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John Stezaker, or the world turned upside down

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Introduction

The critical literature on the work of John Stezaker (b.1949) struggles to situate it in relation to post-war art movements and practices. Some critics invoke the general category of conceptual art, but this fails to account for his deep commitment to the image. Post-conceptual appropriation art of the 1970s and 1980s – exemplified by the American artists Barbara Kruger (b.1945), Cindy Sherman (b.1954) and Richard Prince (b.1949) and the British artist Victor Burgin (b.1941) – might seem to capture something of Stezaker's use of found media images. However, his work, unlike theirs, is not aimed at laying bare pop cultural stereotypes. In fact, his photography collection has more in common with the found objects of André Breton (1896–1966) or Joseph Cornell (1903–72) than with the objects of 1970s appropriation art. His attitude towards found photographic material is not critical. On the contrary, as this article will argue, Stezaker's photocollages are intended to rescue the image from its current condition of legibility and transparency. His practice aims to liberate the photograph from its status as a vehicle of communication by making it visible as an image.

Stezaker's found photographs are estranged from the immediacy of current visual culture. Severed from their original context, his vintage film stills, publicity portraits, postcards, topographic and landscape photographs enjoy a strange afterlife of visibility. The artist's various strategies include using standard photocollage techniques, such as cutting and juxtaposing disparate components. Yet he carefully aligns elements so that they create a more subtle and subversive effect than the stark juxtapositions typical of most photocollage. He says of his technique that he 'wanted to introduce a seam into what was seamless about the media image'.[1] At other times, his alterations – such as simply cropping the image – are minimal. His 'unassisted readymades', for example, are found photographs that have somehow failed or are damaged in ways that interfere with the transparency of the image.[2] One important defamiliarising technique – rotating the photograph 180 degrees – has proven to be particularly important in the formation of Stezaker's distinctive approach. His decision to turn the photograph upside down was inspired by two revelatory image encounters.[3] He has identified several such chance image encounters, but this article focuses on two that involved upside-down images. The first initiated his well-known series using film stills and publicity portraits, whereas the second inspired his lesser-known landscape series.

This article examines these image encounters and considers the significance of the inverted photograph with reference to two key, unpublished sources. The first is a draft lecture written in 2018, when Stezaker was invited to contribute to a symposium at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, devoted to the work of the French philosopher and writer Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003).[4] The text makes clear that Stezaker's initial encounter coincided with his introduction to Blanchot's writing, and that the two are inextricably linked. The second source is a detailed letter composed in May 2024 specifically for the purposes of this article.[5] Given that neither text has been published, the present author draws on both at length.

Film still

In 1972, when Stezaker was a student at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, his then-girlfriend, Rosetta Brooks, found a striking publicity film still and handed it to him upside down. The image seemed to him mysterious and puzzling. Taken in 1939, the photograph shows a male pianist and a muse-like female admirer leaning on the piano. In the inverted photograph, which was to become *Untitled* FIG. 1, the woman's reflection in the piano looms up and dominates the scene, subduing the dozing pianist. In his lecture, Stezaker recounted the incident and its impact:

> I wanted to preserve something about that moment of misrecognition of the image, something of its momentary illegibility, and I put it this way up on the music stand of our piano and then on successive mantelpieces in my various flats and studios between then (1972) and 1977 at which time I mounted and framed it. In between these times it oversaw a multiplicity of conceptual, post-conceptual and Situationist inspired *détournements* (turnings) of the image – image-text works, re-captioned found images, turning the image to opposite uses at first political and then poetic – all of which I ended up finding unsatisfactory until this image alone survived – uncaptioned and silent, leaving me with what I thought was a cul-de-sac for my practice as an artist in the simple unmediated found image.[6]

The image proved to be anything but a cul-de-sac, for it initiated Stezaker's practice of collecting old film stills and making alterations to them – cutting, cropping, superimposing, rotating – to draw out something latent in the images, 'the source of their unsettling nature'.[7] Most significant for the artist was the way the inverted photograph privileged the reflection over the 'real' within the image.[8]

Following this encounter, Stezaker began supplementing his existing collection of old postcards with the discarded remnants of the film industry's publicity machine. Around the same time, he was introduced – again by Brooks – to the writings of Blanchot. Stezaker has said that he avoided academic studies of Blanchot, feeling instead that the writer's essays spoke to him directly. He credits Brooks not only with discovering the first of what would become a central image in his practice – the film still – but also with introducing him to the intellectual tools for engaging with it.[9] Although Blanchot is an influential figure in literary and philosophical circles, he has been largely overlooked by art historians and critics, except, perhaps, in the ways his thinking persists indirectly through such theorists as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. The critical significance of his reflections on the image remains underacknowledged.[10]

Stezaker came to understand his response to the inverted film still when reading Blanchot's 'The essential solitude' (1951) and 'The two versions of the imaginary' (1907), which seemed to justify his fascination with the image. He later wrote:

> I had found that my earlier practices of appropriation, however ambiguous the textual or contextual *détournements*, always reduced the image to a singular reading. It destroyed what Blanchot called the 'essential ambiguity of the image'. Taking possession of the found image in this way while subverting its original meaning and asserting mastery of the image seemed at once to destroy it as an image. This image seemed to resist such mastery and it was in a slow submission to its possibilities that allowed me to let go bit by bit of all the conceptual and situationist presuppositions about found image

FIG. 1 *Untitled*, by John Stezaker. 1977. Film still photograph, 27 by 19.4 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

> practice: first and foremost, that the image be typical of the moment, and that the practice of *détournement* should be dissimulative. This image did not belong to contemporary culture, it was no longer typical and the spell it cast on me was what I wanted to preserve and not dispel.[11]

It was the notion of 'fascination' – a term that Blanchot used to describe the viewer's relationship to art – that enabled Stezaker to grasp the fundamental importance of obsolete found photographs in his practice. As he has noted, for Blanchot, 'a kind of death of the image, in obsolescence or dysfunction, is often required for it to come alive as an image'.[12] Having outlived its usefulness, a photograph can take on a different sort of value – that of 'fascination'. Elaborating his conception of the image, Blanchot cited Breton's account of the found object:

> we might also recall that a tool, when damaged, becomes its *image* (and sometimes an aesthetic object like those 'outmoded objects, fragmented, unusable, almost incomprehensible, perverse', which André Breton loved). In this case the tool, no longer disappearing into its use, *appears*.[13]

That which 'appears' in this strange way is 'the object's double'.[14] This phantom-double grips the imagination since it no longer refers to anything beyond itself – it is a pure image. For Blanchot, 'the category of art is linked to this possibility for objects to appear'.[15]

Expounding his notion of the image, Blanchot offered a surprising example: the cadaver exemplifies the image for it no longer relates or responds to the living person. As Stezaker explains, the corpse is a reflection, but of nothing:

> The face, in an everyday face-to-face encounter, we see ordinarily as reflecting the persona behind it and as responding to and under the mastery of the person to whom the face belongs. In death, as Blanchot suggests, when there is nothing behind the face, when there is no life to which it refers or by which it is controlled, a reversal occurs. The face, the image, becomes the 'master of the life it reflects'. It becomes pure image with nothing behind it – a pure reflection. When Blanchot asks the question 'What does it reflect', he answers 'Nothing'. He uses the mysterious concept of self-resemblance to describe the face when deprived of its signification as it becomes just itself: the image resembles itself alone.[16]

The cadaver, like the obsolete object, becomes visible for the first time as its own image. Or, to use another analogy, the cadaver, for Blanchot, is all shadow: 'a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms it entirely into shadow'.[17] This connection between death and the image is what lies behind Roland Barthes's observation that, when he has his picture taken, he experiences 'a micro-version of death'.18 The image is disturbing because it points to the nothingness behind it. This led one

critic to observe that 'Blanchot's concept of the image is in fact marked by a kind of muted horror'.[19] However, the uncanny fascination of the image is also related to childhood experiences. As Stezaker has remarked, 'Blanchot sees childhood as the source of image fascination'. Children inhabit 'a prelapsarian world in which images are not yet subordinate to concepts'.[20]

Blanchot emphasised the disturbing elusiveness of the image, noting the way it detaches itself from both the object and the viewer's conceptual grasp. It is this very elusiveness or 'essential ambiguity' that stirs the viewer's fascination. For Blanchot, this involves both separation and contact: 'although at a distance it seems to touch you with a gripping contact'.[21] After reading Blanchot, Stezaker regarded his defunct film publicity photographs and old postcards as image-corpses that appear, for the first time, in all their ambiguity. 'This deathly sense of the image', he said, was required 'to re-instate poetry into the literalism of the cinema'.[22] The various collage techniques he deploys further suspend the communicative function of the photograph, disrupt its legibility and introduce a degree of opacity.

It was not until the late 1970s that Stezaker finally understood the full significance of his fascination with the inverted film still:

> As other images gathered around this one, I began to see my collection as an underworld of images liberated from their ties to legibility. Abandoned to disuse they took on the dark aura of fascination. The collection became for me a nocturnal underworld of autonomously unreal images, a world of spectres and shadows.[23]

Retreating from the art world and withdrawing into this shadow world of images, he 'finally emancipated the work from its conceptual roots' and committed himself to the image. Rather than 'appropriate' the imagery of the movies to mount a critique of popular culture, he instead attempted 'a new awakening of the image'.[24] As David Green has observed, since collagists rescue the image from oblivion, their 'task is primarily a redemptive one'.[25]

For Stezaker, the inverted film still suggests a personal allegory. In it, the subordinated male pianist might be said to represent the traditional active, creative artist, while the ascendent woman is a passively absorbed, fascinated collector of images – an arrangement that inverts the usual hierarchy.[26] The upside-down image allegorises Stezaker's sense of his own role as artist, which crucially involves the ascendency of the power of the beholder over the producer of the image. Perhaps she could even be regarded as a spiritual self-portrait:

> The reflection of the female listener ascends to take over from and subordinate the life it reflects (below), the performer or perhaps the artist–producer. The relation with the real yields to the imaginary: the real to the image. The inversion seems to invest an ordinary image with something marvellous, opening up mythic associations. As the real is consigned to an underworld, the reflected female, the muse, takes ascendancy over the song that calls it forth. I thought of the mythic pairings: Orpheus and Eurydice or Narcissus and Echo. But rather than fade away, Echo returns to dominate Narcissus who himself disappears into reflection'.[27]

Stezaker began to wonder about analogies between Blanchot's conception of the corpse as image and his own collection of old or obsolete images: 'were they in a sense image-corpses, occupying an afterlife (an echo-life) in the collection?'.

> As images encountered in circulation, they were overlooked, treated with indifference as conduits annexed to instrumentality. They had disappeared into their use and only in their disembodied afterlife did they reveal themselves and become visible. Liberated from their relationship with the real, they had become imaginary. They had become fully images. Duchamp echoes this idea of the transition of commodities into visible readymades using the terms 'arrests', 'snapshots' to describe the way that his readymade objects became images of themselves.[28]

In addition, Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) involved rotating a urinal 90 degrees. Mention of the readymade has a bearing on the impersonality of the artist's activity. Stezaker recalls that, as a student, he developed what amounted to a phobia of any trace of his hand or even of control of the image: 'I had come to the realisation that for the image to exert the spell on me that I was seeking, it already had to be there in the world. It had to be before my eyes as a readymade and it had to come from elsewhere'.[29] This attitude was common among post-war artists and writers who reacted against the conception of art as self-expression. Blanchot, for example, wrote about Stéphane Mallarmé, who was a leading exponent of what he termed the necessary 'elocutionary disappearance of the poet'. Blanchot declared, 'it is not Mallarmé who speaks, but language which speaks itself'.[30]

The prominence of the woman's reflection in the upside-down film still inverts what one might normally regard as the subordinate relation of image to object. For Stezaker, this inversion prompted further investigation into reflections, mirror images, shadows, doubles, silhouettes, film noir and the uncanny. It also suggested ways of treating the found film still or publicity portrait that would accentuate its image-character. He began to superimpose postcards on film stills and transform stills and portraits by excising a figure and fixing the remaining hollow silhouette onto a landscape or dark ground. In contextualising Blanchot's ideas in relation to his studio practice, Stezaker realised that his film still collection could be described as 'deathly'. Firstly, the discarded old photographs are mainly black and white; secondly, film-still production amounted to a restaging of action as a *tableau vivant,* giving the photographs a curious rigidity.[31]

Stezaker's interventions further accentuate the inherent deathliness of the image. His *Mask* (c.1980–ongoing) collages, for example, are composed of landscape postcards superimposed on vintage film star publicity portraits. They were begun in the early 1980s after reading Blanchot's writings on the necessary relationship between the image and 'death's space' as well as Elias Canetti's essays on masks and unmasking. Canetti understood the space of death as the fundamental boundary that distinguishes sacred or ritual space from the ordinary everyday profane activities of tribal life.[32] Explaining Canetti's theory, Stezaker wrote:

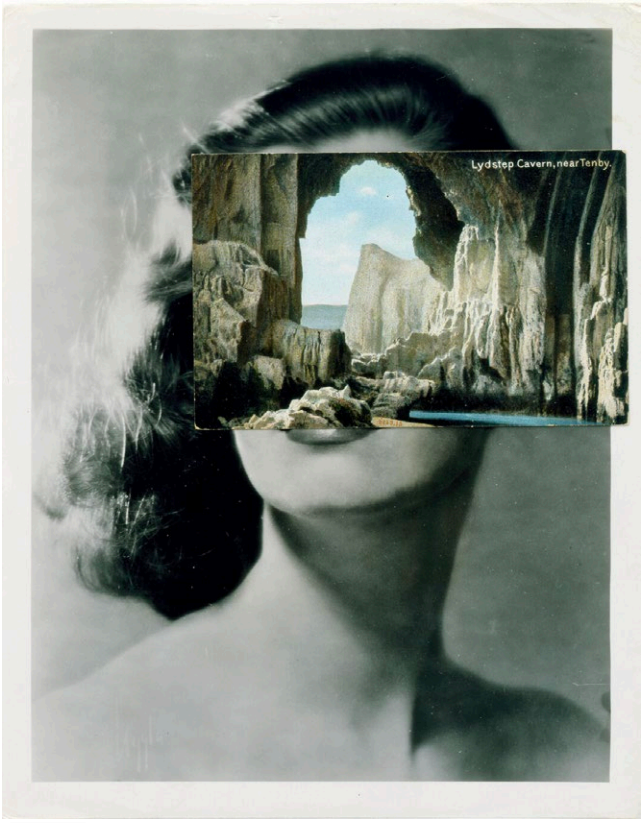

FIG. 2 *Mask XXXV*, by John Stezaker. 2007. Collage, 26 by 20 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

> The moment that the mask is worn, the community enters that separation from life necessary for communion with the other world of the dead and of ancestors (animal or human). The mask itself is fixity in the place of (and hiding) the primary fluid space of social interaction in face-to-face interaction. The face is pure mobility, constantly evading an 'end-state' as Canetti called it, evading, in other words, the stillness of death and evading a kind of visibility too. For him, the mask is the presence of death in life: the presence of absence. The uncanniness of the mask derives from its fixity, whose animation by the bodies of the masked performers is the ritualistic return of the dead.[33]

The *Mask* series usually involves covering a portion of the face of a black-and-white film-star portrait with an old British colourised postcard of a landscape. In *Mask XXXV* FIG. 2, for example, the face of an actress is obscured by a photograph taken from inside a cavern, looking out to sea. Cued by what remains of the portrait, the viewer struggles to discern a viable face. The cavern walls begin to suggest the woman's hair framing her face; a pile of rocks is neatly aligned to form a distorted

FIG. 3 *Mask XLVII*, by John Stezaker. 1992. Collage, 53 by 42 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

Stezaker had already embarked on the *Mask* series when he encountered another rotated image. While exploring a deserted squat in Compayne Gardens, London, he found a postcard showing an African village. Turning it sideways, he recognised a resemblance to Salvador Dalí's painting *Paranoiac Face* (1935; private collection). The postcard was, in fact, an announcement for an exhibition organised in Paris by the writer, heiress and political activist Nancy Cunard, which Dalí had also received. At the time, Dalí was studying Pablo Picasso's depictions of faces based on African masks, and when he came across the postcard on his desk, he momentarily took it for a reproduction of an unfamiliar Picasso head.[36] Seeing the card rotated 90 degrees completely transformed it in Dalí's eyes: a semi-spherical hut resembled a head in profile, the villagers became facial features. He painted this ambiguous image in 1935. Similarly, by placing landscape postcards over portrait heads, Stezaker prompted the viewer to see the superimposed image as distorted facial features or a mask. This is especially true if the work is rotated from a horizontal 'landscape' orientation to a vertical 'portrait' one.

Another key defamiliarising strategy, first employed by Stezaker in the late 1970s, involves excising the head upper lip. However, no amount of projection can fill the gaping hole in the middle, revealing the 'nothingness' beyond. Curiously, the overlaid postcard seems to open onto a vast empty vista situated 'behind' the portrait head. It is as though the actress's face, photographed in the 1940s or 1950s, has revealed an underlying death's head. Stezaker remarked that the collage shows 'the face emptied of "faceness", reduced to a shell'.[34]

Another example, *Mask XLVII* FIG. 3, comprises a postcard showing the entrance to a cave that Stezaker has rotated 90 degrees – from landscape to portrait orientation – superimposed over a headshot of an actor. As a result, the man's features are transformed into a mask bearing a petrified expression of horror. The grotesque character of some of these collages recalls an image encounter dating back to Stezaker's student days, when, upon opening a medical textbook, he found an illustration of a woman's face partially eroded by basal cell carcinoma – an image he found impossible to unsee. Parveen Adams interpreted the *Mask* series as an irruption of the Lacanian Real. The apparition of the anxiety-provoking image is a revelation of something otherwise 'unnameable'. For Stezaker, encountering the mask is like 'a meeting with death in the midst of life'.[35]

FIG. 4 *Father Sky*, by John Stezaker. 1989. Collage, 62 by 44 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

and shoulders from a publicity portrait and affixing the resulting void-like silhouette onto a dark or incongruous background. The silhouette in the *Dark Star* series (1979–83), describes an ambiguous presence–absence. One collage related to this series, *Father Sky* FIG. 4, is of personal significance to the artist: the silhouette vaguely resembles Stezaker's father, the hollow figure serving as a reminder of the man and of his death. Here, a male actor is posed against a standard studio backdrop consisting of painted blue sky and fluffy clouds. The silhouette-surround is used to frame a pre-war photoengraving taken from an educational book on astronomy, which shows a meteor shower over a darkened village. The combination of night, day and silhouetted forms recalls René Magritte's Empire of *Light* paintings (c.1939–67), which depict a nocturnal landscape beneath a sunlit sky.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020–21, Stezaker returned to the theme of the *Dark Stars*, adding a new layer of complexity. In the series *Double Shadow* (2013–21), a negative silhouette is placed on a dark ground and another silhouette is positioned atop the first. In *Double Shadow* FIG. 5, for example, two female silhouettes are collaged together with surrounds in shades of blue, violet and delicate touches of red.[37] Set against a matching violet support, the collage has a ghostly transparency and elusiveness. This is heightened by what Stezaker calls his 'under-over' layering technique: on the left, the pale blue upper cut-out sheet has been tucked under the lower violet one. Stezaker's technique is aimed at engaging the viewer by creating a liminal, elusive image that one cannot quite grasp. As he remarked, 'absence at the heart of representation allows for the intermingling of perception with the image'.[38]

This idea was also beautifully elucidated by Blanchot in his reading of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus, intent on retrieving his beloved dead wife, crosses the threshold of death and descends into the underworld. The gods allow him to lead Eurydice out of the depths on the condition that he does not glance back at her. Yet, on the threshold, he turns around and loses her a second time. Blanchot's prose is at its most darkly luminous when he explains why, within this myth about the nature of art, it was necessary for Orpheus to lose Eurydice again:

> But if he did not turn around to look at Eurydice, he still would be betraying, being disloyal to, the boundless and imprudent force of his impulse, which does not demand Eurydice in her diurnal truth and her everyday charm, but in her nocturnal darkness, in her distance, her body closed, her face sealed, which wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the strangeness of that which excludes intimacy; it does not want to make her live, but to have the fullness of her death living in her.[39]

In short, Eurydice exposed to the cold light of day would cease to be fascinating. Orpheus had to lose her again, for it is her disappearance – and Orpheus's confrontation with the void, with the nocturnal source of art – that enables the work's true accomplishment. The necessity of his mistake, his failure, suggests the extent to which the work of art must exceed the artist's conscious intention and technical mastery. Or, as Stezaker declared, 'the image is most alive to the imagination when touched by death'.[40] Eurydice, like the spectral *Double Shadow*, is a liminal figure and, as

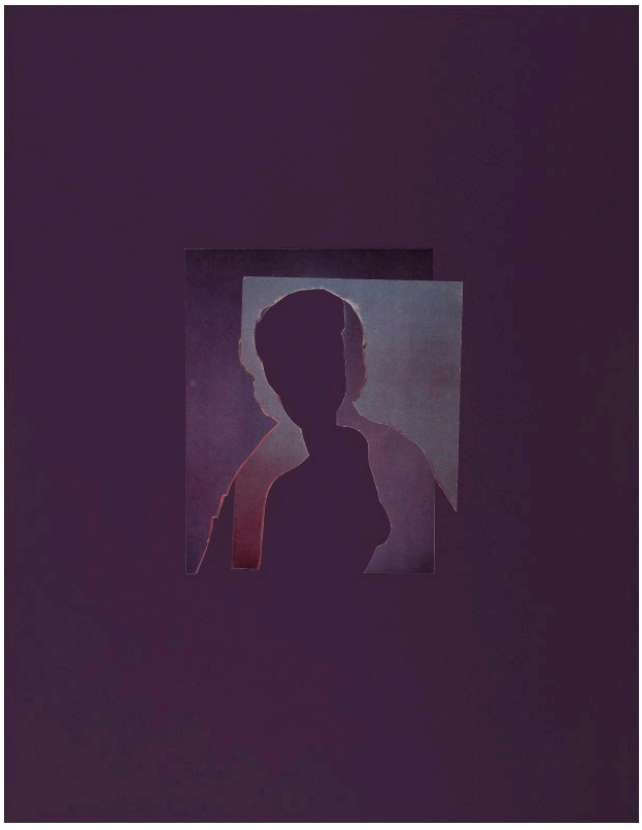

FIG. 5 *Double Shadow*, by John Stezaker. 2021. Collage, 52 by 40 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

Stezaker observed, 'the liminal allows us the experience of ambiguity, which holds us open to the world'.[41] The artist's resurrection of old photographs and his formal interventions serve to keep the image suspended in imagination – hesitating between presence and absence, the real and the imaginary, life and death. This is what it means to preserve 'the essential ambiguity of the image'; it is the liminality and ambiguity of Stezaker's work that account for its fascination.

Landscape

In the late 1970s, when Stezaker was living in West Hampstead, London, a local weekly newspaper ran a mundane article about the appearance of blue-green algae in a pond on Hampstead Heath. To protect dogs from the toxic algae, a fence had been erected. The strangeness of the photograph that accompanied the article struck Stezaker, until he realised that it had been printed upside down. The picture editor had clearly mistaken the reflection of the trees surrounding the pond for the trees themselves, resulting in an image in which the algae seemed to float in the sky. For Stezaker, 'the algae acted as a marginal interference or opacity in the transparency of the mirror image'.[42] Years later, after the introduction of colour photography, the same error occurred with the same components: pond, algae, fence. The colour photograph, intended to document the mundane event, had inadvertently been transformed by inversion into 'an image of an idyll, a magically floating world, somehow elevated and ennobled by the disjunction between image and text'.[43]

Stezaker's chance encounters with upside-down landscape photographs sparked an ongoing search for similar images – ones that could be liberated by inversion from their subservience to the transparency of reportage. He began collecting old topographical photographs – first in black-and-white, and later colour – of trees or buildings mirrored in bodies of water. He found that inversion only worked under certain conditions: if the reflection is too perfect, the technique fails. Ideally, the image should have a seamless quality that carries an initial conviction, but at the same time it must be disturbed by inexplicable moments of interference. The first image in the series, discovered in the late 1970s, depicts a pond with ducks and exemplifies the perceptual shifts produced by inversion: the image flattens, losing all sense of depth, while the ducks' reflections – barely perceptible in the original orientation – assume greater visual weight. Through simple rotation, the photograph becomes a scene of fantastical double-ducks. The inverted and occasionally cropped photographs of watery reflections, later titled *Overworlds* FIG. 6, have, as Stezaker notes, an otherworldly quality, 'partly because of the soft-focus, all-over, impressionistic lustre'.44 It is the interference of anomalous marks, glitches and distortions that is crucial, calling into question what is commonly accepted as objective reality.

FIG. 6 *Overworld*, by John Stezaker. 2008. Found photograph, 32 by 26 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

Overworld II FIG. 7 is a found, inverted and cropped image of a medieval waterside town with an imposing stone tower, which initially seems securely anchored until one notices the elongated ripples marring the buildings. On closer inspection, everything begins to quiver and quake. A large white blot in the upper-left corner resembles a newspaper blown into the foliage – presumably a bit of floating detritus. The narrow band at the bottom of the image showing part of the non-reflected scene suggests bright sunshine, unlike the darkening reflected town.

FIG. 7 *Overworld II*, by John Stezaker. 1990. Found image, 9.5 by 15.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

The photograph is both compelling and punctuated by puzzling opaque interferences. For Stezaker, 'a balance (or friction) between the qualities of transparency and opacity' heightens the reality of the image as image. Commenting on this effect, he alluded to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's remarks on Paul Cezanne's achievement of a pictorial depth that exceeds standard perspective construction. Cezanne (1839–1906) accomplished this, noted Stezaker, by depicting 'a kind of pictorial conflict, even estrangement of the perspectival image'.[45] In a similar way, the estrangement and instability introduced by the inversion in the *Overworlds* series intensifies the status of the photograph as an image rather than as a visual documentation of place. The illusion of depth and solidity of the photographed 'real' world, which conforms to the laws of linear perspective embedded in the camera, are lost in the reflection. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty put it, we see the vibration of appearances that lies 'beneath the imposed order of humanity'.[46] The attenuation of perspectival effects in the photographed reflection recalls Chinese painting. Whereas classical linear perspective reinforces a fixed point of viewpoint and the solidity of forms, traditional Chinese landscape painting has the opposite effect – it enhances the elusiveness of the image.

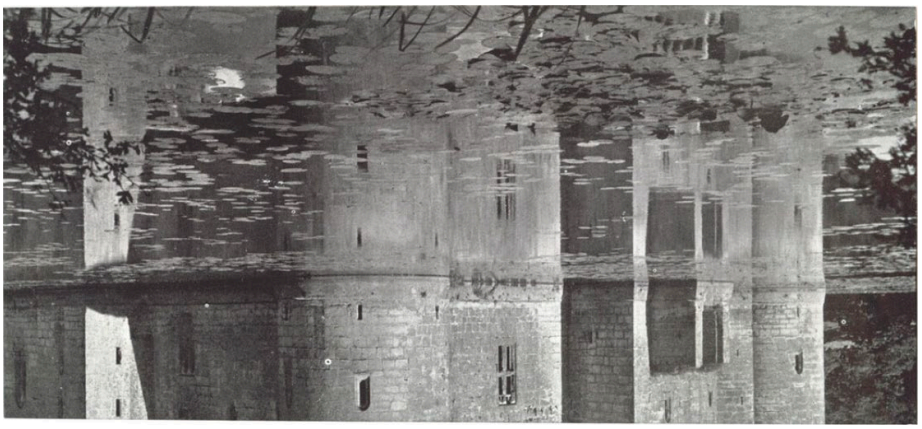

FIG. 8 *Overworld I*, by John Stezaker. 1990. Found image, 10 by 22 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

In *Overworlds*, the sense of the image as image is heightened by rotating the image and giving precedence to the reflection. In 'Monet: or the world turned upside-down', Michel Butor makes a similar case, arguing that for Claude Monet (1840–1926) inverted reflections in water create the 'dynamic instability which is essential to his art': they 'necessitate a perceptual reorganization in ourselves'.[47]

Discussing Monet's *Impressionism, Sunrise* (1872; Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris), Butor observed that the circle of the sun with its reflection in the water's broken surface dissolves and reforms in the mind of the viewer. Another relevant pictorial inversion in the history of art concerns one of the foundational myths of the birth of abstract art. Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) claimed that when he saw one of his own paintings carelessly propped upside down in his studio he failed to recognise it, but was struck by the forms, colours and lines

which, he said, had an 'extraordinary beauty, glowing with inner radiance'.[48] Kandinsky's somewhat dubious anecdote – quite apart from being a key historical precedent for the use of inversion as a means of pictorial defamiliarisation – also features a classic image encounter.

FIG. 9 *Overworld*, by John Stezaker. c.1985. Found image, 5 by 11.2 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

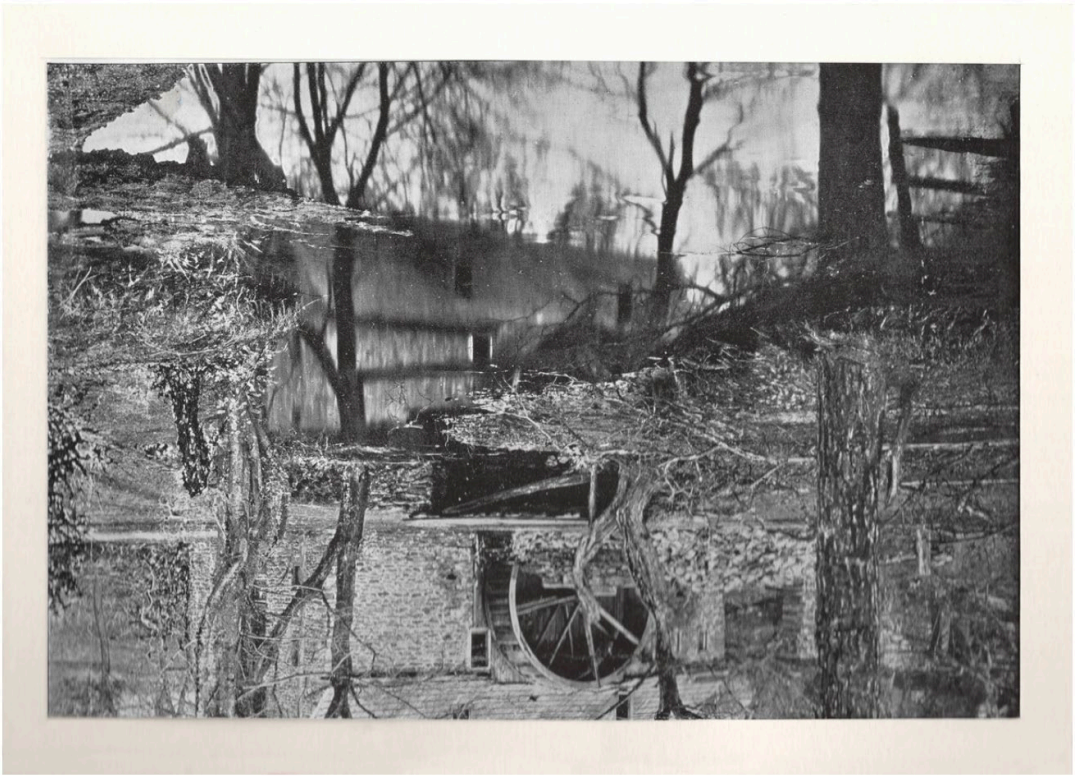

FIG. 10 *Overworld*, by John Stezaker. 2005. Found image, 13.6 by 20 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

One of Stezaker's favourite *Overworlds* is an inverted photograph of the fourteenth-century ruin of Bodmin Castle in East Sussex FIG. 8. He observes that this image's unearthly quality is partly due to the long exposure time of the original photograph, which has softened the ripples in the moat. Reflected water lilies, resembling strange low-hanging cloud formations, appear to float among the towers. Another example of an inverted photograph FIG. 9 seems to show a lakeside town in flames or atomised and sucked upwards. Stezaker experimented with the placement of the borderline between 'real' and reflected image. In another example FIG. 10, the strip of 'real' landscape at the bottom occupies a third of the image, presumably to accommodate the waterwheel of an old mill; the scrub and grasses appear like scratches on the surface of the photograph. The seam between the reflected and 'real' domains marks the place where the image triumphs and the real is consigned to an underworld.

FIG. 11 *Icarus*, by John Stezaker. 1999. Found image, 10 by 22.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

FIG. 12 *Overworld*, by John Stezaker. 2000. Found image, 6.7 by 14.3 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

FIG. 13 *Reparation II*, by John Stezaker. 1999–2005. Found image, 25 by 17 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

A sub-genre of the series of upside-down images, titled *Icarus* (1999), consists of inverted low aerial photographs of cityscapes. The effect can be quite startlingly vertiginous: a bird's-eye view of a seaside town FIG. 11, when turned upside-down, becomes a photograph of dwellings precariously clinging to a cliffside. Stezaker described this simple technique of inversion as 'a more imperceptible form of estrangement'.[49] A good example of this can be seen in an inverted postcard of an island in a loch which, when inverted, becomes a mist-shrouded 'isle of the dead'.[50] Inverting the postcard drains the colour from the scene FIG. 12. A variation on this technique emerged in response to the devastating hurricane that struck southern England in 1987: photographs of trees toppled by the storm were slightly rotated to restore the trees' verticality. While these *Reparations* FIG. 13 correct the orientation of the fallen trees, they also skew the surrounding landscape.

FIG. 14 *Overworld I*, by John Stezaker. 1990. Computer print, 222.5 by 105 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

FIG. 15 *Nymph I*, by John Stezaker. 2011. Readymade, 13.5 by 8.4 cm. (Courtesy the artist and the Approach, London).

In the 1990s Stezaker returned to the landscape genre, this time using photographs from the 1950s and 1960s. In these colour *Overworlds*, he restricted the horizontal strip of 'real' landscape to a minimum. Also, very unusually, he scanned and enlarged them digitally for display in the *British Art Show 5* FIG. 14. These works respond to the impact of digitisation, which Stezaker foresaw as replacing the visible cut and paste of analogue collage with the seamless manipulations of a digital image-world. The unspoken allusion in these remarks is presumably to the appearance in art galleries of large-scale digitally manipulated photographs. Certainly, it is the case that Stezaker's collection of small analogue photographs became even more obsolescent and at the same time more salient with the rise of digital photography and printing.

One of Stezaker's landscape works, *Nymph I* FIG. 15, falls outside the *Overworlds* series because, although spatially disorienting, it is not inverted. It is vintage photograph of a waterfall with surrounding banks of vegetation; its long exposure transforms the foamy water into a white shape loosely resembling a reclining torso. Its title alludes to the significance it carries for the artist. An unassisted readymade, the work compresses two motifs found in Duchamp's elaborate installation Étant donné (1946–66; Philadelphia Museum of Art), which features a headless female mannequin reclining on a grassy thicket with splayed and cropped legs and a waterfall in the background. *Nymph I* served as Stezaker's homage to Duchamp, created for his exhibition *Nude and Landscape* in Philadelphia, where the city's Museum of Art houses a large collection of Duchamp's work, including *Étant donné*.[51]

Conclusion

Although both the upside-down film still and landscape image encounters occurred at the beginning of Stezaker's career, the present author believes that they describe a development in the artist's thinking. His early attraction to transparent reflections gradually gave way to a greater focus on interference in that transparency. He realised that the work required 'a degree of opacity creating the conditions for an awareness of the image as image rather than as transparent conduit'.[52] This shift aligned with his growing conviction that the digital age renders the subject transparent, the work of art overly legible and the environment for art increasingly hostile.

In his essay 'The museum, art, and time', Blanchot argued that 'art is defined by its distance in relation to the world, by the absence of world'. On this account, which is indebted to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, it is only when art loses its religious, state and family functions, which tie it to life, that art truly appears. At this stage, art enters the museum and 'when works of art enter the museum, it is precisely life that they renounce'. Blanchot referred to this environment essential for art's existence as 'death's space'.[53] Stezaker draws on Blanchot to critique contemporary image and museum practices:

> Paradoxically, even though we live seemingly in an image saturated culture, the image is encountered everywhere in chains, subordinated to the word, narrative and succession. The image is ever present and encountered as presence – as an almost real, a nearly present. The encounter with the image as absence is almost prohibited, even in or especially in the spaces that were once dedicated to the protection of the death-space of the image, solitude and fascination.[54]

For Stezaker, the contemporary information-heavy museum destroys the death space of the image. He concludes, 'perhaps this is what is most fundamentally challenged in our contemporary image culture: the experience of what Blanchot calls "death's space" in art, poetry and perhaps in life in general'.[55]

Some might dismiss the technique of image inversion as a playful pictorial device – which, of course, it is. Yet, as we have seen, Stezaker considers it to be a technique with far-reaching implications. Butor touched on these implications when he remarked that viewing the world upside down 'necessitate[s] a perceptual reorganization in ourselves'.[56] He regarded inversion as a way of disrupting our habitual treatment of the visual image as a vehicle of communication – a mode of reception, incidentally, that is particularly common in the case of photography. For Stezaker, however, upside-downness represents a conception of art that was succinctly articulated by Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*:

> Art is the subjective passion which no longer wants any part of the world. Here in the world subordination reigns: subordination to ends, to measured proportion, to seriousness and order. On one front, science, technology, the state; on another, significance, stable values, the ideal of the Good and the True. Art is 'the world turned upside-down': insubordination, disproportion, frivolity, ignorance, evil, non-sense.[57]

This radical statement, as invoked by Stezaker, is intended to challenge the tendency within contemporary visual culture to bypass the fascination exerted by the image and proceed directly to extract its useful values or political implications. Stezaker inverts the accepted hierarchies and gives precedence to a nocturnal underworld of spectral images.

Footnotes

1 John Stezaker, quoted from ‘After images: David Campany in conversation with John Stezaker’, in G. Batchen *et al.*: *John Stezaker: Lost World*, London 2017, pp.17–24, at p.24, available at davidcampany.com/john-stezaker-david-campany-conversation, accessed 15th June 2025.

2 See D. Campany: ‘Preface’, in M. Bosshard and J. Trösch, eds: *John Stezaker: Unassisted Readymade*, Zurich 2016, unpaginated. See also J. Stezaker and D. Campany: ‘Seams & interruptions’, *Frieze* (30th September 2013), available at www.frieze.com/article/seams-interruptions, accessed 15th June 2025.

3 For a discussion of the Surrealist encounter, which is relevant in this context, see M. Iversen: ‘Encounter: Breton meets Lacan’, in *idem*: *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*, University Park PA 2007, pp.61–72.

4 J. Stezaker, unpublished draft for the lecture ‘Image corpse: reflections on Blanchot, Cornell and the found image’, written in preparation for Stezaker’s contribution to *Maurice Blanchot: Maladies of the Book, Symposium III*, part of a series of symposia organised by Michael Newman and Josh Cohen in conjunction with the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought and the Art Research Programme at Goldsmiths, University of London, held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, on 2nd February 2018 (hereafter Lecture).

5 John Stezaker, in correspondence with the present author, 20th May 2024 (hereafter Letter).

6 Lecture.

7 John Stezaker, quoted from *op. cit.* (note 1), p.20.

8 A fuller account of this encounter is given in ‘The third meaning: John Stezaker in conversation with Christophe Gallois and Daniel F. Herrmann’, in D.F. Herrmann, ed.: exh. cat. *John Stezaker*, London (Whitechapel Gallery), Luxembourg (Mudam) and St Louis (Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum) 2011–12, pp.34–46, esp. p.35.

9 Lecture.

10 Exceptions include M. Newman: ‘The image beside the image and the image within the image: prolegomena to an approach to the collages of John Stezaker’, *Parallax* 16, no.2 (2010), pp.79–86, doi.org/10.1080/13534641003634705; L. Kaplan: ‘Photograph or death mask: Jean-Luc Nancy’s recasting of the photographic image’, *Journal of Visual Culture* 9 (2010), pp.45–62, doi.org/10.1177/1470412909354255; and C. Watt: *Blanchot and the Moving Image: Fascination and Spectatorship*, Oxford 2017, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16km12g.

11 Lecture.

12 John Stezaker, quoted from A. Warstat: ‘An interview with John Stezaker’, *Parallax* 16, no.2 (2010), pp.68–78, at p.75, doi.org/10.1080/13534641003634697.

13 M. Blanchot: ‘The two versions of the imaginary’, in *idem*: *The Space of Literature*, transl. A. Smock, Lincoln NE 1982, pp.254–63, at p.258, emphasis in original.

14 *Ibid*.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Lecture.

17 Blanchot, *op. cit.* (note 13), p.258.

18 R. Barthes: *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. R. Howard, New York 1981, p.14.

19 Watt, *op. cit.* (note 10), p.66.

20 J. Stezaker: unpublished notes for a lecture delivered at the University of Derby, October 2021. Stezaker's series *Underworlds*, which crops the top third of film stills, is inspired by the idea of childhood and by Philipp Otto Runge's paintings depicting that adolescent world.

21 M. Blanchot: 'The essential solitude', in *idem*, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.19–35, at p.32.

22 John Stezaker, quoted from *idem* and Campany, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.86.

23 Lecture.

24 *Ibid.*

25 D. Green: 'In the service of the imagination: on the work of John Stezaker', *Source* 50 (2007), available at www.source.ie/archive/issue50/is50feature_David_Green_05_49_54_22-03-12.php, accessed 10th June 2025.

26 See Blanchot, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.36 and 38. See also D. Ades: 'John Stezaker, Monteur', in Herrmann, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp.20–33.

27 Lecture.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

30 M. Blanchot: 'Mallarmé's experience', in *idem*, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.38–48, at p.41.

31 J. Stezaker: 'The film still and its double: reflections on the "found" film still', in D. Green and J. Lowry, eds: *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, Brighton 2006, pp.113–126, esp. p.117.

32 See E. Canetti: *Crowds and Power*, transl. C. Stewart, New York 1984.

33 Lecture.

34 John Stezaker, quoted from Herrmann, *op. cit.* (note 8), p.44.

35 *Ibid.*, p.43. See P. Adams: 'Adding and taking away: John Stezaker collages', *Photographies* 12 (2019), pp.267–82, doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2019.1629995; and R. West: 'John Stezaker talks about collecting and how he produces his work', *Source* 50 (spring 2007), available at www.source.ie/archive/issue50/is50interview_Richard_West_06_37_38_22-03-12.php, accessed 11th June 2025. Stezaker also cites Giorgio Agamben's essay 'The face', which, in a manner that recalls Stezaker's *Mask* series, refers to the proximity of the beautiful face and the 'abyss', G. Agamben: 'The face' [1995], in *idem*: *Means without end*, transl. V. Binetti and C. Casarino, Minneapolis 2000, pp.91–102.

36 See N. Cunard, ed.: *Negro Anthology*, London 1934, where the photograph illustrates an article entitled 'A Zulu wedding at a Zulu Kraal near Durban, Natal', p.403.

37 See M. Iversen: 'John Stezaker: doubles and shadows', in J. Stezaker: *Double Shadows*, London and Berlin 2023, unpaginated.

38 Lecture.

39 M. Blanchot: 'The gaze of Orpheus', in *idem*: *The Gaze of Orpheus and other Literary Essays*, ed. P.A. Sitney, transl. L. Davis, Red Hook NY 1981, pp.99–104, at p.100. See also B. Schlossman: 'The descent of Orpheus: on reading Barthes and Proust', in J.-M. Rabaté, ed. *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, Philadelphia 1997, pp.144–62, doi.org/10.9783/9780812200232.144.

40 John Stezaker, quoted from Warstat, *op. cit.* (note 12), p.77.

41 Lecture.

42 Letter.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid*.

45 *Ibid*.

46 M. Merleau-Ponty: ‘Cézanne’s doubt’, in G.A. Johnson, ed.: *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Evanston IL 1993, pp.59–75, at p.75.

47 M. Butor: ‘Monet: or the world turned upside-down’, in T.B. Hess and J. Ashbery, eds: *The Avant-Garde*, New York 1968, pp.20–34, at pp.30 and 31.

48 Wassily Kandinsky, quoted in Lecture.

49 Letter.

50 John Stezaker, in correspondence with the present author, 27th September 2024. See Arnold Böcklin’s series of paintings titled *Isle of the Dead* (1880–86).

51 E. Manchester and S. Sachs: exh. cat. *John Stezaker: Nude and Landscape*, Philadelphia (Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery) and New York (Petzel Gallery) 2011–13.

52 John Stezaker, in correspondence with the present author, 21st July 2024.

53 M. Blanchot: ‘The museum, art, and time’, in *idem*: *Friendship*, transl. E. Rottenberg, Stanford 1997, pp.12–40, at p.19, doi.org/10.1515/9781503620445-002.

54 Lecture.

55 *Ibid*.

56 Butor, *op. cit.* (note 47), p.24.

57 M. Blanchot: ‘The future and the question of art’, in *idem*, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.211–20, at p.216, quoted by John Stezaker, in correspondence with the present author, 1st October 2024.