HOPELESSLY REALISTIC

figure and ground. the face of a mountain barely visible until a flare fires up and bursts flashlike for a few moments before slowly floating back towards earth. photo graphis; to *etch* with light. an intractable, and prolonged photo graphic moment. a cry for help perhaps, but a cry standing only for itself, beckoning no one in particular.

generally an exposure is determined by the camera or by the operator: light from out there is given access through the diaphragm and past the shutter curtain, before travelling indifferently in the dark chamber towards a dead end, absorption. upending what seemed the most basic of starting points, the opening scene is now inverted; moment by moment, the exposure is taking place within the image itself and the mountain is made visible in a series of fragments, or building blocks layered one on top of the next.. with this fissure comes the inevitable darkness of a blind trailing behind it with every frame and the reminder that the light, the images condition of visibility, always stands in danger of rendering the thing invisible.

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somewhere along the way, probably in conjunction with the picture postcard or the carte de visite, it became photography's lot to preserve the precious, fleeting bits of time called moments. whenever the need to grasp the roots of a certain configuration in the present came upon us, the photographic archive of our lives can tell us where we've been, or if nothing else, affirm that we in fact were. have been. like images in a family album, or a sequence of dna, it should take no more than a string of perfectly preserved moments to restore a failing or aging consciousness to its former glory. as i sift through some of the 16 billion images shared on instagram however, another inversion, a different kind of archive. rather than the breadcrumb trail of a family album, the images here seem to exist solely for the purpose of affirming presence, here and now. i am here i am here, i am there where you are not. in *a nation restored*, Bennin presents us with images which function as both an affirmation of an unspecified and wholly indeterminate present, and as fragments of an archive for a future reading. two differing, and mutually dependent modes of accounting for how something like identity is constructed.

denial on one hand then, and on the other, the futile promise of revival. the photograph carries with it the unmistakable smell of death and decay, of forgetting and being forgotten, and as a consequence, *maybe*, that scent is tinged with hope as well. the idea that things can't get any worse relies on a notion of time as continuous, as a predictable and linear sequence of events, propelling the subject ever forward towards some intangible but inevitable goal. arising seemingly from within itself there is no hope to speak of in the flare referred to earlier; in fact, it does not speak at all. it shares space for a given period

of time with other entities, lights up and floats, always becoming, then fades. if we accept that video is constituted by death and renewal at every frame, on and off, then *natural* is the only designation that could do it justice. as if it were second nature then (what pray is first nature?), this video simply accepts, and it does this without clinging, without desperation, and, without hope.

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it all sounded quite simple at first. an investigative journalists wet dream really, or perhaps that of a rebellious teenager who sees nothing but hypocrisy in the faces of the elders at the dinner table. a supposedly peace loving country, a beacon of peace really, has cordoned off a disproportionately large chunk of its most prized national mountain range for the purposes of a military practice area, *and* a test-site for explosives which coincidentally, this same country happens to export on a large scale. at present, this mountain majesty is to be cleaned up, restored and reset, not only to its former glory, but to a strange utopian vision of what could have been. is this act of restoration, of *giving back* a gift? is it an apology or a cathartic cleansing wiping the slate clean? should we be grateful or is that simply the reaction of the truly subjugated, to politely kiss the hand that slapped us?

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somewhere, some time ago, i read that in order to conserve energy and space, a computer will, when performing a computation, erase each subsequent step as it moves forward. at the end, all we're left with is the initial problem and the final solution so to speak. is the restoration that's taking place here not similar? we are to end up with a product, *nature*, and the processes that will lead to the culminating scene, its future determined state, is to be erased. the layered and fragmentary nature of *a nation restored* is not as simple as a recording of history, though that too would present us with a host of difficulties. if someone were to find Bennin's work in 200 years, what would they in effect be looking at? unlike the layers upon layers of waste and old homesteads built one on top of the other that make up innumerable mounds all around the world and thus easily lend themselves to an archeological dig, what we would get is a fragmentary vision of a certain unspecified moment in time. his many-faceted approach, though confusing at first, seems the only appropriate way to engage with what is taking place up there on that plateau. as a consequence of the complete rewriting of the scene, we could imagine a future archeologist hitting a kind of dead end, or a blindspot. in turn then, Bennin's project presents itself as something that should not have existed in the first place; a missing link so to speak which, if found, presents itself as an obstacle for anyone wishing to enjoy this landscape as *nature.*

we could deem the restoration contra-archeological. if archeology relies on tracing history as it is made visible through the unearthing of layers built up over time, then a given landscape, like a hill here or a fissure there, present themselves as tools to think with back through time. how are we, or rather future generations, to understand or make sense of the history of this place when what's currently taking place is not simply a new layer based on the old one's, but a comprehensive re-writing of the space, complete with new mountain crevices? are we not in the landscape of the photo manipulators in the days of certain totalitarian states, whose job it was to erase all traces of certain marked people in photographs so as to remove them from a given moment? George Orwell's memory hole indeed.

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what Bennin is photographing at the moment is not as simple as the traces of certain activities, but a condition of the landscape; meaning in turn that the subject matter is nothing if not elusive. a moment, whether we're dealing with a man jumping over a puddle, a cum-shot or a boulder, is by definition fleeting, derived from momentum. given that the very subject matter, that is, this landscape, is in a state that itself can't be determined, the moment worked around here is not one which easily lends itself to photographic representation. as a state between states, it exists neither as the nature it is to become, nor steeped in the history that led us to the present. a moment where creation and erasure exist side by side, it begs the question: where, or when is that moment where culture begets, or conceives, nature? by using video alongside the single frame images that constitute it, Bennin is able to make use of its minimal distance from photography as a way of gaining access to two differing versions of the same photographic moment- one as a continual becoming, and the other as indefinite suspension.

in 1952 the title of a book of photographs by Henri Cartier Bresson set a precedence for how the vast majority of photojournalists, street photographers and lay folks came to understand the *nature* of photography. *the decisive moment,* which incidentally became the title at the behest of the english publisher and his marketing strategy, was culled from the artists

foreword to the book in which he quoted a certain cardinal from the seventeenth century; from then on, the photographic *moment* was forever replete with notions of the divine. interestingly, for our purposes here, the original french title was something like stolen images, or images on the run. the defining image from this book, and subsequently for this whole school of photography, is of a man captured midstride above a "puddle". Djuna Barnes' assertion twenty years earlier that "an image is the stop the mind makes between uncertainties'", here finds its inversion. now, the image is instead grounded in the idea of a moment as a duration of time frozen between certainties (within the coordinates of hope as it were): between an understandable past (we know where he's been), and a foreseeable future (we know where he's going).
a man leaps over a puddle, connecting point *a* with point *b*. the imagined trace of his body's arch functions like a constellation of stars, completing a moment of transcendence. and yet, why this nagging sensation that something vital is being concealed or denied by this very perfection? in fact, to designate what this man is leaping over as 'a puddle' seems nothing short of an admission of blindness. miles away from the puddles of a Tom Sandberg, which like black holes threaten to engulf everything in its vicinity, what we're seeing here is an all-encompassing mirror, replaying the whole scene upside down. the moment and the image becomes here a standstill where the notion of time as an abyss of forgetting (and what's worse, being forgotten) is traversed, denied. the subject casually, blindly even, leaps over it and we the viewers, so enamored by the perfection, are oblivious to it. the revelation is, for all intents and purposes, the denial of the possible abyss of time under the guise of its preservation. suffice it to say that the fascination for these kinds of images is the ease with which they make us forget the inevitable memory hole lurking in the shadows of every moment. in Bennin's images there is no decisive moment unifying point *a* with point *b*, no constellations allowing for 'the big picture'. there is no moment of revelation and nothing revelatory about the moment: instead it exists as an illdefined object of scrutiny. the attempt is made to track it, to widen it perhaps, but never to capture, kill or domesticate it. acutely aware of time and its role in generating a meaningful continuity as a precondition for identity, Bennin's images reveal the shadow of the puddle without transforming it into a comforting mirror. the puddle so to speak is invariably there as the shadow trailing behind every photographic moment.

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contrary to a landscape, nature is supposedly a space in which a subject can have a sense of communion with the natural world, without technological mediation. if nature then is a space untouched by technology in its broadest sense, including horticulture, including domestication, then what *are* these images of mountains here presented to us? images of nature? landscapes? or traces of activities not immediately visible?
being in nature then; an experience supposedly as certain, as immediate, embodied and immersive as the weight of a rock in your hand. and yet, once we designate technology as an extension of ourselves (i.e. weapons as arms), are we not allready in muddy territory? regardless of how hard we attempt a complete buddhist identification of being like a drop of water returning to the sea, doesn't the experience of nature imply a conscious awareness of this space and our place within it? isn't experience itself always minimally virtual and thus analgous to a kind of technological mediation?
two years ago, in a dark white cube, Bennin presented us with a video, a static shot of a screen whose six images arranged in a grid showed what appeared to us as nature in its rawest form. akin to those images returned to us from mars of a space unsullied by the dirty feet of man, what we in fact were seeing was a landscape, this same mountain landscape, as seen from the control booth of a man responsible for the remote controlled digger seen midframe. this operator, gently moving rocks to and fro, was creating a landscape, or "nature" as it could have looked had it not been for the shelling that took place here. though thoughts immediately go to drone technology and the image of a soldier safely relegated to bombing houses in some remote village at noon, these images also evoke beauty retouching as it's done, and in fact always has been done, in certain photographic endeavours. is this man, this operator, in nature?
virtual reality is often described as an immersive environment, a term which goes a long way in describing our experience of the the world 'out there'. and yet, what virtual reality and reality have in common is precisely that our experiences are structured by the parameters of the environment, be they algorithms, symbols or bodily representations and thus within these parameters there is leeway which enables us to manoeuvre in a seemingly free and autonomous manner; constraints in the guise of its opposite. at first, the experience of Bennin's environments is that of transporting us into an immersive space, but slowly it's as if, instead of being agents in an environment we can manipulate, we are in fact powerless subjects of a dream in which the most we can do is stand idly by, watching the scene unfold. similarly to those ads for videogames where the action for the first thirty seconds seems to unfold as a consequence of our pressing the keys or rotating the wheel and it all of a sudden dawns on you that it is in fact the game playing something for you, we become in these installations passive bystanders. with no hope of taking any action at all we are landlocked, begging the allimportant question: what action could possibly be appropriate here anyway?

if we are enmeshed, it would seem the logical deduction is that Bennin is the one pulling the strings, setting the parameters; and yet, what's lacking in these works is the safety net of the outsider position, the voice of detached criticism. instead it

seems that what we're getting is no more nor less than what he himself has seen, as if he's submerged in the project rather than remain within an arms length. as if appropriating or changing places with someone inside the system, he's able to use the parameters, or the language of the system to both remind us of *that* which shouldn't be forgotten, and question what *that thing* in fact is, or, could be. these are, in the words of Jaques Ranciere, pensive images.

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a year later, one year ago that is, a darkened room once again, but this time, gone is the cube. the scene is rustic, an old military barn in fact. a shaft of light mimics the path light makes as it travels through the dark chamber of the camera, growing larger as it recedes through the space. the resulting image will not bend to reason. language fumbles. an aerial view most likely. there is ground, and mounds of dirt perhaps which suddenly shift and become grain on the surface of film itself. the image spins perpendicular to the ground, forcing on me a viewpoint i've only had as a pubescent boy heading straight for the ground of my dreams. a view closes in then recedes, revealing nothing but the all important insistence that here there is something: look damnit! the image as index finger. these mounds, with the digger of the previous year fresh in mind, could be waste deposited there, or fresh fill for that which is currently a blank. the raw material of creation, figures and ground, dots and line to a plane. and yet our need for coherence is left strangely wanting.

a restoration typically reintroduces order into that which has, for some reason or other, become unruly or uninitelligible. that Bennin leaves us hanging quite literally, functions as a kind of mirror to what's taking place up there on the mountain. so what then are we to do with this term, the restoration that is, a term which incidentally evokes matter of art history rather than community?

though we've come to equate a landscape with images of nature, the term itself was coined to express the nature of scenes which included human activities and their effects, within a given environment. doubly strange then that what's being created up there on the mountain plane is a landscape, but one which is to be experienced as *nature*. centuries ago, when this area was still nature, its status in the eyes of the populace was that of an undisputed point of identification; literally, a bedrock. the founding fathers of 1814 swore by it, that Norway would stand until Dovre fell. Alain Robbe-Grillet has made the point that our use of metaphors, of calling a mountain majestic for example, does not describe some intrinsic property of the mountain, but is instead a designation which retroactively makes the writer majestic; metaphor bridges, or smooths over the gap separating a subject from the thing described and thus creates complicity. in the end this much-needed illusion of unity renders the writer majestic for having been able to see and describe said magnificence. will we, by immersing ourselves in this landscape and in turn becoming part of untouched nature remove all traces of that which could potentially cause a certain *unease* concerning the state of our nation anno 2013? is this project, from the powers that be, meant to summon certain timeless values of the norwegian, (her primal scream?) whatever that may be?

Bennin's project, rather than taking on the role of the ironic observer commenting on the possibly reactionary nature of the army's project through a kind of nouveau national romanticism, instead mirrors something vital in the national consciousness anno 2013. despite the size and title of the photograph *under storestygge svånåtinden*, it is the very approachability of the mountain which strikes me. granted, the face of the mountain towers above us, but she is no femme fatale. we are not here in the presence of the frightening and titillating sublime. instead i could conceivably ascend the mountain and complete the identification with it if only i put a little *effort* into it. obviously what we choose as points of identification out there speaks volumes about our sense of self. nature here, is not simply some untamable entity to be revered, but a kind of subject, something to be domesticated and put to use, a prospect in all senses of the word.

as any teenager will know, the construction of a self or of a nation for that matter, takes more than a few fences or phrases of demarcation. identity requires a literal as well as a figurative history, so while norway spent the 1800's awaiting the sovereignty of 1905, the national romantic school of painting was busy locating the *core* of the nation in the supposedly incontestable relation that exists (read complicity) vis a vis the nobility of our natural environment. suffice it to say then, that even before the military began bombing this national treasure, we were already overdetermined, fucked, by the representations issued forth from this school of painting. how could nature, the real thing that is, and the experience thereof, possibly live up to the standards set for it by this abundance of beauty? isn't the travesty of representation itself, that it changes the coordinates of how we are to understand, or perceive, the real thing, that even as nothing but passive onlookers, we distort the very ground we're seeing?

faced with the face of the "big ugly" mountain (the literal translation of *store stygge*), the velvety surface of the image in contrast to the hard facts of the matter at hand, becomes a literal embodiment of the abovementioned act of distortion. it would seem

that rather than looking at the mountain itself, what we are seeing is the very makeup distorting the face; the interface, rendition or translation, both hinting at and masking the supposed *real* lurking beneath all these layers. as with a certain view of perception itself, as a screen distorting the surroundings so as to make them visible, i'm reminded of the cruel and unavoidable fact, that without this distorting screen, the thing itself would simply melt away.
turning my head ninety degrees another image has me suspended above a precipice. a gentle push is all thats separating me from a gulf of oblivion, and i wonder if we might not be in the presence of the sublime after all.

I know *mot flathøi* intimately. not in the sense of the generic prospect-card-view of the big ugly mountain. instead this picture is instantly recognisable as belonging to a class of images found in the establishing sequences we've come to expect from certain films. you know the kind. the omniscient eye of the camera glides above the landscape sucking us into the picture and into a story with the prospect and promise that our money will have been well spent. weightless, detached, and yet embodied, this gaze and frame is so generalised and focusgrouped that it appears to belong to, and exist solely for, each and every one of us. this apparently neutral and disinterested gaze, spawned by a system which has spent inordinate amounts of money on finding the most cost-effective way of hooking us, is in fact a very real embodiment of prospecting, of mining for gold. and yet, that image, the one i'm certain i've encountered before, always holds the promise of something to come, of lulling us into the narrative.
rather than transport me further along to where the action's taking place, to that place in my mind where i could conceivably transcend the present and forget about the facts at hand, I am, upon entering the dimly lit "video room" suspended indefinitely in some bygone moment. it's as if Bennin sets up a whole host of promises and premises, only to erase their fulfillment one by one. on the walls, which for the occasion are painted a reddish hue, inimitably placing us in some drawing room of the past, three large framed photographs replace the more immersive technology of the present while maintaining a certain pulsating presence. grounded there on the wooden floor, with the never-ending stream of daylight from the softbox-like ceiling caressing images and onlookers alike, there is no indication of time as a linear progression. like certain museum experiences or those prisoncells lit 24-7, there's nothing but an unchanging, infinite present. there's no sense of what came before, and nothing but a general and hopelessly self-evident statement of fact as to what we're looking at: views towards some mountain or other. immersed in the works of Andreas Bennin, like the deer in the proverbial headlights, it dawns on me that this suspension is at the core of every work present. not the suspension of disbelief, but perhaps of judgement.

judgement however, though easily pronounced, would in this case be a falsehood. (and what, given the fact that this project of restoration is not completed and most likely won't be even in our children's lifetime, would we be passing judgement on?) Rather than taking the expected route, imploring us to act on behalf of this history, Bennin's images exhibit a certain kind of reticence. not the reticence of resignation, but of acceptance at the complexity of the task at hand. if anything, we are encouraged by Bennin to stand back and reflect on the nature of this national project, fully aware that the gesture *not* to act always stands in danger of disdainfully being labeled passive, idle.

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the stuff making up the raw material of Bennin's practice up there on the mountain is not so different in kind from artificial intelligence or stem-cell research. we could easily imagine, if all goes well with the restoration and Dovre in fact crumbles, that we get on our spaceships and create nature on some not too distant planet. though farfetched, it does seem a delightful prospect indeed; nothing less than a pragmatic solution to certain incontestable and disavowed problems.

some would argue that our ability to care for and to empathise with the natural world, is what separates us from every other species. coming full circle then, it is in our nature to cultivate. with its domesticating procedure of framing and taming the subject at hand, photography ineluctably reaches into the realm of farming. while the latter is a form of partnership with a fundamental reliance on a certain sustainability, the action of mining is closer in kind to the notion still upheld in certain cultures, that to take a photograph of someone is to take away their soul, to hollow them out in the span of a split second.

two boxes stacked one on top of the other, occupy the floor of the main room. one of them, the top one, shows a video at each end, while its foundation, the box on the floor, is closed. the gesture of stacking puts us in mind of a warehouse, whilst the containers themselves with their plywood finish and hinged doors seem expressly designed with the safe passage of

some stolen archeological artefact from a not too distant past in mind. that or a kind of storage solution built to house the present documentations of “reality” for a future which has yet to arrive.
on one end then, the flare creates a fissure as the light etches its way through the face of the mountain, whilst on the opposite end (and seemingly originating from the same point) the consequence of this etching itself, like photons grafting themselves on to the face of the film.

a curtain, mid frame, slowly reveals what at first glance appears to be an etching, a cave painting or a pictogram. like the first time I laid eyes on my child during an ultrasound i’m literally fumbling in the dark, unable to make sense of the thing I know I’m looking for in that image. an inversion maybe, or a negative? perhaps what i read as darkness is in fact the light and vice versa. the thing dangles, pulsates, moves closer, or grows. and then, I can’t say exactly when, a complete shift. As a painterly gesture Bennin has gone from drawing the chair, to drawing the space around the chair. figure becomes ground. the very thing apprehended as being an autonomous agent safely out there becomes without warning the consequence of the movements of the point of view we’re forced to assume. as the title indicates we are led through a mine, through the entrails of the mountain.

the supposition that the light which etches itself through the material foundation of the surroundings could only originate from an opening somewhere out of view restores a certain sense of order. and yet, this shift in perspective generally thought to situate us safely on the ground of the image is complicated again by the movements of the camera. in such a setting it is typically the very shakiness of the handheld camera, or the dolly’s complete lack thereof, which seamlessly assures that the viewer finds him or herself trading places with the camera, forgetting all about the mediation taking place. here, with the movements of the camera falling somewhere between these two conventions, it becomes obvious that the mine is not *mine* so to speak. it would seem that what’s propelling us into the belly of the beast is a camera device used all around the world every day by plumbers, surgeons and scientists alike to gain visual access to those places the human being could not possibly venture. there’s a certain lag in the movements, as if there’s a dissonance between the thing and its perception where the distance from the eye to the thing being perceived by way of technology, by remote control is made manifest. it’s as if Bennin is making us acutely aware of the knowledge that what we see and how we perceive it are two different things. by tearing apart the thing and the perception of the thing, Bennin thereby hints at the notion that what we perceive out there is always a case of numerous translations and displacements dependent upon a system of perception most of us can hardly grasp, but which we don’t have to, because in our minds, like a film or video, it happens so fast as to seem smooth, immediate.

if the subject of today typically wades around in the marshy, liquid landscape of a Zygmunt Baumann, then whenever a fixed point of identification is lacking, there is always the temptation to yield to unequivocal doctrines and reactionary notions of a hidden truth lurking beneath the surface of every situation, every facade, and as an extension, every piece of art. the mountain, typically solid as a rock, is an obstruction to be ascended or walked around, but here, in this hollow, the precariousness of that which was set in stone is suddenly made manifest. the mountain, the epitome of matter and unyielding substance has been mined. with the surveying gaze of this literal *tele vision*, where no thing is given particular precedence over anything else, Bennin, by scoping out or taking in the scene, is presenting us with the presence of absence. the construct we sought to identify with, the mountain that is, yields no ore.

having adapted to the darkness, we are led ever forward towards the supposed opening. frame by frame, the darkness yields to the light which indifferently creates larger and larger fissures in the surroundings. the walls are cracking. the exposure is tearing away at the material foundation, not simply of the image, but of the very mountain itself. if we continue on this path, like the investigative journalist following his guiding light, there will in the end be no hollow either as everything will be engulfed by light. as with the demand for transparency which trails behind most every institutional pursuit these days, there is always the danger that an overexposure will simply leave a blank; zero opacity ultimately renders the thing invisible. there would be no way of turning back, of recovering that which has suffered from too much light.

with no say in the matter we move in the direction of the glare. that is, until we turn, led back again in the spirit of nature, towards darkness. to the safety of the umbra where information is retained, latent, for future generations to unearth.

MORTEN ANDENÆS 2013