Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2010

The Businessman as Artist / New American Voices

"Objects and Places" – Photographs by Alan Trachtenberg

Yale University, Koerner Center, 149 Elm St., New Haven, CT

"Object and Places", December 2010. Interview of Alan Trachtenberg

Géraldine Chouard

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5086>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.5086

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference

Géraldine Chouard, "Objects and Places" – Photographs by Alan Trachtenberg

", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2010, Online since 12 April 2011, connection on 01 February 2023. URL:

<http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5086> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.5086>

This text was automatically generated on 1 February 2023.

Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

"Objects and Places" – Photographs by Alan Trachtenberg

Yale University, Koerner Center, 149 Elm St., New Haven, CT
"Object and Places", December 2010. Interview of Alan Trachtenberg

Géraldine Chouard

- 1 "Black-and-white images of diverse scenes in America—ranging from a Mississippi "ghost" town to rooftops in Pennsylvania to an upper New York state racetrack—are featured in a new exhibition of photographs by Yale professor Alan Trachtenberg at the Henry Koerner Center for Emeritus Faculty. The exhibit, titled "Objects and Places," is a selection of 22 photographs that Trachtenberg made over the past 30 years using a large-format (8×10) camera." [Excerpt from the **Yale Daily Bulletin**]
- 2 The following interview of Alan Trachtenberg (AT) by Géraldine Chouard (GC) took place in January 2011.

GC : Alan Trachtenberg, thank you for sharing with us the experience of your first exhibition "Objects and Places", which was held at Yale in December 2010.

1. GC : You are known, of course, for your *reading* of American photographs [*Reading American Photographs : Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, Hill and Wang, 1990]. How did you come to *produce* your own American photographs and *exhibit* them ?

AT : Love of pictures and picturing, first & foremost. But also, I wanted to see for myself what it was like to use a view camera under a dark cloth. Taking my own pictures with the big camera did teach me important things about the work of photographers like Evans, Strand, and Weston.

2. GC : When were these photographs taken ? When you took them, did you know that you would exhibit them one day ? How do you assess the difference between the taking of those shots and their public showing ? What effect did that have on you ?

AT : No, I had no idea I would ever exhibit the work. It turns out that I so enjoyed showing them that I might do it again with another batch of pictures.

3. GC : How were they received ?

AT : I think pretty well. Of course people familiar with my writings on photography made the obvious connections.

4. GC : Why did you choose the title "Objects and Places" ? The quote from James that you included in your show evokes their "mystic" quality. Was that your experience ? Did you choose to photograph objects *instead of* human beings ?

AT : "Objects and places" pretty much covers the point of the show. I can't really say what I was aware of in regard to "meanings" mystic or otherwise while photographing, too busy setting up & making the exposure--it's a big, clumsy camera--but ideas about connections and meanings began to occur as I assembled the show. James's word "cohere" is important. No, I do include people, I have made many portraits, but on this occasion I wanted to call attention to "things".

GC : There aren't a lot of people in your photos ! But the Pepper Girl is really great.

AT : Yes, thanks. You'll see more people in the next show.

5. GC : Your images have a strong geometric sense. We see it everywhere, from the details of architecture to the woman's dress (Woman in the Sun, Rodney, 1990), to the lines of the flag (9. Building with Cornice and Flag. Central Pennsylvania, 1983) and the boards where the results of the horse races are posted (Lines, Changes and Scratches, Saratoga, New York, 1990). Sometimes the play of light and shadow even increases this geometric effect. What did you hope to show with this style of composition ?

AT : Yes, well observed ! I think it may reveal a need for the security of order, of coherence. Partly it comes with working with the large format, which calls for a certain stillness in the scene. Partly it comes with the habit of seeing the world on the principle of center-point perspective. Perhaps I should try to break away from this habit, and I do try now and then but then get pulled back to geometry.

6. GC : What is specifically American in your photographs ?

AT : Are they specifically American ? I think of them as specifically "me". Do I evade the question ? Perhaps. "I am large, I contain multitudes..."

7. GC : In your work, one can notice various echoes of other photographers, such as Evans (front views), Callahan (shots showing scenes on several planes or levels) and Meyerowitz (house interiors), just to name a few of the images that are brought to mind when looking at your photos. Is this acknowledgement a part of American photography as a practice, and if it is, why is that so, in your opinion ?

AT : I think it might be so argued. Does Robert Frank "Americanize" himself by his allusions to Walker Evans ? Perhaps. And Evans to Mathew Brady ? But in the end I am suspicious of these evocations of a specific nationality. Is "American" at play in these pictures of mine ? Not a question I would rush to answer either yea or nay. They are "American" by location, and perhaps "modernist" by disposition. I can say pretty certainly that "American" as a problematic issue was not on my mind either when I made these pictures or selected & organized them or exhibition. Maybe "the South" was on my mind in the Mississippi pictures (and others from Alabama), and "city/country" in other places, but mainly, I'd say, my mind was on getting the picture made.

8. GC : This wonderful photograph : "Farm House Bedroom. Deer Isle, Maine, 1990" seems both prosaic and sacred, with a certain sadness to it like one sees in Hopper's work. Tell us about it. Do you remember the taking of it ?

AT : Yes. It was an upstairs room in a house we rented one summer in Maine. I loved the glimpse one had of the bed & wallpaper as you climbed the stairs. No other personal association (maybe that's personal enough, but not sad) – except perhaps that it always reminded me of a photograph by Walker Evans from up-state New York. Or is it that chenille always looks sad ? – Or is it that an empty bed so obviously made-up always sends whispers of past pleasures and present aloneness ?

9. GC : Is the self-portrait a required passage for photographers ? (Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1996). Why did you choose to represent yourself through these superimposed photos ?

AT : It was too good to resist. I had no idea it would ever find its way as a kind of keynote into a show like this - that was a late decision in any case.

10. GC : Coming back to her "snapshots" taken during the Great Depression, for the publication of her photo album *One Time, One Place : Mississippi in the Depression*, in 1971, Eudora Welty (who, by the way, also took some pictures of tombstones in the South, in Rodney in particular, published in *Country Churchyards*, in 2000) wrote : "I learned from my own pictures, one by one, and had to ; for I think we are the breakers of our own hearts." (*The Eye of the Story*, 1987) Is this true for you as well ? Did looking back on these images also break your heart ?

AT : They gave me pleasure more than anything else. Did I make that picture ? Can I remember when & how ? Well, yes, it comes back to me... The heart-breaking experience for me is the recall of something past, that you were once at that place at that time and had forgotten you were ever there, let alone that you went to the trouble of setting up the camera & releasing the shutter. You might say that every time the shutter snaps it breaks your heart, something simultaneously retrieved from time and lost to time. How do you get around that ? The picture may be beautiful but whatever you had once you have no longer, only the trace of it in a picture on a thin piece of paper. Every photograph can be seen as a sullen reminder of oblivion, but also a snubbing-of-the-nose at death. For in the end, something gets left behind, something left over : if only a photograph !

- 3 All photographs by Alan Trachtenberg. All Rights Reserved to Original Author. Do not reproduce without permission

Objects and Places

Photographs by Alan Trachtenberg

- 1 *Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1996.*
- 2 *"Time to Eat" Diner, Seymour, Connecticut, 1999.*
- 3 *Industrial Landscape, North Haven, Connecticut, 1983.*
- 4 *Abandoned Factory, River Street, Fair Haven, Connecticut, 2010.*
- 5 *Farm House Bedroom, Deer Isle, Maine, 1990.*
- 6 *Perch Couch, Near Chester, Vermont, 1996.*
- 7 *Wicker Chair, Vermont, 1996.*
- 8 *Rooftop View, Schenectady, New York, 1983.*
- 9 *Building with Cornice and Flag, Central Pennsylvania, 1983.*
- 10 *Grecery at Crossroads, Near Rodney, Mississippi, 1991.*
- 11 *Burial Ground, Near Pawtucket, Rhode Island, 1999.*
- 12 *Roadside Lady of Hope, Rural Pennsylvania, 1984.*
- 13 *Whale Watch, Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1996.*
- 14 *Shoeshine Stand, Saratoga Race Track, New York, 1990.*
- 15 *"I'm a Pepper," Saratoga Race Track, New York, 1990.*
- 16 *Line Changes and Scratches, Saratoga, New York, 1990.*
- 17 *Grandstand, Saratoga Race Track, New York, 1990.*
- 18 *Woman in Sun, Rodney, Mississippi, 1991.*
- 19 *Man and Mule/Rodney, Mississippi, 1991.*
- 20 *Mantelpiece, Rodney, Mississippi, 1991.*
- 21 *Anonymous Memorial, Antietam, Maryland, 1984.*
- 22 *Cemetery Monument, Port Gibson, Mississippi, 1991.*
- 23 *Broomer's Café, Port Gibson, Mississippi, 1991.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Select Books by Trachtenberg :

***Classic Essays on Photography* (1980)**

***Reading American Photographs* (1990)**

***Lincoln's Smile and Other Enigmas* (2008)**

INDEX

Subjects: Trans'Arts