

BECKY BEASLEY
ON HAPPINESS

2013

iii.

I lived quite unhappily in Berlin for two years from December 2006 to January 2008. As a response to the invitation to reflect on returning here now, I will begin with a short text which I wrote and was published in 2007 in a small literary journal, alongside a series of both taken and found photographs of the same subject, Berlin Zoo.

Correspondences (1957/2007)

Being alone in a new city makes one do things one might not ordinarily do. The isolation throws into stark relief the other city in which one had developed rich connections with people and places over the years. Certain times, a couple of hours, now seem surplus to the day. They seem flat or, at best, too spacious, vertiginous. Gradually one realises that these were the hours previously filled by friends and conversations. Now alone and, despite having three languages, and as yet unable to speak German, the silence is initially disconcerting. So it is that one morning one finds oneself deciding to visit the Zoo, something one had always planned to do as an adult in the other city, but never did.

It makes sense only in hindsight. At the time it was just an instinct, activated by the renewed energy one has for exploring a new city. Later one realises it was because one was adrift, silenced and, somewhat

unexpectedly, innocent. One seldom experiences innocence as an adult. This is the gift of the new place. Decisions become naturalised. One goes to the Zoo. There, there are other innocents, animals and children. The animals are silent in their fashion and something occurs between you, an imaginary correspondence, history as the longer effort, rather than the small event of my current solitude. I took some photographs of the animals and buildings and emailed scans of them back home. Six months later, in a Berlin flea market, trawling through a box full of old passport and family photographs, I found a handful of small amateur prints, dated 1957, of the same animals and architecture of Berlin Zoo.

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The history of my life is one of return and renewal. Quite despite myself, I slowly came to realize that I had, after all, always been a hopeful person, often buoyed on for years by crumbs. This relation, now no longer so melancholic, remains deathbound; in relation to life, it is played out as a future, as the potential between then and now, which is my life. So too photography. Over the last ten years, I have experienced a definite shift from a melancholic attitude towards- and thus experience of- photography and life, to a more or less joyful relation. Both are clearly possible and as such, at the best of times, now offer me a choice. At 35, I noticed some changes in my work and, after some reflection, I followed its lead and made a choice to have a happy relation. In doing so the work and the life changed. The work was happy ahead of me. I caught up.

The history of sculpture is one of return and renewal. Rodin is a well known example. Each re-casting providing a new return, an alternative. So too my own sculptural relation to photography. Rodin drew over photographs of his sculpture. Until Albert Elsen's book, *In Rodin's studio*, published in 1980, such photographs had been generally regarded as 'damaged goods'¹. It has since been argued that Rodin's many drawings on photographs which were never translated into sculptural works accumulate into a creative practice in themselves. Medardo Rosso's work is the radical example. Rosso (1858-1928) was one of the earliest known sculptors to use photography not to document his sculptures, but as photographic works in their own right, his practice conceptual 100 years ahead of its time. Within my own practice, I employ similar lines of thought as I have discovered over the years in Rosso: radically cropping negatives; at times treating the negative itself as very raw material; at other times I already know when shooting that it is only a small strip or section of the negative which I will work with later; other times designing and preparing physical objects in order to fit the space of the image as I imagine it at a full scale once printed. In many ways, with certain works, I am at no point psychically entering the miniaturized space of

the negative at the time of shooting, but experiencing something of the object as a full-scale dark room projection. Both the shooting and printing take place in different areas of the same studio room and so physically and mentally something spatial about the processes merge. I am aware of the clouds and lorries passing and parking outside the window where I shoot and how their shadows will manifest opaquely in the end and become part of the time of the work. At times a photograph of an object will lead to thinking about making another object which I would only have discovered through the making of the photograph of the first object. I always return to some point of departure, however obscure in the results, in order to move on. My basic motto for the ongoing progress of my practice has, since 1997, remained Roland Barthes instruction, *To get out, go in deeper*. The outside is what I am after, via a burrowing method. I wrote a short manifesto for myself some years ago in response to the thought, *What then of an object which appears inhospitable, but which nevertheless engenders in one a feeling of being potentially inhabitable?* I outlined its possible features for myself as follows:

- i) **an orifice or hole** of some kind for entry, the most minimal being the **pinhole** (re. photo/dark room) or the **chink** (question of the split or crack, as in the design or in the wear), the most visible being the **window** (re. images/architecture) or **door** (open or closed; potentially openable or ajar; also *the barely open door* which is, of course, a closed door) or the **threshold** (which ranges from those so grand they are hardly recognisable as still being thresholds, to those so infrathin as to be barely perceptible as being a threshold at all – the differences between being inside and outside in both the small and the vast are, despite appearances, quite indistinct)
- ii) **an interior** (not necessarily inflated, or rigid) (qualities of the **vessel**)
- iii) **an exterior** (not necessarily beyond the physical space of the object, but perhaps somewhere about the surface; see **threshold** or skin)
- iv) **sides** (which replace the concept of the wall but retain the **thing**; graspable as **thing** if only by appearing to be held together by air or by being on the verge of falling apart) (neither necessarily rigid nor visible)
- v) **resistance which is open** (an **exterior** which is resistant to penetration but nevertheless in some way porous; a simultaneity of open-ness and closed-ness) (see also **sides** and **an exterior**)

- vi) **materialness** (rather than *materiality* which is inherent) A fabricness, something which, even when built, retains a quality of being potentially *buildable-with*. (eg. the over-size cardboard box which one imagines flattening and reconstructing smaller or differently, or the same) (Materialness as this specific *buildable-with-when-already-built* quality).
- vii) **potential for re-use** (see **materialness**)

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Holes in forcefields are key to the possibility of the inhabitable inhospitable object. Through the chinks in the aggressive forces of the hospitable and the inhospitable, the passive nature of habiting and inhabiting spaces finds its agency. However, in conclusion, it would appear that it is the potential for re-construction or development that is the main attraction. The hospitable is founded on a future. *He who dies is your arms is, alas, your brother forever.*

Carlo Mollino's history of photography, the first in Italy, titled, *Message from the Darkroom*, originally published in 1949, goes to lengths to clarify, for me, at least, the profoundly sculptural pre-history of photography. My own body of work relating to researching Mollino, titled, *The Outside*, also began in 3-dimensions, at the Egyptian Museum in Turin, in the room containing all of the tomb artifacts of a royal architect and his wife which had been perfectly preserved. It was very domestic, and it was the domesticity of the contents which interested me and which I understood for myself the first time in that room. By chance I discovered the connection to Mollino's own *afterlife* apartment, decorated in secrecy towards the end of his life, also in Turin, and inspired by the same tomb room at the museum. I embarked on my own exploration of Mollino's apartment as a way of thinking through questions of my own relating to photography, the interior and colour. The resultant body of work was a paper-house of sorts, a puzzle in the form of a fairly long, hinged and essentially repetitive series of photographic panels printed from narrow strips taken from, finally, only three negatives. The works are wall hung and floor standing diptychs and triptychs. The repetition of the panels plays out in space, the hinges giving a feeling that the pieces could be re-configured differently. Some of the panels are glazed with coloured acrylic. The colours—a yellow and a pinkish orange—are taken from one of Mollino's astrological colour charts—and symbolize friendship and happiness. I chose these colours in order to change my life. During the time I was working on these things, I fell in love.