

Anne Hardy

Two-dimensional Sculpture

by Francesco Manacorda

When Thomas, the fashion photographer protagonist of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow up*, accidentally discovers what looks like the trace of a homicide in a picture he has taken, he is haunted by the uncertain evidence of an event that he could only visualise through his prosthetic recording device. He keeps optically enlarging the picture only to obtain half-signs, dotted shapes looking like a body rather than unambiguous proofs. He repeatedly goes back to the location and, one night, finds what seems to be the simulacrum of a dead body. Thomas is ultimately unable to ascertain the reality of the source of the suspicious visual mark in his photograph.

The film ends with a final visit to the murder scene during which Thomas, again, is unable to find any definitive evidence of the murder in the real world. In the final scene, he attends a tennis match, played by a group of mimes in the same park, and ends up participating in the match by throwing an imaginary ball back to the players, which they pretend has gone over the fence in his direction. Shadowing the mystery clue inside the enlarged photographs, the ball is a missing index around which an action is organised thanks to the collective participation in a fictional set of conditions. It is an absence that triggers the complex behavioural pattern of the game, similarly to the way in which missing information is the reason for blowing up the photographic prints.

Anne Hardy's artistic practice could be described as the metaphorical reversal of Thomas's unresolved attempt to verify reality from a mechanically reproduced image. Rather than unintentionally recording a perturbing fragment of the real through the camera, Hardy deliberately prepares, in front of the camera, detailed sculptural simulacra to transform them into ambiguous pictures. In order to produce the image she is looking for, she meticulously turns her studio into a theatre set entirely constructed for the camera's eye only. Imaginary rooms are given three-dimensional temporary presence only to be translated into two-dimensional records and then destroyed. Always empty, they are full of the residues left behind by the fictional actions of a character or a group of people who have seemingly just left them. Comparable to the effects of the absent ball in the mimed tennis game, her photographs aim at the fictionalisation of the world around her through the construction of sets that rotate entirely round absent actors.

While trying to produce the evidence of a supposed action, Thomas unwittingly undermines photography's truth claim. This is especially palpable when the shapes he obtains from the enlarged prints become similar to abstract paintings in which visual forms are non-representational marks that our eye often tends to anthropomorphise. The interpretative action of recognising an object or a body in them is a discreet fictional projection. In this sense, *Blow up* seems to be constructed as a reflection on abstraction as a real possibility for cinema: the indexical nature of photographic reproduction is not

only in doubt but attacked in an iconoclastic fury that looks at an image inside the image until its total decomposition.¹ In a symmetrical inversion, Anne Hardy's photographs tend to bring the mechanical and representational apparatus of photography into the territories of painting. Similarly to the tradition of figurative painting, the artist imagines and constructs an entire world in three-dimensions, taking into consideration the way the light falls onto it, its colours, density and composition, all in front of the camera, completing the process by framing it. This 'iconophiliac'² intention is nonetheless modulated by the constructed ambiguity that pervades all of Hardy's photographs.

The conditions of readability of photography strictly depend on a series of visual marks, normally ascribed as indexes of reality, with which they entertain a real relation through the recording of the light reflected from the objects onto the celluloid film. These supposedly objective and natural signs allow viewers to determine the image's subject matter, situation, narrative and possibly the photographer's intention. In her fully artificially assembled environments, Hardy creates marks that are already injected with uncertain semantic status before the camera captures them. She fabricates signifying elements that already exist in a state of ambiguity ready to be turned into opaque visual signs.

This state of hesitant indexicality is obtained by reducing the information necessary to decode a sign or a constellation of signs being brought together on the same surface. In *Unity* (2009), for example, generic stickers that could be both of religious or sexual connotation reinforce the ambiguity of small metal chains hanging from the ceiling, making it impossible to decode the image as either a cultish spiritual meeting room or as a fictionalised parlour for sexual encounters. Is the scene in *Coordinate* (2009) depicting the leftovers of an illegal bingo session or the traces of party following local political elections? Similarly oscillating semantic conditions are orchestrated in *Prime* (2009), a work depicting a home-made pyrotechnic laboratory. Are the unfinished bundles of tubular elements fireworks or prototypes for small bombs? The collection of helicoidal objects does not contribute in narrowing down the process of denotation that would determine the univocal decoding of the marks in the picture.

In these photographs, the dismissal of photographic representation's presumption of veracity is expanded onto the real. At stake is not the inappropriateness of photography to depict real objects; it is the real that is manipulated to increase the unreliability of photographic representation. Viewers are left to decide which marks to believe and how to read them while reading them. Like clues in a detective story, the scenarios of Hardy's photographs are half sentences, empty and contradictory. The task of decoding is made more difficult by the deliberate tension towards a degree zero of indexicality. This

¹ 'We know that under the revealed image there is another one which is more faithful to reality, and under this one there is yet another, and again another under this last one, down to the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that no one will ever see. Or perhaps, not until the decomposition of every image, of every reality. Therefore abstract cinema would have its reason for existing.' Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision: Writings & Interviews on Cinema*, New York: Marsilio, 1996, p. 63

² Iconophilia is the composed word of Greek derivation that combines *icono* (from εἰκών – eikōn: 'likeness, image, portrait, image') and *-philia* (from φιλία – philia: 'love, affection, fondness') to suggest the attitude opposite to iconoclasm.

operation attacking the truth claim of photography and our unquestioned visual literacy is paradoxically a sculptural one. The artist presents us with invented worlds offering layers of incomplete information. Such an interest for liminal and unsettled signs is also translated into the subject matter of many of the photographs. Often the scene presented to the camera has an element of disorder suggesting a loss of control. The experimental indoor garden set up in *Brink* (2009), for example, seems to be taken over by nature's exuberance which exceeds expectations or, more darkly, some of the snooker cues in *Incidence* (2009) have been modified to produce strange home-made tools, or possibly weapons for group punitive action.

The absence of people in Hardy's photographs makes them traces of unreality, of pure fiction testifying to a mysterious non-existing world. She builds sets by imagining the life of possible protagonists in a theatre play that will never take place. The photograph becomes the trace, a negative portrait that has perhaps a closer relationship to literature than to traditional photography. The idiosyncratic nature of the spaces created for the camera, their intimate quality which makes us feel like we are shown a secret room, their missing 'master index' veering the image towards its unambiguous readability are all elements that conjure up an imprecise mould of their fictional inhabitants. They are like impressions of their absent occupants: negative forms that if pressed on a malleable material would leave a reversed image portraying them. They can be compared to materialised three-dimensional version of the literary convention that involves meticulously describing an environment just before introducing a main character. As such, they seem temporally frozen just before his or her entrance, stuck on the verge of fullness. The interrupted narrative in which they are imprisoned makes them unfinished portraits left in permanent search of their characters.