FOUR COMMENTS ABOUT A DISTANCED WORLD WITH A CONCLUSION PROMPTED BY JOHN PFAHL'S *ALTERED LANDSCAPE* PHOTOGRAPHS

-I-

Rene Descartes' dictum, Cogito ergo sum, "I think, therefore I am," emerged from a matrix of doubt that also sponsored his meditation of 1641 that the heavens, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all other external things, are nothing but illusions and dreams. The Cartesian cleavage between mind and matter, which has plagued thought ever since the seventeenth-century, forced human distrust of direct sensory experience. Matter, continuous, with unlimited divisibility, filling everything, was indeed ensured by God's expressed magnitude, yet that stuff external to mind was but an aspect of nature as a machine in perpetual motion, of world subject to measurement and ultimate confirmation according to the laws of analytical geometry and mathematical rules. For Descartes, things of the natural world were but extended substances, mechanistically determined, not the least like their familiar appearances gained by humankind's being in the world directly sensing their presence. Such appearances of world, matter, nature were displaced by a belief in the primacy of pure reason, a trust in ideas innate to mind, an ultimate certainty that the universe can be constructed by thinking alone.

-II-

In 1689, John Locke wrote in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: *Methinks the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light with only some little opening left, to let in external visible resemblances or ideas of things without: would the pictures coming into a dark room but stay there and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would be very much resemble the understanding of a man in reference to all objects of sight, and the ideas of them.* In the wake of the Cartesian establishment of a sharp dualism between mind and matter, the camera obscura, not only as a metaphor for a new conception of mind, but more significantly, as utilized instrument, activated human urgency to reclaim a rapprochement between the senses and the familiar appearances of the world. The mechanical eye of the camera ensured that the

impermanent reflections of the world received within the dark room or box were free from humanly subjectivist determination. That instrumental method of accommodating such reflections also ensured that observers of those introjected and fleeting pictures were removed from the directly witnessable world. Thus, ironically, not the presence of nature but the distance of nature from direct sensory experience was rendered by the early camera as all too real. Even photography, its indexical capacities wished for, remotely predicted by Locke one and a half centuries prior to public announcement of the medium in 1839, continued to remind humankind of a distanced world.

-III-

At its inception photography was believed to offer radiantly autographic manifestations of the world: the world's own reflected light passing through a lens impressed world's familiar appearances on a light-sensitive tablet within the camera. Sir John Herschel, British astronomer and scientist, discovered that by treating an exposed tablet with a solution of the hyposulphite of soda dissolved any remaining unexposed silver salts, thereby rendering the image originally defined within the camera insusceptible to further actinic effects. It was Herschel who enable light impressions to be fixed, who enabled the world's own presentations *to stay*. Yet, what stayed shifted from the present to the past tense, pictorial images that served less to reflect a world regained for direct sensory-experience than its continuing separation from human beholders. As Stanley Cavell so aptly stated in *The World Viewed* (1971) : … *[photography satisfied] the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation-- a wish for the power to reach this world, having for so long tried, at last hopelessly, to manifest fidelity to another…. Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity) is a world past.*

-IV-

Throughout the history of photographic picturing, photographers have approached the natural world motivated by varied interests in its eventual photographic identification: using the medium, for example, as act of preservation; as measure of scientific inquiry, as definition of environment for potential human occupancy, appropriation, power; as evidence of that often awesome world beyond mind that prompts aesthetic delight or wonder, humility or fear. In their camera-assisted framing of nature, so many photographers have maintained the Renaissance window, that implied transparent barrier between eye and world, that window behind which sight takes place and from which vantage their pictures tirelessly recapitulate perspectival modes that confirm problems of human vision, not the presence of the world. So many photographers have behaved as if all nature could be captured in silver, as if their inexhaustible and indiscriminate two-dimensional disjunctions of natural forms from temporal flux and extension in space implied their regain. So many have photographically framed fragments of the natural world in the service of types of abstraction which ultimately deny any recognition of context and place. The result of such varied interests has been best suggested by Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (1977) : *Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote …. photography implies instant access to the real. But the results of this practice of instant access are another way of creating distance. To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to experience the unreality and remoteness of the real.*

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The body of work from which the ten dye-transfer color prints in this portfolio have been selected was achieved during the period 1974 through 1978, a serried of images John Pfahl, their maker, has identified as altered landscapes. In his lectures, writing, and in interviews concerning this series of work, Pfahl has informed us that the photographs stemmed from *investigations into the ambiguities arising from three-dimensional realities*

subjected to two-dimensional photographic surfaces, thereby admitting his interest in the clear distinction between place pictured and picture of place.

It has been clearly evidenced that viewers of Pfahl's photographs quite often believe there are motifs such as lines or shapes marked on the surfaces of the prints, which closer examination reveals to be tape, string, foil, rope, lace, orbs, rods and other objects place on or in the scenic territories he has chosen to record. He reminds us that such illusions of markmaking are purely photographic phenomena; that they were effected by stationing a tripod bearing a 4 x 5-inch view camera with a 90 mm lens at one crucial point in the space of each selected environment portrayed; that simple drawings were made on transparent overlays attached to the ground-glass viewing plane at the back of the camera and duplicated by artificial elements placed out in the landscapes -- landscapes saturated with picturesque potentials guaranteed by photographs in which traditional schemata for ensuring reflections of nature deemed canonically wondrous and beautiful were alluded to but never obeyed. Such duplicative procedures required an inarguable authority in the control of the optical capacities and mechanical operations of the camera. Such procedures also generally involved two to eight hours of painstaking trial-and-error adjustments, occasionally the aid of assistants, and the periodic monitoring of the work through the use of black and white Polaroid photographs as studies for and checks on the progress of the drawings and their duplication. Such extended involvement in the environments pictured became for Pfahl a *ritual of affection* in which act of eye and mind as well as the forms of nature entered into a state of reciprocally motivating pictorial concerns. And because of his expressed belief in such intimately balanced connections and kinships or differences between those placements in the world and the scenes of the world, both simultaneously recorded by the camera, became exquisitely contained, autonomous, pictured permanently before *all traces of the activity were removed and the landscape returned to its original inchoate state.*

Such elements variable placed or constructed within Pfahl's chosen sites, their identity more often than not prompted by aspects of the forms of nature once present to his vision, may appear to echo, extend or otherwise call attention to a strong formal feature identified in the topography of the scene, as defined by AUSTRALIAN PINES (Fort DeSoto, Florida/1977) in

which the foil once wrapped around the trunks of the trees marks the width of the band of distant Gulf water and brings into union forms near and far; as in CANYON POINT (Zion National Park, Utah/1977) in which the contours of sharply inclined natural walls appear brought to gentle union by the necklace-like rope once draped on the light-streaked rise in the foreground. Such elements may complete information initially suggested by on-site forms, Pfahl's additive units combining with things already located, as in the witty reconfiguration of HAYSTACK CONE (Freeport, Maine/ 1976). The elements may effect references to information signaling systems foreign to the subject defined, as in the allusion to NASA photographs of the moon figured by the blue crosslines in RED SETTERS IN RED FIELD (Charlotte, North Carolina/1976). Motifs may have been placed or constructed without direct relation to natural forms within the scene; nevertheless, once pictured, they often sponsor not only interactive differentiation but synthesis between the element and the earthscape on or in which it appears, as witnessed in PINK ROCK RECTANGLE (Artpark, Lewiston, New York/1975), in which the black tape once applied to the granite boulders configures a geometric shape affirming the two-dimensionality of the picture-plane and repeating its edges while seemingly passing through and emerging from the volumetric forms of the stones.

The critic Anthony Bannon has expertly identified and defined the central concerns of Pfahl's work. Even but a few selections from Bannon's commentary entitled "John Pfahl's Picturesque Paradoxes" (*Afterimage*, February 1979) reveal the richly pertinent measures of his insight:.. *a major focus of the work is its dialectic between the real and the abstract, between an illusion of a dimensional landscape and the imposed pattern of the graphic, between the three dimensions of empathetic space and the two-dimensional, sometimes metaphoric, material he imposes upon it… Pfahl with his artworks shifts the practice of art from the object itself to the object of perception, and, sometimes, boldly, to perception itself… he offers the precision of science, and through its marks provides a conduit for access to beauty, together with evidence of its construction in the one-time-only event of photography. An irony is that such a temporal relationship is suggested in his work not by the fact of the shutter, but by the inference of place. Like the perspective of the Renaissance, Pfahl's vision can be achieved from one point of view only … however, the terms are established by the camera … For with his marks upon the scene itself, Pfahl creates an image which*

is the only image possible. It requires a camera for its execution. Most camera images are not the necessary relationship to a situation but only one of many possibilities. Pfahl's, however, are absolutely necessary -- and utterly self-sufficient, without the need of words and never out of context. They define their own context …. What Pfahl obtains nothing short of the image and the idea at the same time: both the rigorously intellectual and the lushly sublime. He offers an illusion of the real and the gesture of the abstraction, a rendition of the landscape and the articulation of a design, such that his pictures give us access to the world while demonstrating metaphors for its expression….

Two of the images in this portfolio strikingly identify concerns that might be experienced in the observation of John Pfahl's series of altered landscapes, concerns that arise from the contemplation of his pictorial inferences of the real and the invented. In WAVE, LAVE, LACE (Pescadero Beach, California/1978) , the stilled mottled froth of the great tripartite stretch of surf in the upper half of the stratified pictorial scene is echoed illusionistically by the delicate bands of lace embellishing the vegetation on the foreground bluff. Our eyes seek not to experience a continuum of either the water or the lace beyond the edges of the picture, but remain attentively bonded to the internal evidence of interpenetrative relationship, of magical correspondence and interchange between the forms of place and the placed forms pictorially ensured by Pfahl's original activity in the environment and his camera's orientation. In SIX ORANGES (Delaware Park, Buffalo, New York/1975) we should recognize, as surely as did Pfahl, that the perspectival orthogonals defined by the edges of the path, while agreeable to human sight, could never have been or be actual fact; that the dimensional constancy of the orbs extended into space along the path is contrary to perceptual expectation, whereas, were they actual oranges, their similar scale could be proved by measures other than sight to be the case. In SIX ORANGES the perceptually correct is a factual lie; the perceptually false a possible truth.

In any analysis we cannot ask that either of these pictures enable us to transcend the limitations of reality defined by human vision nor to deny our continuing interest in the intriguing extensions of pictorial effect afforded by Pfahl's refined visual intelligence and his faultless camerawork. Yet we can conclude that there are lessons to be learned in the intensive

observation of Pfahl's stunningly exquisite records of now past-tense places and once-involving orientations: that things of the world, animate and inanimate, need not remain imprisoned within their natural or manufactured categorical boundaries; that there is indeed, in the realm of the visual, a language for effecting linkages between naturally existent and fabricated forms, a language which permits interrelationships between disparate identities and ensures their contiguity. Also, we can be certain that intensive observation of Pfahl's work will prompt the recognition that the sense of sight always confirms the conventions and potentialities of our view of what constitutes familiar appearances of the world, that what we see is always progressive toward what we want things to be. Should our visual ambitions fail to substantiate the world, then the sense of touch shall come again to aid. Following John Pfahl's exemplary lead, we may accept the world as guide to new relationships, discovering that nature's proximity is within the reach of our hand.

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