

Searching in the Ruins of Memory: Ori Gersht and the still photograph

'Throughout the journey I chase ghosts, the traces of historic traumas that have scarred personal and collective memories, in an attempt to excavate from deserted landscapes clues about what has been.'

Ori Gersht

Prologue

In the Dutch city of Delft at just after eleven thirty on the quiet morning of October 12, 1654, a municipal arsenal known as the Secret von Hollandt located in the city's north-eastern corner exploded. The blast, fuelled by more than eighty thousand pounds of gunpowder, laid waste to an entire district, completely destroying more than two hundred houses and seriously damaging many more across the city. The poet and dramatist Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) tried to account for the scene of devastation in verse:

Like a churchyard full of bodies,
Crushed, truncated, torn, burned:
A Chaos, mixed indistinguishably.
And the moment of moments.
A century's construction, and a Croesus's treasure:
One spark, one instant and a city is destroyed.

Among the hundreds of people killed in the explosion on that fateful morning was the already celebrated, thirty-two year-old painter Carel Fabritius. He died when his house in Doelenstraat collapsed, as did those who were there too: his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, his pupil Mathias Spoors, and Simon Decker, former sexton of the Oude Kerk, whose portrait Fabritius was painting at the time. Fabritius was pulled alive from the rubble six to seven hours after the explosion, but, having been taken to Delft's old hospital, died shortly afterwards. Formerly Rembrandt's pupil in Amsterdam, and often regarded as a precursor to Vermeer through his common interest in the effects of light, space and visual experience, Fabritius was a prodigiously talented artist, but few of his pictures have survived. However, of the three extant paintings completed in Delft during the year of his death, one stands apart as a delicately poised but indelible guarantee of his virtuosity, and as something of a poignant epitaph to set against the blackened ruins of Delft.

The Goldfinch hovers as a small rectangle of pale, prescient light in the history of art; it is both radical and forward looking, a spark in the long narrative of visual representation, and a point of closure, imbued now with a sense of abrupt loss and the tragic ‘what might have been’ that comes with our knowledge of the artist’s imminent demise. Drawn into the spotlight recently through its association with Donna Tartt’s 2012 novel of the same name, the painting seems too fragile, too quietly and intensely self-contained to withstand the clamouring attentions of contemporary media. Its enigmatic status as an object appears to underline this vulnerability. Intimately bound up it seems with illusionism and the *trompe-l’oeil* traditions of the period in which it was made, the precise details of the picture’s original form and function remain unknown. But its depiction, its idea, of a bird alive and alert in the very second it is seen, seems so wedded to a sense of momentary, almost photographic stillness, to a feeling for observation in time and space, that it is difficult to disagree with the conclusion that Fabritius’s overriding concern here was with ‘perception, not deception’. And perhaps, to speculate a little further, his phenomenological thinking and practice was also to do with something elusive and frail about that perceptual experience, about its ephemerality, and the fugitive nature of our relationship to the living, moving material world around us.

In his relatively short life Fabritius had known personal tragedy; he had lost his first child in August 1642 and his second a year later. His first wife, Aeltge van Hasselt, also died in April 1643. And, although by the time he had moved to Delft around 1650 it appears he was about to marry again, he would have known something of the delicate and balances that shape and define existence. *The Goldfinch* comes to us now with that sense of balance freighted by historical events. As a picture it seems held in state of becoming – both as a representation of a fleeting moment and as an object in time; its deceptively simple, formal economy and bravura painterly style, that poise and confidence, now seem inexorably connected to, indeed they seem to invite associations with, the violent, chaotic tangle of the artist’s death. None of this will help us to understand the specific motives and conditions of *The Goldfinch*’s making and reception in 1654. But these details are part of the painting’s extended life, part of a meaning that has evolved over time, the ‘slow-burning fuse’ of the work of art. As it has moved through history this small picture has become a locus around which certain tensions and opposing elements have coalesced; the spectres of destruction haunt its fragile beauty, a gathering darkness pressures its daylight, and in that eternal instant, in the bird’s ‘twitching response’, we now see both presence and absence.

.....

This may seem a circuitous route into an essay about the work of Ori Gersht. It is true that in all his drawing on art history, and throughout his various explorations of the still life genre, *The Goldfinch* has not been a chosen model or particular point of reference. But the picture and its associations resonate powerfully across Gersht's work of the last fifteen years or so; in fact it could stand as a metaphor, or presiding presence, over an art that also rests on such fragile balancing, and one which, although profoundly concerned with the experience and memorialising of the Holocaust, extends into a more universal meditation on our often tenuous and unstable relationship with the past. And, central to this meditation for Gersht are questions of perception and representation, particularly in relation to the photographic image. Exploring photography's technical boundaries and representational limitations, he asks: how might we connect with and speak of places, experiences and events from history, and, more specifically, how can we usefully and poetically engage with the fading traces and interstices of personal and collective memory? Throughout Gersht's work these investigations have been articulated through a central and profound duality, within which what is formally beautiful and stable, that which exists in a state of equilibrium and grace, has its looming and often erupting obverse: violence, fragmentation and a sense of trauma and loss.

A pressing context for these unfolding tensions in Gersht's work is the advanced play-back, freeze-frame culture of contemporary photographic and digital media, and the continual opening up of our public consciousness of temporal extremes. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes famously remarked that 'the age of the Photograph is also the age of revolutions, contestations, assassinations, explosions...' Building on Bergson's ideas, Barthes suggested that, from its inception, photography has helped to draw us into a phenomenological conflict between 'duration' (that he likened to the process of 'ripening') and the instantaneous; the emotional, experiential and temporal 'impatiences', as he called them, of its age (which, we suspect, ever-developing photographic and digital technologies might be deepening and making more complex). The conceptual framework of Gersht's art encompasses this entire history of photographic time; in places echoing its earliest experiments and in others interrogating the capacity of its technological frontier, all the while deploying both the still and moving image, often in ways that dwell on a dialogue or notes of perceptual discord between the two. Across this body of work, images and narratives are in a state of uncertainty and instability – becoming, fading, breaking-down. Forms of fixity and permanence are underscored by the unpredictable extremes and disruptive processes which brought them into being; a poetics of fragility holds sway, a consistent, enduring balance between coherence and dissolution.

The moving image works have tended to take centre stage in the consideration of Gersht's work in recent years, at least since his monumental film *The Forest* was first shown in 2005. But the still photographs have continued to serve as a foil for the films' more dramatic structures: either they have acted as points of aesthetic concentration, emphasising key scenes in the film's conception or narrative and transforming them by generating other ideas or opening up new photographic spaces; or they have existed as independent series altogether, other tributaries of thought, where the subject matter, the process of realising the image and a deliberation on the nature of photography itself – its fallibility, unpredictability and expressive potential – are the integrated elements of the enquiry.

Gersht has said that, essentially, his work is borne of a desire to reach out to the past, to hold on to stories, to memories that are, like photographs exposed to light, gradually fading, being slowly erased and corrupted by time. Like Walter Benjamin, who believed that how we act in the present can change the meaning of the past, Gersht's work is not only an attempt to preserve these connections to history, but to bring them into the here and now, to attempt to understand them through the creative and recuperative process of enacting or making something new. For him the simple recording function of the camera and the photograph's indexicality has proved inadequate in this recuperative act, this way of connecting and understanding. Yet in his pushing and manipulating of the photographic process, chemically and digitally, Gersht is not simply demonstrating this inadequacy. His still photographic series, such as *White Noise* (1999-2000), *Ghost* (2004), *Liquidation* (2005), *Hide and Seek* (2009) and *Chasing Good Fortune* (2012), could also be seen as the defined space in his work where what is most intangible finally materialises, where the physical and psychological begin to merge, and where, as Max Kozloff once said, 'the timespan of the picture broadens out, sometimes symbolically and always with a sensuous result, to draw in the spectator as a companion to the reverie of the artist.' This essay will be primarily concerned with these still photographs.

.....

'There is something abominable about cameras, because they possess the power to invent many worlds. As an artist who has been lost in the wilderness of mechanical reproduction for many years, I do not know which world to start with. I have seen fellow artists driven to the point of frenzy by photography.'

Robert Smithson, 'Art Through The Camera's Eye' (1971)

Before considering Gersht's still photographs more closely, it might be instructive to pause here to sketch in an outline of the photographic culture from which some of the fundamental principles of his work have evolved, and within which he matured as an artist during the late 1980s and 90s in London. By the time Gersht began his first degree in Photography, Film and Video at the University of Westminster, the radical revisions of theory and practice that had already transformed the terms of photographic discourse internationally had begun to impact heavily on the institutional frameworks through which photography was then being taught, published and exhibited in Britain. Here, as elsewhere, the photographic image had become a site of convergence for a range of interrelated ideas and practices, from conceptual art, film, photographic and cultural theory, and more widely from post-modernism, which, since the rapid expansion of electronic and printed media in the 1960s, had offered various challenges to what was regarded as photography's new and oppressive power. This culture was characterised by a broad sense of critical scepticism – found in magazines and journals, on gallery walls and in university departments – about photography's documentary authority and its value and autonomy as a coherent art form. The binding orthodoxy, which to a greater or lesser extent affected all forms of photographic practice, was that photography was essentially a kind of conceit, a complex seduction whose apparent unmediated fidelity to appearances and ability to see inside time to reveal essential, objective truths, only served to distance us from any real understanding of history or our social world unfolding in time, creating instead new and pervasive forms of blindness. In the broad wake of these cathartic developments, even documentary photographers in Britain, still largely committed to a realist paradigm and to gathering evidence with the camera, had begun to look for new and more subjective ways to engage with social issues and unravel their own photographic identities. While for other younger and emerging artists, such as Ori Gersht, photography became increasingly bound up with forms of intertextuality, with the production of images whose aesthetic frame of reference extended far beyond the photographic, and whose meaning necessarily referred to and was mediated by other narratives, discourses and histories.

For Gersht, and others, given the accepted limitations and deceptive condition of photographic evidence, what became important during the 1990s was the potential interplay between the visible and the invisible; between what the camera can reveal, its descriptive mechanism wedded to the moment, and what it cannot see, those different layers of time and experience, historical and psychological, and that elusive depth of duration. This tension was also bound up with the photograph's status as, on the one hand, a trace of the past, what Barthes referred to as its 'certificate of presence', its guarantee that 'this has been'; and, on the other, its essential 'pastness', what has been called the 'tyranny of distance', its sense of a prior encounter sealed

within the image and forever cut off from the time of the present. These tensions, ‘this dialectic of presence and absence’, increasingly became a preoccupation of photographic debates and practices of the time. In 1994, while Gersht was a post-graduate student at London’s Royal College of Art, they were the central themes, for example, of an important and influential exhibition, *The Epic and The Everyday*, curated by James Lingwood and Martin Caiger-Smith for the Hayward Gallery, which included the work of Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky, Gabriel Orozco and others. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Lingwood set the tensions inherent in photography’s paradoxical immediacy and ‘pastness’ against Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas in his essay *Epic and Novel*, where he drew distinctions between the classical, epic tale that is always distant from the time and place of the reader and the literary form of the novel, which, arriving in parallel with photography in the early nineteenth century, introduced a new sense of continuum between the past and the time of the present. In connecting history to some of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary life, the novel embodied what Bakhtin called ‘indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving everyday reality...’ Photography also introduced the sense of an immediate connection to the present, but it was unable to give form to the ‘multiple textures of time’ found in the novel. To draw out these distinctions, Lingwood referred to Walter Benjamin’s essay *The Storyteller*, which suggested fundamental differences between ‘information’ and ‘the story’. According to Benjamin: ‘...the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely, and explain itself to it without losing any time; a story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves a concentration of strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.’ The central questions therefore, foregrounded by *The Epic and The Everyday* and thereafter of pressing potential for the ambitions of so much photographic art, were: how can photography engage directly with the dialectic of historical time and the time of the present, how can it ‘resist the surrender to information’, and how can it ‘retain the reserve of the story’?

For many young artists working with photography one response to these questions was to consider the more durational condition of the moving image, and to exploit a kind of intermediary space between the still and the moving where new representational tensions and new possibilities would come into play. In many ways these modes of interaction were becoming more commonplace: another important context for this recognisable shift in photographic art towards the end of the 1990s being the growing proliferation and influence of new media and digital technology, and the increasingly routine interplay between moving and still images across computer screens everywhere. After graduating from the Royal College in 1995 Gersht was quick to utilise these new technological possibilities, and as his work developed, as we shall see later in

this essay, the moving image began to suggest not only ways in which his interest in photography's contradictions might be expanded, but also how that kind of investigation might become a conceptual framework for dramatic interventions into narratives from the past, in particular those closely allied with his personal history.

But in a sense the question of photography itself has remained at the core of Gersht's thinking, and as its social function and technological basis has altered over the last twenty years, so the still photograph has presented a consistently fertile space for experiment in his practice. In many ways Gersht's photographs have become like a spectral counterpoint to the dominant weight of mainstream photographic culture: as the pictures from our surrounding landscape of photography have become more brightly ubiquitous, more sharply defined and saturated, ever more intertwined with our experience though ever less possessed of the story's 'reserve', so Gersht's photographs have become their pale shadows, resisting clarity, definition and the insatiable demand for information. Alongside his films, for which sound is often extreme and integral to the dramatic impact, his still photographs have sustained a quiet gravity and profound presence that is simultaneously 'weight-less'. Brought into being in defiance of the standard regimes of advanced camera-craft, the pictures are the poetic residue of a kind of technical malpractice, in which the time of the exposure opens out and fidelity to appearance is replaced by what we might call a 'truth to essence', one receptive to the phantom signs of history and the restless searching of artist's own experience.

.....

'In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like the photographic print left in the developing bath too long.'

W. G. Sebald, from his last novel *Austerlitz*

The gravitational pull of Ori Gersht's work, in resisting and reversing the photographic industry's technical imperatives, has tended to draw him not forwards but back in time. To be more specific, despite his interest in the thresholds of new photographic technology, he senses a more profound affinity with the earliest of photographic experiments, by Sir John Herschel, William Henry Fox Talbot and others, and that point in the medium's history when the newly fixed image on paper nevertheless hovered in the state of its most delicate impermanence. Conceptually at least, Gersht imagines holding on to that moment of opacity and instability, creating a photographic art that is

eternally of Fox Talbot's 'fixing a shadow' and similarly resonant with all that term's ambiguity and implicit contradictions. Geoffrey Batchen has highlighted the 'peculiar articulation of temporal and spatial co-ordinates' to be found in Fox Talbot's earliest publication on photography, *Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing*, of January 1839, in which he conjured his sense of excitement and uncertain revelation: 'The most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our *'natural magic'*, and may be fixed forever in the position which it seemed destined for a single instant to occupy...Such is the fact, that we may receive on paper the fleeting shadow, arrest it there and in the space of a single minute fix it there so firmly as to be no more capable of change.' Here, as Batchen has so persuasively argued: 'It seems that he (Talbot) was able to describe the identity of photography only by harnessing together a whole series of binaries: art and shadows, the natural and magic, the momentary and the forever, the fleeting and the fettered, the fixed and that which is capable of change. Photography was, for Talbot, the desire for an impossible conjunction of transience and fixity. More than that, it was an emblematic something/sometime, a "space of a single minute" in which space *becomes* time, and time space.'

If this indeterminate state of the photograph has become a useful abstract for the way Gersht's envisions his still images, it was paradoxically through experiments with the moving image, notably in one of his first short film pieces, *Neither Black nor White* (2001), where he began to conceive of that indeterminacy as an useful analogy to and framework for engaging with the past through the present, drawing together the long history of Jewish experience and his own identity as an Israeli. *Neither Black nor White* (the title itself seems to refute a certain photographic orthodoxy) proceeds as a fixed landscape view from a hill top position in the Jewish quarter of Nazareth down onto the Arab town of Iksal in Israel, and so across an ethnic border. The film begins in darkness; the town's lights seen as nothing more than a starry sky. But as the dawn breaks and we move slowly from night to day, and as our understanding of what we are seeing changes, the town is gradually revealed. And yet, after the dawn breaks, the light of the day continues to increase to a point beyond visibility, until the image of the town below us is finally erased into a whiteout, a form of brilliant over-exposure; a process that is repeated again and again as the film is looped.

Neither Black nor White is a complex meditation on the comprehension of place that magically and mysteriously unfolds as a reversal of the appearance and disappearance of an unfixed photograph, materialising from white paper only to fade to black on exposure to the sun. The film suggests a vigil or surveillance, but its narrative is inconclusive; it begins and ends with misrecognition, with forms of blindness. The elusive still image of the work, the point of view

that never comes to rest, that never achieves stability or constancy, not only becomes a metaphor for photography itself but also for a kind of shifting, transitional consciousness, one locked into an illusory, circular journey from dark to light, from the invisible to the visible and from ignorance to knowledge in an endless ebb and flow.

'Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory...but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory...the Photograph is violent, not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed...'

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

By the time *Neither Black nor White* was made Gersht had been living in London for over ten years, and return visits to Israel had become one part of a wider journey into the past, to revisit sites where traumatic histories had been played out and where the traces of those events remain, the gathering 'presence of absences' as Michel de Certeau called them, 'the countless ghosts that lurk there in silence'. Gersht's way of journeying therefore has been to undertake a personal and cultural archaeology, and of all his work the still photographs have been its primary documents. And, reflecting the journey, all these pictures represent to some degree encounters with landscapes, and with the particular resonances of 'place'. But they are, uniformly, unreliable certificates of his having been anywhere. Like Barthes who refuted the photograph as memory, and Susan Sontag, who suggested that photographs have now replaced our memories, 'in the end it is the photograph that is remembered', Gersht is wary not only of photographic information coming from the past, but also of photographs as records of his own experiences. The photographic 'documents' of his journeys might rather be said to articulate an 'intimate distance' in relation to place; produced as the camera's recording function is deliberately compromised in the exposure (and further in the processing), in effect casting the lens adrift, uncoupling the camera from its indexical relationship to the visible world in order that it might transcribe, unpredictably, another kind of evidence. Then, like Coleridge fascinated by the quality of his own, self-induced hallucinations, Gersht examines the results, sifting through his images to discover what has come from each place, what might have emerged 'unseen' but not unfelt from the journey and the encounter.

These strategies first became manifest in Gersht's work on a train journey taken in 1999 from Krakow to Auschwitz, a kind of foundational pilgrimage for the artist, which resulted in the series of photographs, *White Noise* (1999-2000). In many ways what he has called 'the struggle' of the camera to deal with the depth of emotion arising from this journey, mirrors his own wrestling with

those feelings of intimacy and distance. His photographs catch that ‘frustrating absence’ of the past, of traumatic events overwritten by the passage of time that echo unformed through the open shutter of his camera as he passes through the landscape on the speeding train. Rather than a physical journey *White Noise* is a form psychic disturbance that recalls Apollinaire’s vision of the London suburbs also seen from a train, a vision that he described as ‘wounds bleeding in the fog’. By taking ephemeral information that barely registers on the film, by holding something that is always passing, always fading and drifting from view, Gersht’s *White Noise* delicately re-inscribes the journey to Auschwitz and establishes his ‘desire for presence’ in the landscape, his own personal reconnection with its waning history.

‘We ask those who will come after us, not gratitude for our victories, but the recollection of our defeats. This is consolation: the sole consolation that is given to those who no longer have any hope of being consoled.’

Walter Benjamin

Five years later Gersht returned to this approach and his ongoing ‘desire for presence’ in the photographic series *Liquidation*, part of an ensemble of ideas and works arising from another momentous journey, to the landscapes around the towns of Kolomyia and Kosov in the Ukrainian where, in 1941 and 1942, his wife Nogah’s grandfather, Baruch Engler, had survived the brutal, systematic murder of over 2,000 Jews by the Nazis. Gersht made the journey after reading Engler’s written account of his experiences, which describes the horrific details of the attacks and his own period in hiding after Kosov became ‘Judenrein’, cleansed of Jews – events that took place in and around the forests of the area. The tensions of both *The Forest* (2005), the film prompted by Engler’s memoir, and *Liquidation*, derive from the implicit contrast between the striking and apparently unsullied natural spectacle that Gersht saw in the forests during his visit there in 2004, and the knowledge of its terrible past, the buried history of a place once ‘chewed up by war and fertilized by the bones and blood of the unnumbered dead’.

The Forest is the first of Gersht’s large-scale film productions, and the first work in which, inspired by Benjamin’s ideas, he set out to consciously disrupt the closed continuum of history through the creation of a new narrative, a dramatic physical event within which the past is ‘resurrected’ and unlocked in the present. The film’s epic sense, its invocation of a Romantic sublime, the deep intensely ‘felt’ sound and visual impact of the felling of trees, all construct a powerful figure for the violence and immense gravity of the unimaginable and unrepresentable events now erased from the beautiful landscape. In contrast the photographs of *Liquidation* are mute, the slow shutter speed producing blurs and smears of information that visibly responds to

the journey's progress through space and time. An apt comparison is to Gerhard Richter's paintings based on photographs, which have been described as 'eroded representations', the 'ghost of a ghost'. Like those of *White Noise*, the *Liquidation* photographs provide the psychic co-ordinates of *The Forest*, a mapping of the invisible in the surrounding landscape and the monitoring of a state of mind that achieves, in its silence and sense of loss, an almost rhapsodic urgency.

The sense of dramatic intervention into the history of a place and a community that *The Forest* represents, the sense of a re-connection with the past that might 'save the historical real from indifference, from oblivion', became something of a creative catalyst for Gersht. It led indirectly to a series of films over the next three years, *Big Bang* (2006), *Pomegranate* (2006) and *Falling Bird* (2008), which took the idea of violent contrasts between harmony and destruction, stillness and movement, the stable past and the eruptive present, to new extremes. In these works, the peaceful forest location (where, after the trees have fallen, natural order is restored) is translated into the more rarefied settings of still life tableaux, based on paintings by Fatin-Latour, Cotán and Chardin. Each selected pictorial model is an embodiment of carefully constructed formal beauty and a sense of duration, that slow time of ripening and decay, inflected here not by our romantic connections to nature but by our melancholic relation to everyday objects and things. W.G. Sebald wrote of objects as the dispassionate, mute witnesses of our history, to which we have 'a subordinate and dependent relationship'. 'Because (in principle) things outlast us', Sebald suggested, 'they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experiences they have had with us inside them and are – in fact – the book of our history opened before us.' Although Gersht's things are organic, and therefore more mutable and transient as objects, the space of the still life that these works recreate chimes with Sebald's words. And seen in this context, the explosive moments of destruction in Gersht's films, which turn pristine material order into a slowly churning chaos, are not only the abrupt appearance of violence and the sudden intrusion of another register of time into the still image, they also present the spectacle of visceral damage inflicted on the idea of the still life as a reflection of our common experience elevated and made perfect; they destroy a metaphor for human time and history.

Gersht's primary photographic reference here, and particularly in *Pomegranate*, is the work of Harold Edgerton. In the 1930s, while a professor in the electrical engineering department at MIT, Edgerton began to experiment with stroboscopic equipment and high speed cameras to produce images – such as the iconic bullet passing through an apple – that introduced new layers of optical and temporal perception to the world through the mass circulation of Life magazine where many of his photographs were published. Following Edgerton, Gersht's still life films were

produced in laboratory-like conditions, as experiments, involving highly skilled production teams, special effects and pyrotechnics experts, sound designers and a process of technical problem-solving that also evolved as a creative enquiry, one that embraced unpredictability and chance, or what Gersht has called ‘a divine fusion of luck and timing’. The still photographs that seemed to come as a by product of the process, such as series *Blow Up*, were in effect an essential part of the documentation of this ‘research’; they suggest the recording of results, the ‘evidence’ being tracked and examined more closely. But in this they also become a strange new space of aesthetic contemplation, one that, along with the slow atomization played out in the films, represents a kind of ecstatic reverie of seeing, in which new abstract forms and configurations of matter begin to startle the imagination.

It is interesting to think of Gersht’s still life films as part of a longer story of scientific and technical experimentation that spans photography’s entire history and that, as well as Edgerton, might also encompass Muybridge and Marey, and beyond them Fox Talbot. In Gersht’s work, as much as it is an expression of contemporary visuality, we sense Walter Benjamin’s idea of our ‘optical unconscious’ continuing to open up. But, of course, Gersht is as far away from Muybridge and Marey as he is connected to them; his still life films and photographs are as much conscious interventions into that history of scientific achievement as they are part of it. While in *Blow Up*, *Pomegranate* and *Falling Bird*, he explores the relative recording mechanisms of photography and film, he also acknowledges, and plays with, the perceptual ambiguities and contradictions resulting from that comparative process.

Henri Bergson thought that the photographic trajectory towards breaking down the moving world into ever-smaller fragments only served to distance us from actual experience. Writing in 1910, with Marey and Muybridge in mind, he said that these micro-moments, ‘...are not part of movement, they are so many snapshots of it, they are, one might say, only supposed stopping places. The moving body is never really *in* any of the points; the most we can say is that it passes through them. But passage, which is movement, has nothing in common with stoppage, which is immobility.’ For Bergson, it was impossible to isolate perception from memory: ‘Pure perception’, he said, ‘however rapid we suppose it to be, occupies a certain depth of duration, so that our successive perceptions are never the real moments of things, as we have hitherto supposed, but are moments of our consciousness. Theoretically...the part played by consciousness in external perception would be to join together, by the continuous thread of memory, instantaneous visions of the real. *But in fact there is for us nothing that is instantaneous. In all that goes by that name there is already some work of memory.*’

Gersht's works dwell on this tension. In the still life films, the instant, photography's 'decisive moment', is quite literally deconstructed, to reveal others inside it; new sights are recorded, but it is also a kind of reductive objectivity; as a photograph the desolate beauty of the shattered vase of flowers, the 'destroyed' Fantin-Latour, becomes detached from time as a surreal remnant, a mesmeric echo of the violence that created it. And yet, of course, this echo resounds far beyond the specific conditions of a studio experiment. Although we rarely see them dissected in this way – and that is very much part of his films' uncanny power – we cannot escape the fact that Gersht's explosive narratives are metaphors for events that already exist in our collective imagination. For Gersht, as an Israeli artist, and for many others, these events are all too real and close to hand, but at least since the media coverage of 9/11, they have also become imprinted on all our memories.

However, this requires some qualification. Because in many ways the most sinister dimension of the multiple images of 9/11 was the way in which millions of viewers, those watching live on TV and those reading their newspapers in the days afterwards, were drawn into an overwhelmingly sublime confrontation with the horrific events of that morning in Manhattan. There is no doubt that the shocking testimony of those pictures, and the sense of fear and dread they generated, was matched by an equally affecting awe and uneasy excitement at the magnitude of what was happening and the sense of being a spectator to the making of history. The fact that 9/11 has left us with some of the most compelling, defining images of our contemporary culture is an unsettling thought, but perhaps what is more disturbing is that for all the awful grandeur and terrifying details revealed by the media coverage, these images lead us inexorably away from any real understanding of the actual, visceral nature of the events and the experiences of the people directly involved in them. These are things that seem beyond or consumed by representation. Even for people close enough to breathe in the acrid odor of the ruins, those who may even have recorded aspects of the events for themselves, the multiple layers of visual documentation now compete with their memories and over time begin to supplant them.

These discomforting paradoxes are at the heart of Gersht's films and photographs. His insistence on a seductive aesthetic in his work is, in part, a strategy to involve the viewer in a conflict of understanding between that aesthetic pleasure and what lies beneath or follows from it. But perhaps, too, Gersht's motive here is to salvage something transcendent and enduring from the accumulating wreckage of the past and present. Certainly in photographic terms, from his very earliest work, he has been interested in the camera as a subjective tool, which although limited for him as method of description, might be driven beyond its documentary function to become a transformative device, as we have already seen in the pictures of *White Noise* and *Liquidation*. For Gersht, it is exactly at the point where the camera begins to fail, where its mechanical logic

collapses, that its usefulness and aesthetic potential is released; even here, in the process of making, the destructive tendency is measured against what might be wrested from it. His short series of photographs *Flowers* (2004), for example, sets this out in its simplest terms. In this work wildflowers found on rough ground and roadsides London, clinging to life in the toxic wake of passing traffic, were tightly framed and photographed using extremely long exposures that almost erased the film. What emerges as a result, from the most depleted and prosaic of circumstances, are light-saturated pictures that appear as dream-like visions of a pastoral idyll fading into memory. One space becomes another, and what is debased and overlooked is recovered and irradiated, the textures of a gritty urban realism (and more broadly those of social documentary photography) give way to a romantic imaginary from the camera's counter zone of failure and distortion.

If Gersht used *Flowers* primarily to test out an idea and a technique, a more substantial project developed out of its basic template, and once again took him back to Israel. *Ghost* (2004) is a series of photographs of ancient olive trees growing in Arab plantations in Israel's highly contested region of Galilee. The trees can be thousands of years old and are sacred symbols loaded with religious significance and historic connections with agricultural livelihoods, land ownership and political territory. As in *The Forest*, the trees here not only signify the passing of history, and the unfolding of slow historical time, but they also represent the witnessing of that history; their material structure absorbing and being shaped by the environment and the ages of human conflict that they have survived and now stand for as fitting symbols. Trees have longstanding anthropomorphic connotations, and while this gives further weight to their venerable presence in Gersht's pictures it prompts the sense too that, as we follow their gnarled contours, the shapes of bodies begin to emerge, locked in what could be an embrace or a relentless struggle.

Gersht's approach in *Ghost* was to wrench from the camera and from the film not only something commensurate to the trees historic and symbolic presence in the landscape but also images expressive of the physical and psychological impact of his own encounter with them, as an act undertaken in the present. Again, there is that hint of subversion his stated approach: 'my intention was to destroy the film by flooding it with light', but in order to achieve this, by opting to make the pictures at the moment of maximum light, in the searing heat of the midday sun, Gersht had also already imposed upon his working method a sublime tension between aesthetic contemplation and physical discomfort. His account of what happened after the pictures were made suggests how his ideas and experimental attitude to process are completely integrated in his practice: 'when I processed the film, I got dense, black negatives. I then took the negatives to my darkroom and attempted to save the traces of information that had registered on the film. The ghostly effect (in the images) is a result of light bleaching the emulsion. In other words, the same

light that originally registered information begins to erase the film, and new information is recorded on top of old information. The film becomes a plane on which simultaneous processes of recalling and erasing are taking place. Metaphorically, this process can be compared to recollecting and forgetting.’

The resulting images conjure a kind of hallucinatory landscape trauma. Against an apocalyptic yellow sky, the olive trees radiate a perverse energy. They are living ruins, paradoxically ancient and modern, that seem to stand as memorials for a convulsive history and an uncertain future; their contorted, ‘struggling’ bodies, whose branch tips blur during the extended exposure, are restlessly breathing through indefinite time. Again in Gersht’s work beauty and desolation are entangled, they cannot be separated; aesthetic pleasure and invention are coupled with a sense of unresolved concern and anxiety. Therefore the picture is not a site of redemption or nostalgia; the intervention into history, the connection made, the ‘salvaging’ from the wreckage, draws the subject and the viewer into a dialectical space where ideas ferment. The aesthetic priorities of the artist are the vehicle through which that process is initiated and sustained.

Two photographs that appear to invite us into this permanent condition in Gersht’s art, pictures that are emblematic of its principles and something of a minimal distillation of its underlying atmospheres, are two large-scale panoramic landscapes from the series *Hide and Seek* (2009), that borrow their title from Primo Levi’s novel *If Not Now, When*. The photographs from *Hide and Seek* were made among marshes and swamps at the border of Poland and Belarus, the remnants of vast primeval forests that once covered most of Europe. In periods of conflict these areas have often provided places of refuge, as they did for communities of partisans who lived there during World War II and whose experiences are described in Levi’s book. The places where these events happened are now difficult to find and do not appear on any maps, so while searching the area Gersht had to enlist the help of a local forester to discover their precise locations. This process generated an apparent tension between the anonymity of the places, the question hovering over their actual existence, and the burden of history that has settled around them. It was a tension that for Gersht enclosed a compelling dialectic of place; between physical presence, the unchanging almost featurelessness character of the landscape, and something metaphysical, where place might be defined as a site around which, over time, a collective human unconscious begins to condense. And in this particular case that sense of the unconscious place, its metaphysical existence, is made more intense by the psychological and physical extremes endured by those once hidden there. In Gersht’s resulting photographs from *Hide and Seek*, the forests and swamps become places of layering and occluded vision; clearings are glimpsed through curtained

windows, and in *If Not Now, When*, mirror-like reflections create an uncanny sense of doubling, the forest erecting its own veil of uncertainty and illusion.

In his novel Primo Levi also ponders the themes of memory and forgetting that thread through Gersht's art: 'Crammed with memories, and at once filled with forgetting: his memories, even recent ones were faded, they had hazy outlines, they overlapped in this effort of his, as if someone were making drawings on the blackboard, then only half erasing them before making new ones on top of the old.' In the first of Gersht's *If Not Now, When* photographs, one of his most indistinct and painterly, even the mirage of the doubled forest seems to be disappearing with the clearing mist, the tenuous condensation of the unconscious is evaporating before our eyes. In the margin of his notes for *Ulysses* Joyce scribbled the words, 'Places remember events', but perhaps, Gersht suggests, they also forget them; that is if we forget to remember. If Gersht's entire body of work were in itself a landscape, the expansive, beautiful photographs of *If Not Now, When* would surely provide the portal through which we might begin to discover it.

In Gersht's own passage of discovery, the physical and metaphysical landscapes of World War II have had a particular and obvious resonance for him. In a sense dealing with the all-consuming events of the Holocaust, its 'black hole of meaning', and its legacies of diasporic journeying and settlement (in the utopian formation of the state of Israel), has at its heart questions of representation and the competing forces of reality and imagination. The Jewish experience of the concentration camps, it is said, is beyond representation – unthinkable, unimaginable and therefore unrepresentable; and, further, to attempt representation would be to inevitably trivialise or even deny the enormity of the trauma. To this we might link, more generally, the failures of photographic documents as either adequate witnesses of past experiences, or as contemporary reflections of history, limited as they are to what the camera can describe in the present moment. The debates about these issues continue and are much broader than can be adequately dealt with here, but, as we have seen, for Gersht they are inextricably bound together and provide the impetus behind much of his thinking and his practice as an artist. And given that so much of this work has been invested in exploring these themes in relation to World War II, it is perhaps unsurprising that he would also be drawn to a place where its shadows of destruction and the contested questions of representation and remembrance have also left an indelible imprint on the post-war imagination.

The photographs of the ruined cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki lingered like afterimages over the Cold War and helped to define and fuel the deep-seated anxieties of the nuclear age. Now, like

the jagged, empty shells of buildings rising from the otherwise flattened, obliterated cities, the images are in themselves like archaeological specimens, relics that time has built over and whose shock value has long been diluted by the knowledge of a technologically more complex world and of much greater, unknown forces waiting to be unleashed. But in Japan these landscapes of memory have a more complex topography of experience, one that still breathes beneath the surface of its industrial regeneration and buoyant post-modernity.

Gersht's interest in the complex legacy of the war and atomic destruction in Japan began, as many of his projects do, with a simple impression, a mental picture that cradled a poignant contrast: between the soft, pastel palette of cherry blossom, an omnipresent symbol of Japanese national identity, and a darker sense of the barren, nuclear-contaminated soil that nourished the cherry trees in the post-war years. The short flowering season of the cherry blossom moves northward across Japan as the warm weather arrives in Spring, prompting many public ceremonies and rituals as it goes. Its powerful but ephemeral presence in the landscape, is allied to the importance of transience and mortality in the national character, expressed in the concept of *mono no aware*, which suggests a particular sensitivity to impermanence, and a gentle sadness at the passing of things. But, following his image of the pink blossom overlaying contaminated soil, and the sense of resilience and regeneration that sprang from it, Gersht's fascination developed around his growing understanding of the blossom's patriotic symbolism co-opted to militaristic causes. In times of war it had often been used as an emblem of soldiers' suffering and of their mortality, their lives would be said to 'bloom as flowers of death', while each new Spring flowering would symbolise their rebirth. In World War II, *kamikaze* pilots would paint the sign of the cherry blossom on their planes, or take branches with them for their final flight as a measure of the passionate beauty their deaths would represent; the sense of youthful sacrifice evoking the falling petals of the blossom.

Gersht's series of photographs *Chasing Good Fortune* play on this ambiguity, in which, once again in his work, an idealised image of romantic beauty, with its attendant affirmation of the natural cycles of life, death and rebirth, is undercut by a much darker historical narrative and cultural memory. In conceiving the work Gersht built on the image of that pale pink colour against a darker ground, and with an idea of exploring this contrast further he acquired a newly developed digital camera able to function in very low light conditions. But when he began photographing in Japan his intention was to exceed the camera's threshold of competency by working late at night; and, as he has said: 'Despite the darkness, light bounced off the subject and travelled through the open aperture of the lens...but the digital sensor struggled to interpret it, producing the colour aberrations in the final print(s).'

The effect of these ‘aberrations’ in *Chasing Good Fortune* is that Gersht’s photographs appear to be breaking down under a gauze of grain and pixilation that brings to mind both the painterly strategies of Impressionism and the experimental colour registration produced by the potato starch-coated plates of autochromes, photography’s first colour process developed by the Lumiere brothers in France and patented in 1903. In fact Gersht principal subject in these pictures, the cherry blossom, seems subsumed into a series of repeated experiments to explore the course of the camera’s failing sight. As in Monet’s late paintings from his garden in Giverny, colour here seems detached from the perceptual process and drifts through a strange crepuscular light. From about 1914 Monet’s eyesight was being affected by the development of cataracts that distorted his appreciation of colour, and recent scientific research has speculated about the influence this may have had on the increasingly diffused character and darker palette of late paintings such as *The Japanese Footbridge* (1920-22). In Gersht’s *Chasing Good Fortune* photographs the colour distortions and fragmentation of the camera’s induced blindness produces its own exotic and darkly seductive pictorial aesthetic, a decorative trace of the process of recording and representation that has an air of *fin de siècle* decadence. In contrast to its arrival in Japan each year as a positive, almost elemental force, here the cherry blossom generates an atmosphere of foreboding. As if fracturing under the weight of the blossom’s conflicted memory, the *Chasing Good Fortune* photographs appear to be alive and undergoing a bloom-like spasm of their own, but one stilled at a moment of intense pressure and imminent collapse.

In one photograph, however, entitled *Isolated* (2011), our view is removed to a point where an entire tree becomes visible against the black night sky, while under it a mirror image of the tree is reflected in the dark water of a lake. The distorted colour is now contained within the extraordinary spreading shape of the tree, which, without any clear sense of scale, takes on other associations: the multiplying of a virus, the growing patterns of a fractal, or the momentary capture of an explosion that takes us back to the photographs of *Blow Up* and to the very foundations of Ori Gersht’s art of the last fifteen years. And in the context of *Chasing Good Fortune* it is also difficult not to see in the tree’s explosive cherry blossom the inexorable rise of a mushroom cloud. But, again, this photograph is essentially an image of doubling, of one landscape inside another. Like the photographs of *If Not Now, When*, it reverberates with the mysteries of perception and understanding, the balancing of physical and metaphysical space, the correspondence between the conscious and unconscious mind and the provisional nature of seeing. It suggests a reality that is always haunted by an alternative view or another dimension, by a fading memory or by some other presence hidden in the uncanny resemblances of the

simalcrum. It reflects a world that is constantly stalked and called to by its own image, entranced by messages from the other world of photography.

David Chandler

March 2014