

■ John Stezaker

The Approach London November 11 to December 19

The meaning of *The Third Person Archive* resides in its varied and evolving uses, both individually and socially. Beginning in 1976 and running in this showing to 1993, it opens as a series of investigations that explore the enchantments produced by the isolation of fragments in a topographical image. These microcosmic fragments, hinged predominantly on isolated figures, or the incidental 'stuffage' overlooked if not actively avoided by most photographers, are organised along a series of permutations involving figure and format: figures single and paired, looking back, separated by a street lamp, or approaching a curb. Each is framed first in a horizontal format and then later a vertical letter-box aperture that shifts the mode of display and look of the archive from the topographical and imperious 'eye' of the beholder to the typographical 'I' suggestive of the subjectivity, or individuality of both the observer and the observed.

The descriptive paragraph above, written as if it almost attempts to function as an explanatory wall panel, reduces, perhaps even violently, the uses of John Stezaker's *Third Person Archive*. Stezaker does not look for images – he finds them. There is a difference. This has to do with letting go, if not indeed ceding some control over an image, but also opening oneself to the pleasures of being lead by an image and significantly, an image at home along the margins of its mass culture. If one were to begin to excavate the uses of *The Third Person Archive* for Stezaker, I suspect that such an effort would be quickly overtaken by a mounting catalogue of historical exits and retrievals: from certain excesses and extremes of conceptualism, to the reclaiming of its suppressed prehistories in Surrealism through to the found image, Cubism and collage. Along the way, one would also likely travel from Mao to Merleau-Ponty, the Situationists and the production and reproduction of space through an image. But I am not convinced a review is the ideal place or time to discuss this, or even if the evolution of an artistic practice and a set of politics can necessarily be reduced to such a graphic trail.

Originally conceived as culminating in a book work, this continually reshuffled collection of between 175 to 250 images – it is both additive and subtractive – has most often been shown among friends in Stezaker's home when black archival boxes open and lend *The Third Person Archive* a familial relation to *Le Cadavre exquis*. The archive – it is not Stezaker's

only one – comprises images culled from a single source. The images reproduced through lithography and as photo-gravures in *Countries of the World* as it was serialised during the 20s and 30s were themselves drawn, in part, from national archives that spanned the history of photography. The selection at The Approach focuses on the European figure in some 30 examples that offer a historical exploration of the everyday individuality of the figure as they walk through the early modernist city. A strange thing happens: as the figures get smaller, more of their individuality emerges. At the same time, I am convinced as a viewer that I have access to some form of collectivity and consciousness through these individual acts of posthumous voyeurism. Witness the possibility of enchantment. If one could open the museum case, lift the glass and then the over-mount that frames the fragmentary, and yet-complete image reproduced on the invitation card, the tiny figure with shadow intact looking back from the top of a small flight of stairs would dissolve into the anonymous identity of a middle European market square.

My narrow focus on *The Third Person Archive* enforces a similar suppression of subject as it does itself. All that I have so far covered over with my own window mount is that which allows the archive to find its index or analogue in our psychical experience of lived and built space as scattered

semantic places whose text is written into meaning through spatial practices of not only walking but also reading. Here are exactly those works that draw on the pedestrian practices of those who live below the thresholds at which visibility begins. A suite of seven found images, *City*, 2000-04, depicts the already collaged nature and everyday strangeness of our built environment through the most simple and subtle of adjustments. The found image *Icarus*, 1999, is something of a bridging work between the two 1987 examples from the series *Underworld* included in the show and those more recent works. Like the spaces of the images in *City*, that of *Icarus* is inverted to show a beautifully successful picture of the failure of progress but one in which, this time, the hero survives or at least is still falling. ■

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John Stezaker
City IV 2000-04

