

States of Statue

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experimental exhibition text for Joshua Bilton's photographic installation *States of Statue*
in *Hello World!*, curated by Catherine Turner and Zoe Marden

L'Atelier-KSR, Berlin

2014

<http://joshbilton.com/Page8.html>

A photograph contains the cuts that will cut through it. Evental cuts, spikes that hook the scene's deferred futures into static weaves of greys and silvers. Locked in a moment, the photograph elongates action, defers that which comes next. It sees time step outside of itself as a waft of incremental decisions (the meshes of an afternoon in which leisure pats time on the head and tells it what it's like to choose between coffee and toast and tea), and it sees time come into itself as a basket that hangs between birth and some kind of silver nitrate death. A basket that smells of an intricate tide of chemicals, or pixels. A basket that arrives like the kind of headache which follows an intense experience in which you have given up a part of your life wilfully, rolled some of your future into your present for added spice. A basket that holds its ear up to the conch shell of objects, partakes of their epochal time. A basket that sits on the borderline between object and diagram, trades in the trading cards of being and signing. A basket that sees the shapes of plants as exquisitely architected odes to the stardust from whence they came. A basket that shifts the ground between histories of nostalgia and their respective objects.

The viewing subject, if she be precarious enough, if she lacks coordinates to such an extent that she must land in the photos with all of the weight of a heavy or light homeless heart, might be inclined to think of the photographs as containers, as melting points between object and image. Assembly points – vantage points that tack out a foreground, middle ground and background – from which to dive into a landscape of forms evacuated of their material substrates. (Shrubbery without the shrubs.) The hollowed out shapes delineate spaces to swim in, and their dance of borderlines pulls on the kinaesthetic imagination.

She might be inclined to see the photographs as forms of facing, in which a staged encounter between image-regimes from disparate eras call back and forth to one another in a crossfire of simulated mirror neurons. The sculpted idol calls out to the scanner; the digital print pinches the Victorian portrait's apparatuses for making object-ness. (The photograph-as-facing dissects a swath of precise conflicts between the tasks of photography and the tasks of sculpture.)

She might be inclined to see the images as calls to the decision making process. The suspended present, like an elongated moment in memory before a catastrophe hits, or before an anticipated event doesn't come to pass, fills up with the echo, "Where to go? Where to go? Where to go?" Decision finds its

mixers on the rocks of the stuff that is not its own. Decision-making is torn at the borders between responsibility and relinquishing: losing musculature in a halftone glare, becoming like seaweed that only moves when the current moves it, miming an unshakable couch-potato impassivity in the hopes of keeping one's spot and getting a word in edgewise later, for the benefit of a different witness, a witness to come.

But the photo has no time for such frameworks. It just goes, it just keeps going.

Like the edges of the forms it describes are the sides of a highway, which always look the same, always maintain the same contours, even though you keep driving and driving.

Songlines weave their way between edges, stitching in peals. Doors open and close, leading to a space behind the material.

The photo cuts the sculpture at its horizons, transforming it into a bas-relief mask for the absence of its third dimension.

A fleet of self-centered worlds land not-quite-correctly on a surface. A mannerist gaze, crippled by its own regrets, undoes the symmetries of the proportions on which its glances sup. The crumpled contours submit to this rearrangement. They know that with docility and receptivity, they'll bounce back eventually. They'll revel in their elasticity.

In order to get back to the garden, I have to wring myself out, become very empty. Empty, like a black and white image of a surface.

A sound enters from in front of the frame. It's a slow gaze, a lacy momentum of rumbles, aimed for a point of entry just to the left of the statue's ostensible spine. A piercing but slow sound, the kind of sound like when you're six and you're in bed and suddenly you hear this screaming possibly from downstairs, this screaming that's both quiet and endlessly loud and you're not sure if it's really in the space or if you're the one who produced it, and then you realize you can turn the volume up and down, and yet it still calls from elsewhere. The chorus rolls in from the downstairs of elsewhere and sneaks up behind the bust. The space to the left of its shadow-spine opens up, chews, swallows and sputters.

The friends, seated on the grass, perform a sculptural act. They transform the statue into an eavesdropper; their turned backs tune it into irrelevance. Like radio dials that catch its excesses of tone in a net and select some, displaying them in a forgotten shop window in a ghost town outside of the frame, off camera, to advertise the unconscious thresholds of their purpose.

In 1909, the biologist Jakob von Uexküll coined the term *umwelt* to describe the perceptual world that an organism inhabits, based on the sum total of information received and processed by that organism's nervous system. The field of sensory ecology parses out ecosystems into overlapping, sensory,

“self-centered” worlds, based on what each of its constituent members perceive. Not surprisingly, it has been easier for sensory ecologists to study the perceptual worlds that are most closely in keeping with human sensory capacities. But what does the stone sense? What is its blind/deaf/mute path to perception? In a world in which (as Bergson would have it) matter is an “aggregate of images”, if by image we mean “a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*” (1929, p. vii); in a world in which matter is a self-existing sort of image (p. viii); in a world in which the brain and nervous system are by no means the origin of images, but are merely complex apparatuses through which to produce various kinds of space between perception and action, then the nervous systems can step out of the scene for a minute (myelin sheaths hanging on shelves off to the side). Stepping to the side, they turn down the perceptual volume of the scene (way, way down), and the image-ness of the stone really blossoms. And the sculpted sensory apparatus (the blind eyes, anosmic nostrils, the mouth unfilled by taste) become indices of the absolute zero of the stone’s perceptual world, which is also an absolute everything, an *umwelt* as big as the universe.

According to the ancient Egyptian myth, the dead, upon entering the underworld, would have their hearts weighed against the weight of a single feather. Those whose heart was found to be the same weight as the feather (or lighter) had led a virtuous life and could leave the underworld for paradise. Can the photo give us training wheels for this? Can it slurp up the shapes of the weightedness it feeds on and it shake them like dice, and in this shaking perform a kind of weight training for form that’s as light as a feather, as light as a feather, as light as a feather?

References

Bergson, H. (1929) *Matter and Memory*. Translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

Burnett, S. (2011) “Perceptual Worlds and Sensory Ecology”. *Nature Education Knowledge* 3(10): 75.