

Saron Hughes The index as Still Life

JOHN SLYCE

*"Whatever else its power, the photograph could be called sub- or pre-symbolic, ceding the language of art back to the imposition of things."*¹

Rosalind Krauss

There is something missing in the image by Saron Hughes entitled *A1 Still Life: Cushion*. The language I deploy here aims to point to that missing something, as if the words I write were an extension of my own index finger hovering over the image as it identifies this ostensive lack. As I write, my words begin to fill and cover a virtual sheet of pristine A4 paper; bounded by the paper's margins, they map out the would-be contours of its two-dimensional space. The sheet of A1 paper Hughes has inserted in this photograph is different in every significant way to my sheet of A4. Hers is a shifter whose collapse was brought about during the brute fact of one thing meeting another: paper and cushion. This collision squashes out space – the representational space of the photograph and with it too goes a certain type of meaning. All that is left behind is the residue of an indexical trace, or the footprint of the cushion left in the sands of a sheet of A1. This is, arguably still for some, the alpha if not also the omega of an ontology of the photographic image.

The indexical trace which bears a photograph's relation to its object and the world is of late a victim of fashion in the eyes of some. There are those for whom digital technology raises the spectre of a post-photography which somehow breaks those ties that bind; for others, the index is implicated in a moment of theory that does not so much trouble the photograph and photography as those individuals who would prefer its link be an expressive one that leads directly back to its maker. This series of works by Saron Hughes looks awry at the photograph and in doing so produces work that speaks clearly about the status of the image and also the status of the index. There is a fundamental gesture in their making that is flamboyant and elegant, but at the same time crude and somewhat absurd. There is no hint of a story and not any space for one in these images.

At the same time, these pictures are the result of an event and clearly something has happened to produce a result that is, at once, literal and yet also poetic as it suggests an opening out onto another physical plane and dimension of meaning. The ding, crease, or fold is generally considered the ruination of a photograph. Exactly why the sheet of A1 paper appears in each of Hughes' images in this series is opaque – any answer would remain abstract and yet the

creases each carry are concrete, particular and descriptively critical. For me, Hughes follows the line of Krauss above and cedes the language of art and the photograph back to the imposition of things by working not with symbols but with materials that carry a physical relationship to their referents – the representation meets the represented, or the sheet of A1 as index.

Saron Hughes is best known for sculptural work that is decisively planar and often concerned with processes of over-laid space. She frequently forces two-dimensional aspects and representational features onto her three-dimensional works. Space is a fundamental material and subject in her work whether the form it takes is more clearly sculptural or photographic. When I first encountered the series of images that is *A1 Still Life*, I related to each as a type of two-minute sculpture, or variation on the work of Erwin Wurm. Their initial family resemblance is to that of sculpture, but Hughes' work soon departs in that its gesture is in no way a performance or expressive one.

These works before you – *A1 Still Life: Cushion*, *A1 Still Life: Armchair* and *A1 Still Life: Fruit* – strike at the essential meaninglessness that surrounds a photograph. In our moment where photography enjoys a comfortable seat at the table in the big house of art, many makers of photographic images exploit this feature of meaninglessness to produce a picture and product that aims wholeheartedly to achieve a state of nothing more or less than ambiguity. Surfing this wave of ambiguity is a strategy that will clearly deliver a semblance of success. Saron Hughes is aiming for something else, something more in these works. By looking askance at the index, at the status of an image and the problematic relations of representation and the language of objects, she says something fundamental about how a photographic image works and means. And like every lesson of import that is persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive, it has all been said before. For me, however, it is in the potent and blank whiteness of these sheets of A1 that we need to confront the index as at once a shifter that is vacant, empty and evacuated, but at the same time is an indelible feature that produces the shadowy trace of a realism without which there is no world of photography, or really much of anything else.

1. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 1', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986, p. 203
