



In a Place Like This

Duncan Higgins  
Johan Sandborg

The work seeks to investigate the complex relationship between emotions and the language of images and representation. Echoes of places, people and historical representations constitute the experience of our presence in the world. Stories and objects should not be accepted as mere constructs of fact or fiction but rather be considered as conduits for pluralities. By examining the dialogue of visual memories and fragments of history the project raises questions such as: How do we approach facts through the complex relationships of personal immediacy? How do we operate the ambivalence of testimony itself? Through engaging in a response to events on the very fringe of our apprehension the work addresses the possibilities for communicating intimate emotions evoked by accounts experienced by others.

The work attempts to put forward visual discussions and critical positions that can function as responsive 'friction points' in an image saturated culture where images are produced with unthinkingly ease, and proceed to be disposable and forgettable.

"In a Place Like This" is on-going artistic research through collaborative visual dialogues between Duncan Higgins and Johan Sandborg. The research presented is not defined as a fixed series but should be considered as an ongoing proposition. At this instance the research is rendered as three distinct adaptations constructed through book formats.

Each adaptation has its own specific visual construct that can either be viewed individually or seen as in correspondence to each other.

#### Adaptation one:

A PRINTED BOOK CONSISTING OF THREE SEPARATE SECTIONS THAT TOGETHER FORM A SINGULAR VOLUME. THE SECTIONS ARE CONSTRUCTED TO FUNCTION AS A COMPLETE INTERWOVEN IDEA. THE FIRST SECTION IS THE VISUAL EXPLORATION CONSTRUCTED AS A DIALOGUE SPECIFICALLY ASSEMBLED FOR THE ADAPTATION. THE SECOND SECTION IS A TEXTUAL RESPONSE TO THE QUESTIONS, DIALOGUES AND PROCESSES THAT HAVE EMERGED DURING THE PROCESS OF THE RESEARCH. SECTION THREE IS A REPOSITORY PRESENTED AS A CATALOGUE OF THE UNEDITED 'RAW DATA' THAT WAS USED IN THE VISUAL DIALOGUE IN SECTION ONE.

#### Adaptation two:

A unique large format book (60x45 cm), consisting of over 150 pages of photographs and drawings. Each page printed and hand drawn to create a singular dialectic form. The visual construct within the large format book can be viewed as a contained series but can also be seen in relation to the dialogues in the other adaptations.

#### Adaptation three:

A digital edition that will have the possibility to evolve and shift as the project develops through different and additional iterations. The digital edition can be obtainable through the online web site; [www.inaplaceikethis.com](http://www.inaplaceikethis.com).

This web site will archive the whole ongoing inquiry.

.....the image is an act .....

## A montage

- The technique of producing a new composite whole through the combination of separate parts together.
- That make extensive use of cuts, re-framed moments and changes of scale or subject or sequence or relational position, particularly to set up new meanings not conveyed by the subject itself.
- A fiction exposed to mobility, open to the imagination, avoiding singular meanings, pointing to multiple meanings.
- Using the fixed or suspended moments in variable combinations, repetitions to mobilise them.
- To get access to the singularities and gestures of moments within moments.
- Singularities combined with essential multiplicities in non-linear sequences.
- Imagination and knowledge directed through montage.
- Creating a form that thinks. A form that is dialectic. A dialectic without a fixed outcome.

what more is there to see  
flowers, violence, landscapes

Johan Sandborg



1.

I am photograph,.....I am camera,.....I am of the world,.....

I remember everything, ....I acknowledge all things,.... and what I assume you shall assume; for every memory that belongs to me, as good belongs to you, the world replaced through me;

through violent rest and spears of summer grass,<sup>1</sup>

through preserved armoured objects,

through fractured frozen frames history sits for her portrait,

and when the shutter closes,

I lock her in an embrace until she forgets, why she undressed before me, while men have knelt and wept before her white body, pleading for her hidden flowers, I refuse, her flowers do not stand for love, at least they do not stand for mine,

I demand, go look behind the ranges,<sup>2</sup>

what more is there to see.

1. Walt Whitman. "Leaves of Grass", 1900

2. Rudyard Kipling. "The Explorer", 1898

2.

look, look,

while mountains of photographs grow, knowing is enough for mountains like these,  
what are we looking at, exposed to camera leer,

that which has been seen cannot be unseen, no longer can you say;

I have been there, for what is left is only here, this, the shining surface, of this paralyzed gaze.

Yet even as it seems that this is etched into our memories, the further away we are,  
the more the cannonballs,<sup>3</sup> return to stones,

scattered on the hillside, across a desolate and featureless

landscape, emptiness and unease along the sloping sides of the ravine,

that which has been seen cannot be unseen,

the cannonballs moved to make a more captivating intent,

that which has been photographed is re-memorized, returned to stone,

those are the re-memories,

of cannonballs to stones,

of gardens turned to flowers,

of island to roses,

for they have; the look of flowers that have been looked at,<sup>4</sup>

and if I should bring you flowers as a gift, you would look at them and say; these are  
not flowers, these are yet more photographs, and you would hand them back,

preserve your memories they are all that is handed to you.

3. Roger Fenton. "Valley of the Shadow of Death", 1855

4. T. S. Eliot. "Burnt Norton", 1936

3.

I do not think that you are interested in the photographs,

in fact I am sure that you are not,

I am beginning to suspect that it's all about something else,

I have a book that talks of photography, of death, of how being in front of a lens  
relates to death, a death-in-waiting,<sup>5</sup>

I object to that, it is a limiting way of seeing, I do not care for death, death brings  
nothing to the table, death is only a failure in imagination,<sup>6</sup> also I do not care for the  
opposite of death, whatever that might be, I am not concerned with the concept of  
opposites,

I believe it to be something other,

it is necessary to consider an alternative, rather than finding signs of future death in  
photographs, we should be considering signs of something other;

we should consider the action,

not capsuled, not as preserved frozen cabinets,

but as a singularity of departure, each photograph carrying all the

movements of everything within,

as an act,

pointing cameras at something, evokes something pointing back,

it is not without intention nor without calculation,

the image is an act and not a thing.<sup>7</sup>

(the sun is out and I have photographs to make)

5. Roland Barthes. "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography", 1980.

6. Harold Bloom. "A Map of Misreading", 1975.

7. J. -P. Sartre. "L'Imagination", 1936.

4.

I have made photographs of flowers,  
they do not smell of perfume,  
they are dark, lush, violent,  
carried into darkness through photographs,  
through closed eyes, as artifacts of vision,  
fixed yet unfixed, less dramatic, slower,  
these are such stuff as dreams are made on,<sup>8</sup>  
these are answers to your violent reasoning,  
seen by candlelight, we shall learn with closed eyes,  
I have made photographs of flowers by candlelight,  
the flowers do not stand for love, at least they do not stand for mine,  
the flowers are nameless, they have forgotten their histories,  
they stand so close to Eden, I have prepared them for you, so you might wander aim-  
lessly, I have gathered them, prepared them to become heroes,  
so that you will not starve for visions,  
what more is there for you to see.

8. Shakespeare. "The Tempest"

flowers  
violence landscapes

Duncan Higgins

In the first instance the paintings presented here started when I saw a photograph some years ago that burnt my imagination and left a scar, it was a very nasty and real encounter.

The subsequent paintings then set out to try and communicate the complexity of this emotional response. This direct encounter opened up an almost impossible ethical and political question, or even human understanding of such places, what happened there – that is, for its contemporary relevance. Not only do we lack anything close to a complete understanding; even the sense and reason for what took place, still seems profoundly enigmatic. This can only encourage the opinion of those who would like places like this to remain forever incomprehensible. It passes, but does not pass away.

Trying to un-fix something:

1.1

For the paintings possibility: To be able to be or not to able to be.

1.2

Or possibility as a negation of possibility (not {to be able}) and necessity (not {to be able not to be})

1.3

The distraction and destitution of the subject

1.4

I could not, not respond.

1.5

The impossible (is) forced into a material action, an existence of the impossible – to address the unfathomable.

2.1

There are 78 paintings. A slowly developing progressive narrative or cyclical series of references structured by a specific and set reference point.

2.2

There is only one visual reference point I am using for the paintings throughout this sequence, taken from one visual source, I then split, fractured, magnified, reversed, multiplied the original in numerous new photographs via my mobile phone, this was a very deliberate fracturing of the original.

2.3

The original is one photograph, made up of 4 separate printed negatives that I finally found as one complete photograph reproduced at:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Auschwitz\\_Resistance\\_reconstruction.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Auschwitz_Resistance_reconstruction.png).

2.4

I am looking at a very specific point in time, an event, and a moment of which this is a representation; the representation of the act or actions that took place in order to make this image.

2.5

To me this representation is of a frightfulness; a frightfulness that was used as a weapon, as a means to the end of victims. We are still sickened by the poison of such doctrine, by crimes committed everywhere and continually answered by the same crimes – they are still taking place today. We have before us the memory and lesson. Let us not imagine that anyone can reject this – we have never stopped seeing it, and contrary to every hope, we will continue to see it today and tomorrow.

2.6

It is the idea of this moment of representation, how it took place, how it fits into particular historical moments of representation and how this is contested today. That is the conversation. The conversation is with this moment of representation and what that means to me and us today. So it acts for me as a set of visual co-ordinates and references, reference points to work with, away from, think about and re-configure through painting. Through the process of painting all this is contested towards a transformation of an idea. I just hope the paintings make visible this idea.

2.7

This idea of transformation has always been important for me, it is what starts the whole process, it is absolutely marginal for me to understand and yet it is very usual. To un-fix something that as I understand, is problematically fixed.

3.1

4 photographs were taken in secret and at great risk, though one person pressed the shutter to record the images, the taking / making of the photos was a collective action.

"In the summer of 1944, the Sonderkommando men asked the camp resistance for a small camera so that they could record the criminal tasks they were forced to carry out: emptying of the gas chambers and incineration of the bodies. The Sonderkommando organized some damage to the roof of the gas chambers of Krematorium V and requested repairs. The internal camp resistance then came into action. A "flying squad" to which Szmulewski, a member of this organization, belonged came to repair the damage. Szmulewski was carrying a dixie can with a false bottom in which the camera was hidden. Once the prisoner-repairmen were on the roof, Szmulewski passed the camera to a Sonderkommando man working at the cremation ditch who had placed himself against the north wall of the gas chambers, under the roof overhang which was 2.45 from the ground. This prisoner then quickly entered the north gas chamber whose door was open for ventilation purposes. There he was safe, as the room had already been emptied of corpses. From the centre of this room he took two photographs of his comrades feeding bodies into the cremation ditch. Then, hiding the camera in his right hand, he emerged from the building and went along the north wall to the eastern end of the building then about 30 metres into the wood, moving parallel to the eastern end of the building, under the cover of the trees. In front of the Krematorium, to the south, a group of women considered unfit for work, the next "batch", was undressing. Some of them were already naked, a little way away from the others, taking a few steps while waiting. The sun was shining right in his face, through the trees lining the Ringstraße, so there could be no question of using the camera normally, using the viewfinder as he had done in the gas chamber. From rather far away, so as not to be noticed, he took a first picture of the women by guesswork, holding his right arm against his side with the camera in his palm. Hidden behind a tree, he wound on the film, emerged and took another picture in the same way as before. The direction the lens was pointing in was difficult to judge under these conditions and he pointed the camera too high, photographing the tops of the trees instead of the women. Retracing his steps, he returned to the comparative safety of the Krematorium, moving along the north wall to the gas chambers. Szmulewski was watching out for him. A quick look round, no SS. The Sonderkommando man held up the camera which rapidly changed hands again [see the photograph showing the assumed path of the photographer]. Szmulewski replaced the camera in the bottom of the dixie, the repair was completed and the flying squad departed. The whole process had taken only fifteen to thirty minutes. The photos were taken out of the camp and handed over to the Polish resistance in Cracow".

<http://www.holocaust-history.org/auschwitz/pressac/technique-and-operation/> page 424

4.1

In this instance the photograph brings a complex discussion regarding what has been described as: An impossible image. So I have to ask myself:

Why? And is this an impossible image to work with?

4.2

For me there is no such thing as an impossible image in painting. Only bad paintings at worst, I also don't think there is such a thing as something that is impossible to represent, I have never understood this sort of argument. Perhaps there are things that you or I don't want to see? That however has got nothing to do with images in themselves only the parameters of looking and also in the act of making images. Where this happens? Or the context of how it was made? Not the image itself.

4.3

If we have to think about these particular photographic images: as an act in itself. In this case, it gets compelling and problematic at the same time. I am detached from the actions or activity that produced these photographs in an absolutely profound way. You give up trying to think or judge, you turn yourself into a recorder with your eyes – it hurts.

4.4

At the same time the actions that produced these images carry all the gravity of importance they correspond to. I can't feel any distance; this is why they are so complex in this very particular instance. The significance can be approached via an ethical avenue or even human understanding; how are we are going to find it possible to decide on what rules condition our ethical position and understanding.

To see or not to see?

It is now no longer the possibility of seeing, it is the impossibility of not seeing.

5.1

The problem is not of the image in itself; the problem is the distance between the action and the thing depicted.

5.2

The lack of ability to depict or [re] present the actions required taking the image and the events depicted.

5.3

The question of the indexicality of the photograph?

5.4

What is depicted?

5.5

The gesture of an image?

5.6

How can this become a document, a factual record?

5.7

Photograph as an event?

5.8

Placed in a variety of different contexts, stripped of meaning and given new ones.

5.9

Each time representing the same action, though each time given a new reading and narration of the actions via a text.

5.10

Changed, altered, retouched, cropped, re-described through text, evidenced as fact, fixed in time, a static moment, a static action.

5.11

There is the appearance of a truth moment here; I know this is not a fixed or static moment.

6.1

My concerns here are absolutely in relation to how these photographs are used. I really mean used and how to determine these facts and where the thresholds are? Who sets them?

Who these rules are for?

How do we manage them?

Where?

Why?

6.2

It is this messy uncertain ground that needs negotiating. It is here also that the ethics of representation I am interested in sit.

7.2

How representation is considered becomes constituted by the artwork itself.

7.3

Not as a nostalgic remembrance of the past; instead one with complicated layers, is active and where recognition is not located as a complete physical representation.

7.4

In this sense the paintings are an exploration of the act of remembering as a thing in itself.

7.5

With this: How to [re] integrate paintings into historically active conversations about – our – a history of violence. A history it is necessary to recognise and remember, as we are living in it today.

8.1

To me the systems of 'looking' that applies to mediated 'looking' is very different from 'looking' at these little paintings.

8.2

I am using these photographs to locate a conversation for me as a starting point.

8.3

The paintings I hope point towards a set of proposals, rather than a static polemic and certainty.

8.4

Not a fixed or defined proposal.

8.5

I also think that if we are not careful and remember how we might over use and observe the conventions of the photographic and 'looking'.

8.6

How can we expect paintings to do what photographs do, and it is a quite separate language and form of communication?

8.7

I worry that we apply the rules of; "tele" distance 'looking', learnt from photography to everything we see in the world. How can painting be this? Or expect it to be so? Or want to be so? Or a photograph be a painting? I worry that a potential problem derives from our obsession with seeing everything visual in terms of photographic 'looking' - "I see it therefore I understand it".

8.8

For me, painting and photography work independent of each other within the definitions of their specifics as languages and don't fill the same ground. They are not in competition, despite what some commentators think, they function as independent languages. They borrow, learn, steal from each other yet have distinct boundaries.

That's good.

8.9

Cinematography as distinct from photography is a closer bed partner to painting and vis-à-vis I think.

Based on the premise that they both start out in fiction, from nothing, they exist

from the imagination and are a construction, rather than starting from the tracing or documenting of fact. In this sense I see cinematography as having no illusion of being a traced moment stolen from what is perhaps the topography of the real.

So to start out with there is no expectation in cinematography, I also think neither does painting. Photography does, despite our lack of trust in the photographic truth fact, photography still carries an essential expectation of a real tracing, and even if it is a fiction it carries this idea. Don't you think?

8.10

I am thinking of the absolute instant of the photographic moment and how this gets re-narrated back into the conscious constructed narrative of things. We also have the well-trodden ground of the mechanically re-produced image, digital constructions and how this proliferates these narratives.

8.11

For example I know these photographs I am working with have perhaps always been printed the wrong way around, they are always a heavily cropped edit, usually only one small part of four parts is reproduced and heavily manipulated from the negative.

8.12

Even more problematic – in many instances the image we see printed is a version where the negative or contact print has been edited and manipulated.

8.13

Yet they exist in numerous books, articles and museums as statements or evidence of fact. They stand in for something.

9.1

Q - How could or can we dispute such evidence or even dare to ask anything of these photographs I am using, beyond their self defined fact?

9.2

A - Both personally: so I can think and, culturally: so we can think.

9.3

Is the questioning of this photographic evidence ethically and culturally insensitive?

9.5

There is an urgency, an immediacy about these photographs that appears to render the whole discussion of representation problematic. In the face of frightful atrocity, the impulse to theorize seems almost offensive. Before this idea of the photo moment in previous histories, perhaps we didn't need to argue about such questions of representation, only bad or good painting or more importantly the strength of the idea. I think the question was more centred on how we felt or what it made you think, rather than: was this true or not.

9.6

Do you find yourself looking at a film by Robert Bresson or painting by Cranach or Auerbach or sculpture by Louise Bourgeois asking yourself: but is this true?

No we ask how do we feel, because it is an idea we are looking at, the art is asking us that question.

9.7

So again, put simply: we can't look to painting to be a photograph or vis-à-vis.

9.8

It feels important to understand this possibility. So to state it again, I am neither for nor against the photo, that isn't what I am interested in. It is what they make possible and this form of imaginative potential. And again I hope that the paintings themselves say this.

9.9

In the gaps and spaces, constructed in this montage of painting is the imagination for me to think.

10.2

I saw the image the first time in a very specific context at Wannsee Villa in Berlin. When I saw the photograph – that I now understand is only a very small part of the original and is, I think, re-touched and printed the wrong way around – in the very first instance before any cognition as to what I was looking at I saw a painting. It was the central Christian motif of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Even now as I think about it the two are merged together: for example it is so very close to Masaccio's painting and the combination of the Christian use of the golden triangle in composition, as a spiritual device to construct meaning. This is one of the oldest formal devices of picture making in the western tradition. Then the photograph slipped into focus and I was looking at a photographic event that transported me both backwards and forwards, into history and into the very present moment of looking. Woman undressed and being lead to gas chamber five at Birkenau.

10.3

Since then I have found this image in many, many different contexts, it is always used and presented as only a tiny partial cropped moment taken from this bigger moment that I now understand.

10.4

Now I have found out much more about the possible conditions and context of how this photograph was actually made and have seen many more versions of the same image. Yet I am still caught in this switch between thinking about the Christian painted motif and this particular photographic depiction.

10.5

It is this tracing back and forwards, how this event and its depiction belong to the same thread and to my understanding, it has been a consistent thread.

10.5

It is inscribed into our ordering and understanding of visual language in our Christian tradition, it is a well-shared motif, part of our cultural memory and system of knowledge.

10.6

I think without any conscious attention it is why it keeps appearing in so many different contexts as I feel it is a common or at least shared motif: it stands in for something.

10.7

It is the photographic and the event of its making that I think is what commentators find so shocking. It happened, somebody was witness to the event being photographed, holding the camera. To me the photograph is no different to Masaccio, it connects an idea backwards and forwards in history today. The Masaccio is as important as this photograph. Nothing has changed and also everything is different. I want to use this problematic reading to touch something now, to be able to talk about this connection today. It is also a resistance to fixing our emotional selves into a static history forever incomprehensible as isolated frozen moments.

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