

INTRODUCTION BY BARRY SCHWABSKY

Speaking of his embroideries of the map of the world in which each nation's territory is filled in with the design of its own flag, the Italian artist Alighiero e Boetti remarked "I did nothing for this work, chose nothing myself, in the sense that: the world is shaped as it is, I did not draw it; the flags are what they are, I did not design them. In short, I created absolutely nothing." A strategic removal of the artist's subjectivity would allow the work to be flooded by information about the world that, in it, can take legible form: this is the new form of realism offered by the art of the past four decades, and Warren Neidich exploits it to the full in the photographs and videos of his new *Earthling* series.

Looking at the photographs, nothing could be simpler: the focus in each one is on a newspaper or magazine with a face on its cover. It is being held wide open so as to hide the face of its reader—except that one or both eyes have been cut out of the image, revealing another eye, a living gaze, that of the "reader" who is somehow really a spy.

Everything in the photograph somehow exists to frame this gaze. But everything in the photograph somehow really is, almost, everything. The images are far more layered than one might at first notice, and the fact that there are a good many images in this series, all employing the same basic framework, helps us to see that this is the case. First of all, there is the newspaper or magazine itself—the front page or cover, and often a good bit of the back page or back cover as well. Here already is, usually, a tremendous amount of topical information, a sort of time capsule, with the cover portrait of a notable figure from the worlds of politics and entertainment, various headlines, and often on the back an advertisement, a representation of the world of commerce that is the motor for all that occupies the front, the face of the publication. This universal motor is compatible with a multiplicity of languages, design styles, topics, and political perspectives.

Beyond this flat space of the printed page, there is the always more or less visible space in which the reading that is not a reading but rather a spying takes place. Often somewhat out of focus, the setting we glimpse in these pictures is always similar but always different. It may be indoors or outdoors, dark or bright, but it is always a public place of consumption, or rather what (at the risk of sounding pedantic) might be called a public-private-public space: the kind of place where one might, in the presence of other people (in public) lose oneself in reading without being bothered (maintaining one's privacy)

so as to turn one's attention to the reported events of the day (public events). To all this, visible of course in the photographs as well as the videos, the latter add a whole further layer of information conveyed through ambient noise and conversation.

In this space, one can permit oneself to become abstracted from one's surroundings. The coffee just arrives, it is served, there is no need to get up and make it; the presence of others creates an atmosphere of conviviality in which one need not participate; the news transforms the world into a somewhat distant spectacle in which politics degenerates into entertainment and entertainment takes on its political—what Louis Althusser might have called *interpellative*—function. In a surprising way, it is the space of Cubist still-life (in which newspapers were, of course, a recurrent feature) with its multiplicity of semiotic levels among which signs are constantly being displaced, a space of quotidian paradox.

But then what is this eye, what is this gaze, that pierces the plane and meets my own in ways that may be sly, fierce, sinister, or sheepish as the case may be but which is almost always funny? What is its function? What or who is it spying on? It is tempting to answer: it's spying on me. And yet that doesn't seem quite right—it establishes complicity with the viewer too easily for the viewer to be its object as well. If anything, though the eye might be anyone's, the gaze that meets me in these pictures seems to be something like my own, only endowed with a surprising ability to violate topology and discern from behind it the surface of things. It is not the truth breaking through the spectacle but it is the desire for truth that intersects the spectacle at an impossible angle. And when I say this gaze is mine, I understand that it can never be mine alone, but forms when shared with the one that meets me in these curious images.

