

John Stezaker. Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art and Design, 27 April - 3 June 2006

While still an art student, it dawned on John Stezaker that the world was already too full of images for artists to add to the stockpile.¹ Abandoning painting, he has devoted his career instead to the meticulous task of collecting, reclassifying, reformatting and juxtaposing the found mechanically-reproduced image with an increasingly pared-down economy of means that reveals the smallest intervention as fraught with complexity. The result is a painstaking critical practice based as much on the skills and intuitions of an archivist as on those of an artist, keyed largely to intellectual rather than visual arts references - it is significant that his teaching position at the Royal College of Art is in Critical and Historical Studies rather than Fine Art - and in which in some cases the simple reframing and reorienting of an original is now found sufficient to release its repressed meanings. Yet at the same time this is a practice torn on the one hand between an exposure of the reproduced image's status as 'weapon of mass seduction' and the redemptive revelation of its occluded poetic resonance, and on the other between its status as critical intervention and the undeniable material fascination of the results.

Although seen as a key figure in that generation of British conceptual artists emerging in the late 1960s with a shared concern for the politics of media, representation and society, Stezaker's work and ideas have in general remained less well-known to wider audiences than those of some of his peers, and relatively little has been written about them. The evidence of Stezaker's calendar for 2006, however, indicates an artist in great demand: a contribution to the *Tate Triennial* hailed by Guardian critic Adrian Searle as a highlight of the show, and at least half a dozen international mixed and one-person exhibitions lined up for the rest of the year. It might be, in part, that the continuing enthusiasm for dada and surrealist collage and photography among curators and public alike has helped Stezaker's work resonate with recent audiences in ways that seemed problematic in the 1970s and after - he has noted how surrealism remained a taboo subject for British artists during this period - and indeed the use of one of his works as the poster for the recent exhibition *World Gone Mad: Surrealist Returns in Recent Art* (Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury, January-February 2006) points to the way in which Stezaker's collage practice is all too likely to be read at first glance as bearing a simply formal affinity with dada and surrealist photographic and collage traditions. Unlike a number of other contemporary artists for whom this might also be said, however, Stezaker's considered and complex engagement with the intellectual currents at stake make this comparison a rather more serious matter.





Figure 1: John Stezaker, *Untitled (Africa) I*, 2005, collage, 19.5 x 19.5cm. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

A new suite of works highlighted by the April 2006 exhibition at the Norwich Gallery, selected in collaboration with curator Lynda Morris, makes this point immediately. The *Africa* collages, seemingly culled from a colour catalogue of African carved statuettes where portions of the reproductions are cut away to reveal what appear to be vintage film publicity images underneath, immediately call to mind Hannah Höch's well-known series of the mid to late 1920s *From an Ethnographic Museum* [fig.1]. Where Höch's collages are generally read in terms of their overlay of an ambivalent and parodic set of gender signifiers over museum-bound colonial artefacts, collapsing together contemporary western beliefs in the colonial and gendered other, Stezaker's *Africa* works seem to empty out even this possibility of interchangeable readings. The carvings and their metonymic but problematic reference to Africa, in pictures suggestive of illustrations from auction house catalogues rather than monographs, are doubly absent. Firstly (as for Höch) they are present as image rather than object in an echo of their removal from one location to another and then from collection to collection, but then they are literally excised from the image frame. Behind their gaping outlines the viewer seems to glimpse not so much a domestic parallel to ethnographic meanings as an entirely internalised, western set of desires, so that now in revisiting Höch's work today the troubling other turns out to be ourselves - and the gossamer threads between desire and its pretexts - after all. Completing the circle back to Höch's ethnographic museum, this sense of the exotic object's emptied-out return to the spectator's



original desire was deliberately intended by the curator to resonate with the reopening of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts just a few miles away during the Norwich Gallery show.

The strategy of removing one image to reveal and frame a second rather than paste them upon one another is one that Stezaker has used for a number of his best-known and most immediate works in recent years, notably those based on movie star portraits from cinema production stills such as the *Dark Stars* series (2005) shown in Norwich. Silhouettes of Hollywood icons from foyer publicity cards or film annuals are excised to reveal different images underneath, perhaps of landscapes, paintings or other film stills, so that beneath every constructed image-as-personality lies its shadow - switching gender, blurring genre and diverting readings with its uncanny reframings. This makes it tempting to distinguish Stezaker's *découpage* method from the familiar collage techniques of dada and surrealism. In fact, antecedents might be found among less celebrated individuals connected to surrealism - works that neither Stezaker nor his audiences are as likely to have in mind - such as the caustic collage work of Marcel Mariën, the rubbed-out film vamps in Abdul Kader El Janabi's *gommages* or the cutting and revealing 'intercollages' of Jiří Kolář.²

The distinction between cutting and pasting is significant: an excavation rather than a layering of the found, Stezaker's archival practice often works through editing and revealing rather than accretion and describing. It invites a sequence of careful removal and provisional realignment that suits the artist's cautious process, apparently requiring long periods of deliberation before a stubborn combination of elements (of which there are never more than two) is finally allowed to stand. The artist himself has described this in terms of an 'evacuation' - a term that points to the sense of hollowness or absence accompanying the mass-produced image - but for Stezaker this deathliness is one that might be related more specifically to Maurice Blanchot's contention in 'Two Versions of the Imaginary' that it is only death that renders a body truly visible and understandable, that turns object into image.³ Stezaker's works may be read as attempts to capture a moment when an image might at the same time be dead yet reveal its true nature, and it is this paradox that might explain his willingness to situate his practice as an exploration of both 'apocalyptic' and 'redemptive' currents in contemporary culture and thought.

The artist's preferred sources, in turn, are outdated books and magazines from the charity shops and second-hand bookshops that he already sees both as opening out onto alternate systems of archiving and collecting, and as suffused with the pathos of death, where the demise of a former owner releases each book to a new set of exchanges. This is a process built on accident and the drawn-out contemplation of each image's meanings, sensitive to the nuances of the item's materiality, and Stezaker's contention is that from their dusty shelves these artefacts are in a



sense seeking him out rather than the other way around. This claim makes it very tempting to suggest a parallel with André Breton's categorisation in *Mad Love* of the flea market find as a predestined, personalised sign, and to see the artist's fascination with images that are both absent yet revealed, 'apocalyptic' yet 'redemptive', as a kind of meditation through the image on the surrealist notion of objective chance.⁴ The *Cinema* series of collages shown in Norwich, in which postcards of landscapes are overlaid on film stills, masking a 'faked' scenario with a natural form in which the protagonists' outlines are unexpectedly rediscovered in rock formations or geographical features like an accidental Archimboldo or de Momper painting, also hint strongly at this fusion of chance and intertextuality in a way that frequently manages to be playful and deeply unsettling at the same time [fig. 2].



Figure 2: John Stezaker, *Cinema 1 X*, 2006, collage, 18.0 x 23.5cm. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Perhaps the most distinctive formal innovation Stezaker has pursued in recent years is the deceptively simple inversion of the unmodified image, a chance discovery that by his own admission took many years for him to accept and incorporate into the body of work. To point once again only to dada and surrealist examples it might be observed that the technique of rotating found images by 90 or 180 degrees has been used frequently to short-circuit the mechanisms of



looking at and reading them, most famously in Salvador Dalí's misrecognition of a Picasso portrait in a photograph of an African tribal scene in *Paranoiac Face* of 1931 (another classic case, of course, of the projection of western cultural values onto colonial text). One might argue that Stezaker's inversions, however, represent something more sustained and less playful than these antecedents, but that they still invite readings consistent with a number of surrealist principles - most notably in the way in which, like many of the most arresting surrealist works, they invite the viewer not to invent an alternative world but to imagine the existing one afresh. For one thing, these found images are only inverted and reframed, not juxtaposed, collaged, retouched or rephotographed. The simple, sober framing and presentation of work on the Norwich Gallery walls - 32 small scale pieces, some measuring only a few inches across, matted and mounted in plain black frames - emphasised the materiality and archival conservation of the source material, and indeed the artist prefers his work not to be reproduced in formats that diminish these qualities or permit the viewer to manipulate them. A nagging question - or perhaps more accurately a necessary tension - remains the extent to which a gallery show like this, even with a selection of relevant critical reading and a small display of early documentation on hand for visitors - can do justice to the density and the radical intention of ideas at work: a strategic assault on visual codes and values that nevertheless chooses the traditional exhibition space, the frame and the 'original' as its weapons of choice.

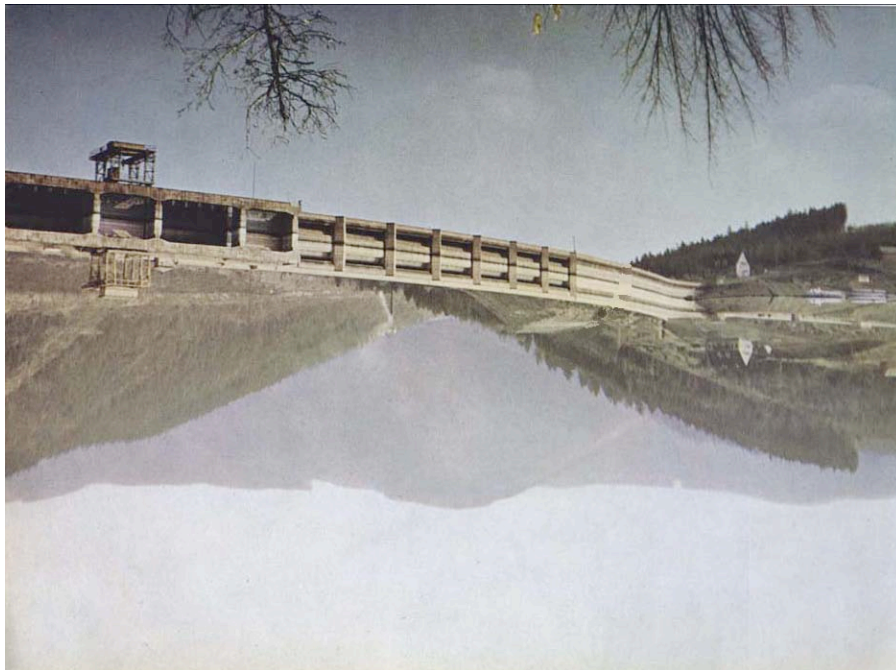


Figure 3: John Stezaker, *Bridge V*, 1998, found image, 15 x 19.5cm. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Yet the result, for instance in the sometimes tiny *City* series (2000-4), is images that on first encounter possess a simultaneous documentary and perplexing quality (and that despite their apparent simplicity are, Stezaker recounts, the result of gruelling work). Upside-down aerial photographs of urban scenes or industrial architecture seem both familiar and yet strangely in suspension, in my case momentarily prompting a reading that their elements had somehow been minutely snipped out and reassembled into an orientation diagram that was readable yet unusable, reconnaissance intelligence for the reimagining of our interaction with social space. Another major theme to emerge from the endless sub-classification of Stezaker's ongoing archive, the bridge, appeared here in six works where photographs of bridges are inverted, sometimes with the 'real' part of the picture deleted to leave only a shimmering reflection that somehow never truly resembles the 'real' at all, opening instead into some quite new perspective [fig. 3]. Stezaker sees these bridges, an outgrowth from the *Overworlds* series begun in the 1980s, as inviting readings of the bridge as a threshold and passage, in particular the metaphorical passage from life to death attested in a number of 'near death' accounts; and more generally the theme of inversion as a utopian invitation to reverse the polarities of real and imaginary in a literal revolution of values, and to discover a redemptive space concealed in plain sight within the welter of images saturating our line of vision.

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¹ Factual information used here has been informed by an interview with the artist, London 1 March 2006 (with my thanks to Lynda Morris for setting up this encounter) and his talk accompanying the Norwich Gallery exhibition, Norwich School of Art and Design, 27 April 2006.

² Marcel Mariën's uses of text, collage and the object, as well as his publishing projects, are a key contribution to Belgian surrealism and a vital link between surrealism and the situationists, yet have still to receive sustained attention from English-language scholarship. For Abdul Kader El Janabi, see Édouard Jaguer et al, *Vamps évaporées: Les gommages d'AKEJ*, Paris: 1985; in addition to being a driving force behind a number of collective surrealist initiatives in Paris during the 1970s and 1980s, El Janabi is also an important link with and historian of Surrealist currents in Arabic. For Jiří Kolář, see for example intercollage works in *Jiří Kolář*, New York: 1975; whilst not a direct participant in Czech surrealism, Kolar was nevertheless active during the forties in Skupina 42, a group of Czech artists and writers closely aligned with surrealist interests.

³ 'At first sight, the image does not resemble a cadaver, but it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image.' Maurice Blanchot, 'Two Versions of the Imaginary,' in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, New York: 1999, 417-27 (419).

⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, in conversation the artist indicated only a partial awareness of this parallel to surrealist theory, and Stezaker himself explicitly links his work to the ideas of a number of writers such as Blanchot and William Burroughs rather than Breton in this regard.

