

Photography Should Build a Tent

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF
STUART BAILES

Many art photographers enjoy reducing the world around them into a series of simple forms; considering the most fundamental relationships between themselves and the objects they encounter as crucially important to their practice. This is also true of philosophy, which has sought to do this for centuries with varying degrees of success.

Stuart Bailes's work concentrates on the most fundamental ideas where both photography and human existence are concerned: time, history, and the way these things can be described, experienced or negotiated by visualizing a fictional space between them. In some recently historical sense photography and existence are interdependent: photographs would not have any reason to be if it were not for the human desire to catalogue, or typologize the objects around us; and existence – the ontological concern – would not have such profound visual depth and relative accuracy if it were not for the camera, sometimes enlightening our perception of the world, and at other times misleading us into a Romantic backstreet that corners and imprudently positions the photograph as a legitimate shoot-from-the-hip documentation of a twisted, destructive world.

Despite the huge challenge such an undertaking provides, these images do successfully attempt to rationalize what it is we might see or experience if time were to pause and present itself in the most profound ways. As Bailes himself puts it:

“What is being asked here is a question about history: a past, present and future image of how things might appear, how we interpret and negotiate these things and why we give them meaning. I want to explore what else is possible from within what we think we already know...”¹

This feature, instead of laying out an essay from the perspective of a single position, seeks to respond to individual images by way of a series of statements from several individuals. In this sense, as the images do themselves, the following statements present a description of what can be seen and said as time stands still and we are asked to look and comment on the relationships between several objects presented before us.

—Daniel Campbell Blight

1. Stuart Bailes, Artist's Statement, May 2010.
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, Royal College of Art MA Photography catalogue, July 2010.
3. Alexander Garcia Duttman, Royal College of Art MA Photography catalogue, July 2010.
4. Daniel Campbell Blight
5. Jean-Luc Nancy, Royal College of Art MA Photography catalogue, July 2010.
6. Alexander Garcia Duttman, Royal College of Art MA Photography catalogue, July 2010.
7. Stuart Bailes, Artist's Statement, May 2010.
8. Daniel Campbell Blight
9. Stuart Bailes, Artist's Statement, May 2010.
10. Daniel Campbell Blight
11. Stuart Bailes, Artist's Statement, May 2010.
12. Daniel Campbell Blight

“Mass, amassed weight, piled upon its own gravity
 This has fallen. It didn’t surge up, it didn’t rise up
 above the earth. It is the earth itself. The earth fallen
 in upon itself, a fall pure and simple. The world is
 born in this fall, during which the sharp air, the
 vivid, bracing air, which for its part never ceases to
 climb, slices the falling mass and divides it into dis-
 tinct terrains”.²

The Exergue, 2009

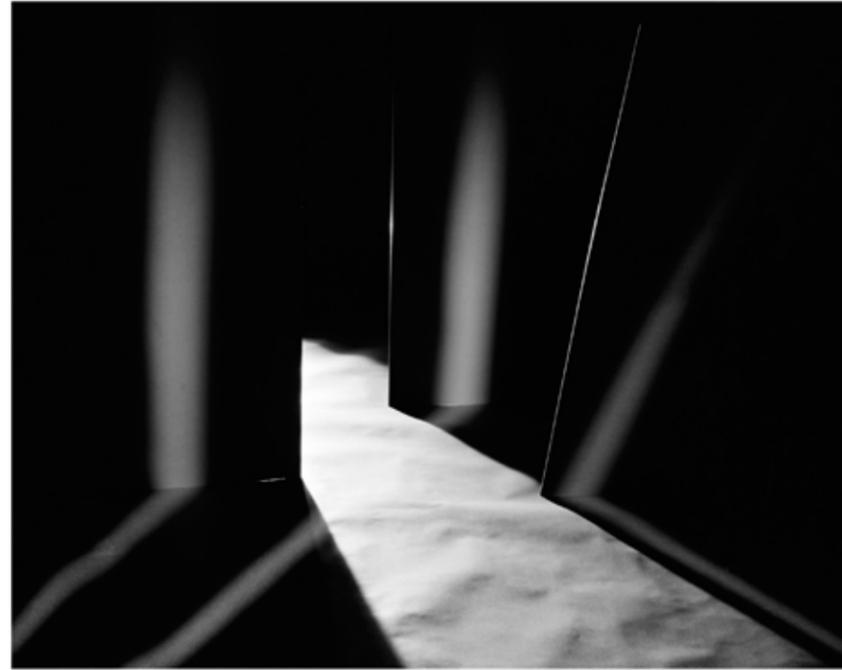
“Earthquake

The buildings have ceased to give shelter.
 Look at the broken glass with a razor-sharp
 edge. But the fear of the earth collapsing into,
 and falling onto, itself, seems contained now
 that the catastrophe has happened and that
 we know that it will happen again. The deadly
 and indifferent light shining from above con-
 tains it.”³

BLUE, UNRIVALLED CUT-THROUGH CLARITY

This has risen, in shadow. From clay and peat
 it glanced up to contrast itself with two other
 objects that came from the soil. The earth
 will make statements like this one; nature
 screams at us in the darkest ways; hoping
 against hope; pining for our disappearance;
 our continual demise; our slow decay. We
 are the shiny surface here, trapped between
 two mounds of earth. The bosom of Mother
 Nature does not nurture our growth in this
 metaphor, but instead smothers us to a brittle
 death.⁴





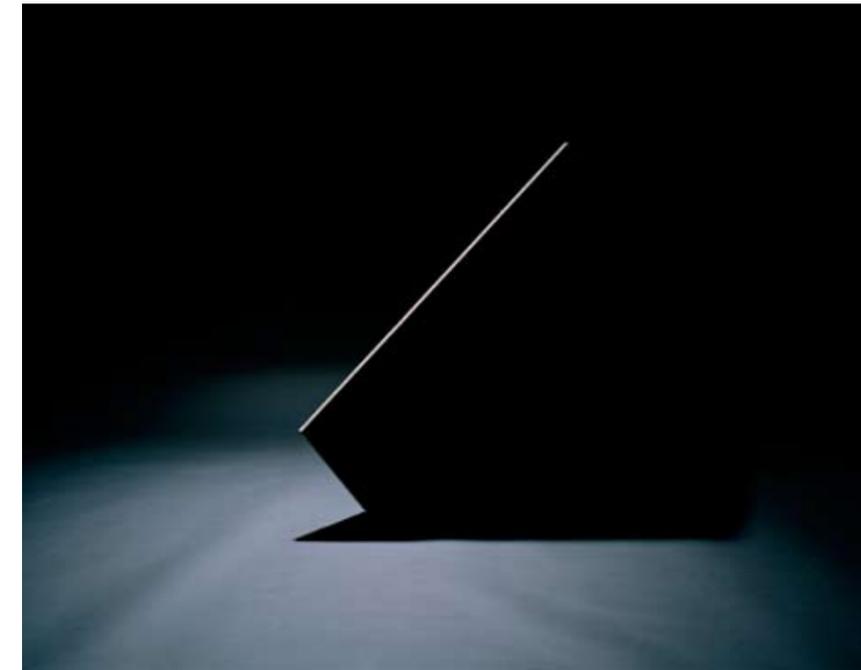
Tent, 2009

“Passage, passageway, narrow path, secret access
—but to what?”

Perhaps to a stage where, exiting from the wings, you suddenly find yourself. There, you would perform a play whose script you would have to make up on the spot. Or, as if exiting from a theatre or perhaps a tent, it may just as well lead to an outside, towards a dazzling exterior. The curtains veil its intensity. In the end, it is this intensity that you want to reach, even at the risk of being burned.”⁵

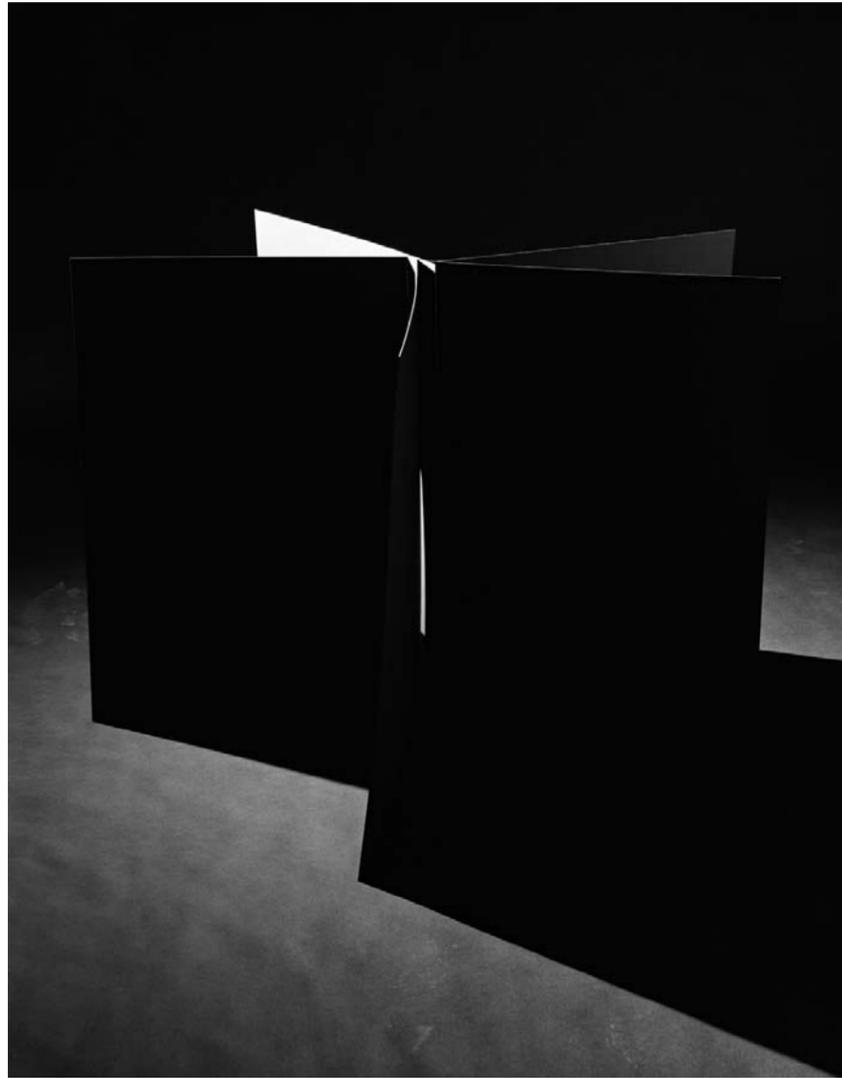
“Photography needs to build a tent, or else the traces will disappear in the whiteness of cold light. Hence the intensity felt when following the traces, when looking at a photograph.”

“My works are the traces of these limits in which only the language of the image is made visible. They are the record, and the recording, of duration and then a pause. Chance follows me as we move through a series of back rooms, navigating passageways and passing under door frames to finally venture out and up onto the stage.”⁷



Report, 2010

The significance of a single edge. This is a foldback speaker; relaying sound to the performer on this fictional stage. You are performing, by looking; by blankly staring at something that is designed to elude you. There is nothing to see here, nothing to report, no people, no identity and no commonplace.⁸



Flank, 2010

“The Flagship and the Decisive, Trench and Flank: the naming of these works recall, or resemble, terminology associated to the Military. These commands, actions and responses all reveal, performing bare boned, a construction that I consider to be a model for the Everyday Theatre. It is a machine that works. We can see how the machine works and its units are conditioned to negotiate

encounters at decisive points. However, in having a choice, actual decisions are made here and only here. They cannot be re-made, as the decision has already been determined and would present another encounter with a decision. Through the discourse of Photography I reconsider these binary unfoldings as Fictional Rationalities.”⁹



**FIVE COVERS WITHOUT A BOOK;
ALL POSITIVE FORM AND NO NEGATIVE CONTENT**

A small crack appears, it offers some light. This is a huge monument to literature, it is one-hundred and fifty feet high and stands on the river bed of the Thames to the East, shadowing the millennium dome. The dome, a New Labour abortion, has been flanked by a black theatricality. It turns and rises up into the air, revealing only one plain of white; existing to imply the importance of careful decision-making; something that has been all but remembered in these despicable times.¹⁰



Extraction, 2010

“I will walk in search of something.

In walking, one creates histories but one is also presented to history. What remains are the traces of these paths, mapped out as though the walk was full of intention. Without destination, one is invited to negotiate the terrain.”¹¹



Extraction, 2010

A TOOTH;
A DENTICLE MONUMENT
TO HISTORY

An old, yellowing crown is replaced, temporarily revealing a disgusting, black stump of a tusk. It is thrown to the ground, growing up again as a calcium fang – the strongest of all objects refusing to be displaced.¹²