Falling into Place by Maurice Berger

In a color photograph by Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, shot on a warm, sunny day in the late 1990s, a man dressed in Native American garb stands front and center (fig. 1). He is tall and lean. He stares directly into the camera. His face is coated with greasepaint, hence the picture's title: Blackface. He wears a small, feathered headdress, a beaded and feathered necklace, and earrings; a blue blanket, decorated in tribal motifs, is draped over his arm. Behind him is an open tent. A young man and woman lounge inside. They are dressed in brightly colored Indian garments as well. What appear to be tribal members congregate in the distance.

On closer inspection, this seemingly straightforward representation of an American Indian reservation starts to turn absurd, humorous, and even disturbing. The man's blackened face, for example, reads as theatrical and grotesque against the wan, pink skin of his neck. The pallid couple in the tent looks disengaged and uncomfortable, overheated perhaps under layers of fabric, beads, and feathers. The tepee, scrappily constructed of cloth and branches, appears to be nothing more than a flimsy prop. The Indians in the background are, in fact, white people clad in ordinary street clothes.

In Robbins and Becher's aesthetic universe, nothing is as it first appears. Images like Blackface suggest that we should pay attention, lest we miss their most telling details. Thus, what at first seems to be a photograph of Native Americans taken in the United States is, in fact, a picture made at an annual gathering of Indian fan clubs in Radebeul, Germany. Inspired by the late-nineteenth-century fictional stories of American Indian life by the German writer Karl May, these festivals—where hobbyists play dress up and take part in powwows—idolize tribal culture, while simultaneously transforming it into blonde, blue-eyed paradigms of Aryan civility.

In the statement that accompanies the images in the German Indian series (1997–98)—a lucid, informative text, characteristic of the short blurbs that come with each of the artists' projects—we learn more about the German fascination with Indians: that May's tales, intended as a progressive critique of white, colonialist aggression, were also Eurocentric and bigoted, inevitably playing into the mythologies of German anti-Semitism and Nazism; that the Nazis identified with Native Americans as the victims of a modern, corrupt, and overly intellectual world; and that Hitler saw the Indian reservation camp as a possible model for the concentration camp, one of humanity's most horrific tools of annihilation. In the end, the revelations of the German Indian series tell us much about the contradictions and historical biases of a nation long fascinated with Native American culture and also driven to appropriate it in racist and patronizing ways.

Over the past twenty years, Robbins and Becher have documented many curiously compelling and historically significant phenomena. They seek out what they call "the transportation of place," remarkable situations like the Radebeul festivals, in which "one limited or isolated place strongly resembles another, distant one," due to the effects of colonialism, immigration, diaspora, globalism, or tourism. Their search has lead them to a range of locations: Lüderitz, a town in the former German colony of Namibia that, fifteen years after the nation's independence, has lost little of its Teutonic flavor; the town of Holland, Michigan, founded by nineteenth-century Dutch settlers, that is replete with contemporary windmills, wooden shoes, and tulips; Almer'a, Spain, where many European "Spaghetti Westerns" of the 1960s and '70s were filmed, and the Old Tucson Studios in Arizona, the location for the earlier American Westerns that served as their prototypes; the Saman‡ Peninsula in the Dominican Republic, home to the descendants of American slaves who migrated there in 1824 but continue to speak English and practice many of the customs of their ancestral homeland; and the small islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon off the coast of Newfoundland, old-world and picturesque remnants of the once-vast French empire in North America.

In their journeys, the artists act neither like tourists nor awestruck purveyors of the exotic, but rather as rigorous surveyors who see and represent the world anew—navigating it, photographing it, and naming it in order to reveal what is generally misunderstood, ignored, forgotten, repressed, or shrouded in clichés. The traditional role of social documentary photography—the Farm Security Administration's images of Depression-era squalor, for example, or Lewis Hine's or Jacob Riis's early-twentieth-century shots of urban poverty—has been to produce explicit but also seductively aesthetic versions of reality, meant to convince a skeptical public or political leaders about the urgency or justness of a particular cause. Robbins and Becher, on the other hand, represent something far more subtle: the evidence of the stereotypes, social dissonances, and duplicity that permeate the visual world before us, but that complacency, ignorance, or fear prevents us from seeing.

Heading to locations that offer the greatest promise of "transportation," the artists travel through an area in search of fragments of information that might provide deeper insights and truths. They arrive armed with weeks of research—about a region's social and cultural divisions or its patterns of racism, poverty, or discrimination—only to cast aside their knowledge in order to experience the place as directly and clearly as possible and thus to represent it more incisively. With each tentative step, each act of engagement, each camera shot, they retell the stories of a region and its people, summoning up troubling realities that can be seen everywhere but remain oddly invisible to most people. They take hundreds of photographs, but only a relative few make the final cut; only when the right combination of elements falls into place can an image reflect the full, evocative impact of the "transportation of place"—that

exquisite instance when reality and its illusion collide.

Robbins and Becher's process of discovery brings to mind Roland Barthes's semiotic exploration of Japan, Empire of Signs (1970). The French philosopher writes of his first encounter with Tokyo—a city famously made up of streets without the traditional Western indicators used for orientation, such as names or numbers—an exhilarating, if somewhat uneasy encounter, filled with a sense of not knowing, of having to rely solely on immediate experience to make sense of the world:

> The city [of Tokyo] can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by site, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing.

The text inspired by this "writing"—the insightful and resonant observations of Empire of Signs—bears no resemblance to the banalities of the travel guide or the orthodoxies of official history. For the philosopher's aim in his journey through Tokyo—a goal central to his intellectual project, and coextensive with that of Robbins and Becher—was to not to reiterate the myths of nation and but rather to make them visible and thus subject to critical analysis. Traveling through Tokyo as free as possible from the restraints of language was an opportunity for Barthes not only to experience the city more viscerally but also to see more clearly the contradictions, disorderliness, and inconsistencies that myth and, by extension, language conceal. Such realities were everywhere in plain sight, but also imperceptible to the world-weary eyes of a people inured to their presence and lulled into believing the myth of a unified and orderly world.

The work that results from Robbins and Becher's process functions on a number of aesthetic, conceptual, and ideological levels, from cultural criticism to social activism. Preeminently, they critique the exploitative power of signs taken for truth, the extent to which the Western eye confuses visual resemblance—especially when it functions as a direct trace of the world, as in photography, video, and film—with reality itself. This "certitude of the sign," as Homi Bhabha calls it, the Westerner's "compulsion to believe" in the veracity of visual images, exposes the eye and mind to all manner of manipulation. "Reality shows" on television pass off contrived stunts, infantile games, and staged events as spontaneous slices of everyday life. Theme parks and even contemporary cities build tacky simulacra of other places—the scaled-down versions of Venice, Paris, and New York on the Las Vegas strip, for example—that are for many as desirable and engaging as the real thing. Broadcast news, in search of ratings and advertisers, routinely blurs the line between objective reporting and entertainment.

In the context of tourism and geography, such certitude impels us to confuse the reality of locations with their myriad representations in the culture at large, and by extension, the stereotypes, hierarchies, and received ideas that have defined these places in the collective unconscious. When the Western eye encounters foreign or different cultures, it often does so in the anticipation of resemblance and familiarity, a belief that the signifiers before it will somehow match up with the already-read, the already-seen, and the already-experienced.

It is this limitation that the Robbins and Becher challenge, both in their working process and in their photographs. Their images, rather than feed our desire for the familiar and certain, purposefully direct our attention to what is indeterminate, uncertain, and confusing. In New York, NY, Las Vegas, NV (1995), for example, the ersatz structures of the New York Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas—scaled-down versions of the Brooklyn Bridge, Whitney Museum, Statue of Liberty, and Empire State Building, for example—are so cleverly photographed that they are easily mistaken for the real thing. The chalets, gothic typeface, and smiling Aryan children that are the subject of Bavarian by Law (1995–96) belie their actual location: a town in Washington State mandated by the local government to encourage tourism by remaking itself as Bavaria, not because of historical or cultural connections, but because the surrounding landscape resembles Alpine Germany. The now-decaying but once-majestic Beaux Arts buildings in the old business district of prerevolutionary Havana depicted in Wall Street in Cuba (1993) are nearly indistinguishable from the avatars to American corporate power and prestige that served as their architectural models. And the garish signage, corporate logos, and generic storefronts in Strip Malls of Toulouse (2003)—details that at first suggest a typical suburban landscape in the United States—turn out to be the markers of American global expansion into a once rustic and picturesque European city.

The artists' imperative to question the certitude with which we see and understand the world has a number of art historical precedents: the tactical cropping, oblique angles, and other formal devices of Neue Sachlichkeit photography in 1920s Germany—strategies meant to radically alter and question these perceptions (see Albert Renger-Patzsch, Zierhecke im Park der Warburgs, Hedge on the Warburg estate in Hamburg c. 1928; fig. 2);

the activist and keenly observed documentary photographs of Dorothea Lange, Lewis Hine, and August Sander; and the socially conscious photo-conceptualism of Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Alan Sekula, and Martha Rosler. Yet another movement in the history of modernism, rarely discussed in relationship to Robbins and Becher, suggests one of the most compelling influences: Surrealism.

The Surrealist ethos was built on the idea of disrupting visual certainty—and thus dislodging unconscious or repressed meaning—through the use of uncanny images that transformed the familiar into the unfamiliar. Viewers were made to confront ordinary objects that appeared like other objects or suggested other meanings through suggestive cropping, oblique points of view, or photographic manipulation (Man Ray, Man, 1918; fig. 3),

for example, or collages, constructions, or straight photographs that depicted unusual or unexpected combinations (Meret Oppenheim, Fur Lined Tea-Cup, 1936; fig. 4).

From an ideological perspective, such slippages of meaning also reaffirm the extent to which representations are not absolute "truths" but rather distant approximations of reality that are at best imprecise and always dependent on context as well as on the conventions, stereotypes, and beliefs of the culture and society at large. In asking us to actively view "reality" and its representations in new and revolutionary ways, the Surrealist object also insists that we look past the biases and received ideas that shape our limited and jaded worldview.

Art historians have extensively analyzed Surrealism's radical social agenda. Yet an important aspect of its politics, one that ties it even more closely to the work of Robbins and Becher, has received far less attention: its anti-racist and anti-colonist activism. In a recent article on the movement's "racial politics," Amanda Stansell observes that a number of Surrealist artists in the 1920s and '30s employed "inventive aesthetic strategies" in order to "galvanize anti-racist and anti-colonialist action." Indeed, there was much reactionary sentiment to contest in a period that represented the "apogee of French colonialism," a time when conservative forces in France were working to overcome the public relations advantage of independence movements in Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Indochina. In response to these anti-colonialist struggles, the French government embarked on a propaganda campaign, culminating in the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris. The exhibition, visited by more than seven million people, retold the story of French imperialism by ignoring its penchant for exploitation and neglect in favor of lurid dioramas that celebrated the exoticism and escapism of native cultures.

For the Surrealists, imperialism and colonialism exemplified the oppressive hierarchies and belief systems of Western culture, making them important targets in their aesthetic revolution. In direct response to the almost universally acclaimed Colonial Exposition, the Surrealists mounted La Vérité sur les colonies (September 1931–February 1932), an art exhibit that matched up European artifacts with art indigenous to colonized nations. African masks were exhibited beside Christian icons, for example, and West Indian music was played with French music, in order to "assert the artistic integrity of subjected peoples" in the face of an all-encompassing European imperialism. On the dialectical effect of this pairing, Stansell observes:

> Each object encouraged the viewer to rethink their assumptions regarding the other object. . . . Through this strategy, the Surrealists presented objects which were central to French bourgeois culture, such as Catholic icons and popular music, as unusual; European culture could not be uncritically equated with a broader 'human culture.' At the same time, the objects continued to refer to their original context, hinting that the cultural power of Catholic icons, for example, cannot be removed simply by exhibiting them in another place.

The ubiquitous Surrealist devices of juxtaposition and visual contrast—strategies meant to upset the social relationships of power by placing opposing forces on the same footing—lie at the heart of the movement's anti-racist critique. A little-known but important work counterpoises the images of the black colonial subject and the white colonialist, each represented as an obvious and well-rehearsed stereotype. The image is set in a vaulted, neoclassical rotunda, a majestic space covered from floor to ceiling with paintings and murals. In the left foreground stands a large white male, whose pose, nudity, and physique suggest the classical Greek athlete and hence the "European physical ideal." In the right foreground, a small, voluptuous black female nude stands in profile, a direct allusion to the Hottentot Venus, a widely published icon in European pseudo-scientific publications, meant to illustrate the deviant sexuality and primitivism of the black female body. The paradox of a brutal colonialism and racism, on the one hand, and the glory of Western civilization, on the other, is accentuated by two other visual elements: a whip that extends from the man's hand and wraps around the woman's neck, and the presence between them of tiny white soldiers who arrange enormous bullets.

The contrast of two contiguous stereotypes—the white Adonis and the Nubian female—'s anti-racist critique, actively questioning colonialism's opportunistic notion of racial difference as fixed, innate, and natural. By juxtaposing stereotypes on the same visual plane, despite the unequal relationships of power racist content. This exaggeration also renders the stereotypes unusual, and thus somewhat unnatural, lifting them out of their innate, unselfconscious, and normative place within the culture at large. The visual and conceptual tension set up by such oppositions asks us to look beyond the stereotypes themselves, to see and think about the unconscious biases, received ideas, and expectations that they represent and perpetuate.

It is this dialectic of difference—the imperative to juxtapose different or contradictory phenomena in order to elicit deeper or repressed meaning—that drives Robbins and Becher's aesthetic. If the Surrealists achieved this effect by pasting together representations of different words, Robbins and Becher do so through the unadulterated representation of "transported" places where different, historically incommensurate, or contradictory worlds come together. This strategy hinges on juxtaposition, on the implicit and often startling distinction between what an image appears to be and what it actually is. More often than not, the two elements of this equation are either stereotypes or conflicting social or cultural forces: the feather-adorned Indian and the blonde, blue-eyed Aryan, for example, or the charm of pastoral Europe and the brash cynicism of American capitalism. The visual and conceptual friction that arises from the immediate proximity of these elements—an effect uncannily achieved not through a willful act of aesthetic manipulation but rather through a process of skillful observation, discovery, cropping, enlargement, and picture editing—in turn elicits unconscious, unexpected, or even contradictory meaning.

In Global Village (2003–05), for example, a series shot in Americus, Georgia, these contrasts provoke observations that might easily be missed by its complacent visitors. The village, a "poverty theme park," was built by Habitat for Humanity, an ecumenical Christian ministry, and is intended to educate its audience about 154 155 the living conditions of the world's poorest populations. Focusing on one of the park's central pavilions, "Living in Poverty," Robbins and Becher photograph its fussy reproductions of shantytowns from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. As the eye glides over these images, however, it begins to pick up certain incongruities and absurdities. What at first appear to be uncompromising images of wretched squalor soon read like ghostly stage sets, free of human inhabitants and any trace of filth, disease, or suffering.

As these contradictions emerge, they suggest a range of opposing stereotypes and meanings—from the distinction between the objective reporting claimed by Global Village and the curatorial manipulation that informs its installations, to the park's vacillation between Christian solemnity and corporate slickness. These oppositions, in turn, throw into sharp relief the paradoxes of "Living in Poverty": its ingenious ability to turn a popular fixture of capitalist escapism—the theme park—into an instrument of social awareness; its expression of an altruism that, in keeping with its sanitized view of poverty, ignores the destitution that exists just around the corner, in one of the poorest regions of the United States; and its unwillingness to take on the complicity of American expansionism and Christian missionary work in global poverty, even though the park's religious and corporate themes make obvious such allusions.

This visual dialectic—achieved mostly through the slippages of meaning inherent to the "transportation of place"—is pervasive in Robbins and Becher's work. In the German Indians, it is the continual and sometimes confusing interchange between two enduring stereotypes that elicits the series' most powerful theme: the ease by which we subjugate, typecast, and co-opt racial difference in order appease our curiosity, fascination, and desire. In the Strip Malls or Wall Street series, it is the disparity between the old and the new—ancient Europe punctuated by the jarring logos of international chain stores, or the opulent remains of American capitalism in communist Cuba—that reveals much about the paradoxical results of imperialism and of the recent but no less problematic effluence of global commerce. In The Exile Brands (1995; fig. 6),

it is the slight discrepancy between the labels of two nearly identical cigars—marking one as made in Cuba, the other in "exile" in the Dominican Republic or Honduras—that raises haunting questions about what is authentic and what is fake. These stark, close-up images represent a tiny visual difference but also a monumental social chasm: that between the Cuban nation and the anti-communist expatriates who, for almost half a century, claim to represents its "real" culture.

In the end, the photographs of Robbins and Becher pose more questions than they answer, which is typical of the artists' compassionate and humanistic approach to their subjects. More than just an inquiry into the world around us, however, they encourage us to ask questions about ourselves. If the German Indians speak to the paradoxes and chauvinism of a nation, for example, they also suggest that we should think about the ease with which we fix identity into easily recognizable characteristics and stereotypes. They ask us to consider as well the underlying emotions and attitudes that shape our own personal view of racial difference—the bias, ignorance, ambivalence, and vulnerability that impel us to see as exotic that which we do not know, to appropriate in order to tame that which we fear. To wit: Langston Hughes, in his meditation on racial slumming in The Ways of White Folks (1934), observes:

> They were the people who went in for Negroes. . . . But not in the social service, philanthropic sort of way, no. They saw no use in helping a race that was already too charming and na•ve and lovely for words. Leave

> them unspoiled and just enjoy them. . . . So they went in for the Art of Negroes—the dancing that had such jungle life about it, the songs that were so simple and fervent, the poetry that was so direct, so real. They never tried to influence that art, they only bought it and raved over it, and copied it. For they were artists, too.

Robbins and Becher's challenging and insightful aesthetic also brings to mind the work of another writer: Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquan-born, Algerian philosopher, psychiatrist, and revolutionary. Fanon—a colonial subject who bravely struggled against France's violent and murderous reign of terror—implored the radical artist to transcend received ideas and clichŽs in order to represent a new and refreshing view of reality. He who illustrates the "truth of nations," the official histories and stories of state, Fanon warned, was condemned to represent "the cast-offs of thought, its shells and corpses, a knowledge which has been stabilized once and for all." The revolutionary artist, he concluded, must realize that the truths of a nation reside in its repressed past and corporeal present, "the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge." It is precisely these seething, incisive truths that Robbins and Becher contact in their ingenious documentation of reality. In so doing, they open a window not only onto our troubled times but also onto the possibilities of a more just future.