

## 'WHAT IS THE 'SUBJECT'? A MOMENTARY CENTRE ...'

John Riddy's photographs traverse an array of historical moments and references while remaining particularly singular and focused. They never propose simply an espousal of the 'medium of photography', and continue to find resonances elsewhere: from Renaissance and modernist painting, sculpture and architecture, to the specific qualities of various city spaces or the moving image of cinema. This points to Riddy's background and outlook as an artist, where, having been involved with the making of both painting and sculpture early on, his formative years as a photographer were engaged with photographing sculptural objects. Two rather obvious points can be deduced from this – that due to Riddy's earlier restlessness in terms of engaging with a particular medium, the photograph was potentially a site of synthesis – of bringing together different aspects from other mediums; it is after all the seemingly most 'transparent' – almost invisible – of mediums (which is why it lay outside the 'traditional' modernist canon). Secondly, his experience of framing modernist sculpture as an ensemble of abstract relations within a space, has left an indelible mark on his practice. To take this last point further, it is interesting to reflect on how Riddy has reversed the terms of the modernist enterprise in his own photographs. If we take Michael Fried's analysis of modernist sculpture then it is bound in ontological terms – that Anthony Caro's sculptures, for example, articulate something that is often nothing like our "ordinary dealings with the world"<sup>1</sup> and which culminate in a specific experience not to be found elsewhere. For Riddy, on the other hand, the world itself – through the mediation of the camera – is viewed as an ensemble of sculptural relations.

Images such as SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA (BANDSTAND) 1998 and HILVERSUM 1998 centralise their architectural subjects as sculptural masses (one with delicate filigree ironwork, the other with planar construction). Due to this positioning, the completeness of the architectural subject might also allude to a corresponding 'completeness' of the picture itself. It is the particular use of framing which gives this illusion of autonomy, in that, as viewers, we are very rarely invited to speculate beyond the boundary of the frame (as opposed to certain snapshots where instantaneously a broader

context is somehow filled in conceptually). It is, however, a sensation of 'clearing' and 'gathering' which accompanies these photographs and which appears more relevant. By implication, such configurations allow the individual spaces not only to reveal their own 'construction' as both sculptural structure and social space, but also the residues and traces of people's activity, of individual lived experience. The reciprocity of these relationships is inscribed throughout Riddy's photographs. Such concerns can clearly be seen in NEW YORK 1994, an image of Grand Central Terminal; the effect is one of emptiness and of grandiose scale – with the illuminated structure of the chandelier taking on an almost transcendental religious connotation, offset by the 'realism' of the residue of daily maintenance. The emptiness and silence of this image (astonishing when one is reminded of it being Grand Central) is certainly characteristic of Riddy's approach.

NAVARRE 1996, and its earlier companion both present images of the entrances to churches and exemplify the positioning of architecture within the photograph as a sequence of echoes and reflections. As in many other photographs, the frontality is severe, formally underscoring the perspectival play of surfaces, and also that of gravity, balance and light. The overall feel of these images is that of a mannerist or Baroque aquatint, or even the setting of a Correggio or Parmigianino painting with the figures removed. In the 1996 image, the exterior is depicted as an almost blinding fluorescent sfumato, while in the earlier picture the exterior appears even more artificial, as if projected onto a screen. In a strange way this 'projection' reflects the space of the camera itself, with its direct lineage back to the darkened chamber of the camera obscura. The Baroque concern with such chambers, as with mirrors and light, results in an intensified sense of interiority. CHARRITTE DE HAUT 1996 possesses something of this intensity with its artificial marble and painted sky amidst a violent chiaroscuro resulting from the harsh light sources which in turn punctuate as abstract blocks. Again, this kind of space echoes the compacted interior of the camera with its regulated contact with exterior light. In one sense this orientation of the receptive interior of the camera with its exterior can exhibit quite explicit sculptural and architectural resonances.

LONDON (GILLENDEYER STREET) 4 & 5 1997 both underline this fact; what they present is in fact a ruin – a series of rooms originally built for firemen and their families, here in the process of re-development as artists' studios. Rather than exude an atmosphere of loss or abjection, these photographs are relentlessly hard-nosed and formal without any sense of nostalgia. Riddy seems to be visually paraphrasing Louis Kahn's suggestion that only at two points in a building's 'life-span' – its original pristine, un-lived condition, and the evacuated ruin – do we get a sense of an architect's

true intention; the rawness of these spaces might even suggest something of Donald Judd's plywood sculptures in terms of primal sectioning and dividing. A fitting reminder, perhaps, of how the spaces within which we operate actually control the physical 'flow' of our lives. The result is a tension, which can be experienced again and again in these photographs, between the formal and the 'lived'.

Riddy's use of a cool frontality and prospecting echoes the photograph's distant pre-history in Renaissance technologies: Alberti's use of the *Veil* or intersection, for example, which unified divergent surfaces into the optical unity of a perspectival projection. Many theorists, including the late Jean-Francois Lyotard, have traced a trajectory from such prospectings<sup>2</sup>, describing a displacement which occurs in the name of a growing democracy: if the vanishing point symbolically represents the governing monarch's gaze in a visual and political order, then when the painting enters the community, the monarch's subjects share this coherent and ordered positioning of the vantage point. Lyotard's point, in fact, is to plot a path from the Renaissance painting to the modern compact, pre-programmed camera, both as a 'democratic' exponential growth of individual multi-perspectival horizons and a dispersal of industrialised technology. The result is the waning of both self-identification and communal identification; in short, Lyotard sees such a trajectory mapping the destruction of both aura and experience, these being replaced by consumption (of technology, goods, know-how – all now integral to the 'tool' of the modern camera itself). If the classical space of perspective has long been in a state of dissolution, what does it mean for these photographs to unflinchingly position themselves once again in relation to it? The answer to this is not, of course, a simple one, because on the one hand, while it centres the viewer in relation to the image, giving them a position from which to survey, at the same time it already suggests a pre-given gaze, an act of looking, which will be re-traced. Yet, no matter how 'placed' or simple this geometricised vision seems, it is always a sequence of labyrinthine reflections and deflections with which we engage; of the play of light, surfaces, frames, gazes etc. To reflect this, the allusion to the classical space of perspective within these photographs is subtly staged or disrupted; Riddy plays with levels of representations within the overall frame, again an inheritance from Quattrocento painting. The long shot of the restaurant in *SOULE* 1996 is ultimately redefined by the photographic mural on the back wall, which in turn is echoed by the smaller framed pictures which surround it. *ROME (FLAMINIO r )* 1999, is another example with its strange electronically illuminated votive figure of the Virgin, while *VALENCIA (PORT)* 1996 strikingly sets up a Benetton advertisement on a hoarding in a desolate and yet grand setting; the curious interplay between the

two figures in the distance, the painted figures and the three hearts takes on an almost surreal atmosphere. This image is in fact binary, which further complicates the apparent perspectival unity, with the initial smooth flow of the two separated images dislocated at the centre.

Surface is also integral to the perspectival illusion and Riddy often utilises this to the maximum. Another way of thinking of the centrality of these images might conjure up certain painting which also focuses on surface – of Barnett Newman or Philip Guston, for example. Guston often gathers forms within a shallow interior space, also with an exquisite sense of time – Guston once said that each painting passed through a crucial twenty minute period where things found their place. Newman, famously, felt that the viewer of his paintings could achieve a momentary unity, individuality, in their own being, as the painter did when he painted it. This 'transference' of experience is not irrelevant to the photographic – with its re-enactment of a gaze once removed and also in terms of 'aura' – the experience of the specificity of an object's time and place – the very thing which photography destroyed according to Walter Benjamin. 'Aura' has the unfortunate air of mysticism and the sacrosanct, and yet if it is thought of as the potential transference of temporality and physicality then its relevance remains – even if the photograph essentially replaces the 'thing' with a 'description' of it. The painter Mary Heilmann, has alluded to something similar within her approach: "I like to think of painting as 'imploded', whereby this chunk of matter can contain many different layers, a kind of compression of experience."<sup>3</sup> Riddy's clarity, his centering of the viewer, allows for the slow unfolding of a similar 'compression of experience'. It is an 'implosion' formed of his own sensibility, of 'culture' in general, and those 'chunks of matter' which reveal their own histories. In this way, Riddy's centralised gaze is not about some kind of 'mastery'; on the contrary, it facilitates the interface between these various perspectives.

ROME (COLOSSEUM) 1999 may well bring to mind those bleak landscapes which punctuate Antonioni's early films, providing a sense of 'nothingness' or 'silence'. The absence of human presence is, as in other photographs, in fact an illusion; in the distance a group of people are reduced to a miniature tableau, frozen and integrated into the landscape. In ROME (PYRAMID) 1999 there is an almost completely symmetrical articulation of the space, the monumental form of the pyramid being flanked by four rectangular plaques on the left and two similar forms on the right; two figures circumscribe and reinforce the shallow space surrounding the monument by simultaneously moving away from it. The human presence in these photographs never appears

'tragic' nor imbued with any of the attendant melancholy of the presentation of a past moment. These photographs have little to do with either Cartier Bresson's decisive moment or Barthes' inscription of death. It is more a sensation of 'it is' than 'that-has-been' which accompanies these images. This is partly to do with Riddy's commitment to the possibility of a poetry of the photographic, free of any sense of sentimentality or morbidity. In connection with this, it might well be worth recalling Gilles Deleuze's discussion of Pasolini's 'cinema of poetry' with its figuring of what Pasolini called the 'free indirect subjective'<sup>4</sup>. As Deleuze describes it, "It is a case of going beyond the subjective and objective towards a pure Form which sets itself up as an autonomous vision of pure content. We are no longer faced with subjective or objective images; we are caught in a correlation between a perception-image and a camera consciousness which transforms it (the question of whether the image was objective or subjective is no longer raised)." Its characteristics are: "'Insistent' or 'obsessive' framing which makes the camera await the entry of a character into the frame, wait for him to do and say something and then exit, while it continues to frame the space which has once again become empty, once more leaving the scene to its pure and absolute signification as a scene."<sup>5</sup> The poetic in this instant is a construction utilising the very different viewpoints of the character's world-view and the camera's, produced with a self-reflexivity, and giving equal weight to the space which contains both. This sense of clearing, of presences being removed during the unfolding of the cinematic process, as identified in Pasolini's work, has its parallels in many of Riddy's images, especially those from Rome. One example being *ROME (VILLA ADRIANA 2)* 1999. Here, the austere roughened walls of the Villa provide a disturbing claustrophobic space whereby the archways, through the angle of the shot, appear momentarily sealed. Looking rather like an empty stage set, it somehow speaks of a vast movement of history which has taken place within this space; bearing the scars and traces which point to a sedimentation of time within its confined limits.

John Riddy's photographs answer to the continuing need for artworks that sweep away the 'noise' which underpins general lived day-to-day experience. They also address the figuring of subjectivity within the artwork, in all its complexity, in relation to things, to 'others', and the mediation of the photographic act. The issues which are highlighted by or underpin these photographs might be presumed, in a culture of arrogance, to have been deconstructed out of sight in the 80s and 90s, no longer tenable even. Riddy, however, does not articulate such concerns with the self-satisfied 'mastery' of a conservative; nor with the bravado of any ironic revisitation; on the contrary, these

images possess a plasticity, a fragility even. One senses the immense focus and concentration that brought them into being, and ultimately their sense of genuine exploration. Not simply documents of places, they constitute an exploration of the poetic, of the continuing possibility of private reflection. Toward the end of his monumental study, *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre suggested, "There is no 'reality' without a concentration of energy, without, focus or core,[...] What is the 'subject'? A momentary centre. The 'object'? Likewise. The body? A focusing of active (productive) energies. The city? The urban sphere? Ditto."<sup>6</sup> This is something that Riddy has intuited throughout his work: it is a process of lining up these centres, energies, histories, in a very particular way either side of the viewfinder, and allowing a free play of correspondences and connections to occur between them.

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1. See Michael Fried 'How Works: A Reply to T.J. Clark', *Critical Inquiry*, September 1982

2 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, pp.119-122, London, 1991

3 Conversation with the author, New York, May 1996

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, pp.74-75, London, 1992

5 *Ibid.*, p.74

6 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p.399, Oxford/Mass. 1999