

On the matter of photographs

Photographs are not just 'images', such as the images falling on the surface of our retina. Photographs are not the image of their subjects; photographs generate *their* images out of the surface of a real, tangible, present material substance - often the fragile layer of photosensitive chemicals bonded to photographic paper, or the pressed ink of reprographic technique, or, today, the now-ubiquitous glowing matrix of pixels assembled in digital screens.

Yet critics and historians of photography tend to take for granted that a photographic image is the unity of a single optical image, 'seen' by the camera lens and fixed in the otherwise uniform surface of the photograph's physical support. Although the rise of digital simulation, editing and compositing has created a culture of artificial images which has detached the contemporary image from any reference to what could possibly be claimed as the 'real world', even our hallucinatory new image culture retains the orthodox commitment of the old culture of lens-based images. It goes largely unnoticed that the photographic image is always *whole*; always something 'seen' by the eye of an imaginary viewer, which originates from the single point of view of the camera lens (real or simulated). In our culture the image's two-dimensional surface is always unbroken, integral – simultaneously a smooth membrane *and* a window onto a coherent world (however fantastical), present to the eye of the beholder.

But Anita Witek's work rejects the integrity of the photographic surface, putting the imaginary space of photography back into question. Witek cuts printed photographs into pieces, fragments, slices, sections, panels and frames, which are assembled in various ways and then rephotographed. The 'whole' image becomes fragments, which become a whole image again. But in this cycle our sense of the nature of an image is changed. The image travels: from the original subject to the first printed surface; from the whole of the printed surface to the fragment of the cut print. These fragments are combined into an assemblage of material fragments of many images which become a whole image again, to be printed (or displayed digitally) once more.

But what *are* the images we find in Witek's works? What they are not are images of *subjects*. Witek's work makes a radical shift away from what is traditionally understood as photocollage or photomontage. Ever since the invention of photo-reprographic processes, artists have corrupted and repurposed the printed image through cutting and fragmentation. From the political propaganda of the Russian constructivists and left-wing activists such as John Heartfield, to Surrealists like Max Ernst, through to the punk graphics of artists such as Linder Sterling, images made of recombined fragments have been a key element in the avant-garde and radical visual culture of the twentieth century, while contemporary artists have continued those legacies into the present: for example, British artist John Stezaker for example (with whom Witek studied) has consistently explored the psychological effect of disjuncture and perceptual misidentification that arises when images are spliced, aligned and overlaid.

But what these artists and movements tend to share is a commitment to the coherent image and a recognisable subject, however outlandish or uncanny. These assemblages present themselves as a new 'subject', however strange or self-negating, but still rely on certain visual conventions of space, composition and the integrity of a field of the image.

But the images Witek creates are different. They appear to be made of the visual 'residue' to be found outside a photograph's main focus. It is as if Witek has rescued from printed images everything that was ancillary or secondary to the photographer's original subject: background, shadow, texture, surface, but also gradations of tone which suggest hollows, depths, recesses. Among these cut-out fragments we can find the grain or texture of surfaces, the shadows cast by

an object, the folds in cloth, parts of objects or the silhouetted outlines of otherwise absent things.

Full of shadows and planes, Witek's images suggest spaces which aren't really architecture, and in which space itself continually collapses and dilates. Object and background become inverted. When we think we're looking at a thing in a space, we discover that the outline of the thing has become the aperture through which we see to some *other* space beyond. Looking at Witek's most recent monochrome images, we are constantly thrown into a state of vertigo, never sure if we are looking *into* a space or *at* a surface, never certain that we are looking at things seen in space, or at fragments of space seen as things.

Critical to this strange and disconcerting experience are the traces of the fragment's physical reality. These otherwise flat elements bear the traces of a ragged scalpel cut, the hints of scratches, creases and folds. One fragment cast its shadow on what is beneath it. 'Real' space – the truthfulness of the camera's recording of these assembled fragments – becomes confused with the represented space still contained within the fragment. This is an unusual sort of *mise en abyme*, since something that is 'in front' can represent a space which is 'behind', while betraying its own surface shadows and contours.

Witek's images hold our attention because they insist that the photographic image is not the same as the reality in which it exists, yet into which our mind's eye is always all too ready to enter. But this resistance isn't an admonition or a refusal. It is a generative space, in which the lack of easy visual anchors prompts us discover the 'sense' of these images. Often this sense might be a feeling, an emotion, or the impression we have of the experience of memory – the paradox of an absence which is also present. The nature of time and psychological interiority – both the conditions of memory – are implicated in Witek's images. This accounts for something of the intimacy of Witek's images: close-to and without the usual stabilising, distancing of perspectival space, we are somehow 'inside' a constellation of moments of visual experience, which we assimilate, or incorporate, rather than projecting ourselves into the 'elsewhere' of an imaginary scene. Witek's images bring us back, not only to the materiality of images, but to the materiality of looking – to the embodied self, in whose interiority seeing and knowing are gathered together to make sense.

JJ Charlesworth

JJ Charlesworth is a writer and art critic. He studied art at Goldsmiths College in London in the mid-1990s, before turning to writing criticism. His reviews, articles and commentaries have appeared in publications including *Art Monthly*, *Modern Painters*, *Time Out* and the *Spectator*. Since 2006, he has worked on the editorial staff of the London-based art magazine *ArtReview*, where he is one of the editors. His doctoral thesis, completed in 2016 at the Royal College of Art, is a study of art criticism in Britain during the 1970s.