

Between Appropriation and Reconstruction
Brian O'Connell on Lisa Oppenheim

Balanced between appropriation and reconstruction, Lisa Oppenheim's work relies on substitutions and omissions applied to the photographic and filmic records through which the historical and the present are transmitted and constituted. Though this underlying conceptual strategy remains not far beneath the surface, it results in a remarkably diverse number of formal solutions encompassing photography, drawing, film and slide installations (such as *The Sun is always Setting Somewhere Else* reproduced in this issue of *Art and Research*). This versatility mirrors her use of an equally broad range of source material, including public archives, popular photographic anthologies as well as found materials such as posters and photographs posted online, including those of US Military personnel in Iraq.

Two of Oppenheim's photographic series depend on archives generally accessible through the United States Library of Congress and other public institutions. Beginning with the physical condition of the medium on which the photograph was originally held - glass or film negatives - Oppenheim either 'fills in' the evidence of the medium's material history or omits all but the signs of this history. In *Killed Negatives* (2002-2006) Oppenheim uses the U.S. Farm Security Administration's collection of Depression-era American photography. The FSA's editors punched holes through those negatives deemed unfit to print. They were, however, preserved and catalogued as 'killed' within the archive. Oppenheim re-shoots sometimes multiple versions of the archival photograph at or near the original location. She prints the contemporary image masking all but the position and shape of the hole meant to 'kill' the original photograph. These masked images are then paired with their archival antecedents. Similarly, *Damaged* (2003-2006) insists on the photographic medium's ability to serve as an index not only of the instant of its exposure but of time since that moment. In this series, Oppenheim uses damaged images found among the archives of the *Chicago Daily News*. She prints only those parts of the image where the emulsion has chipped or washed away and pairs them with their original captions.

For the 2006 Liverpool Biennial, Oppenheim approached the archival image from another angle. Asked to produce work specifically about Liverpool, she used the gaps inherent in the archival process as an opening for new images of the city. Contained within the Liverpool Record Office are over 200,000 images taken by local photographer Edward Chambré Hardman between 1923 and 1965. Accompanying these images were Chambré Hardman's own sometimes absurdly detailed descriptions, complete with sociological commentary and the additions of Record Office archivists. Oppenheim used these written descriptions as a guide through the city and its surroundings to produce contemporary 16mm-film corollaries of the images described in the archive. These images, each about 30 seconds long, became half of a two-sided simultaneous film-loop projected on a suspended screen around which the viewer is able to walk. On the opposing side of each

image, the descriptions responsible for its production are projected over a shot of the sky above each site: each side alternates between image and text sequence. The viewer therefore questions the possibility of a narrative connection between text and image but, ultimately, recognizes that image and corresponding text are never simultaneously or sequentially visible from any given point of view. Through this simple spatial trick, visual and linguistic memory is actively engaged not only in Oppenheim's own process of trying to reproduce one archival reality from another, but also in reproducing the processes by which the past and present inform one another.

With the *The Sun is Always Setting Somewhere Else*, Oppenheim takes on another displacement, this time, however, not a temporal but a spatial one. Here she finds online images of the setting sun taken by U.S. soldiers in Iraq. The majority of these photographs seem overtly to exclude the reality of war in which they are taken, in favour of the blazing sunsets more familiar to greeting cards than war mementos. Ordering 15 of these images as the sun sets in the frame, Oppenheim re-photographs them placed by her outstretched arm over the sun as it sets in her native New York. As one sunset replaces another, the viewer cannot help but notice in the substitute images the distant plume of dust kicked up by a tank or the spot of a helicopter in the sky. The result is a mixture of political and aesthetic critique that seems, if through nothing but its being a 35mm slide show, to evoke a not-so-distant past in which 'bringing the war home' was an equally pressing concern. In this case, however, the immediacy of such a project seems overwhelmed by blogs from the front and held at bay by the Romanticism not only of the image, but of a project which is thoroughly tangled up in mediation.

The three projects briefly described here share a tension between an archival impulse on the level of research as well as production and an anxiety about the stability of received information that seems to prohibit blanket appropriation but also preclude complete reconstruction. For Oppenheim, the critical capacity of the displacement (or re-placement) of one term by another, taken for granted in other practices, seems not fully satisfactory. Instead, there is an insistence on the act of producing and interpreting information, visual and otherwise, through circuits of the present and the past; the linguistic and the material; the personal and the collective.