

PLANE MATERIALS

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Cornford & Cross

Andrew Lacon

Curated by Nathaniel Pitt





Previous pages

Plane Materials installation view

Brighton Photo Biennial 2014

Photo: Nigel Green

PLANE MATERIALS

Plane Materials looks at the close and complex relationship between photography and sculpture, and brings together for the first time artists Cornford & Cross and Andrew Lacon, whose work has raised questions around photography in relation to the spatial experience of the viewer.

The title *Plane Materials* was inspired by an image/text work by Victor Burgin, from the series *US '77*. Burgin's work, *Flights of Fancy*, combines a photograph of a passenger aircraft seen through the window of an airport departure lounge, with a text punning on the word 'plane' to associate material production with physical alienation. Elsewhere, Burgin has observed, 'A basic principle of Euclidean geometry is that space extends infinitely in three dimensions. The effect of monocular perspective, however, is to maintain the idea that this space does nevertheless have a centre – the observer' (Victor Burgin, 'Geometry and Abjection', in *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds*, edited by Donald James (London: Macmillan, 1991) p.13).

The exhibition *Plane Materials* presented in October 2014 at the University of Brighton staged an encounter between the material qualities revealed through the processes of stripping bare (Cornford & Cross) and covering up (Lacon). Through both formal and conceptual approaches to the work, we could engage with some of the complexities the artists find in the functional and symbolic presence of materials in the world – their aesthetic qualities, cultural values and social uses. Marble from Carrara in Italy and aluminium smelted from bauxite mined around the world: the prime materials of this show serve to evoke the places of their extraction and the systems of their production. Through these materials, the artists invite us to reflect on the military, industry, aviation; on luxury, craftsmanship and privilege. Through succinct sculptural gestures, the works expand our attention to include the absence and presence of materials and their related sites – present, past and future.

Plane Materials was made possible by a Curators' Bursary awarded through the Grain project. Through the course of the Bursary the exhibition *Plane Materials* was developed as a co-commission with Photoworks, Grain and The Library of Birmingham for the 2014 Brighton Photo Biennial. Thanks go to Pete James, Curator of Photography at the Library and Co-Director of Grain, who facilitated access to the archive, and to Nicola Shipley, Co-Director of Grain, who facilitated and managed the commission. Further thanks and acknowledgement go to Celia Davies, Director of Photoworks, and Mariama Attah, Programme Curator Photoworks for co-commissioning *Plane Materials* for the 2014 Brighton Photo Biennial.

Nathaniel Pitt
Curator



Cornford & Cross
Afterimage I (2012), *II, III, IV* (2014)
Installation view, Brighton Photo Biennial 2014
Photo: Nigel Green

Cornford & Cross

Afterimage is a set of works which we made by removing and destroying our photographs, which had previously been conservation mounted onto aluminium substrates by John Jones of London. For example, *Afterimage I* is produced from a photograph which we had mounted and exhibited at Artefiera Bologna, Italy, in 2004, then returned to London and placed in storage. By 2012, speculation on London property had made the pressure on space intolerable, and at last we decided to dispose of the work. Meaning to recycle the aluminium, we tore off the photograph, but when we saw the exposed metal we began an unexpected enquiry, at the level of the substrate under the picture plane.

Afterimage embodies the process of its own (un)making: our removal and destruction of the photograph transforms the work from image to object, exposing the substrate as part of a wider support structure. With its high strength to weight ratio, aluminium is essential to aviation and aerospace, yet its production demands vast quantities of energy that result in high levels of CO₂ emissions. So using aluminium as a substrate for artworks links contemporary art as a form of conspicuous consumerism with the corporate infrastructure of military-industrial globalization.

The relationship between value and scarcity is socially produced. The number of our photographs that we could remove and destroy was limited by the moment in time when we recognized the idea. As an element, aluminium signifies a certain purity. But its over-use has made it banal, and so dispersed attention from its nature as a profligate material, loaded with ecological and social debt. *Afterimage* is complicit in destruction-as-production. Yet the work also proposes that by accepting material limits and the irreversible nature of certain decisions, the possibilities increase for transformation from one state to another.

Afterimage I (2012)

Aluminium substrate after removal and destruction of artists' photograph. 1500 x 1200 x 50mm

The photograph of the site-specific installation 'Camelot' (1996) had been exhibited in 'Tales of the City', directed by Ann Gallagher in association with the British Council, at Artefiera, Bologna, Italy, in 2004.

Afterimage II (2014)

Aluminium substrates after removal and destruction of artists' photographs. 550 x 360 x 40mm; 1700 x 1300 x 40mm

The two photographs of the site-specific installation 'New Holland' (1997) had been exhibited in 'Remote', curated by Camilla Jackson at The Photographers' Gallery, London, in 2001.

Afterimage III (2014)

Aluminium substrates after removal and destruction of artists' photographs. 400 x 280 x 40mm.

The four photographs of the film and video work 'Childhood's End' (2000) had been first exhibited in a solo exhibition curated by Lynda Morris at the Norwich Gallery, Norwich School of Art in 2000, and later exhibited in 'Utopias' curated by Sarah Shalgosky at the Mead Gallery, University of Warwick.

Afterimage IV (2014)

Aluminium substrates after removal and destruction of artists' photographs. 400 x 490 x 40mm; 1170 x 1460 x 40mm

The two photographs of the unrealized proposal 'The End of Art Theory' (2001) had been first exhibited in a solo exhibition curated by Mary Jane Aladren at Nylon Gallery, London, in 2002, and later exhibited in 'Imaging London' curated by Ben Cranfield at Houldsworth Fine Art, London, in 2003.



Cornford & Cross

Aluminium-mounted photograph of the site-specific installation 'Camelot' (1996)

As shown at 'Tales of the City', Artefiera Bologna, Italy, 2004



Cornford & Cross

Aluminium-mounted photographs of the unrealized proposal 'The End of Art Theory' (2001)

'Unrealized', Nylon Gallery, London, 2002



Boeing 747 aircraft, London Heathrow, 2008
Photo: Paul Spijkers, Wikimedia Commons



Access self-storage depository used by Cornford & Cross
South East London, 2009



Cornford & Cross
Afterimage I (2012)
Aluminium substrate after removal and destruction of artists' photograph
Artist's flat, South East London 2012



Cornford & Cross
Work in progress towards *Afterimage IV* (2014)
Artist's flat, South East London, 2014



Amazon rainforest land cleared for a bauxite mine owned by Alcoa
Juruti Municipality, Para State, Brazil, 13 August 2008
Photo: Daniel Beltrà, Greenpeace



Indigenous people of the Dongria Kondh tribe in India protesting against the destruction of their land for bauxite mining by the Vedanta Corporation
Photo: Survival International, 2013



Aluminium waste storage facility in Stade, Germany, 2012
Photo: Ra Boe, Wikimedia Commons



Cornford & Cross
Afterimage I (2012)
Aluminium substrate after removal and destruction of artists' photograph
Installation view, Brighton Photo Biennial 2014



Andrew Lacon

The Colonial and Indian exhibition in South Kensington, London, in 1886 featured a number of exhibits presented by the explorer James Henry Hubbard. These included the first presentation of a stuffed Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*). Now in the Horniman Museum collection, Hubbard's Walrus was an unusual taxidermy specimen. At the time, few people in Britain had seen a live Walrus, and the lack of documentation led to the taxidermy pelt being 'over stuffed', resulting in an over-sized beast with taut, stretched skin. Without the Walrus's characteristic folds of loose skin the specimen looks, perhaps unsurprisingly, strange.

At a similar time in Rome (*circa* 1885), H. Anderson was producing souvenir albums of photographs displaying sculptures from the Vatican museum and scenes of the city. These toned albumen prints, compiled into albums like *Roma*, similarly depict an unrealistic experience of three-dimensional objects, in this case sculpture. Parts of the glass negatives were opaqued, painted on so as to separate and visually divorce the sculptures from their original surroundings. Whilst showing the sculptures themselves in great detail, the images create a distinct two-dimensional experience that is not true to life. The images themselves are mounted on coloured pages, housed in an elaborate vellum-covered album, embossed and decorated with gold leaf. This presentation serves to further distance the viewer from the experience of seeing and understanding the sculptures in their original context. Both the stuffed Walrus and the images within *Roma* start with what could be seen as empirical evidence – a skin, a sculpture – and end by depicting something that bears a relation to the facts but is not true to life.

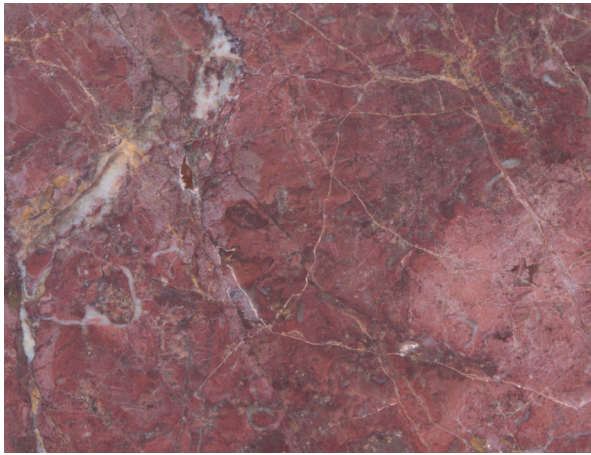
For *Plane Materials* I have made a selection of new works, which look at the longstanding relationship between photography and sculpture. *Vitrine (After Rome) i*, *Coloured Light (Yellow)* and *Reproduction of Sculpture 3* explore the paradox between the image, the object and its display or representation. Sculpture has been a focal point of photographic activity since the invention of photography in 1839. Today, as in 1886, there remains a disjuncture between display and experience, and photographic representation of sculptural objects. I have used purpose-built display structures to exhibit the photograph as a 'referent object'. Defining modern modes of display, the vitrine serves to reinforce the intrinsic and aesthetic values of the original sculptures, which are seen within the photographs. The works are an attempt to reintroduce sculptural qualities of weight, material and surface that are so often lost in the process of documentation.

Sculpted Image (2014)
Screenprint on giclée print
205 x 290mm



Andrew Lacon
Vitrine (After Rome) I (2014)
Carrara marble, Verona marble, steel, glass, dark cloth, *Roma* album
1050 x 660 x 1500mm
Installation view, Brighton Photo Biennial 2014





top: Verona marble (detail), 2014. 1050 x 660 x 30mm

top right: H. Anderson *Roma* album, *circa* 1885. Archives, Heritage and Photography, Library of Birmingham

bottom right: Carrara marble (detail), 2014. 360 x 350 x 240mm





top: *Galleria delle Statue Vaticano*, Reproduction of toned albumen print from *Roma* album, circa 1885

bottom: Carrara marble. Midland Marble Ltd, Birmingham, 2014

top right: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52) Cornaro Chapel, Rome





Andrew Lacon

Coloured Light (Yellow) (2014)

Carrara marble, steel, acrylic, photographic gel, light fittings

450 x 200 x 2330mm

Reproduction of Sculpture 3 (2014)

Black and white photocopy, museum glass, limewood frame

260 x 340 x 15mm

Installation view, Brighton Photo Biennial 2014

Over There and In Between

Elinor Morgan

'This is not a real letter. The real ones are never committed to paper.'
Marina Tsvetaeva to Boris Pasternak, 1926.

I read these words on the train from Birmingham to Brighton.

Prologue

Walking to the exhibition I pass the walls of the Royal Pavilion, a place where state rooms lined with silk, filled with gilt and cradled with light become ghastly in their ostentation. The structure we see today was completed in the early 1800s for the Prince Regent. Its architect, John Nash, influenced by Thomas Daniell's volumes 'Oriental Scenery' (published 1795–1801) made an approximation of an Indian palace muddled with Moorish and Far Eastern elements. Yet the Pavilion is as English as it is Chinese or Indian; its architecture and interiors are a tangled imagination of the exotic, the luxurious, the other. The palace's white onion domes signal to other places, drawing Brighton into an architectural conversation across centuries and continents. They ask me to think about locations and senses beyond the immediate present.

In the exhibition space at the art school this sense of absence continues. I am confronted with tangible things that do not constitute the entirety of the work. Each piece points out to a site, person, time or process beyond itself. The images and objects around me are beguiling in themselves but they are not the thing. The works around me are stand-ins: explanatory texts in an empty museum vitrine. In Greece's national museums the many artefacts and sections of ancient monuments that have been pilfered by others – mostly the British – are surprisingly present. Where carved stones should be, photographic and textual representations mark the missing.

The sense of loss engendered is palpable and political. It evokes the ghostly bicycles left by thousands of members of the Argentinian resistance who 'disappeared' under the military dictatorship of the late 1970s and early 1980s. These bicycles became indexes of bodies, documenting final moments of resistant activity. They compressed movement and time into one potent, public image. Although these symbolic stand-ins evoke completely different eras, events and political environments, both form resistant images that make the absent present. They have a similar effect to a photograph carried in the wallet of a mourner.

I'll put you at the bottom of a deep, bright white gorge. One hundred metres of marble tower above you, stepped in a ziggurat. Streaks of grey run down the white steps, like the stains of giant rivulets. The marble is cool but the sun is high and hot and the centre of this reflective pit is blinding. Giant mouths of Cat trucks attack various levels of the marble walls. Further up,

behind the unblinking whiteness, you can see the snowy peaks of the mountains. The creaks and scrapes of weighty slabs being shovelled about by heavy machinery ricochet around you. It is spring 2014. You are outside Carrara, a town on the north-west coast of Italy.

It is cool in the church. You arrived just as the doors were opening, when the small square and church steps were still shaded from the day's glare. Soon the building will be flooded with the noise and movement of tourists. You breathe the church in with a long breath that brings the smell of dusty fabric and wood polish. Ahead is the altar, a garish shield at the back of a rounded recess under heavy frescoes. The transept of the church is slim: to your left sits one row of simple wooden pews; to your right, another. You take measured steps towards the altar, looking to the chapels on either side of you and glancing back to a high crown of organ pipes. The walls ache and drip with putti and gold. You turn where the pews end. This is what you are here for. The Corinthian columns, like giant rollers mottled with ink, part to reveal an intimate scene bathed in spears of golden light. Here is the theatre of Bernini's Saint Teresa. Marble figures float on a cloud of more marble. The saint's face, somewhere between anguish and rapture, rests on volumes of sculpted fabric. Her mouth is slightly open and a hand and foot hang, post coital. So bodily. The sculpture is smaller than you anticipated and more human. A feminine angel stands benevolently over this woman, arrow poised. A yellow-paned window above gilt tubes pours theatrical rays down onto the figures. Buttery light spills onto Teresa's lap. Eight noblemen sit in two theatre boxes either side of the saint, discussing business, seemingly unaffected by years spent witnessing this sexualized awakening. Time passes but the marble figures remain. A hum of visitors now fills the church and your head aches with layers of overly elaborate stone, metal and paint. You turn away.

Montparnasse, Paris, in the 15th arrondissement on the left bank of the River Seine. It's 1949 and we are in the viewing space at the studio of Constantin Brancusi. We have been waiting here for some time. Four of us stand quietly, imbibing the detail of our surroundings. Smells of the studio behind us – wood shavings, grease and the sharp tang of metal – pervade the space. But the air has a cool, light quality. The ceiling is made entirely of glass and some of the panes are cracked or missing. The floor is coarse concrete. The building is dilapidated but the slight disarray inside is perfectly staged. Ahead stands a coppice of Brancusi's tall, slim sculptures. Around are low, plinth-like forms topped with bronzes, marble pieces and rough, unformed stone blocks. The atmosphere is thick with anticipation. Our attention is drawn to three veiled sculptures. We absorb their shrouded shapes. These works stand like clandestine figures poised theatrically for the perfect moment. We are waiting, not for Brancusi himself, but for the light.

You are inside a plastic box. A smooth, featureless wall slides into the chest-like seat on which you sit. No seatbelt or harness is available. On your way in you saw two further cells but today they are empty. A sense of sweaty doom nags your stomach and the twisty roads make sitting still, or sitting at all, difficult. Both hands stretched flat against the wall, you try to steady yourself. Despite this, when the driver takes a bend in the track at speed you bang your head against the reinforced window. You can see out of this window to the fields around you. The sky is hazy and fields of rape buzz with colour. None of that pungent smell reaches you in here. Is it a two-way window? If you were to pass someone would they be able to see you? Or would there be only a series of three equally sized square panes of black? Where are you? And where are you going? The van's engine is loud in the echoey chamber and you can hear

the driver cough dryly. You lean forward and look through the slat to your left. Light flicks into the small shadowed corridor beyond the door but the space is empty.

Now to the summer of 1997. The lake behind you is float glass. The campus fields have been left to meadow and long grasses are cut by a criss-cross of mown paths. A few lone students dot the scene here at the University of East Anglia. To our right are concrete and glass stepped pyramids designed by Denys Lasdun in 1962 as egalitarian student accommodation. The buildings are a little decrepit now but still impressive. Beyond this, to the left, is Norman Foster's Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, opened in 1978. It is a large aluminium hangar on top of a grassy mound cut with a curved glazed fascia. Between the two buildings sits an agricultural building of galvanized steel notable for its incongruity that apes the mammoth construction to its left. This low-slung container with pitched roof recalls the nightmarish sheds of nearby factory farms. Somewhere inside this impenetrable box pulses the distinctive mechanical beat of a Garage track.

It is hot and humid. You have been driving through jungle for hours. The vegetation around you is lush, thick and full of noise. The Co-operative Republic of Guyana. This country has been blighted by slavery plantations and colonialism. Now heavy industrial production rules. You come to a break in the undergrowth. And you realize, with a jolt, that it is not a mere caesura but a complete cut. The jungle has stopped dead and so has your truck. Ahead lies an enormous expanse of flat red dust. It is 1940 and the words, which are to be spoken in a measured English accent, in the promotional documentary that you are here to make, ring in your mind: 'Without bauxite we have no aluminium, without aluminium we have no wings and without wings, we have no defence.'

Epilogue

Back in Brighton the chatter of pedestrians outside the gallery draws attention to my stasis. It has fallen dark and cars creep past the window. Smudges form on the glass like the shadows of figures not quite captured in long exposure photographs. My ghostly impression appears to either side: to the right a wall of windows superimposes my wobbly outline onto the world outside; to my left aluminium squares and rectangles of varying sizes feed back a shadowy, colourless form. These momentary images recall my first experience of a mirrored lift in which an image of my family and myself shot endlessly in either direction. Here the reflections are harrowingly partial. They mock the stasis of the sculpture in the photographic folio encased in marble and glass ahead of me and speak to the degraded photocopy on the wall.

I take a final look around the room and then move towards the door. Outside it is dark and cool. I walk to the sea, to the luminous glow of the pier's amusement. Ecstatic shrieks of fear fill the air. The energetic sound, light and movement, so at odds with the stillness in the exhibition, is thrilling and repellent.

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Cornford & Cross

Andrew Lacon

Curated by Nathaniel Pitt

Essay by Elinor Morgan

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