

# THE STEREOSCOPIC LENS ADAPTER

PHOTOLANGUAGE: NIGEL GREEN, ROBIN WILSON



Nigel Green/Photolanguage

## photo fieldwork and fragmentation

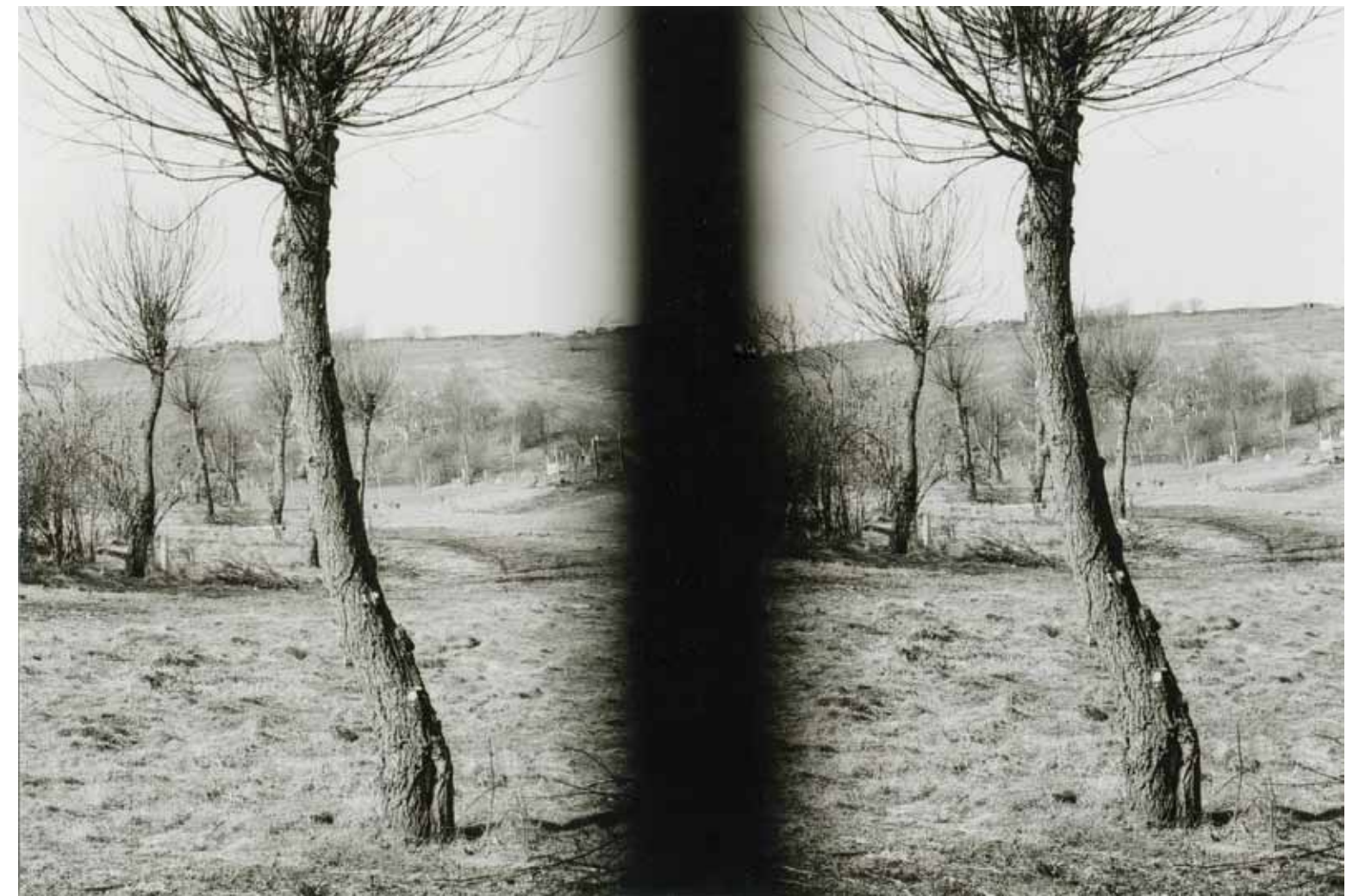
In 1924 F E Wright of the Geophysical Laboratory of the Carnegie Institute advocated the use of the three-dimensional effects of stereoscopic imagery in geological fieldwork, writing of its ability to enhance the visual account of 'the story of the field relations between certain features'. Wright was drawing attention to the sometimes inadequate results of conventional photography within geological research and its 'revisualisation' with regards to photography's capacity to record a strong enough 'impression of space' and of the 'spatial relationship between details' within the field. Noting that the taking of stereoscopic imagery is often associated with expensive, specialist equipment and impractical for the already over-burdened geologist in the field, Wright proposed that a sufficient result can be obtained through the careful taking of near-duplicate images with a conventional camera, and then provided the mathematical equations that would support effective stereoscopic imaging.

We write (nearly one hundred years later) to advocate the misuse of stereoscopic technologies within the field of urban and architectural field work, in order to destabilise and re-invent 'the story of the field relations between certain features'; to make utopic space through architecture's 're-visualisation'.

The constraints on equipment and cost in fieldwork outlined by Wright are familiar to us but have been improved by a more recent invention: the stereoscopic lens adapter. This is a relatively cheap addition to a standard 35 mm camera lens – a configuration of dual mirrors within a small and light-weight housing, facilitate the taking of dual images on a single 35 mm negative. The version we use is a 1980s Pentax Stereo Adapter.

The first time we used the adapter as a tool for speculative field work was in response to the water meadow landscape of Christiania in Copenhagen during a project called *Surface Tension* (Brandon LaBelle, 2007), and the peripheral landscapes of the Swedish city of Malmö for the first phase of the project *Land Use Poetics* (Maria Hellström Reimer, 2009). Both of these projects were brief, with sites explored, work made and exhibited within a window of approximately five days. The Stereo Adapter was part of a tool kit aimed at the production of a radical imagery with little time for processing and evolution.

The work from *Land Use Poetics* was exhibited in the Museum of the Sketch (*Skissernas*) in the university town of Lund and dedicated to preparatory sketches for public art, sculptural works and monuments. Although largely photo-based, we thought of the works we presented there as 'sketches' – propositional, but for a 'monumental' or 'sculptural' outcome that would remain absent (the preparatory imagery for a never-to-be-realised future work). This role of the photographic image as assuming a transitional status (not a definitive, referential one), also underpins our use of the Stereo Adapter in a broader sense, for we do not use it for the production and display of stereograms (the completed '3-d' image manifest through the additional use of stereoscopic viewer), but for the qualities of the 'raw' print itself, as a duplicated image. We value it in its in-between state, for the way its lenticular duplication intervenes into and distorts conventional photographic space.



Stereo print of Spillepeng, Malmö, 2008

Nigel Green/Photolanguage

In Malmö, the Stereo Adapter perhaps found its most pertinent use as a response to the landscape of Spillepeng, a new landfill peninsula projecting into the Baltic Sea, created with bagged waste from Malmö. Sections of Spillepeng had been landscaped by a team from the Landscape Laboratory of the Agricultural College at Alnarp. The dual stereo image posed a nexus of critical questions around the notion of new land, amplifying the sense of unease in the navigation of a terrain that was not simply being worked, but in the act of being made anew – its substrata, surface and its animate life all established little more than two years before our visit. Although Spillepeng was too new to be on coastal maps at the time, it was a model extension to the indigenous ecologies and habitats of Southern Sweden.

An image of a shallow valley with young willows, with a season of regrowth after pollarding, captures powerfully the newness of the land, one which has not yet completely settled from the industrial processes of its creation. The stereo print amplifies a sense of disjunction in the terrain: on one hand, the photographic image itself could be said to resonate with a history of art of the worked landscape such as Van Gogh's sketches of Dutch farming landscapes around Nuenen, or Peter Henry Emerson's documentations of the Norfolk Broads (both from the 1880s), even Rembrandt's etching *St Jerome Beside a Pollard Willow* (1648). On the other hand, the effect of the doubled image within the stereo print suggests processes of replication, cloning, the artificial; a terra forma, a sci-fi landscape in which the assumed relationship between the natural and man-made has to be completely reassessed.

A distinctive feature of prints using the Stereo Adapter is the black border in the centre of the dual image, which occurs as a result of a blind spot between the two mirrors. This is not a crisp demarcation between the two, as with a stereo camera, but an unpredictable void in vision that distorts the inner margins of both. With practice one can mitigate the effects of the blind spot and limit its encroachment on the two halves of the image. However, with our interest in the intermediate phase of the print itself, we embrace the distortions of the central void as a generative zone of interference. It is a central frame that is rogue; that appears as a hostile inversion to the luminosity of the photographic image. It is a third region of image-making within the print, where the indexical realism of the photograph is in fatal dialogue with abyssal depth and obliteration.





Robin Wilson/ Photolanguage

Nigel Green using the Stereo Adapter in La Courneuve, Paris, 2018

After a quite long period of inactivity the Stereo Adapter was reengaged in 2018 for field work in the outer districts of Paris. In research for the *Brutalist Map of Paris* we had come across the work of Renée Gailhoustet and Jean Renaudie at Ivry-sur-Seine town centre. Renaudie's language of 'difference', of the cut and rotated plan in endless mutation, produced the well-known Étoiles D'Ivry. Just to the south east of the town centre is Gailhoustet's lesser known Spinoza housing complex of 1971, akin to a Le Corbusian Unité, but with the public spaces of the undercroft divided not by regular pilotis, but by a series of monumental tectonic slabs with arches and circles cut-out, a visual play of recessional screens and intersecting spherical geometries creating a sculptural space of promenade with diverse opportunities for repose and for sheltered socialisation. Our use of the Stereo Adapter at Ivry was driven by a curiosity as to what the stereo would do to an already highly complex architecture. We were working toward a particular curatorial dissemination, an exhibition in the foyer of London's Barbican Centre, *Re-wiring Brutalism*.

Stereo print of Spinoza Housing Complex, 2018.



Nigel Green/Photolanguage

Whereas the earlier stereos, taken and printed using analogue methods, were left either untreated or subject only to light interventions (such as the addition of a spot stains of coffee), the stereo prints of Ivry were processed digitally with additional layers added in Photoshop. These in part respond to the architecture of the stereo print itself, as much as the architecture represented with it, re-enforcing its internal frames and borders, and adding colour tints to accentuate the effects of the doubling of the image. Within the example shown here of Cité Spinoza, we see a core at the centre of the image where a detail of the undercroft's structure and the fenestration of a community building remains legible, relatively stable, but doubled. In the outer regions and margins of the image, however, dynamic effects of compression, overlap and transposition take hold. The Stereo Adapter has re-moulded space radically, the hazard of mirror-play and its distortions introduce a phantom tectonics and a theatrical sense of mobility to this space of vital structure. Pilotis dissolve before they meet the ground, and are eaten by colour as if by acid. At the foot of the image a doubled procession of heavily pruned botanical forms appear, jutting out of the lower, black frame of the stereo, grotesque and gesticulating, like Surrealist marionettes.

In hindsight, with these monstrous botanical denizens at the base of the image, the grotto-like enclosure of the wider scene, the tints of green and cerise, we can associate this revisioning of Cité Spinoza with a curiosity from the popular cultural history of stereoscopic imagery: the French Diableries of the 1860s to, roughly, 1900. These were modelled, miniature fantasy scenes of the underworld recorded in stereoscopic photography, peopled by devils in revelry, served by an army of skeletons and young women. The scenes were enhanced with back-lighting and watercolour tints.

The 'devilry' of our undercroft imagery, realised through the accidents of mirror-play, is not diabolically inspired, but perhaps critically associated with rogue spatial impulses akin to the underworlds of the Caceri d' invenzione series of Piranesi, which indeed may well have been a distant reference in the minds of Gailhoustet and Renaudie themselves. They share a drive to break existing rules of spatial order, to overturn hierarchies of attention through disorientation, to actively assert the image as a site of spatial mutation which challenges that of architectural production.

If there is a latent critique within the disorientations of our stereo prints, it is not so much directed at the architecture of Gailhoustet or Renaudie, as at the culture of imaging that currently disseminates such architectures on social media, and which defines a fetishised, global media spectacle of brutalist icons. For *Re-wiring Brutalism* we positioned Brutalism within the radical technologies promoted within the Barbican's wider 2019 season of curatorial projects, called *Life Rewired*. We proposed Brutalism as a spatial technology that reached an apotheosis with the work of the likes of Renaudie, the implications of which are yet to be fully appraised. Rather than presenting examples of Parisian Brutalism as a conventional architectural, curatorial portrait, we wished to introduce the work of Renaudie and Gailhoustet as part of a fragmented sampling of brutalist spaces, which included imagery of Chamberlin, Powell and Bon's Barbican itself, presented in-situ. The Stereo Adapter was the primary tool of fragmentation and the production of a comparative and defamiliarised aggregate of Brutalist space.

In the article 'Photography and Fetish' the film theorist Christian Metz developed some thoughts on the differences between photography and film regarding the issue of fetishisation. What emerges from his differentiation is a powerful sense of the force of the photographic frame as the imposition of an 'immobility' and a 'silence' through which still photography asserts its authority over the referent. He wrote, 'Photography is a cut inside the referent, it cuts off a piece of it, a fragment, a part object, for a long immobile travel of no return'.

In Metz's understanding, the notion of the 'fragment' alludes to the referent of the photographic image itself, that which is presented as the centre of viewing and attention, but which, by definition, is formed through the exclusion of other things (the wider contingencies of a relational reality beyond the frame). This, we suggest, corresponds to the design object-centred structure of much architectural photography prevalent in professional architectural and social media. The raw prints issuing from the Stereo Adapter cannot be said to restore the relational complexities of a wider context beyond the architectural, object-centre, but they do actively fragment and disturb Metz's 'immobile' 'fragment'.

For information on the Diableries see, <https://www.londonstereo.com/diableries/index.html>

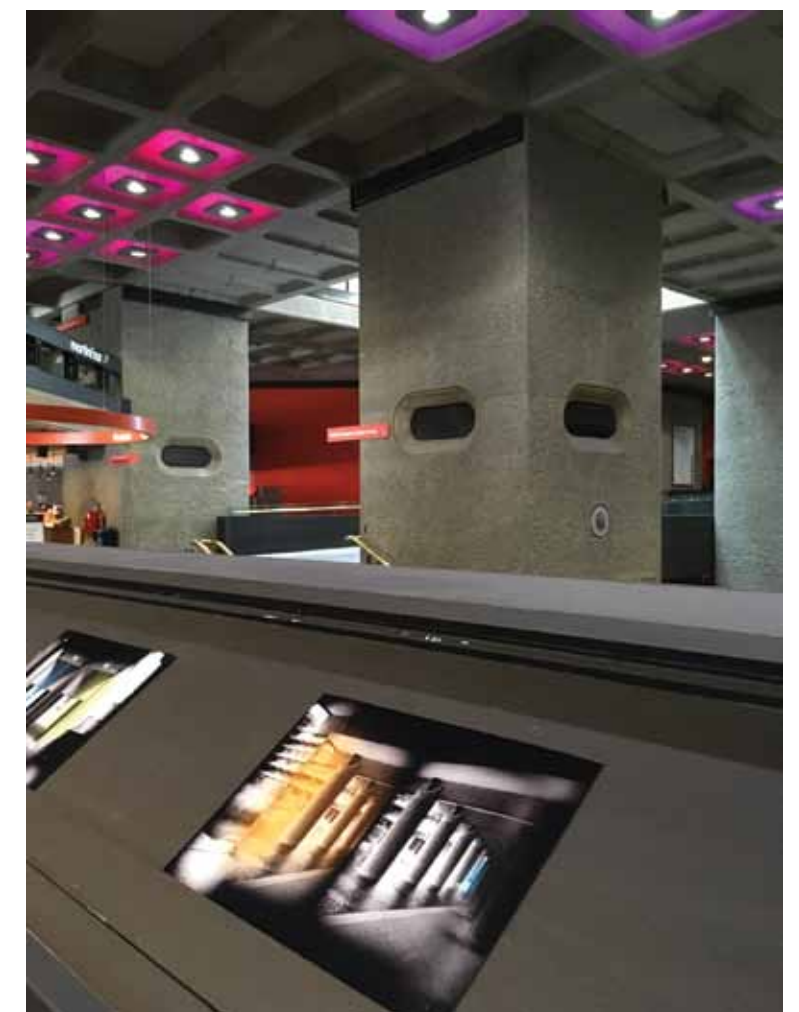
Christian Metz, 'Photography and Fetish', *October 34* (1985), pp. 81-90



Nigel Green/Photolanguage

Robin Wilson installing work at the Barbican Centre, 2019

Detail of Photolanguage's exhibition at the Barbican Centre, 2019



Nigel Green/Photolanguage



The opportunities for stereo duplication within the Barbican were diverse, reflecting the range of interior, exterior and transitional public spaces at different scales that one has access to there. I wish to describe here one image of a northerly section of the complex, within the undercroft colonnade space of the apartment blocks around Beech Gardens to invoke through description the potential of the raw print of the Stereo Adapter as a productive reordering and fragmentation of the architectural photograph, toward a reinvention of, to recall F E Wright's words, the 'spatial relationship between details' and the 'story of the field relations between certain features'.

One of the building's massive jack-hammered pilots, a signature component of the public spaces of the Barbican, is the 'central' referent of this image, but its centrality is, of course, immediately displaced and doubled. Its role in a stable and legible order of perspective depth within the colonnade and the garden's rectangular lake is fragmented, and we see instead an ambiguous cluster of four columns. The doubling of the nearest column now suggests the cruder structural system of a sub-flyover space, whereas in the mid-ground beyond, columns are subject to varying levels of dissolution, with one almost withered and substituted altogether by the central black 'frame'-void of the stereo print. Distortions at the base of the print introduce an uncertain threshold, a blurred jetty of mirror play, confusing the boundaries between solid ground and water. A radical transformation manifests at the right-hand-side where the mirror mechanism of the adapter imports a slice of urban detail from outside the expected scope of the frame: one of the three iconic Barbican towers, Lauderdale, is compressed into a skeletal slice of balcony and frame, reduced to a quarter of its actual thickness but still coherent as architecture and reminiscent of the slimmest of Hong Kong's high-rise dwellings. This right-hand region of the image is configured like an arched aperture, or even a transparent column, and overlaid with a faint screen of dirtied orange, encouraging our gaze out to zones beyond the limits of the Barbican, where a blander, more recent office street façade pushes into the frame. The fetishised homogeneity of the Barbican enclave is broken by a sudden reminder of the wider contexts and conditions of urban modernity.

Stereo print of Barbican Centre, 2019



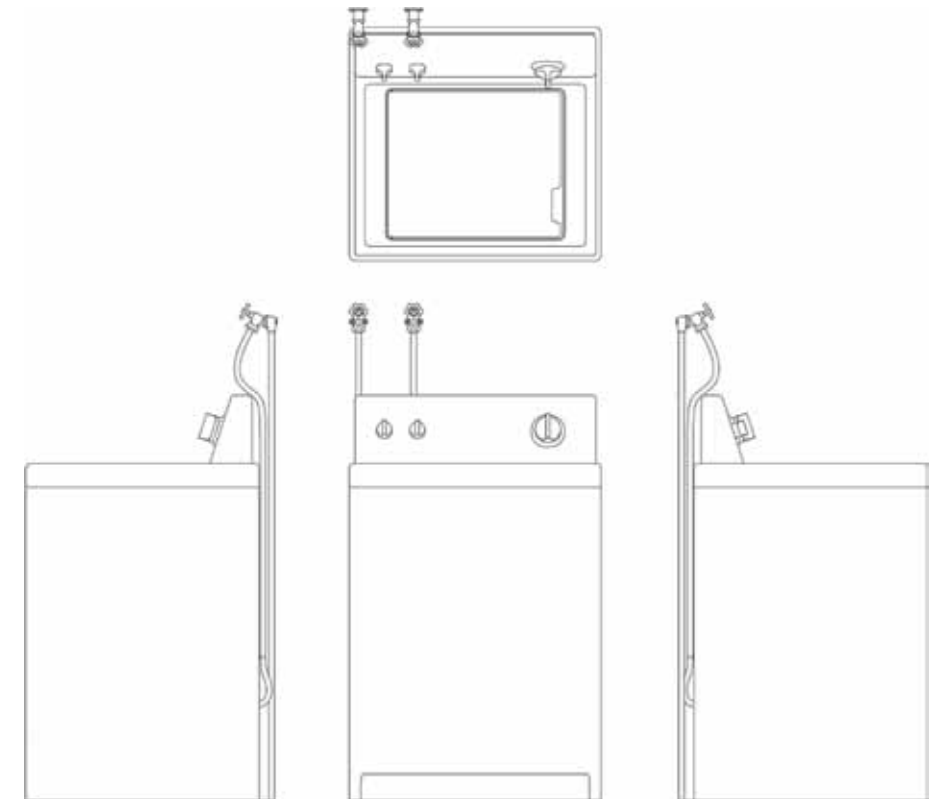
Nigel Green/Photolanguage

# SM 9711031

STEPHANIE DAVIDSON

My washing machine sits in the corner. It is not attention-seeking. Dutiful, reliable, loyal, more of a friend than a machine. This is a portrait.

Kenmore washing machine  
SM 9711031, age unknown



Stephanie Davidson