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## Necessary Fictions: Warren Neidich's Early-American Cover-Ups by Christopher Phillips

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Stratagems for forgetting. "They from the beginning announced that they wanted to maintain their way of life.... And we set up these reservations so they could, and have a Bureau of Indian Affairs to help take care of them.... Maybe we made a mistake. Maybe we should not have humored them in wanting to stay in that kind of primitive lifestyle. Maybe we should have said, 'No, come join us.'... You'd be surprised. Some of them became very wealthy, because some of those reservations were overlaying great pools of oil. And so I don't know what their complaint might be." (Ronald Reagan, in response to a question at Moscow University about the condition of Native Americans, quoted in Time, June 13, 1988.)

A childhood memory. Only a few days after Reagan provided students in Moscow with this hallucinatory account of the winning of the West, an item in the New York Times (June 5, 1988) reported that the designer Oleg Cassini planned a vast "Navajo Nation" complex in Arizona to repackage for the tourist industry the history, art, and culture of that apparently willing tribe. This odd conjunction of events sent me back in thought to the several summers, long ago, when our family paid regular visits to the Appalachian resort town of Cherokee, North Carolina. We were usually accompanied by a friend of my parents... a woman whose interest in the trip sprang principally from the fact that one of her own friends, a New York dancer, migrated to Cherokee every summer to earn a few dollars performing in a popular "outdoor historical drama."

Minus the feathers and war paint that went with his role as a leaping Cherokee warrior, Louis proved unremarkable, aside from a rasping Brooklyn accent and the purple sports car in which he raced around the mountain roads. I remember, though, being puzzled when I was taken backstage before one evening's performance, and discovered there an assortment of equally improbable characters donning their costumes and makeup. Very interesting, I thought, but where were the real Indians?

■ The play itself proposed a relatively bland answer to that question. Situated in a past so hazy as to be utterly remote from the concerns of the present day, it unfolded in a series of melodramatic incidents the tale of the Cherokees' encounter with the homespun agents of Manifest Destiny, their expulsion from their mountain homeland, and their arduous trek to a new, ostensibly happier home on the plains of Oklahoma. Nevertheless another, more ominous possibility was planted in my already suspicious ten-year-old mind each time we passed a crowded burger drive-in situated in the heart of Cherokee. It announced its specialty in brazenly flashing red letters that I can still see: Squawburgers.

Contra Curtis. It's from a similar unmarked crossroads of historical representation and popular memory that Warren Neidich's "Contra Curtis" photographs begin. Disinterred from the vast necropolis of American culture comprised of late-night TV's reruns of the pulp entertainment of earlier decades, Neidich's images are at once perfectly innocuous and

painfully provoking. All-too-typical examples of the estimated 17,000 acts of mediated mayhem witnessed by all of us who have grown up in the television era, these achingly familiar specimens focus on moments of ritualized violence directed against "Indians." Of course we know that these aren't real Indians being burned, shot, knifed, or burst asunder, but actors, actresses, and stuntmen dressed up for the part. These figures serve as stand-ins or surrogates for a "historical actor" long pushed off the main stage of American life, but preserved in cultural memory in the long line of phantasmic Others against whom any violence is permitted.

■ It's the way that such phantasms weave in and out of our culture's interlocking networks of personal memory, popular memory, and archival memory that furnishes the real subject of much of Neidich's work. But aside from this general predilection, "Contra Curtis" has a more specific target in mind. Neidich seems clearly to wish that these photographs be attached as permanently as a shadow to the famous body of work produced around the turn of the century by the celebrated photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis. Curtis's elegiac images of Native American tribes turned a benign paternal gaze upon the "picturesque" tribespeople whom he singled out, costumed, and directed for his camera. Printed (like Neidich's) on platinum paper, Curtis's photographs were circulated in lavish volumes and portfolios to such discerning patrons as J. P. Morgan and Teddy Roosevelt. Neidich, using images drawn from a later, less dis-

creet cultural sector, suggests the bloody historical preliminaries that were genteelly elided in Curtis's nostalgic account of a "vanishing race." Indeed, like that flashing red sign in Cherokee, his images disclose, behind Curtis's veil of tasteful exoticism, an oblique vision of the return of the historically repressed.

Cogito interruptus. Once the very embodiment of the qualities of objectivity, precision, and fidelity, the photographic image occupies an increasingly unstable place in the systems which today generate cultural memory. Certainly the photograph's partaking of the prestige of the indexical sign seemed until very recently to exempt it from the so-called referential illusion that had mired so many other sign-systems in the Slough of Undecidability. Only a decade ago reputable philosophers of history still argued that observing a Brady photograph of the Civil War was, for all practical purposes, equivalent to observing the historical scene itself.

■ But too often photographs convey a dangerously weak sense of the past... substituting a mute and fleeting commemoration for the more active, critical processes of remembering, interrogating, and understanding. Nearly three decades ago Alain Resnais in "Last Year at Marienbad" shared his suspicion that personal memory and photographic images might well lead in different, equally untrustworthy directions. By the 1980s, with the film "Blade Runner" (based on Philip K. Dick's novel) we find android "replicants" conspicuously outfitted with ersatz family snapshots, which provide

them with pre-packaged "memories" of a human past that blocks their discovery of their real mechanical origin. This film's implicit allusion to the human condition... still camped in Plato's cave... is hardly inappropriate as we move into the age of the digitally edited, electronically generated photocomposite: an image indistinguishable from a "real" photograph, an image which renders superfluous the remaining distinctions between photographic fact and fiction.

The pacification of the past. If the camera's images no longer compel unflinching conviction, they nonetheless retain their currency as the standard visual language of the spectacle. Where Warren Neidich's previous work evidenced a fascination with the possibility of fabricating ersatz historical photographs, "Contra Curtis" points not only to the structuring absences of the historical archive but to the historical residue that can be gleaned from spectacle itself. Taking a cue from Duchamp and Breton, these photographs could perhaps be considered "compensation documents," provisional stand-ins for images too often erased from the official picture of the American past.

■ In regard to the contending claims of the image and the historical sense, Guy Debord's recent "Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle" affords considerable insight, if small consolation. Writing twenty years after he identified the "spectacle" as the succession of images that provides the contemporary world with its distorting mirror, Debord points out that during the past two

decades the discrediting of the historical sense has been increasingly adopted as a tactic of power. He notes that such recently fashionable slogans as "the ruins of post-history" can only bring comfort to those who exercise power now, to all those who can avail themselves of the flagrant historical lie in assurance that no correction will be registered. The self-serving flight of fantasy cited at the head of this essay was dutifully reproduced in *Time* magazine, after all, without commentary or correction... sign of an extraordinary public prudence in regard to power, or confirmation of a jaded reluctance to bother to point to the chasm between fact and phantasmagoria.

Circuit breakers. To interrupt the precipitous succession of mutually canceling images that hurdle past us each day, to replace that rhythm, if only for a moment, with another... such is the recurrent dream of the art of the 1980s. If they were not disguised as art, Neidich's photographs might be described as attempts at visual sedition, or local campaigns of "critical disinformation." It remains to be determined, of course, whether they (or any other artwork today) can break out of that subcircuit of activity that Debord shrugs off as the "spectacular critique of the spectacle." For the moment, Neidich's photographs modestly propose that the recycled images of popular history available on every channel can be recycled yet again... this time to provide an ironic corrective to at least a few of the more transparent idiocies which today parade as public discourse.