

PASSING PRESENCE

By Tracey Warr

The following essay on artists Ackroyd & Harvey was published in Ackroyd, Heather & Harvey, Dan eds. (2002) *Afterlife*. London: Beaconsfield / Arts Admin, np. A few copies of the book still available from <http://www.artsadmin.co.uk/artists/ah> and <http://www.beaconsfield.ltd.uk>

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For the last ten years Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey have been using grass as a living photographic medium. Conventional photography captures a present moment and in an instant turns it into the past. Photography sets up, in effect, not a perception of the being-there of an object... but a perception of its having-been-there.¹ Ackroyd and Harvey's photography, on the other hand, is without closure.

Exploiting the light-sensitivity of young growing grass, they imprint photographic images on to grass grown vertically, so that the image is on the length of the blade, rather than dispersed over the tips. As the grass grows, the image becomes sharper. The further away you stand from the image, the higher the resolution – the more distinct it is. But time is, of course, embedded in the fragility of these chlorophyll apparitions. We know that the image will fade, the grass will yellow and die. The gradual disappearance of the image from vision, memory, life, is implicit in what we are looking at. Ackroyd and Harvey are giving photography a performative charge. As Peggy Phelan has pointed out, performance is about disappearance rather than preservation. Performance plunges momentarily into visibility in a maniacally charged present and disappears into memory.² Ackroyd and Harvey's work is a potent evocation of presence and presentness. It briefly delays the passing present but eventually both medium and representation mimic their subject and fade away.

Alongside their photographic work with grass, Ackroyd and Harvey have also been making architectural and spatial interventions with grass. *The Other Side*, made in Italy in 1990, was the first of a series of architectural interventions altering and engulfing structures with grass. In this work they grew the grass up the interior walls of a vaulted room. *Grass House*, 1991, in Hull, was a derelict house covered with a green skin. Their environment, *The Undertaking*, 1992, was made underneath *The National Theatre* of the Palais du Chaillot in Paris. where a labyrinth of tunnels leads to the city's ancient catacombs and cemeteries. Here, they lined the walls, floors and ceilings of passages and stairways with grass, evoking both the claustrophobia of the open turf-lined grave and a sense of life renewing and springing up again. Footsteps worn in the grassy stairwells bore witness to time and memory.

In *Theaterhaus Gessnerallee*, Zurich, 1993, grass was grown over the entire exterior facade of a building, emphasising the outlines of its classical proportions through the blanket of grass. In *The Divide* (Wellington, New Zealand, 1996) they split and separated a derelict building and grassed the vertiginous walls of the narrow divide. Like Gordon Matta-Clark's severed buildings or Rachel Whiteread's House,

Ackroyd and Harvey bring these buildings into the consciousness of the viewer in the form of ghosts – their pasts temporally remote. But they are also given new life becoming verdant abstract sculptures.

In 1996, Ackroyd and Harvey collaborated with Pierre d’Avoine Architects on the Host interventions in Venice. The fact that the city is relentlessly undermined year by year by its canals, prompted them to create and exhibit lumps of plaster – pummelled under a dripping tap for ten days or holed like cheese in a stream for four days – which displayed the effects of water over time. In their work nature becomes a performer. And this performance by nature is even more pronounced in Ackroyd and Harvey’s photographic grass work. It began as an accidental discovery in their first architectural intervention. Having left a ladder leaning against the growing grass wall, they found that its image had been imprinted. They began to explore the capacity of grass to record either simple shadows or complex photographic images. The haunting presence of the emergent organic image was and still is quite revelatory to us.³

In 1997, with support from a Wellcome Trust Sci-Art Award and subsequently a NESTA grant, Ackroyd and Harvey started working with scientists at the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research in Aberystwyth to explore the possibility of preserving the image longer. Professor Howard Thomas and Dr Helen Ougham were working on a stay-green grass, studying leaf aging and developing techniques for controlling the enzyme that degrades chlorophyll as a leaf dies. During the course of their collaboration with the artists they have advanced hyperspectral imaging which allows them to study minute colour changes in grass and a prototype stay-green grass seed which is growing in trials at the moment. In 1998 Ackroyd and Harvey made *Mother and Child* using staygreen grass and then dried it for exhibition in Santa Barbara, California. This process lasts longer than their earlier grass photography but still fades eventually, maintaining the concern with transience and presentness in their work.

These grass photographs recall the strange magic of early images made by photography pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot. He placed an object on paper sensitised with silver salts and then placed both in the sun. When the object was removed, the exposed paper retained the silhouette of the object. The frustration of capturing and then losing the image as it faded led him to seek ways to fix the image. In the 1920’s Man Ray adopted a similar technique with his Rayographs or Photograms and in 1950, Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil made Blueprints in which Weil’s nude body was placed directly onto light sensitive paper.⁴

Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. .. the physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection.⁵

In the fixed photograph there is a predatory, acquisitive instinct at work – an appropriation, a commodification, a stealing of souls. The fixed photographic image evinces a desire to hold on to things,

an attachment to visibility. The camera has been theorised as a tomb, the photograph as a form of death. Things in process become images of frozen moments, artefacts of the past.

Ackroyd and Harvey have developed a deviant form of photography, without closure. Their works briefly stabilise the elusive and transient, and then let it fade away. Instead of the impression of having been there, in their grass photography we experience presence as fleeting present. Imprinting the human image on the living medium of grass they succeed in conjuring presence and presentness, in a celebration of the living moment. At the same time, reminding us of the inevitability of grass, image and subject fading away.

Ackroyd and Harvey's grass photography makes literal the idea that pervades Thomas Hardy's writing that Nature is both a mute witness and an inexorable contributor to the tragedy of human transience. And verdant Nature rolls on, recycling, regenerating while we must imagine a world eventually without us in it. Confrontation with our own mortality emphasises the intensity and vitality of the present lived moment. Ackroyd and Harvey's choice of subjects is celebratory rather than morbid – the lined faces of the elderly who have lived long, a family picnic, mother and child. In *Sunbathers*, 2000, exhibited at Exit Art, New York, both subject and medium are soaking up light. In their imprints of the human face and body on grass Ackroyd and Harvey collide the surface of the material with the subject, mutability with the indexical.

Lush, green grass, saturated with light and water, is a symbol of life, fertility, abundance. The vegetable resurrection myths of the Green Man, Osiris and Balder celebrate the regenerating cycle of life. Plant photosynthesis gives us life by producing oxygen, but grass grows lushly too on our graves. The association of the human body with grass reduces us to temporary coagulations of matter and consciousness, a mere flow of flesh through food chains⁶ Like the skull, grass is a *momento mori* – all flesh is grass⁷ – an image of the inevitable corruption and decay of all living matter.

Ackroyd and Harvey's use of grass as a photographic medium is an indexical practice, rather than a representational methodology. In their grass works there is a continued physical relationship with the subject. Physical traces – stains, footprints, body casts, shadows have all been identified as indexes rather than symbols.⁸ In Marcel Duchamp's ten foot wide painting *Tu m' (You/Me)*, 1918, cast shadows of his readymades, including the bicycle wheel and the hatrack, were projected onto the surface of the canvas. In other indexical works, Piero Manzoni marked his inky thumbprint on eggs (*To Devour Art*, 1960). Bruce Gilchrist's enlarged thumbprint was tattooed on his own arm (*Transmutations*, 1996) and relayed to an audience both as visual performance and as the sound of his pain, through the use of a galvanic skin resistance meter. In her essay, 'Notes on the Index: Part 2' Rosalind Krauss describes a performance by dancer Deborah Hay in which she did not dance but instead delivered a monologue to the audience, insisting that she was there. In their performance, *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-86), Marina Abramovic and Ulay sat in immobile silence, over a total of 90 days, making the same mute point. These

are all indexical documents of presence, to which can be added Ackroyd and Harvey's grass photography where presence and presentness is momentarily slowed.

For their new work, *Afterlife*, at Beaconsfield, Ackroyd and Harvey have captured their human subjects on a nearby zebra crossing in Vauxhall. The portraits of these passers-by are imprinted larger than life onto screens of growing grass but are not just pictures of other people in an unusual medium. Looking at these green images striding through the gallery and life, we see our own reflections caught briefly in the act of passing on.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Rhetorique de l'image*, *Communications*, no. 4, 1964, p 47.
2. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London, 1993, p 147.
3. Heather Ackroyd, Dan Harvey & Professor Howard Thomas, 'The Ephemeral in Focus', Royal Society Lecture delivered at *Creating Sparks*, Victoria & Albert Museum, 17 September 2000.
4. Helen Molesworth, 'Before Bed', *October*, 63, Winter 1993, pp 69-82.
5. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 1' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1985, pp 203-06.
6. Manuel DeLanda, 'Nonorganic Life' in Jonathan Crary & Sanford Kwinter, eds. *Incorporations*, Zone, New York, 1992, p 149.
7. The Bible, Isaiah ch 40: vv 6-8.
8. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)*, trans. Thomas Repensek, *October* 29, Summer 1984 and Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 1 and Notes on the Index: Part 2' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, *ibid*, pp 196-219.