





David Misteli
Experience Reframed: Detachment and Meaning
in Jürgen Beck's *New Deal*

1 Sometime in the early 1950s, or so the story goes, before the New Jersey Turnpike was completed, sculptor Tony Smith took three art students for a night ride on that colossal construction site spanning the swamps and meadows of New Jersey. Apart from—or maybe complementary to—the obvious thrill of having done something rather dangerous and illegal, the drive was, as he later noted, “a revealing experience.” Although the largely artificial landscape they drove past that night was not commonly considered art, he remarked that it had done something for him which art never had: it liberated him from the many views he had about art. “It seemed,” Smith said, “that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art. The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized.” And he concluded his account with an enigmatic judgement that underlined the unique quality of that occurrence: “There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.”¹

Judging from the first pages of Jürgen Beck's *New Deal*, you can tell, of course, that the underlying motivation for this introductory anecdote could be twofold irony. First, it seems ironic to open an essay on photographs taken in Los Angeles with one of the great myths of East Coast minimal art. Second, there's a touch of irony in the myth's main event, namely the experience of a speedy car ride—an experience that, as Beck's photographs taken amidst LA's congested traffic indicate so well, is rather hard to come by in Los Angeles. A metropolis famously built on the idea of the automobile as the primary means of transport, its traffic ironically matches an unmapped yet socially recognized experience.²

All wittiness aside, I don't mean to suggest that Jürgen Beck's *New Deal* references minimal art, or Tony Smith for that matter. The compiled photographs fall into two groups: eight pictures show interior elements of the onetime luxury department store Bullocks Wilshire, and another eleven pictures were taken on the city's freeways from the artist's car. At first glance, both offer separate semantic relations to the book's title. For one thing, Bullocks Wilshire, completed in 1929—the year of the infamous stock market crash known as Black Tuesday—invokes Franklin Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal, US measures to curb the devastating economic

and social consequences of the Great Depression. On a different note, the buildings that line the roads in Beck's car pictures—what Robert Venturi referred to as “decorated sheds”—exhibit primarily the blatant advertisement and sale of unbeatable “new deals.”³

2 Beyond the photographs's distinction by way of motifs, there is also a graphic difference in the way the two groups have been integrated into the book; the large, rimless photographs showing street scenes are spread across two pages whereas the smaller pictures taken in Bullocks Wilshire feature a noticeable black margin and are fitted to a single page. Quite unlike the spreads where the pictures and their support coincide, the wide black margin accentuates the interior photographs by way of visual distinction and simultaneously detaches the images from their context, the book itself.⁴ However, the formal interplay of accentuation and detachment not only describes the formal structure of the Bullocks Wilshire photographs in the book, but also denotes their functional principle with reference to the department store, the remnants of which they depict.

What we see in these pictures are details. In the first photograph, a structure, presumably a sliding door, displays an astounding array of geometric forms. Wavy and diagonal metal inlays are aligned with horizontal and perpendicular ones featuring mellow but lush copper and brass tones. As with the forms and their fabrication, the worn-out, smudgy surface of the wood reveals that this abundant luxury has seen better days. Characteristically, Beck's setup doesn't allow us to look at the door in its entirety. Shot from an angle, the picture clips off the upper parts of the door. And while some of the floor and the doorframe's right edge are plainly visible, only a shadow indicates the likely left edge of the door.

Other photographs feature similar close-up views of interiors. A small, marble revetted recess, for instance, was shot from an angle so that the interior mid-surface mirror reflects the marble, triggering an illusion that accentuates the stone's dainty pattern and at the same time flattens the picture, enciphering its spatial coherence by aligning it with the perceived frontal marble panel above the recess. Three additional photographs take into account architectural elements protruding or receding from the walls or ceilings without revealing their architectural context. Yet another displays colorful geometries stretching across the floor in a play of light and shadow. The final two interior photographs, however, give the least orientation, spatial

coherence, and context. The second to last picture shows a pastel-shaded gradient that appears to be part of a tray ceiling; the final photograph displays alternating angular forms in red, yellowish, and grey-blue that appear to make up the pattern of a fitted carpet. The flat angle at which the ceiling's steps break, their unlikely coloring, and the nearly complete absence of shadow, make it look rather like an abstract, patterned print.

The last two might be extreme examples. Even so, they pointedly outline Beck's approach to Bullocks Wilshire's interior design—engaging with the formal qualities encountered in its materials, patterns, and architectural details. In fact, he seems to induce them by means of his photographic technique. Interested in the material surfaces of his findings, Beck subjects them to a twofold abstraction: He optically accentuates his motifs, throws them into sharp relief, and hence renders them in a stark minimalism. But as a result he also flattens them, like the example of the tray ceiling showed. He collapses the motifs's spatial coherence into the formal structure of his compositions. Abstracting them also means detaching them from their architectural—and hence historical and social—context. As if they were photographs of but not really *about* Bullocks Wilshire, the excessive presence of the interior details simultaneously signifies absence.

Although the building—located on 3050 Wilshire Boulevard in Central Los Angeles, now the administrative venue of the Southwestern Law School—constitutes a very specific place with historical and social implications, Beck's photographs barely give a clue as to their being taken at this site. In this sense, the room beyond the sliding door in the first photograph, or the people (their class, their identity, their relation to the building—are they working there or are they patrons?) that might have used it or still use it today are not just absent from the photograph but the picture itself, which by way of its formalist aesthetic assertively detaches them—the room from its attendees and the door from the room. In the end, there is nothing left but the concreteness and sobriety of Beck's documentary gaze on the sliding door's inlay patterns.

3 In his “Notes on the photographic image,” Jacques Rancière called this “the tension between [...] minimalism and the signification that it concealed.”⁵ Beginning with Roland Barthes's notion of the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* as a photograph's “affective force, irreducible to transmission

of knowledge,” as opposed to the *studium* as its informative content, Rancière describes the *punctum* as “the transfer of an absolute singularity, that of the represented subject, to another absolute singularity, that of the viewing subject.” [9] Contrary to Barthes, however, Rancière qualifies the oppositional difference between *punctum* and *studium*. Drawing on Barthes’s example of Lewis Hine’s photograph of two mentally disabled children, he argues that Barthes’s description of this image’s *puncta*—the little boy’s Danton collar and the girl’s white-bandaged finger—depends on the viewer’s knowledge just as well as the *studium* does. Both follow the same formal logic of identifying informative content in the picture, but while the content of the *studium* relates to the image’s social and historical significance, the content of the *punctum* relates to the viewer’s personal knowledge. What differentiates the *studium* from the *punctum* is therefore the affective force of the latter, which strives “to privatize” the meaning of the image.⁶ [9]

Since Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* is to be thought of as a eulogy to his dead mother, the privatization of a photographic image’s meaning can first of all be assigned to the author’s personal grief. For Rancière, however, *Camera Lucida* also indicates a second, less personal grief, namely “That of the gaze that endeavoured to tie the appreciation of the beauty of an image to that of the social reality that it expressed.” [11] If the privatization of meaning through the *punctum* implied the repression of photography’s shared legibility, the idea of photography’s objectivity—its causal connection to reality, and hence its constraint on artistic intention—was expected to secure its collectivizing potential. The *Sachlichkeit* of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s series of disused water towers and steel mills speaks to us of this plight most pertinently. And Jürgen Beck’s work does, too—not only in terms of the *New Deal* photographs’s disused motifs, but also through his style of documentary preservation and his approach including seriality, uniform framing, and the containment of the artist’s subjectivity. However, if Beck’s pictures speak of this objectivity, they also testify to its failure. That is, the failure of objectivity’s collectivizing potential, in particular. Beck’s commitment to an abstractive, seemingly documentary gaze certainly prompts us to appreciate the beauty of Bullocks Wilshire’s interior designs. Yet, as previously mentioned, their precise *form* appears to detach the pictures from any expression of social reality. Despite, or rather due to, their supposedly objective form, they eclipse all historical and social meaning that might

otherwise excite a collectivizing experience on the part of the beholder and become signs of absence in promoting this very absence (or signification of absence) as the complement to their beauty.

Therefore, in testifying to the failure of photography's objectivity, Beck's photographs of Bullocks Wilshire cannot escape from what Rancière dubbed "the tension between [...] minimalism and the signification that it concealed." That is, they cannot escape the tension individually. But in the context of *New Deal*, these photographs do not constitute singular works; Jürgen Beck embedded them in a series of works with an entirely different group of photographs in order to form one *œuvre*. Paradoxically, however, the black margins visually distinguish the interiors, both from the other photographs and from their shared support. In comparison to the car photographs, where picture and page distinctively concur in size, it becomes apparent that the margins formally and structurally detach the interiors from both the other photographs and the book. At the scale of the book, it is through their framing (what I have previously called accentuation) that the interior images duplicate the "form of detachment" which otherwise shapes each one individually. Remarkably, this means that the signification of absence implicit in each of the interiors becomes explicit as the signification of detachment at the scale of the book. In other words, the signification—the absence of social reality—that is concealed in Beck's Bullocks Wilshire photographs turns into what they indeed come to signify as they appear in *New Deal*: detachment itself becomes the actual subject matter of the Bullocks Wilshire interiors.

4 A bulky, grey Honda SUV slides into the frame from the left. It appears to be very close—an impression heightened by it being partially cut off. The license plate suggests that the car originates from the Los Angeles neighborhood Van Nuys and that the name Miller is of some significance to the car's owner. Beyond that, however, the car remains a bulky anonymity. Despite its proximity, the tinted windows prevent glimpses into the car's interior, and as if to underscore the car's opaque entity, the Honda's fiery red brake lights kindly indicate to keep one's distance. Now another car, a black sedan, slides in from the right side and, in between both, a red Kia flashing its lights. On the side of the road, next to a rusty, disused advertising light box, stands a supposedly temporary, white site hut with two small, barred windows. And while Kylo Ren's red lightsaber

on Disney's Star Wars park billboard in the background punctuates the prominence of red lights on the scene, the vintage light posts that line the road do not really seem to fit into this unpicturesque environment—especially, since they are facing the sidewalk (as if anybody ever walked there).

This is a description of the second car picture in *New Deal*, one of eleven that Beck shot from his car while touring the city. In contrast to the smaller interiors, these photographs are tremendously anecdotal and expansive. They show the vast kind-of-urban jungle that is Los Angeles. Certainly not all of the photographs emphasize the inhospitable traffic-filled landscape as strongly as the one described above. Others let us admire the beauty of the city's urban infrastructure, including details like street signs and electrical wires that at the hands of Jürgen Beck's observant camera become subtle yet distinctive compositional features. Here and there the photographs show remnants of early twentieth-century Los Angeles, not just at the scale of light posts but of built structures. For example, Arthur E. Harvey's American Storage Company Building, built only a year earlier than Bullocks Wilshire, turns up easily recognizable due to the large "Public Storage" sign; almost inconspicuously, Sears's Art Deco tower emerges from behind a skyline of signs and buildings.

As much as these photographs entertain a drifting view of the city—be it the downtown skyscraper contours emerging from the smog in the distance or a 99 Cents Only Stores's peculiar pink overhang—these views remain inextricably tied to the immediate vicinity of Beck's rental car. No photograph is more indicative of that than the one with the bulky Honda, where the glare on the trunk of the red Kia makes explicit that what these photographs display is perceived through a windshield. However, by choosing the car as the basic premise for photographing Los Angeles, the artist introduces a perspective on reality that itself bears the mark of detachment. Whether it is his own car, a Honda, Toyota, Ford, Kia, Lexus, or even a Porsche, the ubiquitous presence of cars in these photographs, with their self-contained metal frames and red brake lights, strongly indicates a "socially well-recognized" reality of detachment—a reality where an extensive portion of daily life is spent in a sea of cars sharing idle time. Nonetheless, tinted windows and advanced AC systems contrive a high degree of separation from the other commuters within the same environment.

In combining Bullocks Wilshire interiors with these car photographs of Los Angeles's streetscape, Beck submits a striking allegory of detachment, in which the *form of detachment* of the interiors is assigned an actual social reality symbolized by the monadic presence of cars in congested traffic. In doing so, *New Deal* also manages to restore what Barthes thought lost, namely the ability to tie the appreciation of beauty in an image to the appreciation of the social reality that it expresses. Even if that tie urges us to acknowledge an uncanny reality.

5 The essay began with Tony Smith's assumption that his experience on the New Jersey Turnpike could not be framed, only experienced. I wish to conclude with some remarks on why Jürgen Beck's *New Deal* is relevant with respect to this statement. There is, quite obviously, an observation to be made: Smith's account blatantly ignores the "framed condition" of his experience; were it not for the car, its windshield, and its speed, he could not have had it. So, despite his claim, Smith's experience had been determined in reality by an elaborate frame(work) all along.⁷ Beck's photographs, in turn, acknowledge that perceiving the world through a car window means quite literally accepting the framework that structures that very perception. Moreover, Beck attempts to connect that framework with the signification of detachment.

What follows is fundamentally challenging because it is about aesthetic paradigms. By ignoring the framework of his Turnpike experience, Smith implied that it was direct, immediate, and more personal than the experience of art could ever be (for him). In a sense, Smith's non-"frameable" experience therefore parallels Barthes's *punctum*: both indicate a deeply personal encounter by which the meaning of an image, a work of art, or a view for that matter, is privatized. This kind of meaning, however, while it might be disclosed to other people (something that Barthes does very beautifully in *Camera Lucida*), must remain singular. That is, it cannot become true for somebody else or be disputed, it is affective and private, and as such also detached from the object that gave it meaning in the first place. This delineates an aesthetic paradigm in which the meaning of a work of art—what it expresses—is collapsed into the emotional and personal response that it causes. In this way, meaning becomes inherently plural because anyone can "possess" one, yet singular because it remains unique.⁸

This might not sound too bad. Indeed, Beck's photographs offer a plentitude of *puncta*, an abundance of opportunities to privatize their own meaning; and certainly, that is not something that could or should be prevented. The extraordinary achievement of Beck's *New Deal*, however, is that it simultaneously refuses to collapse its meaning into the plural singularity of privatization. Instead, because it is about aesthetic and social forms of detachment, it proposes a single meaning that cannot be "possessed," only "understood." That is to say, it is not absolute or private, but rather political and public; this meaning can be conveyed, disputed, doubted, or possibly adopted. The fundamental condition of its legibility, however, is the mode of "framedness"—from the book's layout itself to the black margins and the implicit frame of the car. This is what connects the ways in which Jürgen Beck ties the beauty of his photographs to the experience of detachment that they express.

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1 Quoted from Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 157–158. Originally published in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), 12–23.

2 Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London: Penguin Press, 1971), 36.

3 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 88.

4 The artist implements a similar distinction when exhibiting the photographs. While interiors have frames, the street photographs are directly plastered to the wall, cf. Swiss Art Awards 2017.

5 Jacques Rancière, "Notes on the photographic image," *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2009), 8–15, here 12 (further references in the text).

6 The line of thought introduced here is inspired by Walter Benn Michaels' writings on photography and neoliberal aesthetics. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), chapter 2.

7 Cf. Stephen Melville, "'Art and Objecthood' Word by Word," *nonsite.org* no. 21 (Spring 2017), section 2. Accessed online March 27, 2018: <http://nonsite.org/article/art-and-objecthood-word-by-word>.

8 Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011), 434–472, esp. 450–452.