INTERVIEW: "Interview with Lewis Baltz – Photography is a Political Technology of the Gaze" (1993)

By Jean-Pierre Greff and Elisabeth Milon

The photographer Lewis Baltz, originally from California, has spent the past thirty years, mainly in urban and suburban surroundings, bringing out what would otherwise remain below the surface, marginalised, rejected or that indeed that would exist solely as a transition between two states, between two moments or places. In terms of photography, you might say it was aiming your viewfinder behind the scenes, looking at what does not want to show itself, to be seen. In political and ethical terms, it could be called a form of obscenity: looking at what should be concealed from view, banished from all consideration. His black-and-white series in the 1970′s included houses under construction (The Tract Houses, 1969-1971) and impenetrable walls with openings that are utterly closed (The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California, 1974) and vast desolate spaces that radiate an air of uninhabitability (Nevada, 1978).

His 1980′s series focused on ill-defined spaces where nothing but cast-off objects and rubbish collected, a type of desolate archaeology of what is secreted outside every town (San Quentin Point, 1986). Appearing at the same time, as a kind of counterpoint to this work, were his large colour prints of the city centre, bathing in its extravagant night lights (Rule without Exception, 1988). Baltz has said that he was engrossed in reading Debord and Virilio at this time, which greatly influenced his crucial work Ronde de Nuit (1992) in which the city becomes a space to gaze at, the scene of a pageant. In many of his projects and productions, especially in the last few years, Baltz has become directly involved in planning within a city or neighbourhood. In the interview he agreed to give for ELIA, he dwells particularly on one of these recent projects, in the Dutch city of Groningen.

Nowadays most photographers seem to regard photography as the best way of recording a 'real present' – of course, this is part of the history of the photography. Do you think we need photographs to give us real information about our present today?

LB: No, I don't think we need that at all, any more; we already know, to the point of ennui, what the world looks like in photographs. Other than in very specialized circumstances, photography has been left behind as a descriptive medium. Of course this loss of utility renders it more available to an aesthetic reading. Since

the beginning photography has insisted on its place among the fine arts, now it has arrived, though in ways and for reasons unsuspected by most of its partisans.

In becoming inutile – no longer content-driven – photography became self-reflexive, much as painting did from the time of Manet. Photographs no longer provoke a meditation upon external phenomena, but on the conditions of their own existence. Photography became Modernist at precisely the moment when Modernism faltered, and became commodified at the moment when the intellectual prestige of the commodity is at its lowest ebb. Poor photography. On the other hand, given the recent applications of technology photographs are now quite acceptable objects for the market.

To speak about the relationship between photography and present reality (or urgent reality) is to mention your own relationship with political involvement. At Groningen, for example, you put your work in the public domain. What does it mean for you to engage in this type of intervention? What made you decide to do it?

LB: My work on public projects is site-determined. The place, its history, its particularities dictate the work that I make and the way in which I choose to have it enter the public arena. As a polemical tactic I brought the idea of warfare to the very peaceful city of Groningen, a radical antidote to the famous repressive tolerance of Dutch political discourse. I did this not to seriously propose that the Dutch revert to Hobbesian savagery, but to point out as strongly as possible the failure of Dutch political practice to harness the terrible commercial energies that in fact will decide Holland's future.

The development and filling-in of space in the Randstad region has raged out of all planning control in the last decade, and the historic restraints that the Dutch imposed upon themselves no longer seem to be in force. Holland is a very rich country; it has always been a very rich country. Historically the Calvinistic Dutch have always had, and have benefited from, a discordant relationship with their own wealth. Dutch democracy is many respects a model for the world. Capitalism moves faster. Issues that would have been the subject of protracted public debate as recently as thirty years ago are now presented as faits accomplis long before any questions can reach the table.

All civilized nations (as well as those that are not) pay lip service to the idea of 'Good Government', although its meaning varies dramatically from place to place. In Holland this idea is so highly and generally esteemed that it is, on occasion, practiced. The dominant form of this practice is negotiated consensus,

which represents one extremity on the spectrum of conflict resolution. The other extremity is warfare.

Nothing could be farther from the objective conditions of modern Holland than China during the Period of Warring States, (c. 400 BC) a turbulent epoch that saw the birth of military theory and of professional strategists. The greatest and best remembered of these defense intellectuals was Sun Tzu. In our own century his thinking has proved indispensable to the victorious strategies of Mao Tse-tung and General Giap. Sun Tzu makes little distinction between statecraft and military theory; his army is a polity in itself, reflecting the qualities of the civil society that it defends, but autonomously from it. Sun Tzu devotes the bulk of his thought to the composition of the army, the character of its officers and men (especially the general) and the skein of obligations, responsibilities, punishments and rewards that govern the relations between its components, believing this to be the sine qua non of military success. In Sun Tzu's estimation only 'The Good Army' can profitably concern itself with the practical questions of strategy, tactics, deception, logistics, and terrain.

In Groningen, the city plan has many of the attributes of a civic artifact: though mutable, it is as imposing as any civic monument, and plays a more active role in the consciousness of the citizens than does, for example, the Eiffel Tower or the Empire State Building. Planning is a civic doctrine here, though the precise form of the plan is not, and has mutated many times, often reversing itself, in response to changing conditions. If the city plan ever had Utopian ambitions, they are no longer in force. The presiding idea now is not the 'Good City' but the 'Good Enough City'. When I was asked by Groningen's Centre for Architecture and Urban Development to observe and remark on the city and its plan, the thinking of Master Sun and his disciples accompanied me. The project was to have four parts: the first was the realization of the work on a small scale for the gallery; the second the installation of the works in public spaces around the city – preferably as close as possible to the place where they were made.

The third step was a public meeting, hosted by the planning office, which took place last January. At this meeting architects, urbanists, planners, and disinterested citizens were invited to attend and respond to my critique of the city plan. Astonishingly enough, over 100 persons participated; most spoke, and many were critical of my criticisms. The final step would be transcribing and editing the talks held at that meeting and making a publication (whether as a book or CD-ROM or on a website) documenting my project and the public reaction. This stage has yet to happen.

It was not your first experience in a public space?

LB: No, though it may have been my most successful in provoking a response. An earlier project was done in 1995 for the city of Luxembourg, during its reign as European Cultural Capital. The piece was titled Shhhhhh! (for Luxembourg). With all the respect and affection for the people who were good enough to invite me there and assist in my work, I was left with a very negative impression of the country. In fact, that it was not a country at all, but a loophole in European Union banking law; a sovereign bank; a bank with a flag. With the exception of a charming medieval Altstadt, which houses a number of excellent restaurants – bankers like to eat well – nearly every other business in the city is a bank; 270 at the time I was there. They had literally filled the city and were expanding into a zone bancaire of the Kirschenberger Plateau just near the city.

It seemed clear to me that Luxembourg needed a new flag, one emblematic of its present status in Europe. My proposal was realized as a light-box transparency installed in the centre of the Altstadt. The image was taken from a 'Do Not Disturb' sign that I stole from a hotel in Slovenia. I seriously doubt that anyone other than the organizers of the project understood what it was, or why it was there.

We often discuss your work in terms of aesthetics. Do you agree with this kind of interpretation, that you are creating beauty out of ugly things?

LB: The idea of beauty is completely arbitrary. Duchamp saw this clearly and acted on it: you don't put an object in a museum because it's beautiful; an object is beautiful because you put it in a museum. Everything is photogenic once it has been photographed. The – successful – mission of photography was to deliver the world and all its contents into the category of the picturesque. None of which has anything to do with art.

Even if you completely eliminate the idea of beauty, to photograph a 'wilderness' seems in itself a political act.

LB: That was my intention, though the politics I was addressing were not parochial but, I hoped, something more general: the line that we draw between the 'clean' and the 'unclean'. I was interested in the literal idea of the obscene: what was permissible to view and what must be kept out of sight, out of mind, out of consideration. Object or conditions that had become culturally invisible, not through concealment but because they were perceived (or not perceived) as being beneath concern. I remember an observation made by Janet Malcolm to the effect that photography gave us a world inhabited by telephone and power lines, wall plugs and electrical cords: all the minutiae that we filter out even as

we are looking. The camera's democratic glass eye records all of these instances with the same precision that it records its most privileged subjects. During a certain period it was exactly these kinds of insignificant, entropic phenomena that captured my interest, the things in a stage between their useful lives and their decay.

You don't look first at the city centre, but at suburbia. Isn't this too a political attitude to reality?

LB: It reflects the objective conditions of my personal history. I was born in southern California, which was only suburbs, though admittedly on a gargantuan scale. Los Angeles built a city centre only fifteen years ago, as something of an afterthought. The suburbs – the edges of the city, the places where city becomes not-city – are the places that are mutating, the places where the future hangs in question. Do you really question what Paris, or New York, will be like in, say, fifty years? I doubt it. The pattern has been set and the changes will occur within an already defined matrix. Los Angeles and the new (or non-) cities are a different matter. In fifty years Los Angeles may not even exist. Or it may rival Sao Paolo's population. The nearest thing we have to an unbuilt city in Europe is Berlin. Its trajectory will not be as radical as L.A., or Shanghai, but it is still the most unpredictable of all the European capitals.

We marked one sentence from Lamarche-Vadel about your work which is very interesting. He said that it resembled the elaboration of the experience of historical breakdown. What is your reaction to that?

LB: Lamarche-Vadel is extremely eloquent; I don't think I can improve on his observation.

Lots of your suburban views are frontal and in black and white. Certain other photographers of your generation use the same device. Can you tell us about your point of view?

LB: One of photography's early attractions for me was that it was – or could be made to appear to be – almost the same as ordinary vision; or at least it was the closest thing to that the arts offered. It had the illusion of being unmediated seeing, and it was that quality that I wanted to exploit. I photographed at eye level, the camera tilted neither up nor down. No optical distortion was permitted to distract the viewer, and every trace of my intervention was either eliminated or minimised to the greatest degree possible. I wanted it to appear as though the camera was seeing by itself.

Two decades into The Crisis of Representation we all know better, and of course, really always did. But certainly until recently photography could suggest an immediacy and a veracity unattainable by any other medium. Video has now replaced it, in that and many other ways. Video, not photography, occupies the high ground in questions of transparency and veracity. It has also replaced still photography as the commercial medium through which we first perceive the outside world. A generation ago when an American wanted to know what the world looked like he picked up a copy of Life. Today he turns on CNN.

Black-and-white was, in its epoch 'the colour of photography' as Robert Frank put it. Which was only to say it was the dominant convention and, by grace of that, the most transparent. Colour was reserved for advertising, or for 'art' photographers who were foolish enough to believe themselves to be Luminists; colour always called attention to itself as an 'art' enterprise. By the 1980s the poles had reversed.

When you look at the centre of the city you seem to be fascinated by architecture and that colour can appear. How would you understand these different subjects and 'manières'?

LB: Architecture, real architecture, always defies reduction into two-dimensional representation; if not it's hardly architecture at all – more like a built piece of graphic design. It would very easy to represent the work of, say Michael Graves because his work already exists in the conditions of an image. It is impossible to represent, with any accuracy, the work of architects like Gehry or Nouvel. As a quick once-over of any architectural magazine will verify, architectural photography is a closed system that refers primarily to its own canons of representation and only tangentially to the architecture in question. I've avoided this dilemma in my own work by only using sub-architecture as a subject.

In the most recent work in this vein, the Generic Night Cities the architecture, when it is present, is a figurant. The subject is seduction and betrayal, the contradiction between the poison-pretty colours and the surface and the wasteland that those images offer the viewer.

You know that our magazine focuses especially on art education. What has your own experience of art education been like?

LB: Thanks to Vietnam and the policy of deferring students from military service I became a scholar in a generation of scholars, the best, or longest, educated

generation in America, before or since. I arrived as far as Master of Fine Arts, the terminal degree in studio work. If the war had dragged on another few years I would have gone on for a doctorate in art history.

I taught intermittently in California, mostly as a kind of gastarbeiter. I never sought a permanent position because I found the idea that you would know exactly where you would be and what you would be doing twenty years later more disturbing than comforting.

Since 1985 my relationship with schools has been as a short-term visitor, working on a specific project with the students for a defined (usually quite short) period of time. One or two of these interventions achieved some interesting results: a project that I directed in 1993 with the students of the ENSB-A and another the following year, with the students of the Schule für Gestaltung in Zürich. The ENSB-A project dealt with the frontiers of and within the city (Paris being a city with a unique sense of both its exact centre and its boundaries). The Zürich project focused on the 4th and 5th districts, a mixed-use area behind the Hauptbahnhof, which houses immigrants, drug dealers, Zürich's famous herd of legally tolerated heroin addicts, industrial-scale love hotels, and most of the school's students. Both projects resulted in exhibitions and publications.

Recently I've made it a practice to participate in as many year-end reviews at as many interesting art schools as would invite me. This year they included Cal Arts, Yale, the Royal College of Art, London, and the Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach am Main. I'm interested in knowing what issues engage the current generation of graduates and how this varies from place to place.

Art schools, it seems to me, can be pretty great places. If you do nothing more than hang out a sign saying 'Art School' a lot of interesting, creative people will start coming through the door. Not to diminish the role of the instructor, but I think that the education that goes on horizontally, between the students is as valuable as the vertical, teacher to student, education.