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BOOK

A-Historica Williamsburg

PETER KLOEHN

AMERICAN HISTORY REINVENTED

by Warren Neidich

(New Images/Aperture, 1989, \$19.95)

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Warren Neidich's history series is a photographic attempt to interfere with historical reference by raising issues relevant to historical, journalistic, and social documentation. Subjects include various living museums: Williamsburg, Virginia; Plymouth, Massachusetts; Old Salem, North Carolina; and other sites that contribute to our American, historical identity.

Although Neidich's images are not appropriated, the style and look are; they send a signal that what we are seeing is a kind of historical document, possibly a *carte de visite* from a family album or a studio portrait from a museum archive. The duplication of formal styles, the photocliches (empty stairway and open door, picket fence, etc.) are just specific enough to act as referents to other photographers and photographs, while the tonal quality of the prints suggests techniques of the past (another of the photographer's conceits since these actually are albumen prints).

It is significant that Neidich's focus is less on revelation of this 'identity' and more on the mechanisms of our belief system pursuant to the coding of photographs and their reception as reality. By narrowing his focus, he avoids the more difficult task of trying to unfold the American flag to reveal fact behind fiction, or reality behind symbol — a seemingly futile project if one is to embrace the theories of Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations*, which place symbolic identity within the realm of the 'hyperreal'. Such a task is more appropriately undertaken by the revisionist historian (and who better to bury artifice, exaggeration, and bogus documentation than these 'undertakers' of history). Although photography alone is not responsible for the distortion of facts that contributes almost irreversibly to the unreality of symbol, Neidich is well aware of its immeasurable influence.

Since the invention of photography some 150 years ago, the camera has been used for everything from ethnography to propaganda. The vast production (and reproduction) of images is no less ranging in iconographic content than is the interpretation of that content which is based on a differential assumption of truth. This assump-

tion depends primarily on two factors: one, the amount of objectivity inherent in the photographic process (as extreme a range as mechanical video stills of bank robberies to composed and highly manipulated advertising photographs); and two, the extent to which photographs reinforce existing belief systems. Some photographs show the influence of these two factors more than others.

Neidich's work is *designed to* disguise reality.

In the early 1900s, Lewis Hine's social documentary photographs helped define a reality that brought about some social reform; Timothy O'Sullivan's and William Henry Jackson's photographic records of the West as part of various geological surveys contributed to frontier expansion; and Margaret Bourke-White, in a more sophisticated age of photojournalism, photographed Nazi suicides to bring the reality of war home to the viewers of *Life* magazine. Such images manipulate our view of the world — even more if that world is distant from our own. They reinforce the notion of the photographer as objective recorder of facts (respectively: the plight of ghetto children in factories; the majesty of America's unknown frontier; and the face of the enemy) — all powerful signifiers influencing existing beliefs. However, one picture is *not* worth a thousand words or a thousand pictures that might describe more accurately our reality. Like the instant images from television's nightly network news, such photographs should be received at face value, as surface information, as parts of a whole — no more, no less. For if allowed their appeal to emotion, curiosity, and quick judgment, the images may (and usually do) subordinate contradictory information, exclude the larger sociology, detract from the accuracy of the historical record, and promote stereotypes and false coding mechanisms.

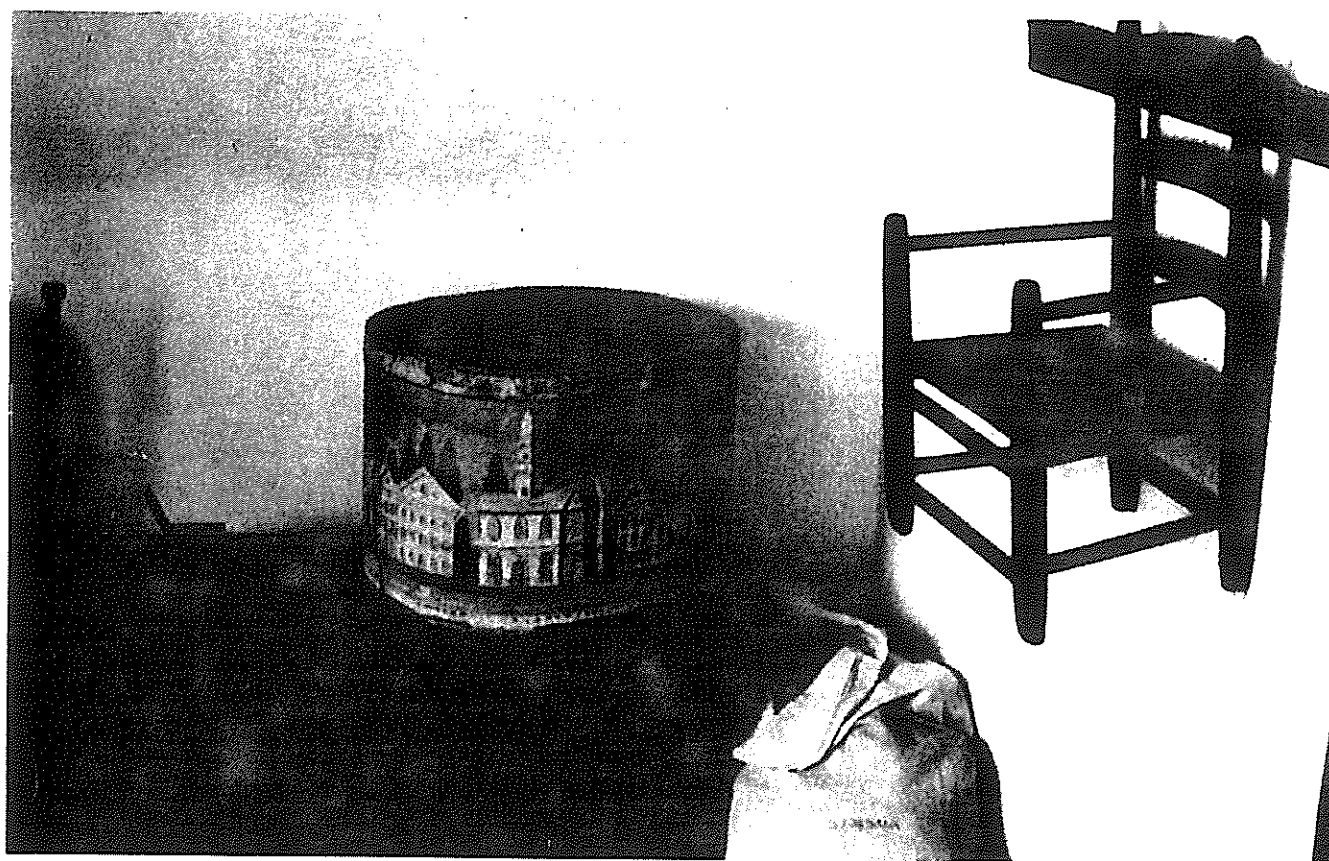
With an understanding of the way photographs function, Neidich's work is *designed* to disguise reality. He presents to his audience small albumen prints of historical sites and scenes. At first viewing we are taken back into time. We are looking at vaguely familiar pictures of our American history. This is the first device he uses in the process of destructuring the way we assimilate information. Hollis Frampton, in *A Talk on Photography and History Time, Space, and Causality* refers to the importance of photographs in this process of assimilation:

Not even the illiterate can imagine a world without written language, and a world without photographic imagery is, for us, unthinkable. If it often seems to us, as we think about thinking, that we think in words, it seems as often, when we are not thinking about thinking, that we think, not merely in pictures, but in photographs.

On the surface, it is Neidich's duplication of style and technique that creates beauty and nostalgia, seducing us and directing our expectation of meaning. If the photographs appear to be old documents from an early history, soon we realize they are recent documents of contemporary events and places. The seduction referred to becomes a mere device of presentation — 'fakery' at the first level of reading that is subordinate to the larger intentions of Neidich's work.

In his book: *Hidden History*, Daniel Boorstin, historian and Librarian of Congress, explores things he labels 'pseudo events' that have shaped and continue to shape history. 'Pseudo-events' are staged media contrivances (mostly from the post-war era) that disguise reality and artificially create or exaggerate public opinion and, ultimately, effect history:

In the last half century a larger proportion of our experience of what we read and see and hear, has come to consist of pseudo-events. We expect more of them, and we are given more of them. They flood our consciousness. Their multiplication has gone on in the United States at a faster rate than elsewhere. Even the rate of increase is increasing every day. This is true of the world of education, of consumption, and of personal



De Stijl Chair, 1987 Albumen print, 8" x 10"

relations. It is especially true of the world of public affairs.

To broaden Boorstin's concept (but in no way to distort his basic premise), Neidich's photographs are also staged events, manipulated images of pseudo-historical sites, such as Williamsburg, Virginia, which, according to Boorstin, some academic historians not pleased with its restoration have called 'a harmless but amusing example of American vulgarity — a kind of patriotic Disneyland.'

Although Neidich's photographs are less concerned with swaying public opinion or calling into question the need for the architectural practice of historic restoration on a grand scale (which has more to do with questions of taste and sophistication), he is concerned with the conceptual process of how photographs can mislead, distort and confuse historical reality.

If there exists in Neidich's photographs a soft, understated look suggestive of beauty, even 'aura', there is, in sharp contrast, an ironic, arrogant, and certainly overstated aspect as well. The titles: *Tupperware, Rin Tin Tin, One Dollar, Just Like TV* are choices of words that quickly degenerate subject matter, place it in a context of pop culture with emphasis on consumer commodification and material consumption, and reduce a sophisticated reading to one of sarcasm and critical reproach. Furthermore, Neidich includes himself in some photographs, posturing in costume as part of the pseudo-history he is satirising. Again, this heavy-handed and self-reflexive distortion confuses meaning. Such fractures immediately create transference from the literal to the conceptual. From these devices we infer that the aesthetic seduction is a trap, that the brief social commentary on the institutions

involved is of minor thematic importance, and, more significantly, that they set the stage (in an ongoing theatrical performance) for Neidich's next trick, his primary concern — that of process: the technical process of making (or faking) photographs; the process of how meaning is ascribed through the manipulation of signifiers; and the process of creating paradox.

Neidich's devices of titling and the use of himself as a model are strengthened by his inclusion in the frame of found objects or the actual placement of contemporary artefacts to distort the sense of time. Placement of these 'foreign' referents in the context of the historical document has a similar effect to that of the advertising technique that manipulates meaning. Judith Williamson in *Decoding Advertisements* refers to a Benson and Hedges ad in which the pack of cigarettes is positioned in the foreground of a



Just Like T.V., 1987 Albumen print, 8" x 10"

historical scene:

The Benson and Hedges ads are teetering on the brink of historical representation, since they do refer to a time outside that of the subject's. Yet this iconographic past (Orient Express, Old Church) is still totally subjectivised — only given meaning through the idea of an individual's story. Real events, or objects connected with real events, are hollowed out, as with other referent systems, leaving only the interiority of the subject, an inside without an outside, denying 'objective' historicity.

Neidich employs other related techniques. He confuses our perception by artificially imposing parallax problems and stop motion device not possible with early cameras (these academic schemes are less successful since they depend on a careful scanning of the images and a sophisti-

cated technical knowledge). However, a careful reading does illuminate other perceptual trickery: occasionally, there is a reversal of left to right orientation which frustrates normal viewing procedures. And, more significantly, Neidich uses soft focus to further distort and disorientate our perception.

If, in consideration of these devices, Neidich's approach seems to rely on an excess of 'gimmickry' to produce 'fakery', then so be it. For in his often blatant attempt to deconstruct, Neidich tries to reveal some semblance of objective reality and some truth about the process that deceives that reality by requiring the viewer to strip away the layers of artifice that he, the artist, has created. How successful this approach is (or, for that matter, any other postmodern critique that uses the devices of deconstruction) against an overwhelming cultural-economic established order which

permeates all aspects of representation, subordinating truths to half-truths, is difficult to answer.

It may or may not be possible to deconstruct these layers of simulacra (Baudrillard defines three orders culminating in the 'hyperreal') or, more importantly, the 'abolished primary processes' that create such layers. Nevertheless, Colonial Williamsburg, perceived as a historical site, becomes for Neidich a site of historical simulation — a kind of fantasy which he, like the pathetic Quixote with sword (or camera) in hand, tries to penetrate by suggesting a point of revelation about the process that interferes with restoration of the real. Baudrillard writes in *Simulations*: 'Counterfeit and reproduction imply an anguish, a disquieting foreignness: the uneasiness before the photograph, considered like a witches trick. . .'