



JOHANNA DRUCKER

# SWEET DREAMS

contemporary art and complicity

ties of representation. But such attitudes recognize the artifact, not revealed social relations, as the central fact of the images. Wall's preexisting social relations aren't any more of a pure presence available for truthful or fictive representation than sausage on a scanner. And the languages of simulation, for all their self-conscious admission of the absence of reference within the field of the real, were never as effective in breaking that relation of visual identity as the blunt effect of scanning digital files has been in undercutting photographic truth values right at the point of production. The document, any document, always stands in dubious relation to that assumption.

The photographic document contributes to an ongoing mythic system of belief through which the notion of real is itself continually reified. But such attention distracts from the fact that these are created works, mere (or sheer) artifice. Thus one level of "dubiousness" feeds on the crossover from fine art's engagement with the critical theory of realism to that of digital imagery and the issues it brings into the discussion. Another doubtful aspect calls attention to the way imagery crosses the lines from commercial and industry photographs to that of fine art and to the impossibility of sustaining a distinct line between them as image. Other dubious documents—Hoey's and Gaskell's—call into question distinctions between amateur, entertainment, and fine art images. The critical claims asserted for high art serve their own mediating function. The belief systems within which images circulate constitute their value as much as their optical or visual information. The myths these discourses produce vary according to the interests they serve. Even the "naturalized" condition in which we accept the distinction between fine art and other images has its source in such constructions.

#### 10. *New Aestheticism and Media Culture*

Warren Neidich's photographs comment on media events. They expose the way experience is mediated through the complex apparatus of contemporary culture industries. In addition, they engage self-consciously with the history of photographic precepts that come from fine art, conceptual, and documentary traditions. These images argue for a formal dialogue with culture and art history and for a new aestheticism as a basis on which to discuss the relation of fine art images to mainstream culture. But the only way to understand the assertion of a "new" aestheticism is to place it in the context of older precedents. In Neidich's case, that requires attention to the specifics

of photographic traditions as well as to the features of engagement and affirmation that position his work within artistic practices in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Neidich sees his work in a postmodern frame, following the historical lineage laid out by Hal Foster and others.<sup>63</sup> That sequence describes a first wave of postmodernism that broke with high modernism's focus on formal properties of media, a second wave that occurred with theoretically inspired work of the 1980s, and a third, more recent, wave in which the artist functions as cultural critic or "anthropologist."<sup>64</sup> Neidich sees himself in this final role. But is this accurate? The cultural critic posited by Foster retains the distanced stance of modern and postmodern aesthetic negativity. However, Neidich's work suggest a complicity—not so much with the values of mainstream culture and the entertainment and media industries as instead with the *enjoyment* these provide. Such observations return us to question the way a new formalism raises issues of reflective engagement through its manifestations. This apparent contradiction between an attitude of critical disjunction and one of positive interaction with mass culture is sustained in Neidich's work. His visual approach argues for a subjectivity that distances itself from mainstream values and provides a point of view rooted in the real and mythic idea of individual artistic perspective. But he also makes use of the complicit pleasure that saturates media production values. The powerfully present tension between these two elements (disjunction and engagement) in Neidich's photographs foregrounds visual form as aesthetic argument in contemporary art. This extends the arguments I'm making for sculptural work, painting, hybrid media artifacts, installation and video work, and digital art and the way these work out an admitted, self-conscious relation to the culture industry through similar reinvestments in aesthetics.

Center stage in the discussion of aesthetics in the last few years was an argument put forth ardently by Dave Hickey. At the beginning of the 1990s, Hickey's pronouncement that "beauty" was to be the overriding concern of the decade resonated through an art world that took up his charge with varied agendas. To the visually starved, theory-weary audiences for whom the 1980s had been a decade of mixed difficulties, the very idea of "beauty" was a welcome, if insidious, relief. The critically overdetermined new conceptualisms of Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and other artists

had prepared the ground for this backlash. Receptivity to Hickey's notion was accompanied with a certain smugness and satisfaction at seeing the theory cart overturned in the name of something reassuringly old-fashioned and familiar.

But the very familiarity of the term "beauty" belied the complexity of concepts—and art political agendas—that it concealed. For whose beauty were we to take as the standard? Whose aesthetic investment was to be used as a measure against which new forms might be assessed? In *The Invisible Dragon*, Hickey dismissed this question as irrelevant, intent as he was on resurrecting the potency of visual persuasion.<sup>65</sup> Hickey succeeded by elegant argument. He made comparisons, for example, between images by Mapplethorpe and Caravaggio, using the seductive idea of a regime of aesthetic submission that carries sexual as well as artistic overtones. By selecting such canonical and highly aesthetic works to demonstrate the power of images to engage the viewer in a ritual surrounding the "arrested moment" enacted therein, Hickey was able to campaign for the salvific capacity of "beauty" to resurrect the old notion of the "transcendent" value of fine art. Beauty was not an index to circumstances of cultural production, in Hickey's argument, but a way out of context in the name of aesthetic form. A clever approach to theory-bashing, Hickey's work undercut political correctness through indirect means, never mentioning identity politics agendas but sidestepping them entirely with a retro-conservative position that appealed by appearing to be above the fray of art world culture wars. The aesthetic sensibility that Hickey prescribes is strictly formalist, a stripped-bare closing of the circle of art into itself as a field of reference.

But the aestheticism that we find in Neidich is quite at odds with the "beauty" promoted by Hickey. Neidich's aestheticism can't be cast into an old-fashioned formalism. His is not a retro-gesture, a claim to ideal beauty through the purity of form or out of history through a transcendent image. In this regard he joins those artists of recent years for whom formal properties have become again an invested instrument of communicative efficacy. I would hesitate to cast all of 1980s postmodernism into a completely un-aesthetic category, though the "anti-aesthetic" announced in Hal Foster's anthology of that title of 1983 indicates the attitudes of New York-style postmodernism that were birthed under its shadow.<sup>66</sup> Emphatically true, however, is that in the critical climate of the 1980s and culminating in debates

around the 1993 Biennial, appreciation was never articulated as a formally based enterprise, thus supporting the sense that artists' work led with issues and ideas rather than through a materially based rhetoric.

A substantive change occurred through the course of the 1990s. Formal values were given a serious charge to carry meaning through the capacity of material to communicate semiotically and sensually. The new aestheticism is a formalism informed by conceptual art, critical theory, identity politics, and the satisfactions of studio practice in dialogue with media culture. In other words, this is not a revival of modernist formalism with its belief in the inherent properties or purity of media. Neidich's work exemplifies the hybrid integration of these once utterly distinct, even antithetical lineages, an integration that prevails across the broader field of art production in recent years.

Placing Neidich properly within the history of contemporary art requires a sketch of photographic practice fraught with historically charged concerns, each of which has its own relation to aesthetic properties. The Camp O.J. series produced at the end of his cross-country, Kerouac-inspired, mythically heroic journey (according to the narrative supplied by the artist), is composed of large-scale color images of the media camp struck up around the O.J. Simpson trial (fig. 21).<sup>67</sup> The title of the series alludes to the central reason for the existence of the site and its appurtenances, but nothing in the images refers to the trial or its issues in any significant way. This could be a media encampment for a presidential race, a royal wedding, or any of the other incidents that are daily fodder for the broadcast industry. Since the mediation apparatus, not the event, is Neidich's subject, this is part of the point. O.J. is very far off camera in the series, which makes sense.

The thematic obliqueness is matched in formal characteristics of the photographs whose aesthetic precepts violate the standard conventions of fine photography. Such systematic violations are very old news, of course. The lack of focal emphasis, absence of hierarchical distinctions, fragmentation of the scene, use of framing that is neither snapshot incidental nor fine art fetishized, disregard for the protocols of photographic production with no absolutely clear undermining of them, a sense of the documentary impulse but without any statement of principles or editorial position—the list of traits could go on. But they are used in Neidich's situation with a very self-conscious sense of their history (and their cognitive effect—Neidich's interest in vision and brain function is a developed part of his approach to



21 Warren Neidich, *Vanishing Point*, part of the series *Camp O.J.*, 2000, photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

image production).<sup>68</sup> Yes, he seems to be saying, all of this has been done and will be done. In doing it himself he is not claiming invention or transgressive violation of the terms of aesthetics. Rather, he acknowledges that since those transgressions are now part of the stock-in-trade of photographic practice, they are themselves highly coded aesthetic gestures. From the moment of its invention in the early nineteenth century, fine art photography's bid to "art" status depended on the elaboration of a set of legitimizing aesthetic conventions (a capacity to demonstrate its formal and expressive values). But the history of photography since its acceptance as fine art in the twentieth century was characterized by the same kind of medium-specific self-consciousness that occupied other "modern" art. The elaborate taking apart of these conventions derives from a dialogue within that tradition of the "composed" versus the "found." Just as the fate of narrative within high modernism improves in the postmodern condition, so the implied narratives of Neidich's images engage the combined character of found and contrived work. Their allegiance to the "found" gives them their

documentary credentials. Their engaged contrivance allows them to self-consciously play with the frames and devices of postmodern artifice, made conspicuously, visibly, present. Even the use of the fish-eye lens, with its distorting gaze, calls attention to the fact that these are contrived photographs, not mere "documents" pretending to transparent record.

Many of Neidich's apparently anti-aesthetic features can be traced to conceptual art, which gave photography another kind of legitimacy as "document" of the "immaterial" acts and objects central to its rhetoric. The aesthetic force of conceptual art, its striking distinction between idea and artifact, became the basis on which fine art could presumably eliminate production values. The emphasis on "non-aesthetic" properties gave conceptual photography distinction. Three decades later, this position has been reintegrated with the suite of production tools available to an artist.<sup>69</sup> The necessity for an anti-aesthetic is not as stringently defended—or defensible—within the current cultural climate. We are weary of the empty, unconstructed image that pretends not to care about its visual appearance. Neidich's images contain that disregard as a posture, seeming not to give in to requirements of careful composition or traditional aesthetics—but at the same time they make every effort to fascinate through visual means.

The editorial point of view in these images demonstrates Neidich's participation in mediated culture. Neidich doesn't position himself outside or above the life he observes. His depiction of persons, for instance, the newscasters, camera crews, other technical and editorial members of media teams, is clearly without malice or grotesquerie. Neidich is not cynical, but he is critically concerned with how media fascination is produced. At the same time, he is careful to make use of those principles to attract and keep his viewers' attention. A photograph of a woman broadcaster, preparing herself for the camera, shows her at the moment of taking on the persona she projects through the media. Her body is awkward, almost not her own. Her costume is vivid, mall-bright, and her face and hair perfectly cosmetized to read into the technological feed. Yet she is vitally present as an individual person whose job is to perform a role. Her presence splits between self and image, between embodied consciousness of the role she performs and the role itself, hanging on her like her outfit, and yet, less separable from her than those professionally coded clothes. A certain tragic tone attaches to this image, and the mood casts its pall through the series as a whole, showing that the process of producing "fascination" is a complex activity of

sleights and feints and duplicities performed with earnestness and distance, professionalism and ironic recognition in active, simultaneous contradiction.

Neidich cannot be simply pigeonholed within a single historical tradition, which also speaks to the contemporary condition of his aestheticism as a new formation rather than as a retrogressive gesture. His work makes use of the full history of effects, in a highly self-conscious manner, producing in the viewer an awareness of critical concerns as well as perceptual ones, all through properties of the images. For instance, the obvious "unconstructedness" of these images, the fragmented, ordered-disordered, apparently uncomposed and yet elaborately selected, produces a visual field that has to be pieced back together through a combination of looking and reading. Legible but not immediately apparent, the structured bits have a random "life captured unawares" aspect that is actually as artificially constructed as any *tableau vivant*.<sup>70</sup> The prints are saturated, rich with embedded color. But for all their large scale, they are not fetishized, deep-focus detailed works, and they flaunt their allegiance to a fast-moving, on-the-fly, journalistic mode with a deliberate disregard for either fine art quality or documentary craft. Taken in sum, the aesthetic characteristics of these photos are a series of sidesteps that jump off and away from quite recognizable points of tradition.

The notion of laying bare any device whatsoever carries with it the echoes of early twentieth-century avant-garde practices whose earnest naiveté was suffused with belief in the possibility of revealing the mechanisms of illusion in order to raise political consciousness through aesthetic means. The current condition of media saturation, of image glut and visual overstimulation, denies us the luxury of such easy critical operations. We cannot simply "take apart" an image, any image, or work of art to show that its conceits are merely a means of deception. The structures of engagement are too complex in current (or indeed, in any) culture. The means of elaborate production involve us through already internalized spectacular experience. We are so inhabited by the images of media life and so complicit with their fascination that taking them apart would serve very little function. How does one undo the image according to which the very terms of self and culture are constructed? An impossible task, like perceiving oneself as whole from within the embodied mind. We are fully interpolated subjects. The deconstruction of the spectacle in many ways just reinforces our subjective and



complicated relation to its many layered, interlocking systems. In it, and of it, we are mediated creatures in our early millennial lives. Neidich's images show this, claiming along the way in his particular vocabulary of scientific, neurobiological critical parlance, that this is a feature of the cultured brain in its specific historical moment. Rather than ignore the potency of mediation, Neidich intends to engage its affirmative capacity, its ability to seduce us through consumable sensation.

Thus the avant-garde, with its resolutely critical stance and distancing mechanisms of image production and execution, is only a residual specter as it appears in Neidich's lens. This is a quoted avant-garde, a citation and reference, not a living, pulsing presence in real form. As a quotation, it marks our distance from the historical moment of its appearance on the artistic stage and to give us purchase on the distance from that point of origin. Neidich's rhetoric embraces Foster's reinvented version of the avant-garde artist, that savvy cultural critic. But the addictive capacity of media productions translates into his own visual work. A fascination in looking at the process of production permeates his photographs, and though the production values they embody are far from those of mainstream media, they are not antithetical to it. Quite the contrary, if Neidich quotes the avant-garde and its stance of critical interrogation, he also quotes and participates in the look of trendy publications whose photographs are produced for entertainment value within the mainstream zones of spectacular consumption. The glitz and celebritization, the exploitative voyeurism and journalistic assertion into realms usually left invisible, unrecorded, are all present. Neidich is playing paparazzi freelancer, professional with bulbs flashing and an entrepreneurial instinct, seeking out events on which to feed his appetite for anything that can be transformed into a photograph for sale. The images are not "life taken unawares" but rather life made aware in order to participate in the world of media and mediated images. Living to be image, the media subjects of Camp O.J. are well suited to such an approach.

Neidich's Camp O.J. series also shows us the world in which "image" is always being produced and put into circulation, but the angle through which Neidich looks at that world inflects his images with a gratification that wasn't allowed within a postmodern photographic canon. Neidich knows that his images are framed by the voyeuristic obsessions that the media produced and fostered around the O.J. incident. By not showing the chief protagonists of the tale and focusing instead on the mediating structures

through which the event of the trial is produced for spectacular consumption, Neidich participates obliquely in the same system that he is slightly to the side of. These images could be (and have been) published in a photo-essay in a mainstream lifestyles magazine. They could be—and are—also shown in galleries and museums. In this era of fine art fashion, the slick products of a Richard Avedon have claimed space on the museum and gallery walls. The glamour industry's inroads into the citadel of fine art may stir protests in certain quarters, but Neidich doesn't shy away from this compromise. His "art" production, occurs in a variety of sites. This distinguishes him from those photographers who do commercial work as a "day job" but preserve their "own" creativity for fine art. His work also moves away from the affectless stance of canonical postmodernism (Levine, Prince, Kruger) emblematic of the "already produced" image-in-circulation sensibility. Like these postmodern artists, Neidich clearly has a sense of mission. Art has something to do, something it can do, and that *only* it can do. What has changed is that this mission may no longer be fulfilled by opposition. Quite the contrary. The most subversive act that fine art can currently perform may well be to show its own complicity with mainstream culture.

Fine art photographs provide a specifically aesthetic form of mediation. To do this, of course, they must be aesthetic objects. They demonstrate that subjective affectivity can be inscribed within an image. By showing that possibility they appear to preserve the last vestige of a romantic sensibility in which the artist is the lone voice, the individual talent. After all, Neidich chose that quintessential late-romantic on-the-road outsider Jack Kerouac as his mythologized model. Doesn't that put Neidich right back into the stereotype of the artist-hero, alienated in his own individualism?

Yes and no. Neidich's series positions itself not simply in relation to fine art but also in relation to media and the experience of existence mediated through images. The struggle the fine art artist faces is to find a formal vocabulary through which to be distinct from mass culture while competing with it. How does one engage the viewer outside of mass media while acknowledging the fully colonized condition of all imagery? Perhaps very simply, by making artifacts out of that experience, ephemeral testimonials to its having passed through us. Contemporary existence is fully mediated, and through all the systems described by critical opponents of the culture industry. Fine art imagery, such as Neidich's, occupies only a tiny, rarified, endangered zone in visual culture. Any functionality that attends to such

imagery, besides the immediate insight to the viewer, comes through the set-aside to-be-seen aspect of its identity so that it can—as it does here—show us something. That it shows us the backstage of the culture industry is hardly a surprise. What else is there to deconstruct? To interrogate? To take apart and put before an audience? These gestures are not simply an imitation of the visual culture production system, they are also part of the culture's self-conscious reflection upon itself.

Mediation as a social process is crucial to the artist's work, an object of fascination not only as an image, but as a process of image production. Media trump fine art, they overwhelm it. The aesthetic force of these images is not what they depict, but their demonstration of the way mediation can itself be captured as an image and then cast back into the culture as a momentarily reflective frame. These photographs affirm the seductions of mass-produced imagery and spectacle. They acknowledge the mutual dialogue of fine art and the rest of visual culture. The aesthetic of fine art is not "other" than that of mainstream culture but exists as a space within it.

#### 11. *Techno-bodies and Art Culture*

Contemporary artworks give evidence of an increasingly anxious discourse played out in displacements, extensions, or relations to a supposedly "real" body.<sup>71</sup> The anxiety expressed in such works exposes contemporary concerns in a telling way. To get a purchase on this work, a glance at the technologized body in popular culture provides a useful foil. The images of the techno-body in art are in many ways responses to these popular notions.

For instance, contrast the body implied by the space suit and the one implicated in the virtual reality device. A space suit embodies the older technology of modern rationality, while the virtual reality machine is a disembodiment that represents the new technology of the so-called postmodern hyperreal. The space suit—like its counterparts, the diving bell and aqualung—is a Jules Verne-esque piece of ancient, cumbersome, technological hardware designed to preserve all too vulnerable flesh in a hostile or foreign environment. By externalizing all of the body's functions—breathing, eating, elimination of waste—and encapsulating the organism in a sealed, self-sufficient mechanism, the suit sustains life through isolation and enclosure. As an image, the space suit is encumbered with history, resonating with old, industrial technology that extends human experience through