

Where the thinking stops, time crystallises...

Jane Rendell

[these excerpts is taken from Jane Rendell, 'Where the Thinking Stops', Malcolm Miles and Tim Hall (ed.), Urban Futures, (London: Routledge, 2002).]

i the angel of history

'A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise: it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress'. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Illuminations, London: Fontana Press, 1992, p. 249.

Starting with Walter Benjamin's comments on Paul Klee's 'Angelus Novus', this essay looks at the present as a place between past and future, a place where past actions and future intentions meet. 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel caught at the threshold of time, allowing the coming together of the past and the future in one instant. Occupying a threshold position in space, time and consciousness: between history and myth, between dream and awakening, between antiquity and modernity, Klee's angel was a key image for Benjamin. The figure of the angel is dialectics at a stand-still – a frozen moment encapsulating dialectical contradiction. At this moment, the present is allowed access to the past. Here the past and the future, the 'has-been' and the 'not-yet', come together in a single configuration creating, for Benjamin, a 'monad'.

[...]

For me, the angel provides an emancipatory impulse for thinking between places, times, people, things and ideas. Referencing the figure of the angel as a messenger or threshold figure works metaphorically as a device for moving between theory and practice, as well as across disciplinary boundaries between architecture, art, critical theory, geography and philosophy. This essay is not structured as part of a linear and progressive argument, but rather as a collection of self-contained pieces, with similar themes that overlap and reiterate notions of the angelic as 'the between'. The essay is angelic in content and form. The style is angelic thinking, a mode which is both subjective and objective, critical and creative. The

structure is an angelic topography, an architecture with a complex pattern that can only be compared to the intricate structure of a snowflake not discernible to the naked eye, or a multi-faceted crystal that changes in the light, or even to a kaleidoscope that fragments an existing view of the world. Angels are not simply messengers, they are also figures of transformation. In their status as flux, as ever-changing, they challenge traditional modes of representation and offer opportunities to think space and time differently. In this case, an angelic temporality is one where memory is not nostalgic but imaginative, and which chooses neither to look backwards nor forwards, but to focus on the potential offered by engaging with the present moment.

From Rut Blees Luxembourg, Katherine Yass and Uta Barth, to Tacita Dean, Jane and Louise Wilson and Victor Burgin, contemporary artists working in photography and video, seem obsessed with capturing the present as a frozen moment, often in relation to permanently or temporarily abandoned buildings. Images of buildings in the architectural press are rarely cluttered by inhabitants or even traces of inhabitation. This current fascination with places devoid of people is different. In these photographs of architecture, the emptiness is not about keeping the details clean, the gesture is more generous. Here the emptiness is not created in order to better view the object, but in order to provide a place for the viewer to imagine. These images are suggestive. These places have not always been and will not always be empty. Their very emptiness in the present passing moment allows us to project all kinds of alternative scenarios onto them - past and future. Like detectives we search for clues, traces of past occupations; like script writers, we set up props for future activities.

A similar kind of interest can be found in the work of artists intervening in abandoned spaces, such as Ann Hamilton; dealing with material expressions of absence and presence, such as Rachel Whiteread; or exploring decay and transience, such as Anya Gallaccio. Here we have insertions into found spaces, not simply as the presence of a gaze, but as the physical action of placing something material in a site. Whether inside a traditional gallery, or in the urban realm outside the gallery, these artists tend to engage closely with the situations and contexts they find themselves working within. The kinds of objects they 'place' in these spaces do not necessarily operate through dialectical juxtaposition, but through the insertion of moments which allow time to expand. In this way their tactics are analogous to the work of those making photographic images. In both cases, despite the differences in media, the viewer is asked to engage with the object they are presented with in such a way that they have no choice but to become conscious of the passing of time.

[...]

ii lustre

the quality or condition of shining by reflected light

a sheen or gloss

an iridescent metallic decorative surface on ceramics

the glaze used to produce this

a thin dress-fabric with a fine cotton(formerly also silk or mohair) warp and worsted weft

a glossy surface

any fabric with a sheen or gloss

to make attractive be or become lustrous.

[...]

v blurred focus

[...]the 'location' of the work hangs somewhere between the viewer and the wall, in the empty space we are looking through. (Uta Barth, 'Uta Barth in conversation with Sheryl Conkelton, 1996', Sheryl Conkelton, *Uta Barth: In Between Places*, University of Washington, Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, 2000, p. 15).

The third photographer I want to bring into this discussion of time and empty spaces is Uta Barth. Like Yass, Barth is also interested in intervening in the viewing relationship that the subject has with the object that they are looking at, and she does this in a number of ways. Sometimes, as in 'Ground' (1994-7), she blurs the focus, making it impossible to read anything within the frame but a territory and some objects contained within it. Often these are images of mundane and everyday domestic settings, where we find ourselves peering at what might be, for example, the edge of a curtain, no. 46 (1994); pictures on the wall, no. 42 (1994); or the air-vents along the edge of the floor, no. 96.3 (1996). In numbers 3, 9 and 10 of 'Field' (1994-8), the images of ordinary street lights in the city at dusk appear to hang in the sky like huge harvest moons, conveying an unearthly quality to the scene. In playing with our desire to see these things clearly and to discern their every detail, Barth brings an intensity to the act of looking.

On other occasions, Barth focuses our attention on previously un-observed margins and gaps between things. It is the edge of her frame, not the centre, that Barth is interested in; and she makes these edges matter. Objects we would expect to find in the middle of an image, we find right at the periphery, just about to slip out of view; while centre stage we are staring seemingly at nothing at all. For '. . . in passing' (1997), Barth made a series of photographs that prioritise the gap between two people by placing this absence in the centre of the image. In 'nowhere near' (1999), we view through selected portions of a framed window, patches of the horizon blurred, out of focus, far, far away. In her most recent work, '. . . and of time' (2000), the photographs show light caught on the wall-to-wall carpet and beige painted walls

of the most boring rooms. The only things to capture our imagination here are the fleeting shafts of light itself.

But what do these images tell us about time? It is clear from Barth's work that time cannot be understood without space. By holding the object of our gaze away from us, Barth creates a distance between the viewing subject and the viewed object – it is a distance that she controls. By bringing the experience of looking and the desire to see right into focus, Barth positions us very much in the present tense. Like Yass' play with the gaps between different viewing positions, Barth's focus on the absences in normal viewing conditions makes time more tangible: we are made aware of ourselves looking in an ongoing present. As in Luxemburg's 'Liebeslied', Barth's 'Ground' and 'Field' create a lustrous surface, a glossing of the present moment, that allows the viewer to become absorbed in their own act of looking.

ii (lustre again): the act of self absorption

[I feel unsure here of what I have said. Is what I see in these photographs what is 'really' there or am I only looking at what I am looking for? Am I, like the photographers, lost in my own self-absorption? The places here are empty, they allow us to project ourselves onto the image. They are full of time, of the minutes passing by as we try to see, and of time ignored as we drift off into dreams. Are these images full of potential, are they dialectical images where our awareness of the present allows the past to become visible? Or is time held still by our own reflection. The self-absorbed look polishes and shines until we can see our own reflection. The tendency in the views of these contemporary urban photographers, and in my own comments on their work, is to gloss the external world of things and places creating a lustrous surface. Are we doing this to reassure ourselves? Is the present more comforting than the past? Is self-reflection the creation of a critical distance or is it simply narcissism?

This seems to me akin to nostalgia. Doreen Massey has written of nostalgia as a selfish act, as a way of keeping the past in place according to one person's view of how things happened. Nostalgia holds everyone in check, not allowing them space to move forward. Unlike modernism's wish to move forward, to progress, a postmodern attitude to the past is a nostalgic version of history, whose co-ordinates are determined by a wistful backwards glance. Looking back from a distance up ahead, things and places seem to gain a glossy sheen. Memories take well to stain-remover and to lustre.]