



Brigitta Lund: *In Transit* (American Airlines)

– and the winners are:

BIRGITTA LUND

&

ERIC BAUDELAIRE

Interviewed by Jens Friis



Eric Baudelaire: *Territorial Waters*

Each year since 1995 the prestigious *Prix de la Fondation HSBC pour la Photographie* has been awarded to two photographers regardless of age and nationality. The competition is open to contemporary, living photographers working on the representation of reality with no restrictions as to treatment or approach. At the time of the selection, they may not yet have published a monograph, as the award

– apart from the honour – consists of organizing a touring exhibition and co-publishing a monograph of their work. Winners of the 2005 award are Eric Baudelaire of France for his series *Imagined States* and Brigitta Lund of Denmark for her series *In Transit*. KATALOG met both for an interview before the press opening of their exhibition in Paris.



Eric Baudelaire: *The Sleeper (after Stalker)* △
 Brigitta Lund: *In Transit (Iraqi Soldiers)* ▷

Congratulations on the award and on this joint exhibition. Your images, as well as the texts in your books, are quite different in form and yet somehow they seem quite closely related. We will get to that later, but first of all let's discuss the award. How did you end up exhibiting here?

Eric: A couple of years ago I submitted some work to the *Prix CCF de la Photographie*. It was a different body of work called *Manifest Destiny* – a landscape survey of the American West 150 years after the conquest of everything west of the Mississippi. I made it to the finals of the *Prix CCF*, which was great. The following year I submitted a different series of images from this body of work *Imagined States* which was not quite finished yet. I had been working on it for the last three or four years, but it is a very slow process partially because of the location and partially because of the way in which I work. Last February, while I was in Abkhazia on my third trip, I received a text message from the Foundation saying that a wonderful photographer called Brigitta Lund and myself would be finalists. Furthermore,

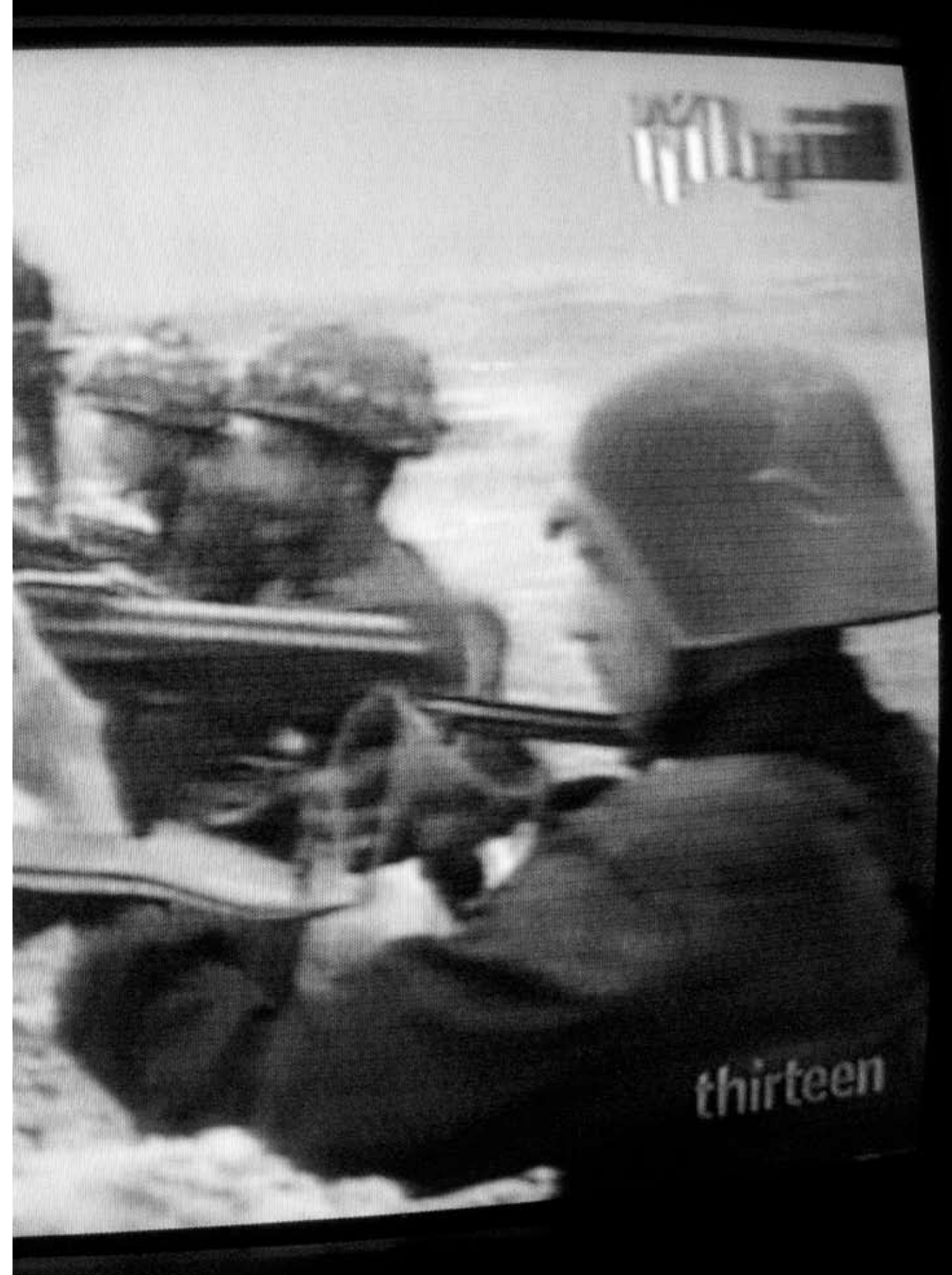
we were going to exhibit and do a book each. At that point I actually started an e-mail correspondence with Birgitta, while still in Abkhazia on the last two or three weeks of my trip over there. It was interesting to continue working on the project because it was the first time that I was photographing with the concrete knowledge that some of these pictures would be in a book or in a show as an end result.

Birgitta: I had worked on this project called *In Transit* and a French photographer friend of mine living in London said to me that there was this foundation called the *Prix CCF* and she thought that I should submit my work. And so I did. Last February I got a phone call, just like Eric, telling me that I was one of two who had won the prize. After that everything went pretty fast. I didn't know too much about this foundation beforehand, but here I am.

You actually submit work to the foundation?

Eric: Yes, I think about 15 images? Or perhaps 20 images?

Birgitta: I believe it is 15 images that you can submit from 1 to 30 November.





Brigitta Lund: *In Transit* (Times Square, New York)

Eric: In this sense it is a very small dossier compared to other foundations in France. I don't know how it is in other countries, but in France there is usually letters of recommendation, endorsements by other people, like for the Guggenheim or similar. However, for this award it is very simple: a one-page statement and I think a CV. And that's it. There is a very quick turn-around because they receive quite a lot of work.

Birgitta: More than 600, I think...

Eric: ...and they have a single person who is the artistic adviser. This year it is Oliva Maria Rubio from La Fàbrica in Madrid who organized Photo Espania for years. I think that she spent 48 hours looking at everything and she picked out 10 or 12 finalists.

Birgitta: So they are nominated.

Eric: And there is a jury that convenes and actually votes.

Birgitta: And the jury is about 12 people. And one of them is...

Eric: Agnès de Gouvion Saint Cyr who works in the French Ministry of Culture and has been a patron of photography and photographers for 20 years.

Birgitta: But also people from the bank HSBC, the Foundation as well as Oliva Rubio. So there is a mix of people.

Do they usually give the award to two persons every year?

Eric: Always.

Birgitta: Yes, always two.

Because my next question was going to be: Why the two of you? Do you have an idea?

Eric: It is impossible to know what they had in mind, but I think this year the correspondence between the two works is particularly interesting and strong. That hasn't always been the case. Usually it is strong photographers who win, but not necessarily two bodies of work that you would put in a show together. However, I think an independent curator would find it very interesting to show these two works together.

Birgitta: They are so completely different and yet they have all these crossings or connections. In many ways, I think they strengthen and supplement each other.

Eric: There are also biographical similarities that are coincidental: Birgitta's story of living 18 years in New York and I, as a Frenchman having lived in New York for 12 years, came back to Paris in a very parallel way, a year before Birgitta, and for similar reasons. One of the things that touches me a lot about Birgitta's work is that I feel that I have experienced a similar story, but I was never able to photograph it the way she did. I feel that her work speaks to something that is very close to what I have experienced but was never able to make something out of. But then in a strange way some of my images are



Eric Baudelaire: Painter



Eric Baudelaire: *Parade Ground*



Brigitta Lund: *In Transit (Window, Copenhagen)*

about similar issues and ideas.

Birgitta: Not the same places, but the same thoughts.

And perhaps the same feelings? One could come to the conclusion that your images, Birgitta, are about feelings and yours, Eric, are about facts. But are they facts, indeed? What I read in your book, Eric, made me wonder a bit. Are these digitalised manipulated prints?

Eric: They are about the interesting intersection of fact and fiction. There definitely is a fair amount of manipulation in my images, but never digital, although I am not dogmatic about this and I am very interested in digital modification of images. For this body of work, however, the fictionalised elements or the constructions are all done in-camera. As a consequence there is a unity of light, mood and atmosphere in these images. The pictures are taken in a place that has subtropical climate; it is always sunny there except for a few weeks a year. That was when I photographed there, because I was interested in creating this kind of overcast atmosphere. But the images are set up in the sense that there are some elements that have been brought into the frame. When there are people in the landscapes, there is some degree of choreography and modification. But they are all straight, analogue prints, except for the image *Parade Ground*.

So they are not manipulated, but staged?

Eric: Some of them are staged. *Painter*, for instance, is staged. When there are people they are usually staged, whereas *Plantation* couldn't

be staged. I spend an enormous amount of time on my projects, usually just driving around looking at things, going back to the same place time and time again. Sometimes I see something and I immediately make a picture. That would be that case with *Plantation*. We were on our way to a wedding, I stopped the car and five seconds – or rather twenty minutes – later the picture was made and there was really nothing to add. However, for *Painter* a lot of time was spent on finding the right location, the character, costume, dog, props, thinking about the idea behind the picture and eventually setting up the shoot much in a way that you would with a film crew. Spontaneity is not much of an option when photographing with a 4 by 5 inch camera.

The text of your book also refers to the film director Andrei Tarkovsky's movie *Stalker*, a source of inspiration that is very evident when looking at your images. You have created some of the same moods in your images by exploring Abkhazia. And you, Birgitta, you also seem to stalk and explore unknown territory, but a territory inside yourself. Have you depicted your personal transition?

Birgitta: Yes, in a sense it is more a fragmented recording. I think my images are the complete opposite of what Eric just described. Mine are all digital images and nothing is set up. Everything is more towards what you described in *Plantation*. My camera is always in the bag, so when I see something, I grab it. Later it is the process of going through millions of contact sheets. I sometimes feel that I take the



Eric Baudelaire: *Foundations*



Birgitta Lund: *In Transit (Ground Zero)*



Eric Baudelaire: *Interruption*

pictures twice. First I take them in a blind phase with my eyes closed just because there was something in my gut – the idea.

An emotional response?

Birgitta: Yeah, it makes you want to take the image, but you don't know why. And then another process happens when I look through all the contact sheets trying to figure out what I am actually looking at while putting the images together. It feels almost like you're taking the picture one more time. And it is important how one image is put together with the next one in order to tell a story.

Another difference between these two exhibitions is that you, Eric, have printed big unrelated images. Whereas you, Birgitta, have printed smaller images in some cases even putting two together in the same frame. Thus your images interact in a direct way.

Birgitta: Yes, I feel there is a dialogue. It would be a very different exhibition if I changed the size or moved around images.

Eric: And there is a narrative continuity in the way you have sequenced them. There are changes between the book and the different shows that you do. It is the relationship between the images that is very important.

Birgitta: The relationship is important and there is a timeline – of course not chronological – rather a way in which you want to push the viewer to look at the images in a certain order for the story to take form.

Eric: It is quite the opposite of what I am trying to do here. My images are trying to be individually as autonomous as possible. The sequencing is mostly figuring out a graphical way for them to be compatible in the same space while being completely autonomous. I try not to

make connections between two pictures.

One could say that your “film,” Eric, is within one image, whereas Birgitta’s film is within the whole sequence of images.

Birgitta: Yes, the images really need each other.

Is the fact that both of you have lived in the United States for a long time – and even been educated there – is that visible in the sentiments described in your images or in the way you work as artists?

Birgitta: I don't know if it is visible in my work, but I feel that in our new friendship there certainly is an understanding of having lived in two cultures for a long time and coming back to where you were born or where you grew up. The feeling of displacement. I know, this is not what you're asking, but I am not sure – actually I've often been asked this about past work too. But I'm not sure.

Eric: For me it is very important. It is no coincidence that I usually gravitate towards projects that are about identity – national identity – and the difficult issues that arise from that. This body of work was photographed in a state that doesn't exist, but in a way exists without existing. I know that interest came out of things that were going on in my head as a Frenchman living in America. After a certain amount of time I passed as an American – I was born in America for some freak reason. I did have a passport and yet I feel completely French. The result is that I certainly have issues or questions of identity that led to the beginning of this work. In terms of form I think I have been very much influenced by American photography – the history of American photography particular with the *New Topographics* in the 1960's, '70's and '80's. Photographers like Joel Sternfeld, Stephen Shore,



Brigitta Lund: *In Transit (Madrid)*



Eric Baudelaire: *Plantation*

etc., have been important for me in terms of content and form. So I think that my passage in the United States was not neutral, anyway.

Birgitta: Definitely not neutral. But do you think you wouldn't have had these influences if you'd been somewhere else?

Eric: You're right!

Birgitta: I feel that the world is getting more and more global. We move around... I am not sure... It's something that I question now, for myself...

Eric: Perhaps it is a coincidence, but I discovered American photographers by discovering America. Being in the American West made me interested in photography and not the other way around.

Birgitta: It is hard to separate the history from yourself.

Obviously it is also difficult to separate ourselves from our nations. Even though we pride ourselves of being one global village now, there is a difference between being an American and being a Danish or a French person in America – and between being a French person in France or a Danish person in Denmark....

Eric: ...or being a French person in France who has lived a good deal of his life in America.

Isn't that being "in transit"?

Birgitta: That's *In Transit* for me.

But in a global village full of individuals aren't states just fictions? In the sense that a society is a place where you know and help each other, how does a country of individuals constitute a nation? If you look at how the Hurricane Katrina disaster was handled, perhaps the United States doesn't exist at all? So if you are in transit in a global village does it really matter where you are? Does it matter whether you are in New York, in Madrid or in Denmark?

Birgitta: Yes, for me it does. It came to a point where I could not see myself living in America for the rest of my life. For many reasons. One of them being the fictional element that you just described. It became important for me to leave. I wanted to move back to Europe, and this is not to glorify Europe at all. There are many problems and many similarities here, too. But it does make a difference for me not to live



Birgitta Lund: *In Transit (Red Lights, Copenhagen)*

in the United States anymore.

Eric: The question that you asked, whether or not America is a fiction, is absolutely the question that I asked while I was doing this work. I am convinced that not only is America a fiction, but that any nation, any construct of collective national identity, is fundamentally a fiction. You can't justify the existence of a nation because of the presence of a river here, an ocean there, and such geographical coincidences. Nations are collective fictions. Some of these collective fictions are stronger than others. Certainly the American collective fiction is particular, it is young and somewhat immature from a European standpoint and it raises all kinds of different issues. *Imagined States* is absolutely about this notion of collective fictions. That's why works of fiction, such as Tarkovsky's *Stalker* or Franz Kafka's *The Castle* are very important: I refer to them to describe an idea of what a national fiction could be. That is why these pictures have been staged that's why they are at the intersection of fiction and documents. Because I think that's what states are: fictions written on top of reality.

Birgitta: In my photographs, the way that they are blurred or television images are out of focus is a way to visually convey some of the same things that you are saying about fiction. That you don't really know what you are looking at that your vision is constantly distorted: what is real and what is not?

It is like a filter?

Birgitta: Yes, constantly a filter on top of a filter, with another filter, and then you have your own filters. In some ways fiction and non-fiction intersect.

Eric: It speaks to the fundamental nature of photography and I think that the most interesting types of photographs or projects, as far as I am concerned, are those that seize upon the particularity that photography is necessarily fact and fiction intertwined, conceptually and quite literally. Those tend to be the areas that interest me.

***Imagined States* seems to be about a broken-down utopia that's slowly disappearing. Is *In Transit* about that, too, in the sense that we seem to go from one place to something different?**

Birgitta: It is definitely about breaking down. For me this is the question, and I think I ask it in the work. Because I felt that I had to make the move in order to find out that perhaps many things are the same, more things than I thought would be. And you end up in this "in transit" feeling, that I see now as a condition that will last for the rest of my life, rather than just moving from one place to another.

An internal condition?

Birgitta: Yes.

Eric: To some extent my work is atemporal – it doesn't feel like the universe of *Imagined States* is in our time. Time is important. We see



Eric Baudelaire: *One Ton of Mandarins*

time in traces of things that have passed, the impact of time on the things men have built and generally the decay of those things. Some constructions might have been interrupted voluntarily or involuntarily. Whether or not structures have been built and whether they have been destroyed is unclear, as you can see in the picture *Interruption*. But at the same time I feel that all this occurs outside of the time that we know. For that reason the pictures exist beyond some of those concerns that you described us as living in. I am not talking about reality, because in the reality of this place that I photographed questions related to the global village are definitely relevant. In Abkhazia people use the Internet and are aware of the outside world. They are isolated, yet they are connected in a way that they never would have been in another age. But I think that might fall outside the scope of this work.

This ended up as an interview about transition, imagined states and broken up utopias, so my next question will have to be: Where are you going next? What projects have you lined up?

Eric: I don't quite know yet. I have been working and thinking about it for the last few months, trying to do something that is actually very different. In other words, images that are not in a *strange* and diffe-

rent place. A project that is not necessarily marked by a continuity of location. I am looking in a direction that is not like this series. I don't know exactly what it will be, but it is going to be more personal to some extent. It's going to be less tied to a story you can tell like this one. But I am still working on it, and will be for a long time, because I am very slow. My project cycles tend to be four or five years.

Birgitta: I see *In Transit* as chapter one. I would like to continue with chapter two and have more people in that chapter. That would be a real challenge for me. I don't see it as a series of portraits, but more like *adding people* to the landscape. I know what I say is very abstract, because it is very abstract for me at this moment, but I hope that it nevertheless makes sense. I see it as the next layer for me as a person and for my work.

It will be exciting to see what you come up with. Thank you very much. Good luck to you both and congratulations again.

This conversation took place on 6 September 2005 at Galerie 13 Sevigne-Baudoin Lebon in Paris. For information about future Eric Baudelaire and Birgitta Lund exhibitions, check our online calendar at <http://www.brandts.dk/katalog/calendar>. For information about the Prix de la Fondation HSBC pour la Photographie see <http://www.ccf.com/ccf/en/communiqués/detail.do?id=697>