and experience it as a “coming into a relationship with” what has been captured. Now we too were there.<sup>38</sup>

Sarah James has argued convincingly in three essays for *Art Monthly*, most notably *The Truth About Photography*, that photography’s history has tended toward the homogeneous. Descriptors such as documentary have fallen victim to presupposed transparency of meaning in a similar manner to the medium’s own equation with the ‘real’. James states that

apart from the flood of largely insubstantial theories of ‘post-photography’ throughout the 90s, which mostly re-read Walter Benjamin or Roland Barthes in terms of the digital world, there has been a striking lack of any convincing theoretical discourse addressing the crucially changed context of photographic practices today, so that the medium still occupies a strange temporality in relation to the present.<sup>39</sup>

The photograph as a document can no longer be easily connected to notions of objectivity or the disinterested conveyance of information. Rosler, Sekula et al put paid to this idea as

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<sup>38</sup> [www.spaceandculture.org](http://www.spaceandculture.org) [accessed February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006]

<sup>39</sup> James Dec-Jan, 05-06), p9.

myth when Sternfeld was still emerging as a photographer. Elizabeth Sussman and Tina Kukielski, curators of Taryn Simon's 2007 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art rightly note that 'since the 1970s, skepticism about the political efficacy of imagery has questioned the ability of the documentary to be interventionist in the face of aestheticization.'<sup>40</sup> Sarah James challenges attempts to dispute the connection between objectivity and photography, wondering 'who exactly still holds such ideas?' Yet it is important to recognise Sternfeld's work, and the early 1990s *Hart Island* series in particular, both as a product of its time and an opportunity to problematise a contemporary photographic vocabulary. The central role of the viewer discussed in the previous chapter enables this chapter to underline in a more overarching sense the importance of treating such vocabulary as historically contingent, and historically *conscious*. As John Tagg contends, 'photographs are never 'evidence' of history; they are themselves the historical.'<sup>41</sup> Exploring notions of the photographic other and peripheral space in relation to the Hart Island series is valid on both levels. While James makes a barely-veiled swipe at too direct a use of postmodernist dialogues as a contemporary theoretical tool – she is against '[taking] up some sort of outdated cultural theory take on constructed histories, memory and the distrust of the document, of facts and history'<sup>42</sup> – it is impossible not to acknowledge the imprint of past discourses in the present. While language and its agency are as contingent on history and time as the photograph or medium they describe, these past discourses do not become obsolete. Stuart Elden clarifies this in his essay *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History*:

Although there has undoubtedly been a heavy bias in favour of history and time in the past, to swing too far the other way through a privileging of geography and space is no solution....we need to think of the two together: we need to both historicize space and spatialize history.<sup>43</sup>

This exploration can utilise the critical space developed through Foucault, Bataille, Klein and Krauss to form a language describing present concerns surrounding the photographic document. James suggests the major concerns of such a vocabulary lies in articulating contemporary expectations for the documentary mode (both on a socio-political level and

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Sussman in Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (New York: Steidl) p 13

<sup>41</sup> Tagg (1993), p71.

<sup>42</sup> James (April, 2006), p4.

<sup>43</sup> Elden (2001), p3.

aesthetically), the role new technologies have played in shifting these expectations and the shift of the documentary from public to private concerns. It is this interior nature of the documentary in contemporary practice that Simon engages with that is especially significant in Sternfeld's case. Sternfeld prioritises the viewing experience through the series as it is collected in book format rather than through exhibition as Simon does.<sup>44</sup> When interviewed for this thesis (there is no other traceable published interview of length with the artist), Sternfeld acknowledges himself as author but allows space for interpretation through exhibition, and more importantly, the individualized and *private* experience of the book. Kelly Dennis points to the use of the photo-book as an emerging Conceptual practice from the mid-1970s in conjunction with the new topography movement, predicated on books such as Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*.<sup>45</sup> Also important to note is that throughout *Hart Island* Sternfeld trains his lens on our contemporary fetishisation of the other through death, a social ritual that has itself performed a collective movement from public to private over the last century and a half. This geographic movement has precipitated the creation of the photographic other – now hidden and unseen, representations of the island exert the ethnographic urge, a will to *know*. Situating this chapter in the wake of the last, it is interesting to consider Foucault's formulations on the intersection of the gaze and the notion of an inwards turn.

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a minimal cost.<sup>46</sup>

His words are particularly poignant in light of Sontag's in the previous chapter. The contemporary documentary gaze has extended past the other and encompassed the daily life

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<sup>44</sup> The *Hart Island* series has been exhibited five times between 1997 and 2000: at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York May 1997 – April 1998; at the Stadthaus Ulm Museum, Germany October – November 1998; in Manchester May – June 1999; at the Ffotogallery, Cardiff, Wales August – September 1999; and at the Museum für Sepulkraikultur, Kassel, Germany May – September 2000.

<sup>45</sup> 'The photographs brief, non-descriptive titles, their sometimes serial installation, their clear lack of moral judgment, and the fact that many were initially published in the then-new phenomenon of photo books, all positioned these photographs not only within an art market ... but within a related art movement: that is, not just as art photography but as Conceptual photography.' Kelly Dennis, 'Landscape and the West: Irony and Critique in New Topographic Photography', *UNESCO University and Heritage 10<sup>th</sup> International Seminar 'Cultural Landscapes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'* (July, 2006), p2.

<sup>46</sup> Hille Koskela, "'Cam Era' – the contemporary urban Panopticon", *Surveillance & Society*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2003), p292.

of the body, from CCTV to reality television. The voracious exteriority of the mode and medium enacts the power of interiorisation in the subjects it surveys.

### **Death, landscape, power: the notion of aterritoriality**

T.J. Demos insists on describing the documentary photograph in particular as an act of power – ‘documentary representation today often serves the interests of the state – to identify, to recognise, to know, to control.’<sup>47</sup> Yet the medium can also subvert the state, the representation of landscape serving to disrupt the received perception of its territoriality. Precisely because of its problematic relationship to truth and the real, nature and the photography of the natural landscape carry the inherent possibility to function as a conduit of power. However, as Sekula states, it is important to remember that ‘not all realisms play into the hands of the police.’<sup>48</sup> Demos uses Emily Jacir’s work, specifically her *Where We Come From* (2001-2003) series, to explore the manner in which the photograph as document relates to site, subject and geographic identity within photographic space [figure 16]. In Jacir’s series, she uses her citizenship status as a Palestinian with an American passport to transcend geographical boundaries (or subvert the power of nationhood over the body), carrying out requests for Palestinians living within or outside Israel and the Occupied Territories. She plays football with a family, visits the grave of someone’s mother, performs small, everyday tasks and duties for those unable to move with the freedom she can. Demos highlights the manner in which Jacir steers away from portraiture, away from the *knowing* function of traditional documentary. Instead Jacir ‘allegorizes [her subjects’] deprived political status through their visual absence, fragmenting identity and thereby revealing representation to be only a partial recognition of personhood.’<sup>49</sup> The origin of personhood is shattered (Benjamin) in favour of a process of disappearing (the loss of movement, national identity invested in the freedom to move) and then becoming (through Jacir’s photographic action). Sternfeld similarly addresses the disenfranchised status of his subjects. Their socio-economic standing leaves them geographically stagnant like Jacir’s and they too remain either faceless or nameless, or for the majority, both. Demos contemporises Foucault’s conception of the heterotopia, connecting the implications

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<sup>47</sup> Demos (2006), p77.

<sup>48</sup> Alan Sekula, ‘The Body and the Archive’, in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. by Richard Bolton (Massachusetts: MIT Press) 1989, p378.

<sup>49</sup> Demos (2006), p79. ‘The piece, then, dramatizes the parallel between political illegibility and representational erasure, where the existence of the exiled subject is conveyed only through a skeletal descriptive language reminiscent of a depersonalized bureaucratic discourse.’



Go to Bayt Lahia and bring me a photo of my family, especially my brother's kids.

I have been studying at Birzeit University for the past 3 years, and I have not been allowed to go to Gaza and see my family. I have no permission to be in the West Bank as a Gazan, so I am confined to Bir Zeit until I finish my studies.

- Rizek  
Born in Bayt Lahia, living in Bir Zeit  
Palestinian Passport and Gazan I.D. card  
Father and Mother from Bayt Lahia

Notes: His family was so happy that I would be able to bring him lemons and strawberries from their land, so they took me to their fields and we picked lemons and strawberries for him. I also carried back my mom's mother made, and a pair of boots, two belts, and some nuts.

إنهبي إلى بيت لاهيا واحضري لي صورة لعائلتي خاصة لأولاد أخي.

أدرس في بير زيت منذ ثلاث سنوات. ولم يسمح لي بالذهاب إلى غزة لزيارة عائلتي. كما أنني مصفتي غزياً فليس لدي تصريح للبقاء في الضفة الغربية. وعليه فأنا محاصر في بير زيت حتى الإنتهاء من دراستي.

- رزق  
من مواليد بيت لاهيا، و يعيش في بير زيت  
جواز سفر فلسطيني و هوية غزة  
الاب والام من بيت لاهيا

ملاحظات: لقد سعدت عائلته كثيرا عندما جئت بهم لي أستطيع أن أحمل له بعض الليمون و الفراولة من أراضيهم وعلمتني الخبز إلى جدرانهم و قنينة ليمونة و فراولة له. كما أحضرت له مجموعة اشياء أمه، و حذاء و حزامين و بعض المكسرات.

Figure 16. Emily Jacir, 'Where We Come From' (2001-2003).

of self-identity through territory to Jacir's documentary space to reveal a non-place, the *aterritorial*. The photograph becomes what may be termed a 'zone of indistinction', a condition Demos and Linda Nochlin (among others) have identified as the major concern of contemporary documentary photography following Okuwi Enwezor's centralisation of George Agamben's concept of *bare life* at *Documenta 11*.<sup>50</sup> Bare life is, as George Agamben contends, a case of 'communities insisting on the same region and in a condition of exodus from each other – communities that could articulate each other via a series of reciprocal extraterritorialities.'<sup>51</sup> This methodology exposes the position of Sternfeld's photographs as evidence of a specific and *other* history of the unknown bodies and landscape of Hart Island while simultaneously revealing the complex relation of the meaning of such photographs (and of the act of photography itself) to the cultural space they inhabit. The spaces of place and non-place are of the same site, and this fact is the only semi-stable conclusion that can be drawn from their photographic interpretation. This results in the sense of anxiety or fear discussed in the previous chapter, where the loss of a distinct point of origin from which to construct the self as separate from the other results in a declaration of identity through geographic boundaries. The representation, even while disrupting the space it depicts, colludes in this process. Demos concludes that 'photography, positioned within ever new and expanding surveillance systems, operates as judicial and forensic evidence, and 'truth' and 'objectivity' live on through their continued institutional and legal validation. Indeed, the *documentation* of naked life appears closely aligned to the exercise of power.'<sup>52</sup>

The treatment of landscape in *Hart Island* acknowledges nineteenth-century images of wild and untouched frontier land taken by Geographical Surveyors and, as an extension, the reinterpretation of this genre through the 'man-altered' landscape of the New Topographic movement. Sternfeld subtly disrupts the traditional balanced mid-line placement of the horizon line; where we see it at all (many of the photographs are trained directly on the ground) it is always broken or completely obstructed by trees, bodies or architectural ruins. The burial taking place acts as a reminder of what is now displaced by the sprawl of the city (a central New Topographic concern). Coffins are situated in a wider context of the natural surrounds, as are views from the island towards the mainland. The *Correction officer's*

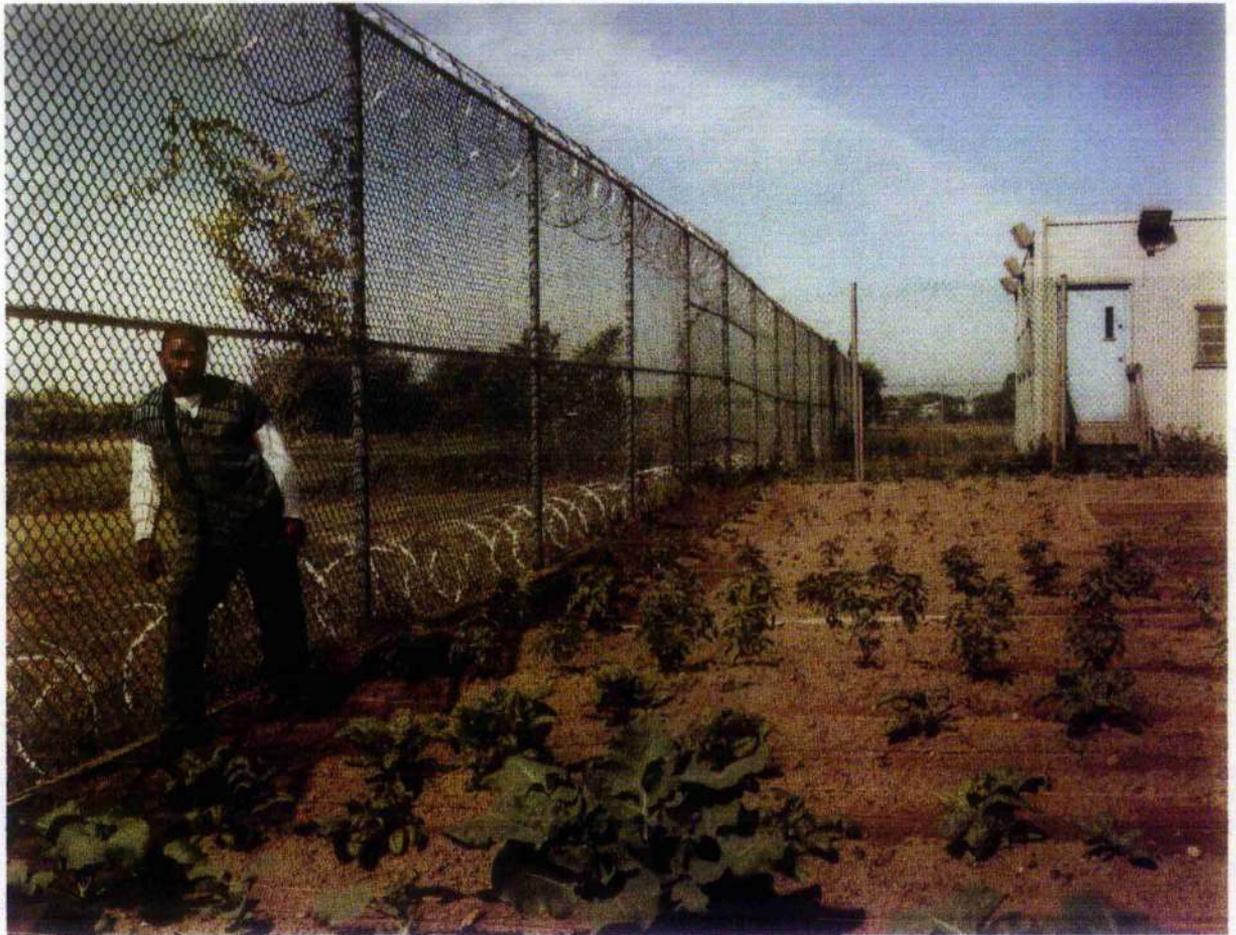
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<sup>50</sup> Demos (2006), p78. As Demos states, 'naked life signifies a revolutionary refusal of national determination and a commitment to conceptualise anew the relationship between life and politics within a spatiotemporal order detached from national sovereignty or the state's territory.'

<sup>51</sup> Demos (2006), p77.

<sup>52</sup> Demos (2006), p77.

*garden, June 1992* [figure 17] tends towards this opening of landscape, but is cut short by the fencing that dominates the left of the images and literally overshadows the prison worker, latticing his body and obscuring his face. In all of Sternfeld's landscapes on Hart Island, the untouched and open elements of the island's geography are mediated by a boundary of some sort. This appears both literally, in the inclusion of fencing, walls or signs that are remnants of the institutions that once populated the island, or a part of the natural environment itself as a wall of grasses or a band of trees. These boundaries serve to invert the traditional notion of the sublime or the unencompassable magnificence of the natural world practiced by nineteenth century landscape painters (such as Albert Bierstadt or the Hudson River School's Asher B. Durand), and early topographical photographers. Instead, the organic, internalised processes of nature and its capacity for self-cleansing and renewal are emphasised in this closeted space. The detritus of society is brought to this place, momentarily identified by a name or number on the side of a coffin, before returning to the anonymity of decomposition and reentry into the earth. Through the inclusion of multiple portraits of the landscape, Sternfeld marks the importance of this other place, shattering the hierarchy of genre implied by his generation of photographers in their prizing of the gaze that primarily focused on the political or social *event* as mediated through the human body. In the case of *Hart Island*, the landscape is full of the remnants and traces of the human body, yet it is ultimately the land itself that Sternfeld directs contemplation towards, evident from the place name used as the title to the whole series. Kelly Dennis suggests a defining characteristic of New Topographic engagement with landscape is the movement's basis in irony, the knowing appropriation and subversion of traditional nineteenth- and early twentieth-century landscape photography that focused on the pristine qualities of nature. Sternfeld can claim a tentative extrapolation of this as a melancholic irony. *Hart Island* references modes of representing human death through the natural landscape yet subverts the traditional response, negating the strongly moral and eulogizing voice Szarkowski identifies as typical of the modern documentary tradition. This subversion corresponds to notions of absence discussed above, of a *negative* inherent to the description of Hart Island's status as other space. The trope of the back-turned figure (*Rückenfiguren*) in the work of Friedrich and his contemporary, Philipp Otto Runge, provides an interesting formal link from the genre of sublime landscape painting, through the practitioners of the New Topographic movement such as Robert Adams, to Sternfeld's portrayal of landscape and the figure in *Hart Island*. Sternfeld's photographs act in a similar way to the anonymous figure of the sublime, engendering a self-reflexive



Correction officer's garden, June 1992

Figure 17. Joel Sternfeld, 'Correction Officer's garden, June 1992' from *Hart Island* (1998)

performance in the viewer— ‘they lead their viewer to contemplate his or her fate ... this inward contemplation leads ... to a sense of isolation, a repeated theme in Friedrich’s paintings.’<sup>53</sup>

Even when Sternfeld takes on a more obviously urban landscape, as in *On this Site*, it is the sense of something absent that renders neither Szarkowski’s formalism nor the New Topographic model of irony pertinent. His picture of a bus shelter opposite the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington D.C. is a case in point [figure 18]. The text accompanying the photograph explains that Yetta M. Adams, a homeless forty-three year old woman, froze to death. The painful irony is certainly presented. Yet, the lack of a figure (or body) means that absence plays the dominant role, as ‘each of these photographs succeeds only insofar as it has been allowed to fail. To fail as an isolated image. To fail as a stable image. To fail as a spectacular image.’<sup>54</sup> In interview Sternfeld paraphrased a favourite Ed Ruscha quote of his, where the latter artist describes a negative reaction to the instinctive romanticisation of landscape and man’s bodily relation to his environment. It is not the overwhelming romantic sublime Ruscha or Sternfeld attempt to record but the recognition of the hollows, shadows and grave pits in which the human body eventually lands. Is there no idealisation of the ruins Sternfeld finds, no nostalgia implicated in the memory of Hart Island’s history? If there is, it results in what Paolo Virno terms in *Familiar Horror*, as ‘a chilling’.<sup>55</sup> Sternfeld seemed to suggest that the reaction of the viewer to a Casper David Friedrich painting (his example) was reversed in his own representations of the landscape: a case of the parts working to elicit a gradual reaction rather than a total or whole work being greater than the sum of these parts. This rather clumsy reporting of a conversation-of-a-conversation relates to the multiple instances where this paper has referred to *Hart Island*, and photographic representation of space in a wider context, as a process through which fragments are collected, pieced together and then scattered for the process to begin over.

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<sup>53</sup> Mitchell H. Frank, *German Romantic Painting Redefined: Nazarene Tradition and the Narratives of Romanticism* (London: Ashgate) 2001, p119.

<sup>54</sup> Lori Waxman, ‘Picturing Failure’, *Parachute*, No. 115 (September, 2004), p32.

<sup>55</sup> Paolo Virno, ‘Familiar Horror’, *Grey Room*, (Fall, 2006) pp.14

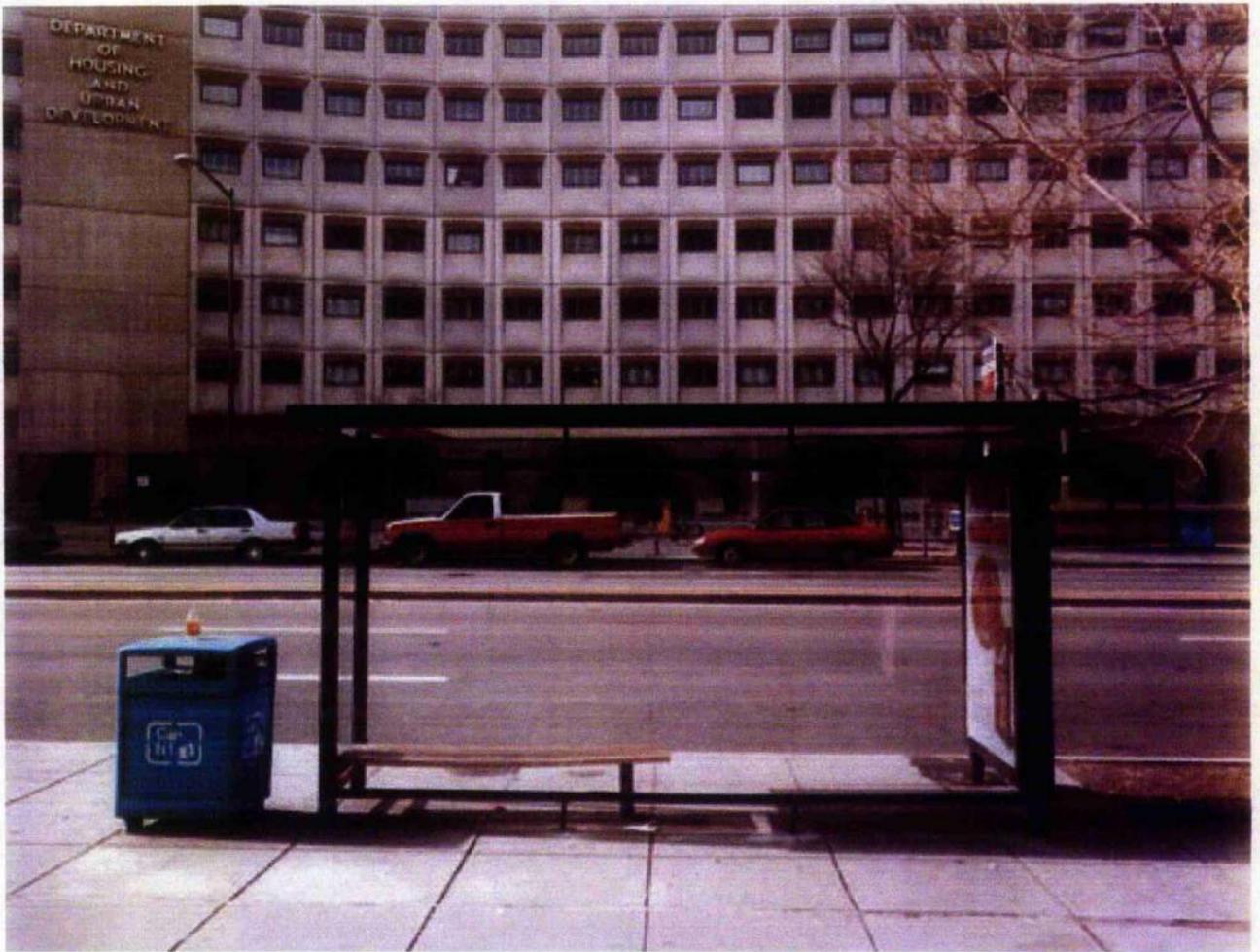


Figure 18. Joel Sternfeld, 'Metro Bus Shelter, 7th Street at E Street, Southwest, Washington D.C., 1995' from *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam* (1996).

Yetta M. Adams froze to death sitting upright in this bus shelter across from the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington D.C., on November 29, 1993. The forty-three-year-old mother of three grown children had reportedly been turned away from a homeless shelter the night before.

## The limits of the archive

Christine Borland's blanket salvaged from a German firing range (*Berlin Blanket*, 1993) and darned to repair holes made by the bullets provides a neat metaphor for an artist's interference with history. Like Borland's work, repatriation or restitution is never completely possible. While 'neither affirmative nor critical', the archive, as demonstrated by Foster at the beginning of this chapter, has limits – missing fibres from the blanket, bodily lack on Hart Island, the negative. The origin of each of these subjects is displaced, and in its stead occurs Benjamin's disappearing, then becoming. Bare life (and, in the end, *our* life) depends on fragmentation, the otherness of aterritoriality. In *From Life* (1994) Borland had a team of forensic scientists reconstruct the face and head of a skeleton she had obtained, revealing scant details about who this person had been [figure 19]. Like Sternfeld's photographs of the mass graves on Hart Island '[such] work can make the viewer question the standards that we apply to compassion, to those we consider as individuals.'<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Stallabrass' suggestion that 'Borland's work, with its strong element of restitution, its forlorn hope of repairing damage done ... of remembering people forgotten' echoes Melinda Hunt's when she describes weaving a history of collected experiences, both written, spoken and silent, in order to represent the island space. Borland's information on her skeleton, short though it is, is more than each of the corpses buried on Hart Island are known by. The name, or in some cases a number, are the only descriptor of the body, and by extension, the life encased in the pine coffin. This series of Sternfeld's epitomises the representation of the 'other' within contemporary American culture through his engagement with a site that, even after the photographic act, remains an unknown geography. Without these photographs, the only eyes to have viewed *within* this space are the New York City Department of Corrections officers and the prisoners who bury the indigent bodies. Even after Sternfeld's series, unless a relative tracks and exhumes their kin these are still the only bodies that exist in this space. The coffins contain burial papers, chemically treated to withstand four decades atop a decomposing corpse in case of this eventuality, detailing the body's identity and the circumstances of death. While the finality of this element may be certain, the possibility of resurrection through representing the unseen, unknown geography of the island remains potential. It is this potentiality that Sternfeld's *Hart Island* describes.

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<sup>56</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London: Verso) 1999, p139.

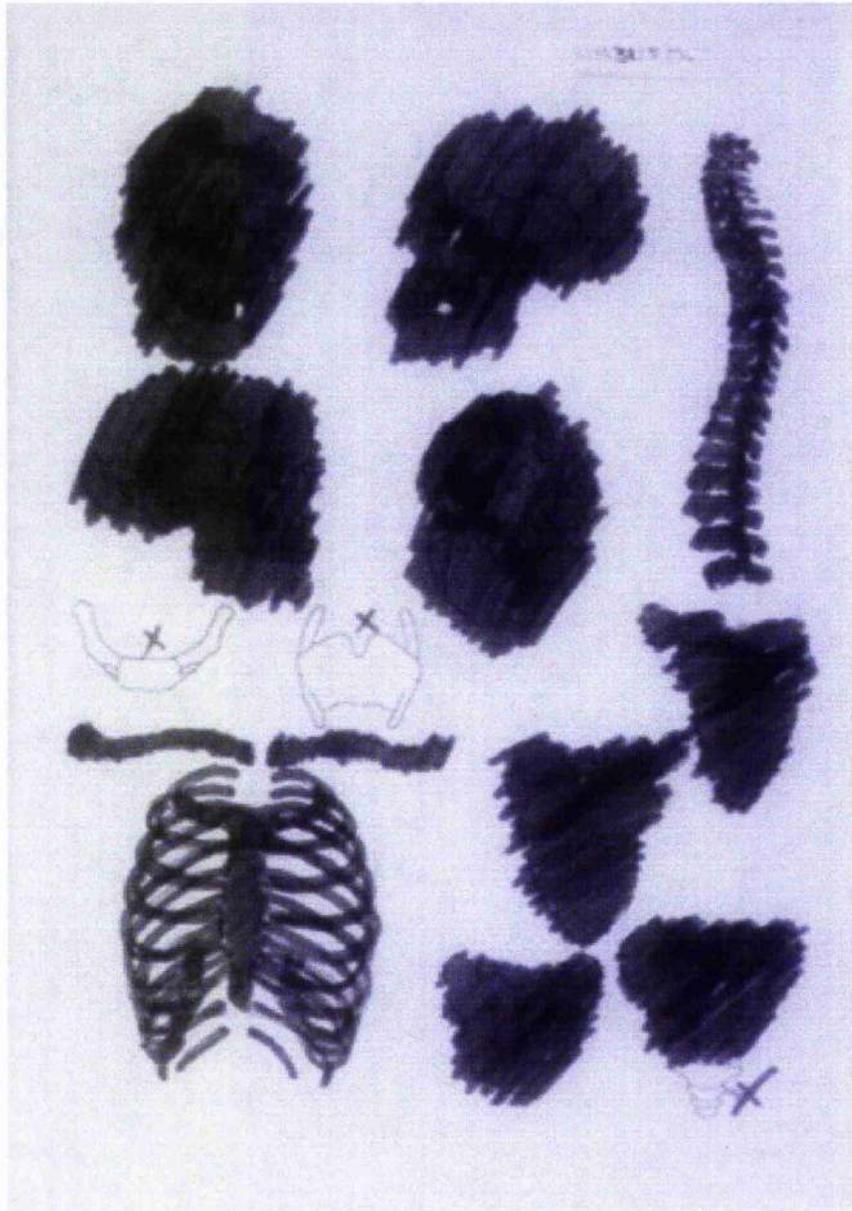


Figure 19. Christine Borland, 'From Life' (1996).

## **Conclusion**

*Our conviction that we are free to choose what we make of a photograph hides the complicity to which we are recruited in the very act of looking.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Burgin, Victor quoted by Sarah Charlesworth & Barbara Kruger, 'Glossolia (1983)', in *The Last Picture Show*, ed. by Douglas Fogle (Minnesota: Walker Art Center) 2003, p260.

Once Gordon Matta-Clark received most of the documents relating to the slivers of land he purchased and photographed for *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (1973), he archived the materials in boxes and gave them to a local art collector with the instruction to 'put them together however you want.' The work had been exhibited only once before, at 112 Greene Street, New York, mid-way through Matta-Clark's acquisition of the fifteen untenable plots. The materials were subsequently returned to Matta-Clark's estate after his death in 1978 and the instructions passed on. They were duly exhibited in time by the Guggenheim Museum who had purchased some of the materials as a discrete 'work', *Reality Properties: Fake Estates, Little Alley Block 2497, Lot 42* (1974). The title deed of the plot (Matta-Clark's ownership now defunct through non-payment of land taxes), an architectural plan of the block the plot lay on, and the documentary photograph(s) of the site were reassembled in 1992 in a formula now assumed as the 'correct' mode of re-presentation. The institutional act of power has become inscribed in the artwork. Each plot has been exhibited in this manner save for one, the fifteenth *Estate*. This remains inaccessible and therefore impossible to photograph and present.

Matta-Clark's project, and the metaphor of this unknown fifteenth site, provides a conclusion to the investigation of Joel Sternfeld's *Hart Island* series of photographs. In his essay *Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust*, Antoine Picon describes flying into Newark airport, the dirty fringes of Manhattan visible to the alert passenger. Picon contends these sites of purgatory are the disturbing zones where nature meets the technological, echoing the description of American landscape that Sternfeld made in the early stages of his practice. The commingling of rust and ruin, evident in the work of Matta-Clark, emphasises the dichotomy inherent to representing the peripheral, Freud's fundamental opposition of *heimlich/unheimlich*. Familiar elements juxtaposed with elements of the uncanny. The ruin 'restores man to nature. Rust, on the other hand, confines him in the middle of his productions as if within a prison, a prison all the more terrible since he is its builder.'<sup>2</sup> A fundamental process of this investigation has been to uncover photography's historical relation to the real, to nature, and to position its relationship to ruin and rust within nature as mutable. As Geoffrey Batchen contends, 'Why, in short, assume that nature is frozen in place as the undifferentiated origin against which culture can secure its identity? ... any given foundation is continually being displaced by a dynamic and troubling play of differences.'<sup>3</sup> This thesis has deconstructed Sternfeld's work on multiple levels: though the photograph as representation of a socio-cultural 'other' site and as a spatial

<sup>2</sup> Antoine Picon, 'Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust', *Grey Room*, Vol. 1 (Fall, 2000), p79.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (London: MIT Press) 1999, p21.

entity (the heterotopia) within which operations of power and knowledge occur; through the space that is created between the photographer, the viewer and the subject and site of Sternfeld's work; and finally, through the performances engendered within these spaces. The methodology has taken as its fundamental purpose the investigation of a specific history of visual representation of socially marginalized or 'hidden' space in the contemporary American landscape. This has been described through the notion of heterotopia and the spatial theory of Michel Foucault in order to formulate a contemporary photographic vocabulary that deals with the heterotopia of the photographic representation of landscape. As Foucault states in *Des Espaces Autres*, 'in civilisations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.' In *Hart Island*, Sternfeld provides a boat with which to make the passage toward an unknown territory.

In *The Crisis of the Real*, Andy Grundberg questions the 'urge to encompass' the American landscape, musing that 'perhaps it is the ineffability of the place, its significance so great that it invites description even while it defies it. Or perhaps it is because America is really a mirror, and in the process of describing it we cannot help but describe ourselves.'<sup>4</sup> At the centre of this deconstruction of *Hart Island* lies the fascination with one's own body, through recognition of the self in the other. It is a process bound by an acknowledgement of the precariousness of bare life, and the proximity between the fragile state of the living and the latent reality of the body as a corpse. It is within this performance, enacted through viewing, that Sternfeld communicates both the seductive noir aesthetic of a peripheral unknown landscape, and effects a repositioning of this landscape through spatialising its history. The represented other space is revealed as a simultaneously *opposite to* and *of* our own memory. As we are free to piece together the photographs and text individually within the parameters of the archive Sternfeld articulates, to 'put them together however you want', the act of memorial described in *Hart Island* is not only that of others, or of other spaces. Ultimately, it becomes our own.

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<sup>4</sup> Andy Grundberg, 'Joel Sternfeld: Itinerant Vision' in *The Crisis of the Real*, ed. by Andy Grundberg, *The Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography since 1984* (New York: Aperture) 1985, p87.

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