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EXHIBITION REVIEW

Annalisa Sonzogni: Identikit II

LILIAN BAYLIS SCHOOL

LONDON, UK

MARCH 6–20, 2015

Drawing on overlapping debates around participation and the relationship between image and space in contemporary art and architecture, *Identikit II* (2015) is the most recent of Annalisa Sonzogni's site-specific photographic installations. Produced as both visual document and artistic response to the disused Lilian Baylis School in London's borough of Lambeth, the resulting twelve large-scale photographs were briefly installed on site within the dramatically darkened space of the former school's octagonal theater. Built in the early 1960s to serve the inhabitants of the area's residential streets and housing estates just south of the Thames, the school closed in 2005, moving to new premises close by. Languishing for ten years before being snapped up for lucrative residential development, the vacant campus sits at the heart of what the *Financial Times* last year described as that rarest of beasts—three acres of untapped prime inner-city land ripe for gentrification.

But having been listed by English Heritage in 2000 as of special architectural interest, the building has resisted the rapacious demands of the capital's elevating property market; and the brick and concrete façade and distinctive timber fenestration of the former classrooms' vernacular modernism have been preserved in the design of the new apartments with which they have been replaced. It was in its early days of redevelopment that Sonzogni worked around contractors to photograph the site, recording both the residue of its forty-year history educating the borough's children, and the creeping presence of the building work through which that history has been all but erased. In conversation during a site tour, Sonzogni described the gradual appearance of heavy-duty

electrical cabling, lights left on or turned off, furniture shifting around rooms, and carpets ripped up to expose the building's carcass. She described taking advantage of the happy accidents that the construction produced: the textbooks, student records, old photographs, and certificates she collected to form part of the final installation; and the square blocks of mismatched paint revealed behind blackboards and defunct radiators that she framed in examples such as *Lilian Baylis School #16* (2013) to create visual continuities between walls and windows that echo the geometric lines of the building itself. Shot from inside and flattened by the photograph's surface in *Lilian Baylis School #36* (2013), the variously translucent and opaque panes of glass reconfigure the windows as abstract paintings, hovering between inside and outside, and between two- and three-dimensional space. References to the early modernist forms on which the architecture's later vernacular style depends recur—from the unexplained orange square of paint left on a classroom wall in *Lilian Baylis School #19* (2013) through to the architectonic composition of the photographs themselves.

But it is the human body's inevitable disruption of the purity of those modernist forms that lent the photographs' final installation in the school hall its poignancy. In this cavernous space, Sonzogni sewed yards of fabric to replicate the theater's huge, original floor-to-ceiling curtains, referencing Adolf Loos's preference for dividing space with sensuous fabric over the more punishing surfaces of concrete or brick. The rich red curtains billowed in the breeze of the unheated space, as if stirred in the wake of its long-departed bodies. Suggestive of a presence further indexed in the neat layout of diminutive children's chairs on stage, they emphasized the uncanny nature of the viewing experience—one that was as much bodily as purely visual. Walking around the space, the mirrored reverse of each print's blackboard-like support was revealed, reflecting and distorting my own image, effecting a momentary displacement repeated when looking across the theater as a whole. Architectural backdrop, mirror-image, and photographic reproduction coincide, creating a surface pattern in which spatial orientation begins to come undone. In the constantly roving eye of the beholder, the relationship between the site and its own image became locked in a never-ending process of reconstruction, enacting the artist's desire to incorporate the visitor's presence as both witness and active producer of the ongoing experience.

And that experience was disconcerting. Bringing to mind Roland Barthes's description in *Camera Lucida* (1981) of the photographic medium's illogical conjunction of the "here" with the "formerly," in the durational experience of the body moving through a space in which traces of its own history were revealed—and then concealed—space and time seemed both dislocated and strangely entwined.

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Installation view of *Identikit II, New composites* (2015) by Annalisa Sonzogni; © Annalisa Sonzogni

