THE STEREOSCOPIC LENS ADAPTER

PHOTOLANGUAGE: NIGEL GREEN, ROBIN WILSON

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In 1924 F.E. Wright of the Geophysical Laboratory of the Carnegie Institute advocated the use of the three-dimensional effects of stereoscopic imagery in geological fieldwork, writing of its ability to enhance the visual account of ‘the story of the field relations between certain features’. Wright was drawing attention to the sometimes inadequate results of conventional photography within geological research and its ‘re-visualisation’ with regards to photography’s capacity to record a strong enough ‘impression of space’ and of the ‘spatial relationship between details’ within the field. Noting that the taking of stereoscopic imagery is often associated with expensive, specialist equipment and impractical for the already over-burdened geologist in the field, Wright proposed that a sufficient result can be obtained through the careful taking of near-duplicate images with a conventional camera, and then provided the mathematical equations that would support effective stereoscopic imaging.

The contraints on equipment and cost in fieldwork outlined by Wright are familiar to us but have been improved by a more recent invention: the stereoscopic lens adapter. This is a relatively cheap invention: the stereoscopic lens adapter. This is a relatively cheap.

photo fieldwork and fragmentation

The first time we used the adapter as a tool for speculative field work was in response to the water meadow landscape of Christiania in Copenhagen during a project called Surface Tension (Brandon LaBelle, 2007), and the peripheral landscapes of the Swedish city of Malmö for the first phase of the project Land Use Poetics (Maria Hellstrom Renner, 2009). Both of these projects were brief, with sites explored, work made and exhibited within a window of approximately five days. The Stereo Adapter was part of a tool kit aimed at the production of a radical imagery with little time for processing and evolution.

The work from Land Use Poetics was exhibited in the Museum of the Sketch (Skissernas) in the university town of Lund and dedicated to preparatory sketches for public art, sculptural works and monuments. Although largely photo-based, we thought of the works we presented there as ‘sketches’ – propositional, but for a ‘monumental’ or ‘sculptural’ outcome that would remain absent (the preparatory imagery for a never-to-be-realised future work). This role of the photographic image as assuming a transitional status (not a definitive, referential one), also underpins our use of the Stereo Adapter in a broader sense, for we do not use it for the production and display of stereograms (the completed ‘3-d’ image manifest through the additional use of stereoscopic viewer), but for the qualities of the ‘raw’ print itself, as a duplicated image. We value it in its in-between state, for the way its lenticular duplication intervenes into and distorts conventional photographic space.

In Malmö, the Stereo Adapter perhaps found its most pertinent use as a response to the landscape of Spillepeng, a new landfill peninsula projecting into the Baltic Sea, created with bagged waste from Malmö. Sections of Spillepeng had been landscaped by a team from the Landscape Laboratory of the Agricultural College at Alnarp. The dual stereo image posed a nexus of critical questions around the notion of new land, amplifying the sense of unease in the navigation of a terrain that was not simply being worked, but in the act of being made anew – its substrata, surface and its animate life all established little more than two years before our visit. Although Spillepeng was too new to be on coastal maps at the time, it was a model extension to the indigenous ecologies and habitats of Southern Sweden.

An image of a shallow valley with young willows, with a season of regrowth after pollarding, captures powerfully the newness of the land, one which has not yet completely settled from the worked landscape such as Van Gogh’s sketches of Dutch farming landscapes around Nuenen, or Peter Henry Emerson’s documentations of the Norfolk Broads (both from the 1880s), even Rembrandt’s etching St Jerome Beside a Pollard Willow (1648). On the other hand, the effect of the doubled image within the stereo print suggests processes of replication, cloning, the artificial; a terra forma, a sci-fi landscape in which the assumed relationship between the natural and man-made has to be completely reassessed.

A distinctive feature of prints using the Stereo Adapter is the black border in the centre of the dual image, which occurs as a result of a blind spot between the two mirrors. This is not a crisp demarcation between the two, as with a stereo camera, but an unpredictable void in vision that distorts the inner margins of both. With practice one can mitigate the effects of the blind spot and limit its encroachment on the two halves of the image. However, with our interest in the intermediate phase of the print itself, we embrace the distortions of the central void as a generative zone of interference. It is a central frame that is rogue; that appears as a hostile inversion to the luminosity of the photographic image. It is a third region of image-making within the print, where the indexical realm of the photograph is in fatal dialogue with abyssal depth and obliteration.

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After a quite long period of inactivity the Stereo Adapter was re-engaged in 2018 for field work in the outer districts of Paris. In research for the Brutalist Map of Paris we had come across the work of Renée Gailhoustet and Jean Renaudie at Ivry-sur-Seine town centre. Renaudie’s language of ‘difference’, of the cut and rotated plan in endless mutation, produced the well-known Étoiles D’Ivry. Just to the south east of the town centre is Gailhoustet’s lesser plan in endless mutation, produced the well-known Étoiles D’Ivry. Centre. Renaudie’s language of ‘difference’, of the cut and rotated plan in endless mutation, produced the well-known Étoiles D’Ivry. Cyan centre. Renaudie’s language of ‘difference’, of the cut and rotated plan in endless mutation, produced the well-known Étoiles D’Ivry.

Re-wiring Brutalism

For information on the Diableries see, https://www.londonsterio.com/diableries/index.html

The opportunities for stereo duplication within the Barbican were diverse, reflecting the range of interior, exterior and transitional public spaces at different scales that one has access to there. I wish to describe here one image of a northerly section of the complex, within the undercroft colonnade space of the apartment blocks around Beech Gardens to invoke through description the potential of the raw print of the Stereo Adapter as a productive reordering and fragmentation of the architectural photograph, toward a reinvention of, to recall F E Wright’s words, the ‘spatial relationship between details’ and the ‘story of the field relations between certain features’.

One of the building’s massive jack-hammered pilotis, a signature component of the public spaces of the Barbican, is the ‘central’ referent of this image, but its centrality is, of course, immediately displaced and doubled. Its role in a stable and legible order of perspective depth within the colonnade and the garden’s rectangular lake is fragmented, and we see instead an ambiguous cluster of four columns. The doubling of the nearest column now suggests the cruder structural system of a sub-flyover space, whereas in the mid-ground beyond, columns are subject to varying levels of dissolution, with one almost withered and substituted altogether by the central black ‘frame’-void of the stereo print. Distortions at the base of the print introduce an uncertain threshold, a blurred jetty of mirror play, confusing the boundaries between solid ground and water. A radical transformation manifests at the right-hand side where the mirror mechanism of the adapter imports a slice of urban detail from outside the expected scope of the frame: one of the three iconic Barbican towers, Lauderdale, is compressed into a skeletal slice of balcony and frame, reduced to a quarter of its actual thickness but still coherent as architecture and reminiscent of the slimmest of Hong Kong’s high-rise dwellings. This right-hand region of the image is configured like an arched aperture, or even a transparent column, and overlaid with a faint screen of dirtied orange, encouraging our gaze out to zones beyond the limits of the Barbican, where a blander, more recent office street façade pushes into the frame. The fetishised homogeneity of the Barbican enclave is broken by a sudden reminder of the wider contexts and conditions of urban modernity.

My washing machine sits in the corner. It is not attention-seeking. Dutiful, reliable, loyal, more of a friend than a machine. This is a portrait.