



John Lehr: The Island Position Interview

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John Lehr's "The Island Position" (MACK) is a proposition about the state of America as seen through its edifice of its commerce. At once alarmingly beautiful due to its saturated color and formal sensibilities, the work when contemplated on a whole delivers an important, if darker set of sensibilities. The facades of shops, the techno-utopias of the call centers or mobile phone sales points fade into boarded-up strip mall windows and the implications of a plastic and temporary commercial culture begin to appear.

Reminiscent of Luigi Ghirri in the handling of his color palette and perhaps with an echo of Walker Evans (Bethlehem Wireless) with his picture post card interest in early modernity, the landscape Lehr manouevers through appears at times banal or safe, but offers further mediations about how we navigate the façade of capitalism in America and what it means to be lured into and churned out of its clutches. It is, but one of a series of important books that is documenting the changes in America in the early Twenty-First Century. Rarely are we able to witness in such pristine execution the tip of the iceberg of decline-what better place to start than with the investigation of America's commercial decay. Lehr provides a lush and deceptive key in which we may begin unlocking the potential of America's commercial decline.

BF: Your book is really phenomenal. I am still trying to wrap my head around pieces within it and contextualize the whole. The way to perhaps start this discussion is to get a general sense about what the title refers to-it has an advertising, which means certain form of economy that relates to the image. Can you tell us about that background and if you personally have a background in marketing or advertising or if it comes from a theory background? Which came first...the images or the context? I think often artist like to say they start with a concept, but I personally find it equally if not more interesting when an artist performs as automata, selecting, canvassing sites etc and then putting the images into context as it forms by gathering images first....

JL: Thanks, Brad. When I began this work I had no idea what I was after. I'm drawn to photography as a medium because it is what allows me to make certain kinds of discoveries. I have nothing against a conceptual way of working, but what interests me as an artist is stumbling onto something through a process that is open to intuition and serendipity. I love the idea that I can begin my day as a photographer not knowing what I want to mean but through the process of photographing I can uncover something. It's often the pictures themselves, not my ideas that drive things forward.

I look at the pictures and eventually one of them takes on a different level of significance. The pictures help me understand what I want to mean. That's how this project began, with a few photographs that stayed with me, and pointed towards some new possibilities. As I began to make more of them I realized the pictures have a lot to do with the commercial facade as a sign that advertises individual aspirations and anxieties just as much as it advertises what is for sale inside. I knew I wanted a title that would point towards advertising, and a pay-to-play type of capitalism so I started doing some research and found the island position. I don't have a background in marketing or advertising, the title simply came out of my research, which was instigated by the pictures. I do think my background growing up in a working class family in Baltimore has had a huge impact on my work, and what seems to interest me as an artist and a citizen.

BF: There are a number of images in your book that remind me of a few various strains within the

history of photography. If I ignore the incredible color for the moment, I am looking at a primary effect of image-making in which the signs in the image become the impressing structure of relation more than the overall photograph of say the shop front, which yields them to artists like Walker Evans played with in his images of billboards and signs. Berenice Abbott also had a formula for working with New York in this manner photographing the city, the barber shop, the cigar "indian" etc, which was quite interesting because at this time, we also had the rise of Edward Bernays, Sigmund Freud's nephew and the Godfather (and all variants of what that term implies) of advertising marauding the economic and visual landscape of the first half of the American Century.

All signs point towards distribution of economics in many cases with photography. Your work comes at a very particular time and we will focus on the color in a bit, but for this inquiry, I want to ask about how you see things in America right now?

The images that you have been led to by your intuition happen to be a model for severity along the frontlines of the American landscape at present. We have an empire teetering back and forth over a line of regression and progress (as it has been if not morally, certainly economically) for nearly one hundred years. The mood is shifting somehow, though being from Baltimore, I suspect you have been aware of it for some time, but the capacity in which the images you are making to speak volumes of our current American post-century is very adept and needed. The technological aspects and governance of what you choose to photograph are a huge element in the work-cell phone stores, computer related shop fronts and then the closed plywood edifices that wander in front of your lens all point to this very unusual precipice in which Americans are finding themselves perhaps or at least have found yourself questioning means of production and economy by pairing images in the book between plastic throwaway technology and boarded up shop fronts. The human backstory or element is deceiving non-apparent. Can you explain how it feels to be focusing on this aspect? Do you walk and feel emptiness when you come across these images or excitement? Confusion? And why have you chosen to forgo human presence?

JL: I'm so glad you picked up on this aspect of the work. I suppose it goes without saying, but the intuition and serendipity I'm mentioning is of course guided by my particular experience. Things feel quite dire in America, and they have for almost as long as I can remember. The empire has crumbled and in many ways what you see in the pictures are the outward displays of people participating in a system that will never deliver on its promises. The varying levels of attention, neglect, hope, and desperation that are visible on the facades reflect individual responses to an almost perpetual state of economic crisis. Right now that crisis has a lot to do with the disappearance of the physical marketplace. I include big box stores here as well. Everything is shifting to an online purchase model and with that I think there is a cultural shift taking place. Daily interaction is becoming increasingly virtual, and we are turning more and more inward. I've tried to make these pictures embody that transition from a physical culture to a virtual one.

The process of moving through the world and making the pictures is often heartbreaking. There is just so much failure and neglect everywhere I go. But there are also moments of great surprise where I see evidence of perseverance, humor, or a knowing nod to futility. All of this points back to human presence, even though there are no figures in the pictures. For this work I wanted to picture an economic system, a social contract that is disintegrating. I'm of course aware of how this impacts the body, and there is great work being made in the area, but I'm after the scaffolding itself. The structural bones on which we hang our hopes and dreams.

BF: The techno-utopia of these things have such a short shelf life it seems. I remember in the 90's pyramid schemes and phone cards were the manna by which we were embracing the future in which value was already moving towards something of a non-existent materiality in so much as that currency, checking books etc were just on the cusp of reduction towards debit cards and ATM machines.

There is also the decline of consumer architecture most notably in the American mall, the invention of Alfred Taubman inspired by the arcades of Paris- networks where the consumer organ was able to live

in architectural host to shop and spend and keep the larger organism of the economy alive in neo-liberal Regan-inspired times. It of course has given away to outlet and strip mall fringe architecture, even cheaper Chinese goods and a host body in pieces. These are some metaphors mixed amongst the parallels of your work and the sickness of the post-War American dream, which indeed seems to be crumbling. In effect what you are doing is taking the pulse of the dream as it erodes towards a flat-lined beep.

Was most of this work created in Baltimore or possibly in the periphery of the city? And on a point of technicality, the work you have in the book has a very certain technical aspect to it, its brightly lit and very enticing to the eye due to the saturation of color? How are you making these images and how do you manage to process this condition, which I can only assume is a by-line for the topics we have thus covered. i.e. the saturation and the consumer sensibility of the color palette seem to reflect the urges of consumerism and advertising as they are very desire-oriented....

JL: The pictures were actually made in about a dozen states across the country, mostly in the south and along both the east and west coasts. The fact that they look as though they could have been made in the same American place and yet lack some deeper geographic specificity is intentional.

It's important to me that the subjects are rendered in the pitiless light of mid day. This kind of light is difficult to manage in color but it gets closest to the even illumination I want in the final prints. I'm trying to make a picture where every surface is active, and straining for attention. In this landscape everything needs to be noticed and desired. I make the pictures with a 4x5 view camera. I chose that camera specifically for its ability to torque perspective and volume. If you look a little closer at the pictures you'll see perspective isn't quite working the way it should and specific surfaces or objects often take on an unfamiliar sense of volume. That's something I'm doing in camera, when I'm in front of a subject, and I see this as the first of several acts of interpretation that happen in my process. Later after I scan the film and make an initial print there is a great deal of work going on in the computer to break down certain hierarchies of attention. There's also a significant reconsideration of color going on where I am trying to coax out relationships I feel are important. There is a quote I learned from reading George Saunders after I had been making the pictures for a couple years: "Capitalism plunders the sensuality of the body". When I read that line I knew that was what I had been striving to articulate through all these technical decisions.

BF: Very interesting points here. First, the idea of using the swings and tilts of a 4x5 to draw attention or distract from points in the frame has the technical merit of what the rails were intended for, namely to correct perspective or to manipulate it to focal points-on the other hand, one can also use this to disorient and to play against the natural phenomenon of human perception, which plays nicely into the images you create. It renders the optics as claustrophobic and at points unnatural to the human experience as the referents inside the frame, notable the archaeological objects of capitalism-the signs, the plastic etc.

Secondly, you mention that the images can be made anywhere and a second position to that is the exacting nature of the elimination of people-to be alone as it were with the signs and symbols of economy. It creates a space in which by removing "secondary audience and spectators" the viewer becomes the primary audience of what is in the frame. Instead of wandering through a crowded street and seeing the image-object in the frame with others, we are left to be its sole audience and vice-versa. Some of this must have been the technical choice of the camera etc, but I also have to ask you to why you declaratively or perhaps in a softer way, demonstrably decided not to include people. Why? In doing so and including people-bereft images like this, we have to question a world of images without people to activate them....

JL: Yes, another thing I'm trying to do with those kinds of camera movements is to destabilize the rationality one expects in both the subject and in the method of depiction. All of this leads to the kind of frenetic isolation you are referring to above, where both the subject and the spectator, or viewer, confront one another individually. On a basic level this is simply a way of enabling a different kind of attention. One has to consider a single place, and the myriad of decisions that

led to its creation. On another level this hyper-singular kind of picture places the viewer back into a cycle of discovery, observation, desire, and judgement that is central to the model of capitalism I am depicting. Viewing the picture completes this cycle, activates those material decisions, and implicates our own bodies and minds as part of the model. We are the people missing in the pictures. We are the spectators.

BF: Yes, this spectator as activator precarity of condition is essential for the optimization and enabling of your work I think. It reminds one of how we function as spectator within the transgressive or perhaps aggressive landscape of consumer symbol and advertisement. The second skin of photography only pushes that rhetoric further and delivers unnerving questions about the state of how we consider parity of experience with the recording condition of the photograph. This of course is the base of photography's struggle as concept in the modern world. I wanted to check in on one last thing before we conclude. This work is very much of the now. Its condition and its ability to provide a conversation on America, but also the loosely generalized terms about the economy of surplus images in a capitalist environment creates a temporal condition as well and I am very curious what this work looks like in twenty or thirty years. Do you see yourself continuing this work or monitoring the pulse we mentioned in America with this? I could see a catalogue of this somehow, a critique in a Sears and Roebuck catalogue format. Perhaps however this is a one off for you?

JL: I'm glad you asked this because it's something I've thought a lot about as the project has progressed and as I finalized the book. I'm curious to know whether this way of working could be a way of continually addressing the social and cultural shifts we've been discussing, instead of freezing this particular moment in amber. There is one picture in the book, 1455, 2018, that was made just before the book went on press which, at least for me, signals such a potential. In it we see an image of an image, or a sign of a sign. As you look more closely at the picture it becomes clear that the entire facade is a digital facsimile that is printed onto a vinyl tarp. There is an algorithmic quality to the image I sense when I see the botched scale, and the haphazard extension of the parking lot "reflection". When I made the picture I thought of it as an accelerated end point to what I had been doing but as time has gone on I've begun to think of it as a fascinating and terrifying new beginning.