

Eric Baudelaire, *tele-reality*

by Guillaume Désanges

What lends Eric Baudelaire's photographs their subtly fantastical quality is, first of all, his way of representing the human. While human presence is always perceptible in his works, it is never frontally apparent, yet always there by proxy: remote, absent, fragmented, projected, frozen, even spectral. Men here are seen less as individuals, as autonomous psychological entities, than as the index of a pre-existing situation that seems to be beyond them – subjects subordinate to a political, technological or economic order. They appear as fugitive visions and mobile shadows of anonymous passers-by in *Circumambulation*.¹ Protagonists are static, sleeping, mere representations or simply absent (except for the traces of industrial activity) in the *Imagined States* series.² They become mechanical operators (the billposter and the subway users) in *Sugar Water*³ or archetypes, absorbed in their deliberately dramatised poses in *The Dreadful Details*.⁴ One could describe Baudelaire's photography as 'structuralist,' such is its focus on fragmentary representations of systems,



architectonic elements and devices in which, however subtly robbed of their reality, men appear as mere walk-ons. Functional parts. Accessories. The portrait of the puppeteer in the *Imagined States* series is emblematic of such a condition. He reflects back that reality, as a manipulator who is clearly not a demiurge but a hollow operator, the effigy of a technician, a puppet himself.

Circumambulation, 2007
two channel video and text
19 min 43 s & 19 min 42 s
installation view, Juana de Aizpuru gallery

This political dimension, albeit essential, is never emphatic in Baudelaire's work, for it is immediately counterbalanced by aesthetic qualities – the careful, pictorial-style composition, the precision of the framing, the impeccable quality of the prints and a certain solemnity in the choice of formats. This deliberate double positioning, that of a rigorous and political conceptual photography coupled with the formal seductiveness of the 'beautiful image,' sometimes flirting with an elegant documentary style, is constantly destabilising our perception of this work in which most of the intellectual issues rest on a network of referents and motifs that are subjacent, indirect and dissimulated. If the purpose here is to give form to ideas, then it is definitely done through the image itself rather than in the discourse that accompanies it, or even, more precisely, in ways of doing things rather than in the motifs represented. In Baudelaire's practice it is usually the working process that creates tension and politicizes the subject matter. In order to signify the way in which contemporary wars, for all the ubiquitousness and proclaimed immediacy of information channels, seem somehow unreal,



Imagined States (Puppeteer), 2005
c-print & diasec, 37.8 x 47.2 inches

fictionalised and hopelessly out of phase with real experience, Baudelaire restages a false conflict situation in a real Hollywood set. With its actors, make-up, costumes and lighting, the image is pure theatricality, while at the same time evidencing a troubling cognitive efficacy. *Site Displacement / Déplacement de Site* involves the same kind of action-based critique. In order to give form to questions about the topographical determinants of a French city, Clermont-Ferrand, where he has been invited to carry out a project during a residency, Baudelaire privileged the metaphor of *process* rather than of form. The development of this city with its industrial tradition is inextricably tied to a single century-old business (Michelin tyres), whose production units, as is the case in many other zones, have been gradually moved out to emerging countries. But it was not the traces of this industrial mutation, however visible in the city, that the photographer chose to directly represent in his images. Rather, he chose to refer to this phenomenon by reproducing this economic process at the level of his own practice. Picking up on an announced project – which was later indefinitely postponed – for a joint venture, involving the construction of an overseas Michelin factory in Bombay, he sent the photographs he took in Clermont-Ferrand to an Indian photographer that he knows and hires him to produce a series of similar photographs that would act as (Indian) echoes of his views of Auvergne's capital city. This act of artistic twinning is neither documentary in nature nor is it a simple denunciation of a significant economic situation and its possible social consequences. Rather, the project itself functions as an activation of the concept of subcontracting and outsourcing. The result, which is striking (it is almost impossible to distinguish the origin of the photographs) extends the work's concern to the topographical uniformity induced by globalisation.



Site Displacement / Déplacement de Site shows clearly how Baudelaire manages to transfer the critical thrust of his work from the political to the artistic domain, by opting to address the fundamental themes of the representation (globalization, outsourcing, subcontracting) through a manipulation of the rules of his own medium. This general strategy of displacement and evasion unfolds the issues rather than circumscribes them, and opens up a multitude of perspectives. Thus, *The Dreadful Details* prompts us to reflect on war but also on the nature of images. Thus, *Site Displacement / Déplacement de Site* evokes not only industrial offshoring but also the blurring of the notion of authorship in photography (especially in the digital age).

The Dreadful Details, 2006
c-print & diasec, 82.3 x 147.7 inches, diptych
commissioned by the C.N.A.P.

It sometimes seems that Baudelaire approaches these specifically photographic issues with a sense of frustration, for he seems doggedly determined to probe the medium's limits as a way of representing the real. The ontological capacity of the still image to represent movement, for example, is given rather direct form in *Sugar Water* and *VBLANK*,⁵ which takes up the ideas of Bergson and Deleuze on the irreducible antagonism between interval and duration in the conception of an event. These aporias are in fact spatially resolved in *The Dreadful Details*, a deliberately condensed war photograph, which unites in a single scene the roles of innocent victim, soldier, civilian, intellectual, witness / voyeur, etc. It's all there, but unfolded on the surface of the image. A Cubist-type technique forces the gaze to

go through a real obstacle course in this scene which functions as a 'montage' both in the cinematographic and physical sense of the word.

Thus, the channel of Baudelaire's critique is always aesthetic rather than discursive. Without leaving his specific field, in piece after piece he probes the nature of artistic representation in relation to the experience of reality, working to intensify the sense of that distance created by the representational arbitrariness of the rules of art. Sometimes he even duplicates or exaggerates it. In *Blind Walls*,⁶ the graffiti is marked on the plexiglas protecting the work, as if to underscore the photograph's double distance from the real façade. In *Sugar Water*, the event (an explosion of a car in a street) is distanced by photography, then by the performance of the billposter, and, finally, by the video itself. In the same way, *Site Displacement / Déplacement de Site* doubly scrambles our references: by means of a visual distancing (oblique views of a complex but invisible socio-economic reality), and also a geographical one (Clermont-Ferrand / Bombay).

More than any other discipline, perhaps, photography is a matter of morality, notably because it is directly connected to the real, because its technical ease makes it widely accessible, and because it is at once composition and testimony, objective capture and arbitrary decision. How to avoid aestheticising one's subject? And, at the same time, how not to misdirect the power of an idea? Baudelaire probes the contours of these ethical questions in every work. Specifically, in order to circumvent the temptation of 'lifelike' photographs, and to avoid any misunderstanding in that regard, he produces his stagings of the real without any reference to an identified or even identifiable situation. The question of naming is crucial here. By refusing to give a precise name to things, men and places,

Baudelaire decontextualises and deterritorialises, adopting semantic abstraction over characterisation. But his images do not become anonymous for that matter. Instead, they refer to strangely familiar 'benchmark' situations, the exact referent for which nevertheless remains beyond our grasp. In *Imagined States*, Abkhazia, which is not mentioned, is a universal exemplar of an industrial utopia in its death throes, captured in a transition that could lead either way, to construction or destruction. *The Dreadful Details* presents a benchmark of contemporary conflict, never seen and yet already memorised.

It may also be his mediation on the ethics of photography that keeps Baudelaire away from allegory and makes him prefer to take his subject from what already exists, from the figurative, even if he then goes on to stage it. His position seems to fit the term 'factography,' as used by Tretyakov and quoted by Benjamin Buchloh.⁷ This new technique of representation, literally a 'writing of the facts,' gradually replaced the abstract *faktura* of the radical avant-gardes in the Soviet Union during



Sugar Water, 2007
HD video projection
72 mins



the 1920s. The concept was to substitute the idea of a formal science of reality, mainly through photomontage, to the search for transcendental forms of art advocated by the Suprematists. In Baudelaire's work, there is always an element of (formal and conceptual) photomontage within a given image, and an effort to exploit the maximum legibility of the elements in the image, but without any verist or documentary concern. As we know, such an orientation is hard to maintain, given its proximity to the practices of propaganda and advertising. But taking a moral position does not mean one should not take any risks.

1. *Circumambulation* (video installation) involves two camera views, one pointed skywards, the other down to the ground, held during two consecutive walks around the construction site at Ground Zero in New York. Presented slightly out of sync on two monitors, the film leaves the hole created by the attacks of 9/11 permanently off-screen, even though this is what defines the walk. Thus the work elicits a kind of topographic amnesia, transforming this physical nucleus of contemporary conflicts into an indeterminate, abstract zone.

2. *Imagined States*, a series photographed in the independent state of Abkhazia in Georgia, represents a political entity caught between construction and destruction, birth and agony, structured identity and Romantic chaos.

3. *Sugar Water* is a 72-minute looped HD video projection of a Metro billposter who, in real time, puts up poster after poster of the same event (a vehicle exploding in the street), each one covering the last. The work tests the possibilities of physical sequencing in relation to a news-like image, confronting the duration of the physical labour of the publication with the immediacy of the accident.

4. *The Dreadful Details* is the artist's most talked-about work in recent years. This reconstitution of a contemporary war scene

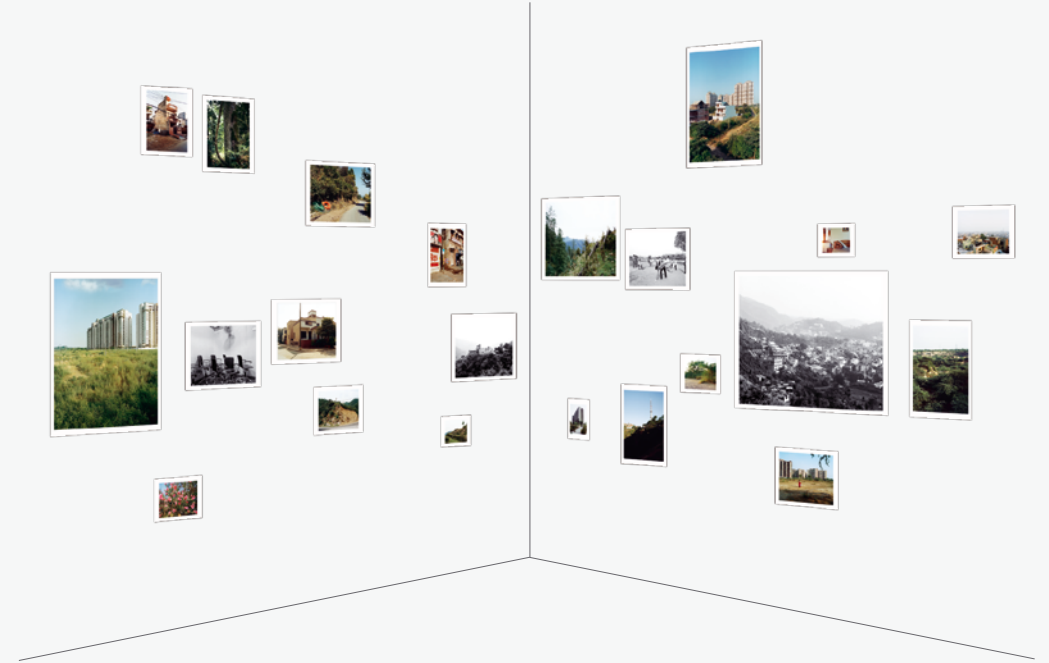
(showing American GIs in a Middle Eastern setting) made in Hollywood and meticulously composed in the great tradition of history painting is incisive in its simultaneously emotionally immediate and protocol-distanced relation to current events. But far from being a provocative comment on photojournalism, this work actually questions the existence of a collective visual memory that could be described as almost 'clichéd.'

5. *VBLANK* is a vertical triptych in black and white representing three different phases of a given situation during the same day: a house plant facing a switched-on television. The long exposure time means that the images on the television have merged into a simple source of monochrome light, taking over from the fading light of day.

6. *Blind Walls* is a series of wide photographic views of the windowless gables of late nineteenth-century Parisian buildings. A professional graffiti artist was asked to tag the plexiglas protecting each image with phrases like *I Hate Ground Zero* or *I Spin Ground Zero*.

7. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Faktura et factographic', *Essais historiques I – Art moderne*, Villeurbanne: Art Éditions, 1992.

Blind Walls (I Hate, I Need, I Speak), 2007
photographs, plexiglas & graffiti, each 36 x 47 inches
installation view, Elizabeth Dee Gallery



Déplacement de Site / Site Displacement, 2007
22 c-prints
dimensions variable
partial installation view