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High Formalism: The Aerial View and the Colour Field

John Beck

Abstract

Laura Kurgan's *Monochrome Landscapes* (2004), first exhibited in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, consists of four oblong Cibachrome prints derived from digital files sourced from the commercial Ikonos and QuickBird satellites. The prints are ostensibly flat, depthless fields of white, green, blue and yellow, yet the captions provided explain that the sites represented are related to contested military, industrial and cartographic practices. In Kurgan's account of *Monochrome Landscapes*, she explains that it is in dialogue with another work from the Whitney by abstract artist Ellsworth Kelly. This article pursues the relationship between formalist abstraction and satellite imaging in order to demonstrate how formalist strategies aimed at producing an immediate retinal response are bound up with contemporary uses of digital information and the truth claims such information can be made to substantiate.

Keywords

Formalism Abstraction Surveillance Camouflage Satellite images

The increasing public availability over the last two decades of location-based

information systems, previously the sole preserve of military and intelligence agencies, has radically altered everyday conceptions of space, rendered the use of satellite maps and images commonplace, and made considerations of the dilation and contraction of scale an ordinary function of conceptualizing the positions of things and of people. The relatively seamless movement between satellite maps and images, aerial photographs, and ground level photographs made possible by freely available services like Google Earth has, to a large degree, domesticated the once vertiginous prospect of the vertical and oblique aerial view, and the impression of optical mastery enabled by the capacity to move around represented space via keyboard, mouse and screen produces the effect of an achieved democracy of vision. At the same time, growing familiarity with surveillance and data-gathering technologies and their critical role as evidence to justify and obtain consent for military and police action domestically and overseas, has contributed to anxieties regarding the extent to which the military and security services, and increasingly corporate and commercial interests, are able to command, control, and utilise the accumulation of all sorts of data, including the details of private citizens. The massive expansion of what can be seen of the world – or, at least, what can be pictured -- has been accompanied by a powerful increase in the suspicion that much remains hidden from view; the erosion of privacy has accompanied the expanded vistas of the electronic realm and the predations of an aggressive, penetrative techno-vision have become a permanent aspect of 21st Century politics and culture.

Perhaps the two most obvious fields to undergo radical transformation as a consequence of the innovations in geographic information systems (GIS) are mapping and photography, areas that conventionally sit at the intersection of science and art.

Maps and photographs each promise a direct relationship with the real, a facticity that is nevertheless at odds with the complex representational strategies that contribute to their production. As the systems delivering information become increasingly automated, the presumption that interpretive input contributes to the presentation of data has waned. What once required the skill and judgment of teams of cartographers and photographers is now delivered automatically. It is here, in the disembodied manufacture of satellite- or drone-vision, that the challenges of the new visual order are most apparent. Without mediating human agency, data can easily take on a positivist clarity (it is what it is) while at the same time breaking free from any sense of function (information gathered relentlessly for its own sake). The skill required to interpret such information is still most often claimed to reside with those agencies who developed the technology: the military, security services, corporations – skills most often self-described as rational, objective, and functional. Yet the act of reading a map or photograph has never been an entirely scientific process; it requires conjecture, associational thinking, and an openness to doubt.

As images derived from GIS sources have become a primary means of legitimating military and corporate policy, the emergence, over the last decade or so, of various forms of what Stephen Graham (2010) calls countergeographies has sought to complicate and challenge the apparent ease with which satellite and other GIS images have become part of the arsenal of the self-evident. The work of Eyal Weizman and the Forensic Architecture project (2014), based in the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths College, London, has undertaken a wide range of multidisciplinary, collaborative investigations of sites of conflict, exploitation, and injustice across the globe. Trevor Paglen (2006; 2009; 2010) has mapped US ‘black

sites' and photographed military bases with astrophotographic equipment; pursued military satellites, drones, and other apparatus of the security state. Photographers like Jon Rafman (2011), Mishka Henner (2011) and Doug Rickard (2012) have trawled Google Streetview to produce exhibitions of 'found' images that combine conventional genres like street, landscape, and documentary photography with the bureaucratic gaze of the surveillance image.¹ Laura Kurgan's work is similarly interested in the ways that photographic and art history can critically engage with GIS images, not just through the theoretical and discursive analysis of images but through an engagement with form as an integral part of the code through which data is given meaning.

Kurgan is Director of the Spatial Information Design Lab at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University. Her work is mainly engaged with the politics of digital location technologies and the visualization of data. Since the first Gulf War in the early 1990s -- the first post-Cold War conflict to see the US rehearse its so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) with the unprecedented use of information technology -- Kurgan has investigated technologies of location, imaging and mapping in a series of practice-based projects driven, as in the work of Weizman, Paglen, and others, by a commitment to opening up the critical potential of information systems. Mapping mass graves, incarceration patterns, disappearing forests, and currency flows in a series of case studies from Kuwait (1991), Kosovo (1999), and New York (2001) to Indonesia (2010), Kurgan seeks to

¹ For further examples of recent work concerned with mapping, information systems, and representation, see Abrams and Hall 2006; Bhagat and Mogel 2008; Harman 2009; and O'Rourke 2013.

interrogate and complicate the uses and outcomes of digital imaging technologies, foregrounding the complexity of interpretive procedures and the opacities and blind spots generated by them as well as testing the much-vaunted ‘growing global transparency’ promised by policy analysts. For Kurgan, a more nuanced and skeptical understanding of the technology requires an awareness that a new mode of viewing things has been introduced into the public sphere, ‘a way of viewing things close up at a distance in which there is no absolute scale, no anchor, no center.’ As a consequence, ‘evaluating this new visibility and negotiating its reality is a lot less obvious’ than it is often claimed to be (Kurgan 2013: 24).

Monochrome Landscapes

Kurgan’s project *Monochrome Landscapes* was first exhibited in 2004 at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria as part of a show called *Architecture by Numbers*. The project consists of four oblong, forty by eight-two inch Cibachrome prints derived from digital files sourced from the commercial Ikonos and QuickBird satellites. The geographic location of each image is provided in general terms by a descriptive caption and more specifically by the precise numerical values for latitude and longitude -- the numbers that the satellite’s sensors are instructed to record. The resolution is given as 0.61 of a meter per pixel in three cases (from QuickBird) and 1.0 meter per pixel in the fourth, Ikonos image. The heat value of each position is expressed as a number that is then assigned a standard colour. Kurgan’s four images are named White, Blue, Green, and Yellow, and while they are not completely uniform in tone – there are apparent wrinkles in the white, ripples in the blue, splodges on the green, and dirty marks on the yellow -- the four panels serve, in the

manner of a rudimentary colour chart, to correspond to those names. The broad insistence of the work – through its title, the simple colour values assigned to the panels as well as their largely blank appearance – is upon surface.²

Yet this depthlessness is only ever partial and the detailed captions, as well as the uneven tone of the images, shift the weight of attention toward the manner of complexity – the technological, computational particularities -- that has engineered such a reduction. White, blue, green, yellow: snow, water, trees, sand. The colours offer a rudimentary palette for landscape representation but the details are precise: the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, slated for oil exploration during the Bush administration (white); the intersection of the equator and the prime meridian in the Atlantic Ocean, the degree zero-zero of mapping (blue); old growth rainforest in Cameroon, site of illegal logging (green); the Southern Desert in Iraq in the early days of the war (yellow). Kurgan's selection of sites economically braids together issues of resource extraction and global geopolitics using the same forms of data acquisition and manipulation technologies mobilized to advance the actions of exploitation and domination taking place upon the colour-coded landscapes reproduced in the photographs. The refusal of the images to yield much in the way of visual information other than their generic colour values operates, once the locations are registered, as a mode of ironic whitewash: the technologies of surveillance and big data have been deployed to reveal their capacity not for exposure, but for concealment.

² The images and accompanying text for *Monochrome Landscapes* are available on Kurgan's website: <http://www.100k.org/monochromelandscapes/monochrome-landscapes>

Monochrome Landscapes, then, riffs on some of the contradictory signals delivered by the title of Kurgan's recent book, *Close Up at a Distance* (2013), in which the project is discussed: the remote sensing device simultaneously draws close but holds at bay, promises to reveal all but can pull back far enough that definition is lost. In this the satellites and the technologies deployed through them are but more powerful versions of earlier imaging devices that offered or threatened to picture everything that there is to see and much that there is not. And as with those other technologies, the data delivered by satellite imaging systems can erroneously be taken to be facts. Kurgan's work with data is, in this regard, resolutely 'para-empirical,' a term she uses to signal resistance to the notion of data as the real itself. Rather, for Kurgan data is never more or less than representations and interpretations – there 'is no such thing as raw data' she argues (2013: 35) – and while 'para-empirical' holds tight to the concrete it also allows for enough of the 'sense of auxiliary, almost, not quite,' of 'alongsideness and incompleteness' to give leverage to interpretative energy (35).

The value of incompleteness is demonstrated in Kurgan's essay on *Monochrome Landscapes*, which not only provides an explanation of, and context for, the production of the work but proceeds to probe further. By stepping into the images through a series of zooms, Kurgan refuses to allow the dumb regularity of the surface to stand and instead presses the data to yield what distance has withheld. In the zoomed images, the arctic remains white, though more intensely pearlescent, and the Atlantic stays stubbornly blue, if more leathery; but the forest is made to give up a freshly build road and a pair of helicopters hang over Iraq. The abstract, in these images, is shown to be made of the real – not the 'objective' as such, and its positivist

residues, but historical and political conditions are shown to constitute the granular source of the data. Faced with the monochromatic – images ‘in which every pixel looks pretty much alike’ – ‘it’s hard *not* to look for something,’ claims Kurgan, as if blankness itself is less a strategy of concealment and more an act of provocation (2013: 155).

It is hard not to look for something, and the *New York Times* could not see much in *Architecture by Numbers*: ‘there is little to help the visitor fathom the arcane, often impenetrable displays’ (Glueck 2004). The affectless passive aggression of *Monochrome Landscapes* is largely unpicked in Kurgan’s subsequent essay, but is this interpretation to be taken as part of the work, a belated and determined dismantling of the apparent autotelic sufficiency of the images? Or is it to be read ‘alongside’, as Kurgan would have it, a paratext that runs next to and is auxiliary to the four panels of *Monochrome Landscapes*, troubling and probing them but leaving them frostily inert? There is certainly a playful splitting here, with Kurgan as both artist and critic, radical investigator and corporate data jockey. The slipperiness is part of the project, it seems to me, as the status of data swells and shrinks according to the uses to which it is put and the contexts within which it is situated. Data can be hard-edged abstraction or a target grid, vital intelligence or dumb emptiness, but the problem with this capaciousness is that if data can be made to say anything at all it can also be made to say nothing.

Kurgan’s presentation of the oblong monochrome panels is clearly a calculated alignment of digital imaging and modernist aesthetics, particularly the aesthetics of mid-twentieth century American painting, yet it is not obvious why. While the four

panels stage the scene of modern art's autonomy – a knowingly dated move but successful enough at any rate that the *New York Times* backs off -- the unpacked and zoomed-in images interrogated in Kurgan's writing give the lie to the integrity of the original panels and reinstalls figuration and narrative. The pictures were never really abstract, Kurgan reveals; they never are.

If this is the case, though, are the images even necessary? The intertwined narrative of Arctic oil, illegal logging, misadventures in Iraq and the history of mapping is compelling enough without the trick-shot of lifting helicopters out of the ochre ground, though that is also an effective part of the story. What is missing from this engagement with the not-really-concealed content of the images is a more sustained consideration of the form of the four panels. What if the engaged and detailed attention to content in Kurgan's account of *Monochrome Landscapes* is a feint that diverts attention from the form of the panels, which are presented, after all, as an iteration of that most contentious of high modernist conceits, the abstract colour field? The more Kurgan discusses U.S. Geological Survey fact sheets about environmental despoliation, the more the stubborn fact of four 40 x 82-inch Cibachrome prints tends to recede from view. 'There is more than a formal aesthetic at stake here – these are vulnerable ecologies and politically charged landscapes,' Kurgan reminds the reader (2013: 153). Perhaps, but what about that formal aesthetic?

The images that comprise *Monochrome Landscapes* were designed, Kurgan explains, 'to converse formally with the work of another artist in the Whitney collection, Ellsworth Kelly,' notably his screenprint *Four Panels* (1970-71) (2013: 153). *Four Panels* is a belated addition to Kelly's signature red, blue and green paintings of the

late 1950s and early 1960s which utilize flat, tonally invariant fields of colour in hard-edged compositions typical of post-painterly abstraction's disavowal of gesture and figuration. Kelly's four panels are monochrome oblongs of, left to right, green, black, red and blue. The panels of *Four Panels* recall the rectangles used in Kelly's *Spectrum* paintings of 1969 rather than the geometric forms of the earlier red, green and blue canvases. Unlike the large paintings, where the red, green and blue shapes are placed in dynamic proximity, the colours in *Four Panels* are separated by a white ground or border, much as the separate monochrome *Spectrum* canvases are spaced at a uniform height along the gallery wall.

Kurgan does not elaborate on her reasons for aligning *Monochrome Landscapes* with Kelly's work, though its blank, reductive, zero-ambiguity look is in accord with the map legend effect Kurgan achieves in her piece. Beyond this superficial formal similarity between the works, though, by associating her landscapes with Kelly's colour fields, Kurgan has plugged her digital prints into the mainframe of American modernist abstraction at a particularly apposite juncture. The emergence of colour field painting at the end of the 1950s was identified and promoted by Clement Greenberg as a vital move in American art through the elimination of extrinsic conventions and preoccupations -- of depth, illusion, gesture -- in order to produce a pure and autonomous artwork. In 'American Type Painting' (1955/1958), Greenberg celebrates in Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clifford Still's work the rejection of drawing and design, what he claims is an 'escape from geometry through geometry itself' (1965: 226) as the edge of the canvas ceases to be a confining limit but an aspect of the work. Newman's paintings, for Greenberg, 'do not merge with surrounding space; they preserve [...] their integrity and special unity. But neither do

they sit there in space like isolated, insulated objects; in short, they are hardly easel pictures -- and because they are hardly that, they have escaped the "object" (and luxury-object) associations that attach themselves increasingly to the easel picture. Newman's paintings have to be called, finally, "fields" (227). Ellsworth Kelly is made-to-order Greenberg.

There are at least two points worth considering here in relation to Greenberg's establishment of the field. The first is the insistence on negation, the movement of painting away from what Greenberg calls 'artiness' and toward an essential realization of its medium specificity: serious art for Greenberg is about negative choices. The second thing to note is how much this negation is positioned as a mode of resistance – resistance to the luxury object, to kitsch, to incorporation into the degraded bourgeois order of things. For Greenberg, Newman's paintings are self-sufficient but not insulated from the world; rather, they claim their own particularity and are not translatable into something else, pushing out into the world without capitulating to its demands. This is not formalism as a withdrawal but as a challenge, a sledgehammer taken to what Rothko called the 'familiar identity of things [that] had to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment' (Rothko 2006: 58). Read through this stern, hard-body formalism, Kurgan's inscrutable, reductive monochrome landscapes repeat the attritional logic of Greenberg's removal of traces of non-art and the content becomes the form. Yet even as the work appears to achieve this renunciation, Kurgan brings the content back in, insisting that there is more than a formal aesthetic at stake.

There always was more at stake, though, and I think that Kurgan's self-cancelling formalism is partly a means of working through the antagonism between self-evidence and representation staged by Greenberg's defence of post-painterly abstraction. The reason it is worth doing this in the context of satellite images is precisely because the data generated by the technology, acknowledged by Kurgan's impatience with the notion of data as the real in itself, claims the place once held for the autonomous art work: the supposition that data just is. The removal of gesture and image, what Newman called the 'props and crutches' of outmoded associations, might demonstrate a renunciation of kitsch in favor of art, but it was also something of a trap since by avoiding the distortions of expression through the erasure of the readable, the outcome was work that willfully stood for nothing (see Guilbart 1985). The transformation of modernist abstraction from resistant avant-garde to the official (high) culture of Cold War America demonstrates the fluidity with which refusal can be folded into complicity. Part of Kurgan's job in works like *Monochrome Landscapes*, I think, is to reactivate the stubborn awkwardness of formalism without reproducing the acquiescence latent in its refusal to speak.

Formalism as Diversion

To produce an autonomous work of art, all traces of extraneous stuff – the non-art – has to be removed, a kind of wipe-down of all surfaces to remove evidence. The integrity of data as 'raw' implies the same untouched quality, as if the technologies that produce information are self-erasing, leaving only the data in itself. What drives this push toward the self-evident is to a large extent a consequence of a particular

economy of the gaze that puts a premium on immediacy of perception and downgrades interpretive entanglement as failure.

In his discussion of Newman, Rothko and Still, Greenberg writes that ‘in the end these pictures, like all others, stand or fall by their unity as taken in at a single glance’ (1965: 226). While this may be the case with all pictures, the single glance is the thing that colour field painting relies on more than most: what there is to see must be seen immediately, all at once, self-evidently presented before the eyes. In this sense, the difference between non-figurative and figurative pictures might be said to be a difference between looking and reading, the first being a retinal response, the second an interpretive engagement. In a short text on his work published in 1969, Kelly writes: ‘Making art has first of all to do with honesty. My first lesson was to see objectively, to erase all “meaning” of the thing seen. Then only could the real meaning be understood and felt’ (Kelly 1996: 93). To achieve the ‘honesty’ of the single glance involves an erasure of all distracting complications – the props and crutches that might associate the work with anything other than itself. ‘Real’ meaning can only be understood and felt once there is nothing to left to read, no information. The dream of direct retinal communication, here, though, can only work through the removal of any trace of the labor that produces it. The resulting work thus functions as a kind of decoy that relies upon a single glance to determine that what is seen is all there is to see.

In this regard, when Kurgan says that, in pictures where there is so little to see, ‘it’s hard *not* to look for something’, she is, in formalist terms, not looking in the right way, or looking for too long. The single glance is not enough for Kurgan, whose need for something to look at recalls the philistine response to abstract painting that

demands the picture be *of* something. There *must* be something in the picture somewhere, Kurgan's persistent gaze demands, and because the images she is concerned with are, while not photographs as such, images reliant on the indexical relation to the referent digital images have inherited from photography, she is right inasmuch as the indexical relationship between the picture and the thing photographed ought to guarantee some sort of correspondence between light emitted and its documentation. After all, in the end, Kurgan is not looking at paintings, however much her panels may be arranged to look like paintings. But to make photographic images that work like abstract paintings is to invite the assessment of the single glance – the Greenbergian test of unity and self-sufficiency – even if such a test is radically insufficient. As Rosalind Krauss once wrote of James Welling's photographs, Kurgan's *Monochrome Landscapes* hold 'the referent at bay, creating as much delay as possible between seeing the image and understanding what it [is] of' (1989: 66). It is this delay between seeing and understanding that allows for misrecognition and opens up a space of narrative feedback between the opacities and transparencies of formalism and the satellite image.

There are, then, layers of dissimulation and deception at work here, not only in Kurgan's use of the colour field as a mode of display but in formalist aesthetics itself. Kurgan borrows the devices of colour field painting to exhibit digital images that appear 'empty' but are not; in so doing, she is able, by reintroducing the persistence of 'content', to challenge the notion of the self-evident (painting, photograph, or data that 'just is'). The colour field trope, then, is a decoy that, to be identified as such must become part of an interpretive narrative within which it is revealed as a formalist stooge. But the formalist aesthetic itself must also be understood as a mode of

dissimulation in the sense that it is only through the concealment (erasure) of the art work's associations with non-art that it can be said to realize its autonomy. Every time Greenberg, Newman, Rothko or Kelly insist on erasing, pulverizing, or eliminating 'meaning', they draw attention to that which is not evident in the work at a single glance but can only be detected negatively by the vacuum produced by the work's blankness. In this *mise-en-abîme* of seemingly absent content, what Kurgan locates by *not* not looking for something – by looking into the image and not glancing across the surface, by insisting on the necessity of narrative and interpretation – is how the diversionary tactics of formalism preemptively occlude the apprehension of content (history, politics, agency); indeed, the camouflaging of content must, by now, be properly understood to be the content of the form.

The trickiness here is not merely a consequence of trying to get to the bottom of Kurgan's use of Kelly's monochrome but is, in fact, I want to suggest, integral to an understanding of the history of the close links among abstract painting, surveillance technologies, and political aesthetics. One of the critical commonplaces that these links have given rise to is the observation that modernist abstraction in painting looks like aerial photography and/or camouflage; and that this surface similarity allows for a reading of photographs as if they were paintings.³ Certainly, the development of camouflage during World War I is hard to separate from early 20th Century painting, not only because, particularly in France, Cubist-inspired techniques were deployed in the production of early pattern disruption material. By the 1930s, the links between Cubism and camouflage were a well-established part of recent cultural history.

³ On aerial photographs and modernist photography, see Shell 2012: 94; Sekula 1975 ; Saint-Amour 2003; Saint-Amour 2011.

In a much-cited passage from her 1938 book on Picasso, Gertrude Stein describes the moment, early in World War I, when the painter sees, for the first time, a camouflaged truck and claims it a triumph of cubism. '[W]e had heard of camouflage,' Stein writes, 'but we had not seen it' (Stein 1984: 11). Extrapolating from this moment of identification, Stein is able to retrospectively deliver an assessment of the relation between modern war and modern art that has proved remarkably resilient. Just as cubist painting broke from prior modes of representation, the 'composition' of the Great War was similarly not like other wars; it had 'neither a beginning nor an end' and 'one corner was as important as another corner' (11).

For Stein and Picasso, hearing of camouflage precedes seeing it. Being able to recognize camouflage as camouflage requires some knowledge in advance of what it might look like and what it is for. Before seeing the truck, camouflage is but a rumour; Picasso could, on the basis of what he has heard, have claimed camouflage for cubism already, but in Stein's account it is only on the basis of seeing the camouflaged truck that an 'amazed' Picasso is able to cry out that 'it is we who made it.' Seeing is what counts here, unsurprisingly enough, even if the thing seen is an object painted so as to evade perception. Only when the camouflage is not functioning as camouflage – when it is failing to disrupt the perceived form of things – can it be identified as such.

Conceding that the camouflage of 1914 belonged to Picasso, Salvador Dali laid claim, in a short article for *Esquire* in 1942, for the camouflage of World War II as 'Surrealist and Dalistic': 'the secret of total invisibility and the psychological camouflage' (Dali 1998: 340). What Dali has in mind here is the application of his

paranoiac-critical method, whereby the paranoiac's tendency to see connections between things that are not rationally linked together is cultivated in order to dissolve the notional truth of appearances. Such a strategy develops the displacements, diversions, and doublings of disruptive patterning into a factory for the manufacture of phantom enemies and terra incognita by collapsing the distinction between figure and ground, between forms and the spaces separating them: everything the viewer sees is potentially something else. The ease with which Surrealist investigations into the unconscious were, in the post-World War II years, as Raoul Vaneigem notes, 'co-opted by the dominant mechanisms of deception and fascination' (1999: 60) – namely advertising and politics -- indicates the extent to which the strategic duplicities of war came to permeate the postwar world. Weimar Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer, put to work camouflaging barracks in 1940, conceded that survival required 'artistic neutrality, camouflaging one's real intentions'; Schlemmer decided to devote himself to the 'cult of the surface' (Schwartz 2014: 168).

One response to an achieved Dalian reality where everything means something else is to renounce mimesis. It is here that Greenberg's defense of American abstract painting, with its emphasis on the elimination of content, seeks to shake off the combat model of the European avant-garde and its associations with camouflage. Yet, as we have seen, it is precisely through the renunciation of mimesis that abstract art renders itself almost sublimely amenable to the most neutralizing form of pattern misrecognition: the silent surface of pure colour as the warm bath of affirmative culture. If the triumph of American painting, and of American postwar culture, is a triumph of the cult of the surface, it is a triumph also of camouflage – of hiding and showing. The two main modes of camouflage strategy, according to Hillel Schwartz,

are invisibility (hiding) and deceptive visibility (showing) (2014: 155); camouflage is less about completely screening off the hidden than of disrupting perception through doubling, obscurity, displacement, and disorientation using an array of masks, decoys, substitutions, and obliterative countershadowings (156). Like the eliminations of formalist abstraction, the point of camouflage is to work hard to produce the effect that no work has been done at all. While protective colouration is most effective against the quick glance, the deceptions of camouflage are less concerned with fooling the unassisted eye and more properly engaged with disrupting the penetrative gaze of technologically-enhanced vision: of binoculars, telescopes and, most of all, of cameras.

Ellsworth Kelly was one the many artists who served, during World War II, in the 603rd Camouflage Engineers, the visual deception wing of the so-called Ghost Army, the US military's tactical deception unit officially known as the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops. It was equipped with inflatable tanks, cannons, jeeps, trucks, and airplanes that were then camouflaged imperfectly so that enemy air reconnaissance could see them. Kelly did not design camouflage himself but was responsible for printing a series of silkscreen posters for training purposes, each of which depicted a particular form of camouflage (Behrens 2002: 173). Knowing what to show and what to hide, what the eye can register and how it is interpreted – the calibration and management of the single glance and the deep interrogative analysis of reconnaissance – are established aspects of Kelly's work from the outset.

Digitalized Colour and the Return of the Non-Figural

There is another reason, I think, why Kurgan is attracted to Kelly's *Four Panels* and why she thought that *Monochrome Landscapes* could 'converse' with it. Kelly's use of red, green, and blue seeks to establish a direct optical relationship between the work and the viewer, following Young-Helmholtz's trichromatic colour theory, which produced the additive Red Green Blue (RGB) colour model that made possible colour photography and continues to be used in television, video and computer displays.

Red, green and blue are not the primary colours of painting but of science. The RGB model identifies three different kinds of photoreceptors in the eye that are variously 'tuned' to perceive primarily long, or red, wavelengths, middle/green, or short/blue ones. The brain interprets the light signal received and interprets its colour value according to the sensitivity of the response; the discrete red, green and blue panels of Kelly's print are, then, as unambiguous in their messages as it is possible to be, seeking to reduce the necessity of interpretation to a minimum, just as the black panel signals the complete absence of light. The intensity of the red, green, and blue signals is full on, black is fully off. In this way, Kelly's *Four Panels* reduces vision to its most basic components (the white border delivering the combined full intensity of R, G, and B), the primary materials of sight stripped of overlap, diffusion, shade, and combination. As the foundation of virtually all colour processes, whether chemical or electronic, RGB is the language of modern visuality. For Kelly, following Greenberg, red, green and blue is as close to direct retinal communication as there is, stripped of all association, all culture, and reaching straight into the cones and rods of the eye. Everything else is interpretation. As a crystallized example of formalist purity, a purity sought via chromatic nakedness, Kelly's *Four Panels* promises, once and for all, to disambiguate the visual. For Kurgan, it is precisely this disambiguation that is the false flag of raw data, used to pass off intelligence as fact.

As the model for all colour sensing, representation, and the display of images in electronic systems, Kelly's RGB work unwittingly gifts to Kurgan a shorthand for what David Batchelor calls the colour chart's contribution to the 'digitalization of colour' (2000: 105). Batchelor makes the distinction between the analogical colour circle of the artist – 'a continuum, a seamless spectrum, an undivided whole' based on a 'grammar of complementarity' and relational hierarchy – and the 'grammarless accumulation of colour units' that comprise the colour chart (105), the digital opposite of analogical colour:

In the colour chart, every colour is equivalent to and independent of every other colour. There are no hierarchies, only random colour events. The colour chart divorces colour from conventional colour theory and turns every colour into a readymade. It promises autonomy for colour; in fact, it offers three distinct but related types of autonomy: that of each colour from every other colour, that of colour from the dictates of colour theory and that of colour from the register of representation. (105)

Batchelor suggests that postwar art, from Rauschenberg through Warhol and Richter to Noland and Kelly, constitutes a move away from analogical to digitalized colour: individuated, discrete, 'no mergence or modulation; there are only boundaries, steps and edges' (106). Removed from the 'register of representation', digitalized colour is the denatured colour of bureaucratized vision: autonomous units of colour unattached to anything but themselves, independent, interchangeable, grammarless. What Kelly's RGB paintings and *Four Panels* are after, then, is not just the formal purity of the

single glance but the management of a glance that receives already rationalized and separated -- digitalized – data that blocks, unmoored from any grammar of complementarity, its relation to anything other than itself.

In her essay ‘Documentary Uncertainty’, artist Hito Steyerl describes watching a news broadcast during the first days of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. A CNN correspondent, pointing a direct broadcast cell phone camera out of a car window, claims that this kind of broadcast has never been seen before. This is true, Steyerl observes, because ‘there was hardly anything to see on these pictures’ due to their low resolution. The ‘green and brown blotches [...] looked like the camouflage of combat fatigues; a military version of abstract expressionism’ (Steyerl 2007). Asking what this sort of abstraction has to do with documentary, Steyerl argues that it signals toward ‘a deeper characteristic’ of contemporary documentary images: that ‘the more immediate they become, the less there is to see.’ In other words, ‘[t]he closer to reality we get, the less intelligible it becomes.’

Steyerl uses this example to expand on the equally uncertain conceptual territory of contemporary documentary, which can no longer be satisfied with the discredited, positivist categories of ‘truth’ or ‘objectivity’ and must instead exist in ‘perpetual doubt’: ‘the only thing we can say for sure,’ she concludes, ‘is that we always already doubt if [the documentary mode] is true.’ This doubt is underscored in the case of the CNN images, produced by embedded journalists whose output is already mediated by the military. If, as Steyerl suggests, ‘we are all somehow embedded in global capitalism’ and the very idea of critical distance is never more than an ‘ideological illusion,’ the truth may well lie, not in any ‘objective’ report but precisely in the

blurred cell phone pictures – in the abstraction that represents nothing. Such images, she concludes, ‘are as post-representational as the majority of contemporary politics. But, amazingly, we can still speak of truth with regard to them.’ The form tells the truth, here, since the blurred CNN pictures are ‘perfectly true documents’ of the condition of ‘general uncertainty,’ of the ‘precarious nature of contemporary lives as well as the uneasiness of any representation’ (Steyerl 2007)

The challenge, for Steyerl, is in finding a critical position that does not merely take the condition of uncertainty into account or expose it, but which can replace the affects associated with perpetual doubt -- ‘stress, exposure, threat and a general sense of loss and confusion’ -- with another, yet to be determined ‘affective and political constellation.’ This is, I think, the dilemma of Kurgan’s *Monochrome Landscapes* and of other ‘abstract’ works engaged with the contemporary politics of visibility, such as Paglen’s drone photographs or Bloomberg and Chanarin’s *The Day That Nobody Died* (2008), a series of what the artists describe as ‘radically non-figurative, unique, action-photographs’ (Bloomberg and Chanaran 2008) made by exposing sections of a roll of photographic film to sunlight during a tour of Helmand Province in Afghanistan while embedded with the British Army in June 2008. Recalling Rothko’s desire to pulverize the familiar identity of things, contemporary artists, skeptical of the neutralizing effects of what Bloomberg and Chanarin describe as ‘the conventional language of photographic responses to conflict and suffering’ (2008), are positioned precariously along a fault-line between an always already suspect documentary mode and the risky maneuverings of formalism. In Steyerl’s example of the CNN images, the blur is the truth, but that truth requires a mode of seeing attuned to the misdirections of contemporary politics, the distractions, obfuscations and

double-bluffs of contemporary media, and the representational politics of contemporary art. Such a mode of interpretation – ironic, off-kilter, too easily mistaken for paranoia – does not yield the promised exposure of the hidden truth once offered by critique; instead, it is a mode of operations that at the same time produces and interprets encrypted data, much as the camoufleur, in order to manufacture deception, must also be able to read the signs of the enemy. The syntax of surveillance, with its repertoire of feints, blocks, missteps, distractions, decoys, masks and reversals, cannot convert signal into ‘truth’ but the protean maneuvering – endlessly showing and hiding, moving in and out of focus, in and out of range, switching between codes and across media – is perhaps as close to a critical position as can be reached; it is the a-positionality of counterintelligence.

This doubleness – that the data or image is at once true and false, evidence and artifice, real and illusory, abstract and figurative – does not necessarily have to lead to relativism and acquiescence, as if there were nothing at stake, but it does speak to the radically ambivalent situation of the contemporary photographic image. It is this ambivalence, I think, that leads Kurgan to yolk the satellite image with high formalism since each mode, in its own way, strains toward the promise of some sort of truth not as told but as found – the truth of the single glance that is beyond reflection. As I hope is now obvious, though, the kind of truth claims promised on behalf of the satellite image and of formalist abstraction are, in part, the product of a certain dream of retinal instantaneity and uncontaminated vision that, in order to work, must camouflage the operations necessary for the production of the image. For Kurgan, like Steyerl, the blur is a kind of truth, but Kurgan insists on a form of deep looking that is also made possible by the technology that produces the blur.

It is here that the satellite image reveals itself to be nothing like the blank surface of a screenprint (or, indeed, the conventional photograph) because it can, in fact, be looked into as well as looked upon. While skepticism toward formalism's erasure of content exposes a conservatism concealed by the dazzle of resistance, skepticism toward digital images has, paradoxically, been accompanied by, as Mark Dorrian writes, 'a deep and intensifying commitment to them that is itself, in part, a reaction to new powerful imaging technologies' (2008: 106). For Dorrian, the crux of the issue does not lie in the relationship between the image and truth but between the image and trust; while digitization has indeed eroded trust in the image, it has at the same time become 'the precondition for a new intensity of trust that is extended to it, the balance of responses shifting in relation to differing institutional and discursive contexts and the understanding of interests embedded in them' (106). While the conventional basis for the photograph as evidence lay in its indexical relation to the referent, digital images have not so much destroyed this connection as they have, as Dorrian claims, transcoded the index; it is this transcoded indexicality that has redefined the relation between trust and the image. Today, suggests Dorrian, it is complexity rather than retinal immediacy that seems to be trusted: 'what is trusted is no longer so much the image as the complexity or fineness of the informational content that can be extracted from it' (113). At the same time, transcoded indexicality makes images 'immediately and always already analyses' (114); in other words, the gathered data is captured, processed, and arranged in advance of its apprehension as an image. Any interpretation of an image is, then, more than ever, an engagement with truth as it has been made (and as it is made to appear) rather than as it appears.

This is why Kurgan's panels not only require informational support in the form of captions but also the interpretive supplement of the written essay; unlike Kelly's 'honest' and 'objective' RGB colour fields, where interpretative labor would signal the failure of the work to deliver on its retinal promise, the 'honesty' of Kurgan's work resides precisely in its acceptance of interpretation *as* the work. There can be no legitimating single glance when it comes to the digital image because optical immediacy is always already camouflage, a diversion produced by the RGB system to make data look like truth. The detour Kurgan's work takes through high formalism is part of the necessary re-ambiguation of the single glance that unpacks the strategies deployed by colour field painting to camouflage the construction of immediacy.

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