

Photography as Expanding Form: Virtual and actual expansion in the work of Saron Hughes and Martina Corry

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Saron Hughes: *A1 Still Life*

Hughes' artworks resist medium categorisation. Existing somewhere between the two- and three-dimensional, much of her work appears to converge and deconstruct media. Her *Painting as Sculpture as Photography* (2008) – consisting of suspended painted paper forms in space – is simultaneously a painting and a sculptural installation. Other works are manifested as floor-bound sculptural objects that nevertheless possess many of the characteristics of painting (including flatness). Hughes questions the nature of representation and provokes reflection on the materiality of her quasi-sculptural objects. Her work actively considers the spatial position of the viewer and explores issues of perspective and pictorial space. This concern is evident in her *A1 Still Life* series (2005).

Hughes' *A1 Still Life* series consists of photographs of a domestic interior. Although inspired by still-life painting, the subject matter is unconventional. The A1 of the title refers to the recurring feature of the work: a sheet of white A1-sized paper. *A1 Still Life* is the photographic documentation of the artist's manipulation of a sheet of drawing paper. The work exists in photographic form, but it is Hughes' training as a sculptor that comes to the fore. The paper is employed in a sculptural way, the three-dimensionality achieved through a series of creases and folds. However, the presentation of the A1 paper in the form of two-dimensional photographs produces an effective flattening of the sculptural object and provokes confusion in the viewer's depth perception. The work engenders a movement between two paper surfaces: the actual A1 sheet and its photographic mediation. The work as such, happens in the interplay of these coexisting surfaces.

A1 Still Life charts the journey of paper through the front room of a suburban house, it entangles itself with the furniture, it envelops a cushion, it caresses and covers a fruit bowl, it sidles up to a television. The progression here is not simply the movement of the paper through the room but also a transition between media – from drawing paper to sculpture and from sculpture to photography. The folded sheet momentarily adopts the characteristics of a three-dimensional form. The home serves as the milieu, with the paper mapping both the spatial interior and the psychic and conceptual activity of the artist. Hughes began folding the paper in an attempt to understand the Lacanian "Real"². *A1 Still Life* originates from the artist's attempt to think through Lacan's operation of the Real "as that which resists symbolisation" (Hughes, "A1 Series"). The *imaging* of the Real is non-representational and occurs purely through diagrammatic folding.

The A1 paper becomes an image within the still life of the domestic interior. Yet this motif acts not as a subject for the picture so much as an anti-pictorial device. The paper sheet masks the interior beneath it, obscuring it from view and operating as a type of screen on the surface of the photograph. It may be argued that this screen is *in* rather than *on* the photograph, but its effect is to push forward from the receding pictorial elements of the photograph onto the surface. The paper appears as a floating abstract form that obscures a field of variegated coloured planes. Its advancing form rises to the surface of the photograph,

causing the divergent planes and colours to recede. The A1 paper disrupts the plane of representation and acts as an opaque veil on top of the image.

Hughes' *A1 Still Life: Armchair* depicts a red chair in a domestic space, to the right is a window and to the left an open door. What is most striking about this image is not the interior scene but the sheet of paper that floats on top of it. We cannot say where the surface of the paper is. Impossibly suspended, the A1 paper appears as a ghost that haunts the domestic space. The disembodied form produces a similar effect to the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *Ambassadors*, creating uncertainty in our position as viewer. The paper is twisted so that it almost seems to be escaping from the picture. It is as if the sheet has unfolded itself and is preparing to take flight through the open door. Hovering menacingly, this phantom provokes the uncanny in the viewer both through its out-of-placeness with the domestic interior and via its apparent animation. The looming rectangular form that cajoles us into the picture also points us in the direction of its exit – one corner of the sheet forms an arrow head that juts into the dark space behind the picture. This expanding monumental form destabilises the photograph.

Hughes' work often creates a fracturing of the virtual photographic surface resulting in the visibility of the photograph as a material medium. In an earlier series of work Hughes employed holiday brochures as source material – folding, distorting and re-photographing the publicity images. Hughes “recreated the space of the landscape by folding the image along the horizon and rephotographing the picture along the ground of the image” (Hughes, “Materiality”). Reflecting on the idea that holiday brochures invite the viewer to enter their (depicted) space, Hughes manipulated the images (sometimes introducing new lighting and depth of field) so that the viewer is effectively “thrown further back out of the image as the picture” (“Materiality”). Hughes observes that “the picture plane remains impenetrable – its materiality is emphasised not diminished... Sometimes you can clearly see the texture of the [original] page” (“Materiality”). Hughes' motivation for making the work arose from a sense of “frustration at the smooth photographic surface that I want to break through” (“Materiality”). This desire to disrupt the surface recalls Yve Lomax's account of fracturing within the photographic image:

A fracture appears in the seemingly smooth and transparent surface of the photographic image. The fracture (or is it a cut?) draws my attention to the photographic surface; no longer can I look through the photograph as if it were a window, a pane of glass which unobstructively allows a view “outside” to shine “inside”; to be plainly and truly seen. (Lomax 16).

Folding

It is a single fold that transforms the paper in *A1: Still Life Armchair* into a sculptural form, thus introducing another dimension to the previously flat sheet. Paper can produce an infinite number of spatial variations. In *A1: Still Life* paper takes on multiple shapes, embodies new forms; it produces continuity and contiguity between inside and out. Folding produces new surfaces, textures, layers and constructions of matter. The fold possesses a particular ontological and aesthetic potential for Gilles Deleuze, for whom it is aligned with Baroque art (which demonstrates an infinity of multiplying folds in its rendering of garments). For Deleuze, the Baroque is concerned with materiality – “Baroque underlines matter” and this “matter tends to flow out of the frame, as it often does in trompe l'oeil compositions” (*The Fold*, 141). Discussing the fold's movement towards volume, Deleuze asserted that “it may

be that painting needs to leave the frame and become sculpture in order fully to attain these effects” (*The Fold*, 140). We could draw some correspondences between this aesthetic dimension of the fold and what occurs in *A1: Still Life Armchair*, particularly with regard to its trompe l’oeil effect. The fold in *A1: Still Life Armchair* operates as a diagonal ascending the paper that, in turn, appears to ascend to the surface of the paper print. The A1 paper operates as a type of Möbius strip unfolding onto the surface of the artwork – there is an apparent inseparability between the virtual and actual surfaces. The folding of the A1 paper anticipates the paper surface of the photograph. Folding is introduced as an action that traverses the impenetrability of the picture plane. The viewer perceives a virtual immaterial folding that occurs only in the landscape of the mind (an imagined folding that echoes Deleuze’s account of the Baroque fold). Through folding, Hughes engenders a multiplicity of the surfaces of the work.

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The sculptor is traditionally concerned with the external surface or patina of the work – the outermost element that is visible to the viewer. The presentation of the sculptural object in the form of its photographic mediation suggests a withholding of the artistically handled surface. Yet in *A1 Still Life* the actual paper object and the paper on which it is reproduced become conflated. There is an apparent coextensivity between the literal and optical (virtual/depicted) surfaces of the work. The photograph here takes the place of the original object; it is the secondary screen that produces the surface of the A1 paper as virtual image. The real surface – of the photograph – is intertwined with the virtual surface so that each becomes present in the other. The A1 sheet unfolds between the internal and external surfaces: from the surface of the folded paper to the photograph as the actual surface of this “sculptural” work. The shaping of the paper creates ambiguity when manifested as photograph onto another paper surface. The representational folding of the A1 paper surface produces a virtual folding that is coextensive with the virtuality of the photographic image.

A1 Still Life challenges the boundary between three-dimensional sculptural form and two-dimensional photography. The folding of the paper introduces volume into the otherwise flat sheet. However, the presentation of the sculpted form as photographic image produces a compression. *A1 Still Life* illustrates the problematic flattening effect of photography when it *pictures* a sculptural object that exceeds its dimensions. Volume is reduced to flat representation. Yet there is a virtual internal expansion that occurs through the ambiguous depiction of the folded paper form. The obscuring of the pictorial image by the paper disrupts a reading of the photograph purely in terms of the optical, depicted surface. Although the folded surface is internal to the photograph (it happens within photographic documentation), the viewer encounters a doubling of (literal and optical) surfaces in *A1 Still Life*. There is an indiscernability or indeterminability between the (virtual) photographic representation and its (actual) surface. It is as if the (original) three-dimensionality exceeds the purely representational confines of the picture – expanding onto the surface of the photograph. The failure of the photograph to function *as* image, draws attention to the, usually invisible, photographic surface. The effect that the paper has on the viewer is similar to Deleuze’s account of Japanese scroll painting: “it is no longer the medium that rolls up on itself; it is what is represented on it that rolls up at its surface” (*Essays Critical and Clinical* 22).

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Notes

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2. Personal interview with the artist Saron Hughes on 25 April 2007 and a subsequent email in 2015 which transcribed the artist's notes from the time that she was working on the *A1 Still Life* series. Hughes' notes reference how she was interested in "Žižek's definitions of the Real (through Lacan) as that which resists symbolisation". She further references Žižek's account of the *objet petit a* as – "precisely the paradoxical object generated by language itself as its 'fall-off', as the material left over of the purely self-referential movement of signifiers" (Žižek, 145).

Works Cited

[...]

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Sandra Plummer is a Teaching Fellow in the History and Theory of Art at the UCL Slade School of Fine Art. Her PhD thesis, "Photography after Deleuze: Ontology, Reflexivity and Materiality", examined contemporary self-referential photography. Her articles on contemporary photography have been published in *Photoworks*, *Source*, *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* and *Philosophy of Photography* (for which she is also an Associate Editor). Her research on photographic objecthood includes the curation of "Photography's New Materiality" for the National Media Museum.
