

afterimage

THE JOURNAL OF MEDIA ARTS AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

The Know-how of Thomas Demand
A conversation with James Tobias
Van McElwee's *Liquid Crystal*

VOL. 37, No. 6



USA \$5.50/CAN \$7.50

Holdt's photographs are often described as "anthropological," a designation that is not entirely accurate. While Holdt might be a perfect (and largely unwitting) participant observer, his insider/outsider status is complicated in that these are primarily portraits of people he considers friends. The unvarnished intimacy and frankness of his images, coupled with the patina of the cheaply produced snapshot (retained in digital reproduction), make his photographs more sympathetic to his subjects without romanticizing or aestheticizing the people and situations within them. Holdt seldom shoves his camera directly in anyone's face and rarely engineers a pose: thus, candid images of young lovers in bed and of people standing proudly outside their aging shacks have a balance of involvement and distance that enhances the images' tenderness and the subjects' dignity. That Holdt records intensely raw instances of drug use, prostitution, illness, sex, and destitution is testament to his ensconcement in those worlds rather than a manifestation of a quest to capture vicarious scenes.

The exhibition text draws comparisons between Holdt and artists such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Jacob Riis—all of whom turned their cameras on private corners of America to expose poverty and privation. The most salient comparison, however, might be with Nan Goldin, whose "Ballad of Sexual Dependency" (produced at roughly the same time) shares a vernacular immediacy due to her closeness with her subjects. Like Goldin, Holdt was (and still is) friends with many of his subjects, and like Goldin, he debuted his images as a slideshow, albeit a slideshow that repurposed his personal images as a critique of American social organization. The raw intensity of both Goldin's and Holdt's images, and the knowledge that some of their subjects died violent deaths, entices the viewer into a slightly uncomfortable voyeurism. Yet, there is little that is distinctly lurid about them, excepting those dealing with gun culture and physical brutality.

Unfortunately, but understandably beyond its purview, the exhibition did not address the purpose of placing these images in a gallery setting and did not address the question of whether Holdt

exploits his subjects' trust when exhibiting personal images. Holdt's campaign against racism and advocacy of a European-style welfare system certainly mitigate accusations of class tourism, but those people who see social documentary as irredeemably exploitative will probably find fault with some of Holdt's photographs. While Holdt could keep moving, his subjects were (and are) probably stuck where they are: a dilemma he shares with many photojournalists and anti-poverty campaigners.

Clearly, both Holdt's images and their arrangement ask us to consider the state of the American Dream over the past four decades; viewers are given little cause for optimism on the evidence provided. While it is tempting to see the images as synecdoche for life in America (with racism, inequality, violence, penury, toil, and rapacious capital high on the checklist), it is the personal narrative that emerges from the exhibition most prominently and is one of its greatest strengths. More than anything this is Holdt's view of America, and the titular "love" and "hope" of the exhibition are emotions that he genuinely feels are inherent in his subjects, as is evident through the detailed and often affecting captions that contextualize the images and demonstrate the depth of his compassion for those portrayed in his photographs.

Those familiar with Jacob Holdt's work might find it surprising that this was the first major solo exhibition of his forty-year career. Whether Holdt's moving social documentary constitutes "art" is a question too large to discuss here, but the impeccable setting that the Louisiana Museum provided certainly afforded the viewer ample opportunity to contemplate the work and allowed a broader audience to encounter Holdt's extraordinary corpus.

ANDREW JONES is a doctoral candidate in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

SURVEILLANCE IN SUBURBIA

High Value Targets

By Cheryl Pagurek

Patrick Mikhail Gallery

Ottawa, Canada

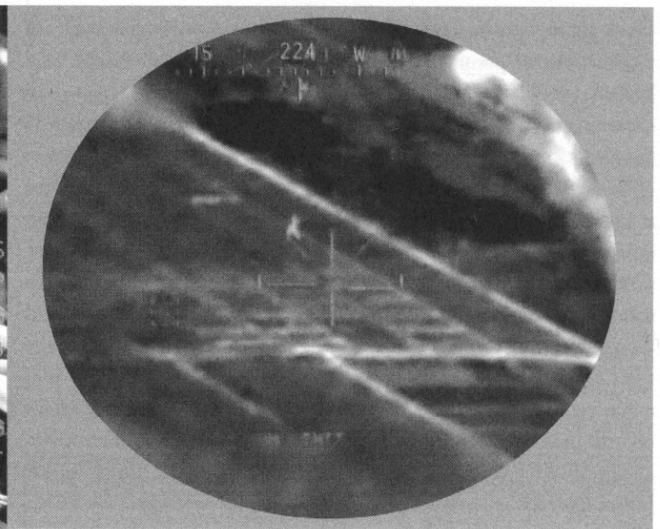
January 6–February 8, 2010

"High Value Targets," a multimedia exhibition by Canadian artist Cheryl Pagurek, employed a diptych format to present contemporary military surveillance and war imagery from the Middle East juxtaposed with domestic scenes of a lush urban backyard to convey a disquieting sense of unease and underlying tension in the family life of middle-class North America.

Pagurek's exhibition raised questions about personal and public security and vulnerability. As she noted in her artist's statement, "The work opens up a space to contemplate the myriad ways in which we, as individuals, might feel under siege in today's world." The artist's understated disclosure about the source of the military content¹—consisting of video footage and stills from the war in Iraq dating predominantly from 2007 and 2008²—allows it to be read as a symbol of threat and surveillance of our time rather than a specific reference.

The soundtrack of Pagurek's dual-channel video, *Growing Pains* (2009), combined everyday domestic sounds with the aggressive noise of armed conflict, and provided an intentionally disturbing ambience in which to view her series of five large digital prints, "High Value Targets" (2009).³

Pagurek's sinister title "High Value Targets" was derived from U.S. military combat terminology referring to attack objectives. Each of the photographs' subtitles—*They have wounded, Clear to engage, Good*



contemporary art, and support has "went" value, all has prepared to

Missile, We've got a runner, and Follow my lead—is an example of military jargon or command taken from her video and reflect the type of armed activity seen in one half of the print and by inference the potential for this activity in the seemingly tranquil urban environment depicted in the adjacent half. For example, *High Value Target 4: Good Missile*, a vertical diptych, presents a verdant suburban "Garden of Eden" seen from above, abutting a grainy green aerial night-vision image of pale buildings surrounded by palm trees and a smoky green tail from a missile that has just hit its target. Both parts of the diptych are overlaid with viewfinder lines that center on the garden and conjure a sense of danger while also raising the spectre of civilian space as the objective of military assault. *High Value Target 2: We've got a runner*, a horizontal dual-image print whose title refers to chasing an escaping person, contrasts a close-up photograph of tender green and red shoots pushing through the soil amid a tangle of last year's dead foliage with a military observation image. The garden—also a scene of surveillance—is superimposed with a circular viewfinder and is seen beside a grainy brown night-time aerial surveillance image matted in vivid green, depicting a barely discernable, ghostly-white human figure running just beyond the crosshairs. Pagurek's work conjures the possibility that our safe and protected neighborhoods might also become a place of surveillance and danger; it also allows us to dimly grasp the living conditions of civilians who experience war from the air.

Pagurek's major work, the *Growing Pains* video, introduces the artist's other roles as parent and gardener. The dual metaphor of the female artist as cultivator of plants and nurturer of children is apt as both require acts of "balancing chaos and order on a small domestic scale" and "the handling of adverse effects."⁴ As the title suggests, *Growing Pains*' original impetus came from the difficulties of negotiating the minefield of motherhood and the problems of making parental decisions about the control, freedom, and safety of children.⁵ The video commences with a car slipping on an icy driveway in a snowy suburban scene juxtaposed with grainy aerial footage of buildings showing plumes of black smoke seen through crosshairs, accompanied by the sound of a helicopter. Through overheard conversations we encounter intimate slices of daily family

life, reminiscent of the contents and tone of a personal journal. A

shift in the parent-child relationship is relayed through Pagurek's son's first unaccompanied airplane flight across Canada at the age of twelve. We hear a man's voice ask, "What are you worried about?" and a woman's reply, "I'm not worried about his ability, but about the usual things—child abductions, plane crashes." The domestic dialogue is immediately followed by the forceful explosion of a building under rocket fire.

the same time, the video's focus on the domestic life of the

Growing Pains establishes a haunting sense of imminent threat in the urban environment by using parallel cinematic language. Shots of the suburban home and garden frequently mimic the pans and zooms of the military surveillance footage, while complex layering and montage moves imagery and sound back and forth from one side of the screen to the other. The seductive colors and textures of gardening activity during four seasons, along with the destructive intrusion of slugs, are contrasted with intense military surveillance and combat footage that escalates to the horrific tracking and shooting of human beings from the moving perspective of a helicopter gunship. It is a scene that becomes all the more disconcerting as the sounds of automatic weapons and matter-of-fact dialogue between airborne gunners and their commanding officers are heard.

Pagurek's work creates connections between geographically separate worlds and the people that reside in them. It also raises questions about the relationship between warfare and "acts of security" there required to maintain our privileged lifestyle here.

JUDITH PARKER is an Ottawa-based art historian and arts administrator.

NOTES 1. The text in the press release for the exhibition reads, "Contemporary military footage from the United States war with Iraq." The *Growing Pains* video credits the source as Digital Video and Imagery Distribution System (DVIDS). The DVIDS website FAQ section describes it as a public service paid for by the U.S. Department of Defense with the content created by U.S. military personnel, agencies, and contractors in Iraq, Afghanistan, and throughout the world. 2. Author conversation with the artist, March 13, 2010, in Ottawa. 3. The prints in the "High Value Target" series range in size from 28 x 76 inches to 77 x 44 inches. 4. Cheryl Pagurek, Artist's Statement, *Growing Pains*, 2009; www.cherylpagurek.com. 5. Author conversation with the artist March 13, 2010, in Ottawa.

Above
High Value Target 2: We've got a runner (2009) by Cheryl Pagurek