

The Case of California

Put all the images in language in a place of safety and make use of them, for they are in the desert, and it's in the desert we must go and look for them.

— Jean Genet

1.

In 1859, in the midst of the first decades of the industrialization of photography, the physician, writer, and inventor Oliver Wendell Holmes published an essay in the *The Atlantic* titled “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph.” In this celebration of photographic technology, he praised the common good of the stereoscope, a portable, inexpensive stereo viewer that would bring stereo photographic images with the illusion of depth into middle-class homes. The stereograph was a precursor of mass media, channeling the same hybrid of journalism and entertainment as almanacs, picture magazines, and television. Stereocards were printed in the thousands and a market developed replete with bestsellers and bootlegs of popular images. The sale of stereographic cards generated an additional source of income for photographers that was often larger than that from commissions or print sales. The wider circulation of these images also introduced a hegemonic visual geography into daily life, while serving as publicity for travel, attractions, and events. Photography, along with the railroad and telegraph, which were developed around the same time, was a technology that redefined spatiality to in relation to measurements outside the body, a prosthetic form of recognition and memory.

With its manipulation of binocular vision, the stereograph short-circuits the brain to create an illusion of depth and dimensionality, anticipating 3-D films, holograms, and VR technology. Understanding the possibilities of photography as a medium of knowledge and novelty, Holmes anticipated vast libraries of images and broad platforms of use. In his most visionary passage, Holmes writes (my italics):

Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please. We must, perhaps, sacrifice some luxury in the loss of color; *but form and light and shade are the great thing.*

2.

The photograph exists as both vision and object. Its optical, scientific materiality separates it from spiritual contemplation of the world or the conceptual mysteries of art, even while there were advocates for its potential aestheticism as a professional practice, echoing salon themes and landscape paintings, and feeding a market for exotica in the heyday of imperialist expansion. Photography also raises the question of whether vision is innate or by necessity embedded in language and a social order outside of its physical parameters: how does a photograph negotiate a gap between sight and understanding? Could it manifest visionary states outside the body? From the time of its invention there were attempts to prove the existence of spirits (ghosts, ectoplasm, immaterial forces) through the objective machinery of the

camera. If this seems outside of the use of the photograph as a descriptive order of reality, it is still reliant on a science-based faith in an oblique, impersonal mechanics as a form of proof. Would a camera render plausible the sacred visions of Lourdes or Fatima?

The earthbound indexicality of photography separated it from traditional aesthetics. Such a lack could confound its status in the immaterial temples of art, or it could be perceived as a radical movement away from the hierarchical orders embedded in centuries of Western culture that Walter Benjamin invoked with the term *aura*, understanding photography as a tool against it:

To experience the aura of an appearance or a being means becoming aware of its ability to respond to a glance. This ability is full of poetry. When a person, an animal, or something inanimate returns our glance with its own, we are drawn initially into the distance; its glance is dreaming, draws *us* after the dream. Aura is the appearance of a distance however close it might be.

While Holmes understood the utterance *Form is henceforth divorced from matter* as a near miracle of rationality and progress, anticipating modernist media theory (Marshall McLuhan) and curatorial practice (John Szarkowski), for our purposes, in approaching the work of Michael Ashkin, let us consider it as a curse. Contra blind faith in technology, there is the skeptical but redemptive note by Benjamin: "The awakened eye does not lose the power of the glance once the dream is extinguished in it. On the contrary: it is only then that the glance really penetrates."

3.

The desert and desert-like settings in *were it not for*, located in a wide area outside of Los Angeles, are recognizable as the conduits of commercial strips, the infrastructure of suburban expansion, the edges between the developed and the undeveloped. All forms have adapted to the movements of automobile and truck. The aridity of the ground gives it an almost biblical austerity, rife with human detritus. These are examples of the urban expansion endemic to the United States after 1945, based on mobility and flow. This culture of the automobile results from faith in perpetual growth, and a reliance on planning and regulation. The scene is rife with inconsistencies and contradictions, generated by uneven cycles of boom and bust. It is a world of privatized interests built on highways of directed vision. Clusters of shops, services, and homes emerge or vanish along empty curbs. Rubble goes overlooked underfoot.

While this pattern is common across the country, development in America's West was exceptional in scale, speed, and intensity. California itself has had an erratic, ersatz mythology of being a temperate, fecund golden land since the nineteenth century, redemptive in comfort, fertility, and prosperity. It is about as close as we can find in the United States to the German word *Sehnsucht*, a longing for distance, warmth, and sun. This language came out of early land speculation, exploration, and fiction. The archetypal narrative of westward migration was established in the Gold Rush of the mid-nineteenth century and later resurfaced in the catastrophic conditions of the Depression, as described in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and its film adaptation (1940), as well as through the "stories" supplied to picture magazines and newspapers by photographers employed by the Farm Security Administration (a government agency), and later borne out in ideals of grand new homes and decadent glamour.

Several decades earlier, in the 1870s, photographs from governmental geological surveys in the Hayden and Wheeler expeditions had circulated in the public as stereocards, feeding a new market of picturesque views of natural and engineering wonders that was concurrent with the building of railroads and plotting of roads. A culture of exultant, idealized photographs of nature became characteristic of America's West, enhanced through organizations such as the Sierra Club, and, more recently, by a lineage of photographers who engaged with the upheavals in the land in a more critical, self-referential, artistic manner. The formal, near-abstract images by Lewis Baltz (1945–2014) of the development of Orange County, which hold back on literal readings beyond their almost shocking geometry, are an intriguing counterpoint to the journey mapped in *were it not for*.

For earlier generations of photographers there was an emphasis on composition and on the seductive physicality of a print, to separate it from the dross of the world. The specificity of geography, the place name as title, would also be important. In *were it not for* the settings are unspecified. It is many places all at once, seen as one. Ashkin's work, with its interests in the invisible power structures of the world, resonates with Gordon Matta-Clark's *Fake Estates*, 1973–74, in which the artist literally bought interstitial pieces of land; or with Martin Kippenberger's 1988 book *Psychobuildings*, whose design mimicked that of the German theory publisher Merve. The bogey in all these projects is the scourge that is private property.

If the postwar generation of photographers, showing in a new world of galleries and museums, largely avoided language in their works, in Ashkin's books it is central. Whether it is in the paratactic massing of narrative among the images

in *Long Branch* (2014), or in the brief passage by Anne Boyer in *Horizont* (2018), the tensions between word and picture are the thing. Each is fragmentary, incomplete. The images remind me of Ashkin's series of cardboard models of prisons: they exist to hold thought rather than to describe surfaces. Working against the succor offered by traditions, the verticality of the landscapes suggests stasis and waste, in contrast to horizontal compositional conventions.

The incessant ironies of the text in *were it not for* are like invasive weeds in and around its desolate, cheapened landscapes. The succession of phrases is like a chant, a spell, or a denunciation. There are both priestly and furious qualities to it. The mixture of thoughts with enigmatic pictures evokes a seventeenth-century emblem book. In Ashkin's mapping of an uncanny, forgotten realm along literally any road, time becomes a strange, redemptive present tense outside the banal, destructive order of this harsh world, offering a spark of self-recognition amidst the tumult of dead language and land.

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Brooklyn, 2020