



LOS ANGELES

Jean Baudrillard

CHÂTEAU SHATTO

Las Vegas, 1996: The photograph depicts a craggy, mountainous desert horizon forming a silhouette against patchy sheets of clouds and the broad blue daylight above them. A stagnant haze lingers at the foothills, punctured by outlines of palm trees and aircraft tail fins. The stretch of tarmac in the image's foreground appears as hazy as the dense fog above it. Commercial jets and ground-control vehicles are darkened outlines, obscured by directional daylight. *Sainte Beuve*, 1987: A vacant armchair upholstered in red velvet is framed against a blank white wall seemingly under bright, studio lighting. A crimson sheet is draped over the chair, pressed into its corners and crevices perhaps by the weight of a now-departed sitter. Despite the fabric's contrasting shadows and sinewy lines, the armchair lacks visual depth, instead registering as a flattened array of curvilinear gradients. *Rio*, 1995: A traffic light and shrubbery are tightly cropped in front of a wrinkled poster showing a coral-orange palatial facade decorated with crown molding, ivory balustrades, and



Jean Baudrillard,
Las Vegas, 1996,
giclée print on paper,
23 1/2 x 35 1/2".

Corinthian pilasters. The scene's spatial dimensions are destabilized to the extent that the poster appears a simulacrum of sorts.

Jean Baudrillard's photography is pointedly consistent in its strategies of capture, which include the aforementioned disorienting plays with spatial depth as well as uniformly saturated color palettes. The pictures exhibited here were taken between 1987 and 2003, and each was captioned according to the location in which the late philosopher's shutter clicked: Venice; Bruges, Belgium; Toronto; Vaucluse, France; and other cities around the globe. In this sense, the photographs acted as a visual travel diary—in both their peripatetic, documentary nature, and moreover by their distinctly touristic bent: Baudrillard seemed to have captured each image solely out of a drive to consume the beguiling unrealness of the real. Nearly a century ago in his celebrated essay on photography—long before Baudrillard would lament the end of art with “banal reality [having] become aestheticized,” Siegfried Kracauer characterized the world as having taken on a “photographic face,” a mask by which it strives to be captured in snapshots and other reproductions. If anything, Baudrillard appears to take this determination as the imperative for his photographic output, meanwhile sidestepping any apparent paradox by juxtaposing such artistic production against his own published declarations of art's insignificance and meaninglessness. (It is worth pointing out the resemblance between Baudrillard's winsome, prosaically pensive urban imagery and the kind of photography that popularizes Instagram feeds.) It could also be possible, however, that for Baudrillard this kind of philosophical contradiction was the point, his own dialectical coup of sorts, staged amid a reality that was becoming, in his words, “too obvious to be true.”

Do these images, as art or as souvenirs, grapple with and inform our understanding of Baudrillard's writing? We could again recall Kracauer, who offered distinctions between photography's role in locating history (which operates via the reconstruction of chains of events) versus serving memory (which links events according to personal significance, outside temporal linearity). How has Baudrillard's drive for radically defined subjectivity, represented by these images and his published writing, been problematized by his now radically determined (historical) subjecthood—by his “being Jean Baudrillard”? As records of an open shutter, and less so as artistic meditations, these prints refocus attention on what possessed the thinker to take on the photographic medium, to stoke the inferno of images devouring the world. At a talk delivered in Las Vegas in 1996 (likely the same trip during which he produced the image described above), the philosopher mused on the conference's theme—“Chance”—assessing that the roller of dice doesn't believe in chance but rather in its abolition with each roll, which establishes an increased connection between the roller's subjectivity and the surrounding (dis)order of worldly things. Baudrillard's photographs can be read in parallel: as memory images, as the erasure of chance with each snapshot, as aesthetic charm leveled with banality—and vice versa.

—Nicolas Limmert