

as a cultural/artistic practice is always having to be made and remade in this way: the very concept of the "photographic" is always provisional, and one of the tasks facing the practitioner is to propose a set of conditions under which photography might appear as a practice and might become something beyond a product of the industrial machine. It is also the case that, in order to be made, it has first to be imagined. If we come back to the idea of "Photography" as a provisional proposal we might have to consider that is neither an art practice nor a technology, but is maybe more like an imaginary object, an imaginary object that originates from a particular form of contact with the world, and which then offers back a particular form of contact with the world. This seems to be a form of contact that we cannot fully understand, that sits outside words – so we have to find new ways to situate it within a framework of words and conversations and debates that can hold it in our imagination. This then has been the work of theory in the academy – not to tell us what photography is in any definitive or prescriptive sense – but to create a space of debate and conversation within which this imaginary object can be sustained and can grow and can expand the way we make meaning in the contemporary world.

One of the biggest challenges is how to help students to be aware of this space of ideas, and to help them to use it to develop their own imaginary possibilities for the photograph without running the risk of either becoming

a slave to theory or alternatively making work that attempts to illustrate it. It is only too easy to produce an elaborate artist's statement that sucks the life out of an image by explaining its relationship to the work of Blanchot or Derrida in minute detail. The image then begins to operate as an allegory of the sacred text and can die a terrible death. Or just become uninteresting, an appendage to the idea. Photographs, we always have to remember, aren't theories themselves and they can't do the work of theory – they become interesting when they butt up against our theoretical preconceptions and seem to challenge them: that's when we know that they are really occupying that special imaginary space and doing what only photography can do. That is the point at which the image is making a claim that "this is what it is to be a photograph at this moment now".

From this opening gambit, this strong proposition, we can, in the space of a critique group, help this conversation to begin as we all struggle to find the words that explain how this picture works and why it works in this peculiar and compelling way. Writers and philosophers can help us – they can provide philosophical markers signalling the presence of particular debates, they mark out a discursive space, a conversational territory within which the photograph can begin to emerge and take on meaning, but in the end the photograph itself, if it is working, will cease to be an imaginary proposition and will make all those other voices go quiet.

#### CAPTIONS

- 1 Victor Burgin ed., *Thinking Photography*, London Macmillan, 1982
- 2 Rosalind Krauss, *Reinventing the Medium*, *Critical Inquiry*, no. 25, Winter 1999.
- 3 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, HarperCollins, 1982

[1][2] → Seán Padraic Birnie, *Memories of the Overlook Hotel* #5, [2][3] → Seán Padraic Birnie, *Memories of the Overlook Hotel* #2, [3][3] → Seán Padraic Birnie, *Memories of the Overlook Hotel* #3, [4][3] → Seán Padraic Birnie, *Memories of the Overlook Hotel* #4, [5][3] → Martin Seeds, from the series *Assembly* (1), [6–12][3] → Martin Seeds, from the series *Assembly* (1), [13–14][3] → Martin Seeds, from the series *Assembly* (1), [15][3] → James Murray, *Reflections* #1, [16][3] → James Murray, from the series *Semibalance*

#### Some Imaginary Photographies

Richard Burniston imagines that photography can not only record events, but can enable them to be repeated, reconstructed, relived. In the culture of the copy there is no original so why not then accept the logic of this idea and pursue the idea that the original can be accessed through the copy? Obsessed also by the idea that the technology of repetition might also be linked psychoanalytically to a response to trauma, our urge to continually revisit the wound in the real that cannot be healed, he has sought to develop a series of reconstructions of childhood events – events in this case that did not happen. Every weekend for months he returns to the river he was forbidden to play in as a child, relights the fire he did not light, makes the den he never played in, inhabits the world he didn't inhabit. He stands in the middle of the river with his tripod, tries to make the picture that can stand in place of the childhood memory he never quite had. He tells us the story of the making and re-making, the continual failure and the attempt to make the image complete. He makes a very particular proposition about photography's relationship both to the psyche and to the past.

Martin Seeds suggests that photography emerges somewhere between document and allegory. Prowling the gardens of Stormont Castle where the government of Northern Ireland sits in fragile disharmony, he collects equally fragile specimens of foliage and plant life, contact printed from his iPhone, archived, set against a sweeping image of the castle itself toppling towards the horizon and the bare trees silhouetted against a fiery sky. Fragility here is both real (the smallest twigs making their presence felt through a contact i-print) and symbolic (the fragility of the political world), and his photographs skirt the possibilities of a landscape beyond the pictorial, somewhere in the felt space between the earth and the sky.

Sean Padraic Birnie knows that technology is haunted. Inspired by the historical precedents of spirit photography and mediums, and the writings of Derrida, Birnie imagines a pervasive technology that is haunted by the presence of others. He watches "The Shining". He imagines the space of The Overlook Hotel. He imagines that the film itself might be haunted. He downloads the image, pauses it forensically halfway through the process. What might we see there? Whether revisiting the black and white darkroom and considering how the image might emerge like ectoplasm from the body of the medium, or downloading digital files on his laptop, the same question is being proposed: what desire is it that haunts our technology, and what does it say about our complex relationship to technology in modernity?

James Murray considers photography as a space of love, intimacy and first contact. Taking as his starting point the story recounted in Pliny's *Natural History* of the Corinthian Maid who traced the silhouette of her lover on the wall of the room while he slept before he left her and the city. In the story the maid's father goes on to make a clay imprint of the cast shadow for her to keep as a substitute for the lost lover. This is a story of the origins of art that places it securely in a discourse of presence and absence, love and loss, the slippage between icon and index. Murray develops a practice based upon the exploration of closeness and distance, the photograph as a Bazin-informed death mask, the relationship of the cast to the photograph to the photogram; the move from the essential image that touched the body of the loved one to the multiple photocopies of a Greek sculpture; a play of inversions and transformations all derived from the primary moment at which the photograph provides us with its own very special cast of the shadow.