I’LL BELIEVE IN ANYTHING

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BFA, Photography & Film, May 2009, Virginia Commonwealth University

A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of
Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

May 15, 2011

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Abstract

I’ll Believe in Anything

This thesis is an extended artist statement that focuses on a body of work created within the Master of Fine Arts program at The George Washington University. My recent photographs are appropriated from U.S. government documents regarding UFOs from the mid-twentieth century, the only time in American history that the government officially studied the phenomenon. I specifically use photographs that have been degraded by mechanical reproduction and are now no longer recognizable as documentary photographs. Because of their abstract quality, I discuss the photographs in terms of visual languages that were prevalent at the time of their creation, particularly Abstract Expressionism, as well as recent developments in the discourse surrounding non-representational contemporary photography. The archival images I have selected have been slightly manipulated, emphasizing and exaggerating the visual association I have created so as to suggest a history in which American abstract art and the UFO phenomenon are figuratively intertwined.
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I’LL BELIEVE IN ANYTHING

Late at night in the darkness of my bedroom I listen to Coast to Coast AM on my radio. Every evening listeners from around the world call in to discuss current events, conspiracy theories, and the supernatural with host George Noory and special guests. Despite being the most popular late-night radio show in the United States, these diverse perspectives on the paranormal construct histories that often oppose official accounts of the past, through investigation, speculation, and faith.

Fascinated by the concept of secret or alternative histories, I decided to conduct my own investigation into paranormal phenomena and found Project Blue Book, the United States Air Force's study of unidentified flying objects from 1947 through 1969. Filed in the National Archives and well known in the paranormal community, the study has been pushed to the margins of mainstream history because the Air Force concluded that UFO phenomena posed no threat to national security. However, the fact that several hundred cases remain unsolved makes the project a source of constant reinterpretation by believers and skeptics.

What I find most striking about Project Blue Book are the photographs – a combination of military and civilian documentation. However, referring to them as documentation is somewhat misleading. Most of the photographs have become heavily distorted due to photocopying and subsequent transfer to microfilm, turning them into enigmatic images. They are no longer windows through which one can gaze into a fixed moment in time. Rather than acting as a tool for confirming that an event took place, the Project Blue Book photographs destabilize history through their illegibility.

Many of the degraded photographs unexpectedly resemble Abstract Expressionist
paintings, as if reproductions of the paintings had been put through a photocopier. Out of the thousands of images in Project Blue Book, I have created an archive within an archive by appropriating photographs that recall the work of specific Abstract Expressionists as well as photographs that possess what Theodor W. Adorno calls the “unintelligibility” of modern art.¹ For example, my piece *Untitled* [Fig. 1] unmistakably resembles Barnett Newman’s “zips” while another, *Fairfield, Ohio - October 27, 1963* [Fig. 2], contains nothing more than a circle within a black border, frustrating attempts at interpretation. I have enlarged the photographs appropriated from Project Blue Book to a scale that hints at the massive size of many Abstract Expressionist paintings, emphasizing and exaggerating the aesthetic connections I have made.

In *Signs of the Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, Donald Kuspit addresses abstract art as a “novel expressive ornament.”² That is, because of its non-referential quality, abstract art depicts something unrecognizable, something that has never been seen before. Kuspit notes that the unintelligibility of abstract art displays “an implicit disbelief in the traditional ways of understanding, traditional codes of meaning.”³ Although Kuspit is referring to modernist painting, a challenge to traditional ways of understanding and seeing also exists in contemporary photography. In his essay “On the Conditions of Production of the Multi-Sided Pictures Works (2006-2009),” artist Walead Beshty points out that “Pictorial photographs are abstractions. They are ‘abstracted’ from a real world and turned into a two-dimensional form… Producing pictorial photographs is

¹ Donald Kuspit, *Signs of the Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 116.
² Ibid, 115.
an active choice; there is nothing inherent about the medium that requires it."\(^4\) Scholar and curator of photography, Lyle Rexer, uses the term “undisclosed images” to describe photographs that offer “a vision of things that have not yet been seen.”\(^5\) Rexer proposes a type of photography that short-circuits the viewer’s attempt to fully understand what he or she is looking at. He writes:

> Photography creates objects that have no past or present, even though they solicit precisely an interest in historical circumstances. Our tendency is to make something of the photograph, to try to say immediately what it means and how it works and why it was made. But the images are more disjunctive than that, and often frustrate such impulses. Other kinds of art, which of course always solicit us on many levels never make so insistent a claim and often deliberately fight against it, resorting to the languages of emotion and direct experience. We are exhorted not to think or interpret but to think and feel…the photograph can yield non-data, images of some thing or event rendered completely ambiguous.\(^6\)

Undisclosed images go against the grain of rational interpretation through a lack of reference to reality. Their ambiguity allows for a visual experience that subverts a photograph’s symbolic and narrative potential.

Made unintelligible through archival neglect, the low-quality reproductions of the original Project Blue Book photographs now exist in the realm of the undisclosed image. They are “non-data.” Like paintings of the New York School, form is their content. However, I do not wish to rid the Project Blue Book photographs of their historical context. The fact that Abstract Expressionism was the dominant American avant-garde art form during the Project Blue Book era demands attention beyond the aesthetic relationship I have set up. While the resemblance between my appropriated Project Blue

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\(^5\) Rexer, 11.

\(^6\) Ibid, 18.
Book photographs and Abstract Expressionist painting may be coincidental, it has led to unexpected associations between modern art, politics, and the paranormal.

Both Abstract Expressionism and Project Blue Book had a unique relationship to the Cold War. As many art historians now know, Abstract Expressionism was used as a “secret weapon” to demonstrate American freedom of expression in the hopes that it would establish the U.S. as a dominant, global cultural force and prevent left-leaning intellectuals from sympathizing with communism. In 1947, the State Department organized and paid for "Advancing American Art," a touring exhibition. This exhibition included several New York School painters and sought to combat “Soviet suggestions that America was a cultural desert.” That same year the CIA was created and immediately took up the task of promoting America’s cutting-edge cultural treasures. In 1950 the CIA set up the International Organizations Division under Thomas Braden, who had been the Museum of Modern Art’s executive secretary from April 1948 to November 1949. Founded and funded by the Rockefellers, MoMA had been involved in U.S. foreign policy since the early 1940s. Nelson Rockefeller left his position as president of MoMA in 1940 to become President Roosevelt’s coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, but still “dominated the museum throughout the 1940s and 1950s, returning to MoMA’s presidency in 1946.”

Under Rockefeller, MoMA played an important role in the CIA’s secret cultural Cold War project by curating and organizing

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8 Ibid.
exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom.\textsuperscript{10}

At the very same time the CIA was orchestrating exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism, it was also searching for answers about UFOs in collaboration with the Air Force. During the early 1950s there was a concern that the mysterious blips on radar screens and objects seen in the sky were aircraft or weapons that had been secretly created by the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{11} In 1952, the year Project Blue Book officially began, the CIA formed a study group that concluded whatever their origin, UFO sightings could be used by the Soviets not only as a way to capitalize on widespread panic in the U.S., but also to gain an advantage during a surprise nuclear attack by “overload[ing] the U.S. air warning system so that it could not distinguish real targets from phantom UFOs.”\textsuperscript{12} These historical circumstances set the stage for a loose, open-ended narrative in which Abstract Expressionism and the UFO phenomenon “seem to coincide in a meaningful manner.”\textsuperscript{13}

In his 1958 book \textit{Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies}, Carl Jung discusses the UFO phenomena in terms of the “psychic situation of mankind.”\textsuperscript{14} Writing his study during both the height of the UFO craze and the escalation of the Cold War, Jung suggests that the two are related:

\begin{quote}
In the threatening situation of the world today, when people are beginning to see that everything is at stake, the projection creating fantasy soars beyond the realm of earthly organizations and powers into the heavens, into interstellar space, where the rulers of human fate, the gods, once had their abode in the planets.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Saunders. \\
\textsuperscript{11} Gerald K. Haines, "CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90," \textit{Central Intelligence Agency} 14 Apr. 2007. \langle https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/97unclass/uf0.html\#author1\rangle. \\
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 14.
\end{flushright}
For Jung, the UFO is a symbol “representing, in visual form, some thought that was not thought consciously.” The flying saucer is a modern analog of the mandala, a symbol of totality and protection, representing the desire to be saved from mutually assured destruction by a higher power. However, Jung admits that his psychological interpretation does not fully explain the phenomenon. It does not account for the fact that UFO sightings have coincided with radar echoes and have been photographed. Only one thing is certain: “something is seen, but one doesn’t know what” (Jung’s emphasis).

My piece The Sublime is This [Fig. 3] is a diptych comprising two framed eight inch by ten inch black and white photographs, side by side. On the left is a semi-legible photograph from Project Blue Book depicting three people standing in a field with their backs turned to the camera, appearing to be looking up that the sky. On the right is a photograph of Barnett Newman and an unidentified woman also with their backs turned to the camera, facing Newman’s painting Cathedra (1950). They gaze upon the overwhelming work, free from “the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, and myth” This sort of vision is what my Project Blue Book photographs demand of the viewer. Commenting on Barnett Newman’s essay, “The Sublime is Now,” Jean-François Lyotard writes:

Newman’s now which is no more than now is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it. Rather, it is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness forgets in order to constitute itself…When [Newman] seeks sublimity in the here-and-now he breaks with the eloquence of Romantic Art but he does not reject its fundamental task, that of

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16 Ibid, 19.
17 Ibid, 6.
bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible. The inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another world, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens…the picture as occurrence or event is not expressible, and it is to this that it has to witness.19

The photographs I have selected from Project Blue Book speak to Lyotard’s idea of the inexpressible – something was photographed, “but one doesn’t know what.” The experience of viewing the photographs remains a phenomenon that never fully reveals anything other than what is being seen “now.” Even in their larger historical context the photographs are unintelligible, allowing the viewer to construct a history based on images that bear little resemblance to the reality that conventional documentary photography is expected to reflect.

References


1. Evan Hume, *Untitled*, inkjet print on dibond, 42” x 54”, 2011
2. Evan Hume, *Fairfield, Ohio – October 27, 1963*, inkjet print on dibond, 42” x 65”, 2011
3. Evan Hume, *The Sublime is This*, two 8” x 10” framed photocopies, 2011
GUIDANCE TO UFO PHOTOGRAPHERS

1. Have camera set at infinity.

2. Fast film, such as Tri-X, is very good.

3. For moving objects shutter speeds not slower that one hundredth of a second should be used. Shutter and f-stop combination will depend upon lighting conditions: dusk, cloudy day, bright sunlight, etc. If your camera does not require such settings, just take pictures.

4. Do not move camera during exposure.

5. Take several pictures of the object; as many as you can. If you can, include some ground in the picture of the UFO.

6. If the object appears to be close to you, a few hundred feet or closer, try to change your location on the ground so that each picture, or few pictures are taken from a different place. A change in position of 50 or 60 feet is good. (This establishes what is known as a base line and is helpful in technical analysis of your photography.) If the object appears to be far away, a mile or so, remain about where you are and continue taking pictures. A small movement here will not help. However, if you can get in a car and drive 1/2 to a mile or so and take another series of pictures this will help.

7. After pictures of UFO have been taken, remain where you are: now, slowly turning 360° take overlapping, eye level, photographs as you turn around. By this technique the surrounding countryside will be photographed. This photography is very valuable for the analysis of the UFO you have just photographed.

8. Your original negative is of value. Be sure it is processed with care.

9. If you can, have another negative made from the original.

10. Any reproductions you have made for technical study and analysis should be made from the original negative and should be printed to show all the picture including the border and even the aperture holes, if your film has them.

5. Evan Hume, CIA – Guidance to UFO Photographers, 8" x 10" framed photocopy, 2011
UFO PHOTOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET
(TO BE FILLED IN)

1. Information on camera.
   Name of camera:
   Camera Manufacturer:

2. Date pictures were taken:

3. Time of day pictures were taken (to the nearest minute, if you can):

4. Direction you were facing at the time of photography (North, South, East, West, etc.):

5. Your location at time of photography (indicate location on map, such as road map, and show direction you were facing when pictures were taken):

6. The direction of each 360-degree ground orientation picture: (this can easily be shown on a map or sketch).

7. Sketch of details of area where you were standing when photography was taken; include such things as telephone poles, fence posts, buildings, etc.:

8. Where was the original negative processed and when:

6. Evan Hume, CIA – UFO Photographic Information Sheet, 8” x 10” framed photocopy, 2011
7. Installation view – *I’LL BELIEVE IN ANYTHING*
8. Installation view - *I’LL BELIEVE IN ANYTHING*
9. Installation View – I’LL BELIEVE IN ANYTHING
10. Installation view – *I’LL BELIEVE IN ANYTHING*
11. Installation view – *I’LL BELIEVE IN ANYTHING*
12. Installation view – I’LL BELIEVE IN ANYTHING