

# Documents of History, Allegories of Time

Joanna Lowry

## A Journey

Ori Gersht takes a journey on a train from Krakow to Auschwitz, through the snow-blanketed fields and forests of Poland. It is a journey that retraces the final distances travelled by those on their way to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. These travellers would not have seen the landscape that Gersht now photographs, pressed as they were into closed, windowless carriages.

In the series *White Noise* Gersht places his camera waist-high on a tripod, he shoots constantly through the window, aware that the speed of the train means he can never record the images he sees. He is aware that not only is he photographing a place, but also a history. The speed of the train, and indeed the entire modern bureaucratic and technological system of railway network, is also a part of the photograph. The photographs tie together two moments in time – the time it took the victims to reach their destination 60 years ago, and the time it takes to make the photographs some wintry day in 1999.

When the photographs are developed the dark Eastern European forests have dissolved into a blur of memory; snowy fields render the images almost completely white. The evanescence of speed, the sharp zip of the winter air slicing past the train window, the cold glare of the reflected snow have all been strangely frozen in time; what was once all movement has become quite still, material, congealed.

What is most striking about the images is that they seem almost tangible in their evocation of a certain kind of painterliness. The brush strokes are thick beneath the photographic film; movement is scratched across its surface as if with a sharp pin. In one of the images the speeding air appears as if a river of rough crumpled silk has been lain beneath the smooth surface of the photograph – an almost tactile image of time passing. Even those few traces of objects frozen on the film – in the instant of their disappearance – seem to have become paint, and to have lost their transparency to

the real.

These photographs can be seen as allegories of the relationship between photography and history. They tell a story, not just about the places that have been captured on the film, but about photography's complex relationship to the recording and production of history. The journey, in all its historical and geographical complexity, is distilled into a purified space of abstraction. The journey becomes a space of over-exposure where nothing can be seen. The white snowfields seem slowly to erase the past.

*Footprints* depicts an impression barely visible beneath a fall of snow. The footprint as a trace of a human presence, a history, will soon be covered up and forgotten. But the footprint encodes a double symbolism. For philosophers it has always been a prime example of the index, a sign caused by the pressure of an event. Photography is characterised by its indexicality – the light from some real event impressing itself upon the film gives a photo its evidential force. Gersht's picture, in its pure white emptiness, seems to put into question not only the erasure of history but also the limitations of photography's potential to represent it. The monochrome is historically the limit point of painting's refusal of representation. Gersht's photographs frequently involve a play on the relationship between this type of modernist reference and the evidential value of the photograph itself. Modernist painting becomes a rhetorical device within his pictures that signifies a particular way of looking, a correct distance, against which the photograph itself can be read.

## Painting

The modernist aesthetic, as it developed within the history of painting, involved a disciplined delineation of the visual field. The concept of an idealised form of spectatorship emerged, an attempt to give a purified form of attention to the painting itself. In effect it was an attempt to strip away from the domain of painting any regressive tendencies to representation, or to the messy historicity of the world. Notions of flatness, surface and colour became central to the idea of the painting as a modernist art form. Certain devices were established to draw attention to these

qualities, particularly use of the monochrome and the grid. Each of these, in their own way, represented an attempt to establish the pre-eminence of a pure and unadulterated space of the visual within which the spectator could encounter the artwork.

Paralleling this development was the advent of photography, marking the fracturing of any singular concept of the visual. The visual, within modernity, has been profoundly destabilised by the spread of photographic and post-photographic technologies. From its inception photography has troubled our concepts of authorship and intentionality, leading us to question their significance in relationship to the image. The automatic, the mechanical, the multiple and the contingent aspects of the photographic process have subtly subverted the security of the spectator's position. The visual world is thus revealed to be intrinsically unstable, de-centred and semiotically ambiguous. The radical disruption of the visual that Walter Benjamin hailed as a consequence of the spread of reproductive technologies has had, as he also pointed out, profound consequences for our relationship to traditional forms of art, particularly painting.

The monochromatic photograph can thus be said to reference two different histories of the visual – the rise of modernism versus the development of photographic technologies. The monochromatic photograph is always, therefore, in some sense ironic, offering the spectator both the possibility of addressing the photograph as pure painting and, simultaneously, a commentary upon the impossibility of such an encounter. It is a strategy designed firstly to make us reflect upon the absence of the disinterested spectatorial position, and then using that position as a subversive means of calibrating our inevitable relationship to history.

Peter Osborne, in a discussion about the modernist aesthetic, argued that one of the key issues within modernity is our inability to conceptualise history. This, he suggests, is an inability born out of the separation of history from memory, and its reduction to a series of productive technologies. In this context, he suggests, the experience of the artwork – an aesthetic space – offers a significant de-temporalising domain of judgement from which experience might be re-historicised:

...if contemporary art is to remain a form of historical experience, it must continue to pass through the de-temporalising form of the aesthetic on its way to a re-historisation of everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

1. Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, p. 85

In contemplating Gersht's work it is helpful to consider how, through reference to modernist painting, he exploits this de-temporalising form of the modernist aesthetic, thus problematising his relationship to the complexities of history. Modernist tropes such as the monochrome, flatness, the grid and repetition subtly mark out a visual space within which the photograph can be read. They are used to throw into relief a tension between the picture looked at as though it were a painting and the complex temporality of the photograph itself.

One of the *White Noise* series, photographed in Auschwitz, is of a deep frozen pond on the edge of a forest. It evokes a history of elegiac photographic interpretations of this theme. The stark contrasts of black and white, the slender, brooding trees are citations from a familiar symbolist vocabulary. But this pond, dark and still, is purportedly the resting place of the ashes of all those bodies incinerated in the crematoria of the camp. Looked at more closely, *Pond* has a formal exactitude that mimics the flatness of the modernist painted surface. Perspectival distance has been denied by the positioning of the distant edge of the pond as a narrow strip across the top of the picture: a slim white line of snow, a truncated line of tree trunks reduced to a band of chequered greys.

The picture is flat. Its formal plane positions us as spectators within the a-temporality of the modernist aesthetic. But this reductive visual surface of the image is doubled by the seductive instability of the photographic – we cannot ignore that this is a real place in which real and terrible events took place. The slate-dark surface of the image is also the frozen surface of a pond into which the ashes of a thousand people have been thrown. And the scuffed surface disturbance of the ice reminds us that this is still, now, a real place and a particular instant in time.

The dispassionate autonomy of the photographic record coupled with this sense of a persistence of the natural world emphasises the strange, shared indifference of

both camera and place to the passage of human events. And yet the photograph encodes a kind of lyrical self-reflexive symbolism: frozen ice symbolising the freezing of time by photography, its secretive and unyielding surface symbolising the resistance to meaning that the photographic image must always represent. The tear in the ice as a punctum standing in for a trauma or event disturbing the a-historical continual presentness of time in the natural world. Photography itself is therefore referenced in the image as a device for reflecting upon the way we measure time, record it, and weave it into the narratives of history.

## Deserts

These two kinds of time – historical and cosmological – converge most forcefully in the desert pictures. The desert is peculiarly situated within the modern cultural imagination. In mythic terms it is a site of absence, an emptiness, a space beyond the city and the social. If the city has become the emblematic symbol of modernity then the desert is its other and all of those binary oppositions through which culture is customarily distinguished from nature can be mapped onto a polarisation between these two spaces.

The desert is thus mythically positioned outside modernity and outside history and those who live in it or survive it take on a mysterious romance in the modern imagination. In narrative terms it is a place beyond the social that the individual might go out into, or be expelled to, only to return magically transformed and renewed. The desert, therefore, operates almost as a symbol of the limits both of a geography and a history: beyond those limits is the endless disinterested extension of cosmological time.

In reality of course, the desert is often the place in which history is played out and in which wars are fought. The peculiar potent symbolism of the desert ensures that it is written into the historical formation of modern national and political identities even as it promises some notion of an exteriority to them. The desert of Judea, outside Jerusalem is just such a place. In Gersht's photographs the camera records with a kind of impassivity the vast space of the desert as a place in which geology is exposed, in

which rocks might lie undisturbed for a thousand years, in which the events of history are set against the endlessly repetitive cyclical temporality of night and day. It is a space of the sublime. But across these spaces run the tyre tracks of vehicles, scouring the surface of the land, indices of those other more recent histories of exploration, domination, reclamation, colonisation, and war.

The emptiness of the desert as an object of representation for photography again brings us close to the figure of the monochrome in painting. It approaches the status of the blank canvas – a space of the non-event. But Gersht positions his photograph just short of this pure modernist space. The desert floor is flattened but it is not totalising – at the top of the picture lies the narrow strip of the horizon. Gersht's photographs pose the problem of just what events occur within the boundaries of this horizon, and the collision between the time of modernity and the much slower time of the natural world. The impassive gaze of the camera offers a space in which the overlaying of these different kinds of time – cosmological, historical and also the time of the trivial, mundane, everyday event – can be momentarily brought together in the same picture and held there.

## Sarajevo

What kind of distance is it that we have to have from events in order to be able to see clearly? It is of course a distance that can only be produced through the visual discourses we have inherited. It is the disjunction between these different discourses, between the flat, uniform space of modernist painting and the photographic recording of event and place, that jolts us into a more alert state of attentiveness.

A river runs through Mostar in Bosnia. People visit it on summer afternoons to swim or fish. Broad and green it wends its way between the wooded banks of the city's outskirts. The sun gleams on the pearl-white sandbanks as they curve between the rocks towards us. In the distance we can see the tiny figures of sunbathers and swimmers basking in its heat. This is a scene that has all the qualities of an Arcadia, and all the pictorial conventions that traditionally accompany it. The landscape spreads panoramically before us in an idyllic world of leisure and pleasure sustained by a vision

of a natural order. In the foreground, just to the left with his back to us, a fisherman stands on a rock, casting his line into the water. We, the spectators, are on the bridge behind him. But our eye is drawn down to the fisherman, standing there in his red shorts, and pictorial convention suggests that it is through his eyes that we must view the scene. The distance between these two gazes is just slightly too great to be accommodated: it fractures the coherence of the pictorial space. The picture rises up before us with a subtle modernist flatness that belies and sits uncertainly with the pictorial conventions of the Arcadian landscape. In response to this quiet collision of visual perspectives we become more attentive, we remember where we are: in Arcadia but also in Mostar, on the bridge, the focus of so much conflict and so many scenes of violence – in a place where people sunbathe, but also where they make war.

This dialectic between the flatness of the picture plane and the narration of a history is also evident in the other *Afterwars* pictures. These photographs were taken on a journey made to Sarajevo in 1998 in the aftermath of the conflict. They record the ordinary devastations of war: shelled buildings and ruined spaces, signs of everyday life returning or ongoing within the shattered remains of derelict tower blocks and apartments. A man sits on a balcony beside his washing line whilst his neighbours' balconies collapse around him; satellite dishes appear, like flowers springing up between the cracks in the walls. The apartment block is the central motif in this series – a testament to post Second World War planning, a symbol of utopian modernism. It represents a vision of modernist social engineering, egalitarianism and a vision of social order that was integral to its very design. These buildings, with their serried ranks of windows and balconies, their reduction of the complexities of social life to the formality and uniformity of the grid, and their bright blocks of primary colour, were also about an attempt to build a kind of future. In this respect the signs of military conflict that pit and scar their surfaces are all the more poignant.

In Gersht's photographs it is this bright structure of modernity that forms the underlying grid of his composition. The white walls, black lines and coloured window blinds measure out a flat pictorial space that evokes the painting of Mondrian. This

reference to the surface of painting is a constant presence within the series, directing us towards a detached site of spectatorship. From this position the photograph takes on a kind of democratic evenness. The camera records only the space and denies us any narrative or melodrama. Photography as a space of information, a plenitude of detail, insinuates itself into the neutralised space of painting, alerting us to the irony of its own insufficiency as a means of recording the multiple histories that make up an experience of war.

These photographs tend towards the allegorical in the way in which they overlay a series of layered references to modernist painting, modernist architecture and to photographic documentation itself. *Untitled* (p. 27) synthesises the issues that are raised. It is a quintessentially modernist image, referencing the early modernist photographers of the 1920s and their belief in the possibility of a new photographic language that would speak to the modern age, a photographic language that was wedded to a visual language of design and architecture and industrial production. But the monochromatic painted surface of the wall depicted in the photograph is fractured, pitted by shell holes, traces of a conflict that exists beyond the space of the picture which lock it into a different kind of history, a different kind of time.

### Knowledge Factories

The architecture that preoccupies Gersht in Sarajevo shares a common heritage with the collection of school buildings photographed in England. The development of these buildings was part of the post-war regeneration that began in the late 1950s and 60s. It represented a national commitment to state education and the concept of a meritocratic society. The modularised prefabricated structures are constructed within the same modernist grid, tropes of repetition are moderated by blank rectangles of colour and glass. The schools, like the buildings of Sarajevo, mourn a brand of state utopianism: Gersht's photographs meticulously record the fading, peeling infrastructures that had always been fantasised as new.

If the modern state is inscribed upon the surface of these buildings, it is a



surface that is revealed in these photographs to be fragile and thin. The constructions of modernity are placed in an uneasy relationship to the slower cycles of time evidenced by the natural world. Each of these buildings is set among trimmed lawns, the saplings that were planted at the time of construction have grown up into small trees. Two measures of time are therefore included within each picture – the time it takes a tree to grow, the time it takes the fabric of the new building to decay.

In several of the pictures the schools' plate glass windows reflect the trees in front of them. A sense of the temporary status of these buildings is evoked by the way in which they are presented as thin screens sandwiched between layers of foliage. The representation of the building as a screen is highlighted again by the gridded structure of the windows and prefabricated panels, and by the way this grid is then itself screened and re-flattened by the lattice of a chain-link fence. Yet within this structure of uniformity and repetition, clearly connoting the production system of the educational industry, small details intrude – a torn curtain, a drawing pasted to a window, a venetian blind strung awry. Each of these incidents indicates a contingency that cannot be contained by the rigours of the aesthetic model being imposed.

One of the principle tensions in *Knowledge Factories* is between the implications of the rhetoric of the grid and the recording of the incidental and contingent events within that formation.

The grid, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, acts as both a fundamental recurring device within modernism and a means of organising the surface plane of the modernist abstract painting. Its lack of hierarchy or centre was fundamentally resistant to narrative, time and incident. Its deployment represented an attempt to define a site of pure spatiality that would be resistant to referentiality. The material surface of the picture could thus be seen as the absolute originary beginning of the medium of painting itself. Krauss's critique of the grid's centrality within modernist practice involved a re-affirmation of the necessary referentiality of the grid itself. She made two significant observations. Firstly the grid always doubles the surface of the canvas:

*...the grid remains a figure, picturing various aspects of the 'originary object':*

*through its mesh it creates an image of the woven infrastructure of the canvas; through its network of co-ordinates it organises a metaphor for the plane geometry of the field: through its repetition it configures the spread of lateral continuity. The grid thus does not reveal the surface, laying it bare at last; rather it veils it through repetition.*<sup>2</sup>

2. Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths' (1981), re-printed in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwell 1992, p. 1,063

Secondly the grid cannot escape a history of references where it has been traditionally used to transfer the picture onto the surface through gridded overlays, matrices and perspective lattices:

*Thus the very ground that the grid is thought to reveal is already riven from within by a process of repetition and representation: it is always already divided and multiple.*<sup>3</sup>

3. *ibid.*, p. 1,063

Krauss' argument draws our attention to a fundamental problem within the formation of a modernist aesthetic: that is, the impossibility of the desire for a pure space of non-referentiality, and the ever-present possibility of a collapse of that space into reference and repetition. There is a sense in which Gersht's play with the rhetorical device of the grid within his architectural photographs enacts an exploration of precisely this dilemma. By invoking the persistent indexicality of the photographic image Gersht performs a deconstruction of the pure space strived to by modernist surface.

Photography, as a technology that is profoundly implicated in the way in which we conceptualise temporality and history, situates itself at the limit point of the modernist aesthetic – at the point at which the concept of a pure visual non-referential surface is unsustainable and gives way beneath the pressure of the complexity of real events, real history and real time.

## Stadiums

Gersht's preoccupations with the dialectical relationship between the flattened modernist surface of the image and the complexities of photography's relationship to

time are re-visited in a new way in the *Mass Culture* series. These panoramic images of spectacular contemporary national monuments build on his interests in a multiplicity of ways: in the formation of national identities, in architecture as an expression of utopian idealism, in the coupling of hubris and melancholy, and in the photographic disruption of conventions of pictorial space and time. Taken with a revolving camera, those are perhaps the most playful images that he has produced – in their engagement with a culture of leisure, rather than with the traumas of war, and in their embrace of a spectacularisation of the image.

The extended time of the exposure is translated into a long narrow rectangle. The circular space of the stadium, as experienced by a figure in the middle of the football pitch, is translated into a long, rippling undulating two-dimensional form, a form that contains the time of a revolution whilst simultaneously suppressing it. The panoramic format is predicated upon a central observer, yet in the form of its production subtly evacuates him from that central position. I have argued elsewhere that the fascination with the panoramic format in contemporary practice, in sharp contrast to its uses in the early nineteenth century, is symptomatic of a de-centring of the subject in relationship to history.<sup>4</sup> Spectacular technical effect becomes a means of complicating and problematising the act of spectatorship, the very act of production becomes fetishised, and time itself is revealed as an effect rather than a subject of representation.

Gersht's panoramas transform the stadiums into fictions of hallucinatory proportions that mirror the grandiosity of their ambition. But these pictures of course are taken not from the viewpoint of the habitual spectator in the stands but from the centre of the pitch, from the viewpoint of the camera. In some of the images the camera revolves not only once but one and a half times: further enhancing the sense of the artificiality of the image. The warping of the space by the image involves an ironic realisation of the impossible desire implicit in the architectural project itself. Anthony Vidler, commenting upon the history of the concept of space itself, has suggested that:

*The Enlightenment dream of a rational and transparent space, as inherited by*

4. Joanna Lowry, 'History, Allegory, Technologies of Vision' in *History Painting Reassessed*, ed. David Green and Peter Seddon, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2000

*modernist utopianism, was troubled from the outset by the realisation that space as such was posited on the basis of an aesthetics of uncertainty and movement and a psychology of anxiety, whether nostalgically melancholic or progressively anticipatory.*<sup>5</sup>

5. Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, p. 3

and it seems clear that these panoramas reveal just such an instability within the over-determined prestige architectural projects that we use to symbolise our modernity.

## History

Photography theory has always been preoccupied with time – with the paradoxical way in which the photographic image stops time and extends the instantaneous into a kind of infinity. It also intervenes in our understanding of the past, making it present for us whilst also reminding us inexorably of its distance. More powerfully still photography has become a dominant cultural metaphor for the operations of memory: its melancholy fragmentariness, the slow chemical processes of development and printing and fading, the archive and the album – these are all elements of the memoro-photographic that have preoccupied artists and theorists. They have also commented upon the way in which photographic technologies are forces of disruption in our sense of history. Philosophers like Walter Benjamin and Kracauer have provided us with a template for thinking about the operations of modernity and the fragmentation of subjectivity consequent upon that. In their writings photography is one of the key agents in the shift from narrative to montage, from continuity to fragmentation, from unity to multiplicity and replication. History in the modern age can only be understood through embracing the discontinuous, through a piecing together and juxtaposition of broken pieces. History from this perspective is subverted by the geographic, dispersed across multiple sites of production, part of a politics of space as much as time.

Gersht's photographs meditate upon history through the language of space: space as geography through the recording of places travelled to and journeys made, but also space as a visual template for measuring the world and situating oneself in relationship to it. The photographs thus play a part in two very different stories. One

story concerns the photographer and the many journeys that he has taken. Always with a sense of openness and expectation. Always on his own. Usually with a book in his luggage to give him inspiration and a narrative plot to mirror his own. It is a story about him as a storyteller, about his imaginary relationship to the places he visits, about the anecdotes he collects, about contingency and chance, and about the details that he notices and records and the way in which through his photographs they accumulate into a much bigger story about nations and wars and histories and utopianism and melancholia.

The other story, which is embedded in this one and weaves through it, and is the one I have told here, is about his dialogue on those journeys with art and modernism; it is about the rigours of form and a particular kind of attentiveness to the image. It's a story about the search for a particular kind of space – somewhere between the horizon and the frame, between perspective and the surface, between the trace and the sign. It is a search for some kind of correct distance from which we can see clearly.

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