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Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell as Photographers: 'the same pair of eyes, only different spectacles'.

Writing to Vanessa Bell in 1937, Woolf imagined 'do you think we have the same pair of eyes, only different spectacles?'¹

I want to start where I left off at a previous Woolf conference where I focused entirely on Woolf's albums, to explore more generally issues of the maternal and the erotic in both sisters' albums. The principles of selection, montage and tableau in albums are the skeleton of a story. Psychoanalytically speaking, albums are often a testimony to our unconscious pasts rather than the pasts we consciously choose to remember. Memories or the 'presence without representation'. Jean-François Lyotard calls "the stranger in the house".² Where, for Freud, the stranger is "the scene of seduction perpetrated on the child", to Lyotard the stranger represents a more general individual incapacity to "represent and bind a certain something" a something which "can introduce itself there without being introduced, and would exceed its powers".³ For me, as I have argued elsewhere, it is the 1892 photograph of Woolf's seated mother and father with Woolf in the background mounted as a significant frontispiece in Monk's House album III which "exceeds its powers" and shapes Woolf's photography. Bell's albums also focus on the unrepresentable, on the immemorial, as Lyotard argues, "the immemorial is always 'present'".⁴

Obviously modernist aesthetics could determine both sisters' sequential montages. The modernity of the albums is striking and must owe something to Bell and Woolf's knowledge of modernism including Cézanne's painting series and Russian and German cinema. Both sisters' use of composite images, the recognition that the process of construction is part of the content of a constructed piece synchronizes with other modernist developments in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, John Heartfield's

montages. Techniques of juxtaposition featured in popular culture including advertising as well as high art.⁵ Cézanne was the central attraction at Roger Fry's 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition. Fry claimed that Cézanne sought to express emotion, not mimetically, but precisely through spatial relationships.⁶ It is true that the most interesting albums were being constructed during the period of Bell and Woolf's "strongest commitment to formalism", with its antimimetic aesthetic.⁷ Susan Sontag argues that 'photography is the most successful vehicle of modernist taste in its Popular version'.⁸ Yet, while both sisters' albums, in some respects, reveal them to be enthusiastic modernists, in other respects they are too repetitious, too obsessive to be catalogued simply as modernist. The photomontages in the albums suggest that some other preoccupation, whether conscious or unconscious, informs a modernist facade. Like a palimpsest, the album sequences offer a crucial insight into those psychic mechanisms structuring Woolf's aesthetics. In Lacanian terms, the sisters' continual photographic repetitions would suggest the 'return' of a visual event which took place outside their contemporary frames. As Lacan suggests "the real is that which always comes back to the same place".⁹

First Virginia Woolf:

Woolf's mother Julia becomes her 'stranger in the house' since for both Woolf's father Leslie and Woolf "she lived in me, in her mother, in her children".¹⁰ Crucially, Stephen explicitly memorializes the exact photograph which Virginia avidly highlights in the opening of *Monk's House* 3. "When I look at certain little photographs at one in which I am reading by her side at St. Ives with Virginia...I see as with my bodily eyes the live, the holy and tender love".¹¹ The connotative power of Julia's image shapes both father and daughter's "wider circles of reflection".¹² It is the visual

language of this particular photograph, what we might call its trauma fragments, I will argue which determines Woolf's own photographic constructions.

There are similar quiet connections and discontinuities between the sisters' albums. Both Vanessa and Virginia are drawn to the maternal. Pregnant, Vanessa fantasizes to Virginia that "I shall see you every day and gaze at the most beautiful of Aunt Julia's photographs (that of their mother) incessantly".¹³ Later, in 1927, she pleads with Virginia "to write a book about the maternal instinct. In all my wide reading I haven't yet found it properly explored".¹⁴ Both shared a Bloomsbury party visit to a film of a caesarean operation. "Really it is quite the oddest entertainment I've ever been to...Leonard felt very ill".¹⁵

Woolf's language of the maternal

All photographs are a language and Woolf's language was maternal. "She has haunted me".¹⁶ Woolf literally wrote 'through' the maternal. "Here I am experimenting with the parent of all pens - the black J. the pen, as I used to think it, along with other objects, as a child, because mother used it".¹⁷ Woolf realised that this pictorial enthusiasm raised complex epistemological questions about the psychoanalytic. "It is a psychological mystery why she should be: how a child could know about her: except that she has always haunted me".¹⁸ Julia Stephen's early death meant that, to Woolf, she became the fantasmatic mother, that is a mother who can exist only as an image, who can be seen or mirrored only in identifications and who might incite the visual imagination (of a photographer) into hallucinatory significations.¹⁹ Hermione Lee argues that the family was Woolf's "political blueprint" and I would argue that the death of her mother gave Woolf a visual blueprint.²⁰ In 'Moments of Being' Woolf describes how it was her mother's death, which "made me suddenly develop perception" (Woolf 1985: 103).²¹

Details of the 1892 childhood photograph appear again and again in the Woolfs photo sequences. Many contain a tall flower, usually a lily, or tree placed immediately behind the head of the subject mirroring the flowers behind the Stephens at St. Ives. In each photograph the object, like the door panels at St. Ives, provides the vertical compositional line of the photograph. In many cases the flower or tree uncomfortably dwarfs the subject like a residue of the past.

In a chapter ‘the Dead Mother’ (which includes depressed and absent mothers) André Green suggests that the “mirror identification” with the mother “is almost obligatory”.²² Green suggestively discusses the history of psychoanalytic concepts in relation to the arts. The mother is a “framing-structure” for the child who projects its feelings back onto the mother through “revivifying repetitions”.²³ Frances Spalding suggests that Vanessa Bell’s paintings similarly revive the maternal. *The Nursery*, inspired by *To The Lighthouse*, and *Nursery Tea* have groups of female figures contained within a circle creating “a nostalgic evocation of motherhood”.²⁴ Bell evokes the maternal with spatial arrangements of objects, strong verticals and monumental figures of women very like Virginia’s photo sequences. It could be argued that both sisters ‘refuse’ their mother’s death by constantly revivifying the maternal in art. Her sister’s paintings taught Woolf that representations can resist death. “This strange painters world, in which mortality does not enter and psychology is held at bay”.²⁵ Thanking her daughter Angelica in 1914 for returning Vanessa’s ‘snap-shots’, Bell conceptualizes photographs. “I see two of mine came out, to my surprise. It’s a pity they aren’t better focussed as the composition is rather lovely. Some of those of you feeding A. almost had the effect of cinema on me, one seemed to see the movement going from one to another”.²⁶ Like other modernists, for example H. D; Bell was knowledgeable about a range of cinematic techniques including montage. But sadly,

choices of Bell's photographs by her children Quentin Bell and Angelica Garnett for their jointly compiled *Vanessa Bell's Family Album* is also hugely selective.²⁷ The book is prefaced by an amusing, but very unrepresentative photograph of Vanessa photographing while wearing an immaculate and incongruous white hat and frilly pinafore. This image overemphasizes Bell's femininity, domesticity and class at the expense of her professional artistic expertise. Bell's photographs disrupt their own singular authority through the narrative contexts of the albums and the kind of psychic stories which meta-texts like albums can tell. In a sense, Bell's very écclecticisim, together with her devotion to seriality provides a key to answering questions about gender and modernism. What I think we witness in the albums of Virginia and Vanessa are the tensions of gendered modernism: the ways in which everyday reality is a necessarily more contingent force in the thinking of women artists and writers and the ways in which this contingency might be represented artistically in repetitive, as well as écclectic forms particularly in photography. As Laurence Rickels argues in *Aberrations of Mourning* the relation of photographic image to referent is always exceeded by seriality in photographic copies and this might productively admit, he suggests, "the phantoms of photography which thus emerge on the other side of their pocket graves".²⁸ What I think Rickels means by seriality and photography is the idea that when photographs are multiplied (as in albums) we tend to look at photographs for possible references to the presumed mentalities of photographer or subjects. Like the albums of her sister Virginia Woolf, Bell's albums "pocket graves" resonate with the maternal. The act of selecting photographs for a family album impacts on different issues than the formally aesthetic including the significance of Bell's gaze as a camera operator and album compiler, and what her serialisation of particular images tells us about her beliefs and desires. Neither do family albums fit comfortably into the conventions of

photographic theory which tends to fetishize the individual photograph and the photographer. Albums are repetitive, feminine forms (in as much as albums are most often constructed by women) not collections of seminal, masculine images.²⁹ In addition, as Walter Benjamin suggests, the enlargement of snapshots (Bell's constant album activity), reveals "entirely new structural formations of the subject...the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses".³⁰ For example, Bell's photographs of her children better match Benjamin's idea that a modernist perception involves the reciprocal gaze ("the person we look at or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in return") than they match Fry or Bell's notion of a pure modernist disinterest.³¹

Bell's photographs are familial and autobiographically revealing in a wider psychic sense, than simply as imitations of Cameron's portraits because they project psychological intensity. Two photographs vividly encapsulate this theme. Album 1 contains photographs of Clive Bell Vanessa's husband together with Virginia Woolf taken at Studland Beach in 1910.³² In both photographs Clive and Virginia collude with Vanessa's gaze but both are passive and unsmiling. If we take the idea of each photograph as an image operative in terms of psychic signs we can look at what the patterns and arrangements of signs might reveal about Bell. In each scene the figures almost exactly mirror each other in positionality. Both sitters have right arms parallel to lower leg and both bend their right legs at the same angle. Such parallelism is reinforced by a pairing of shoes to the right of the frame. In one photograph the raised seams of Virginia's gloves parallel the swollen veins of Clive's downward pointing hands. Such parallelism and repetition suggest a psychic 'excess'.

In 'Perverse Spaces', an essay about fetishism, the 'gaze' and Helmut Newton's photograph *Self-portrait with Wife June and models. Vogue Studio, Paris 1981*, the photography theorist Victor Burgin calls a similar parallelism in Newton's photograph "the subsidiary and 'combined figure' of 'chiasmus' or a rhetorical structure in a photograph which Burgin argues we sometimes recognize only 'intuitively'".³³ Similarly Bell's photographs depict Clive and Virginia's bodies not only realistically but also indexically as if Clive and Virginia's relationship is being represented by Bell. After the birth of Vanessa's first child Julian in February 1908, Clive and Vanessa interrupted their sex life and Clive began to flirt with Virginia. Hermione Lee suggests that from this time - May of 1908 - they began to play a game of intimacy and intrigue which lasted for perhaps two years, that is until the Studland photographs of 1910.³⁴ The Studland photographs carry this hidden psychic narrative. Bell grapples, consciously or unconsciously, with psychic dilemmas which emerge within the repetitions and patterning of each image like Burgin's rhetorical structure. As W.J.T. Mitchell suggests in *Picture Theory*, an account of the literary and textual aspects of picture theories, photographs can equally project a private point of view and materialize "a memory trace embedded in the context of personal associations".³⁵

For example, family tableaux and window framing are common pictorial devices which show Bell's understanding of artistic codes. But Bell's repetitions and enlargements of particular photographs suggests the presence of other tensions than simply Bell's facility in translating painting codes into photography. Why did Bell need to represent herself as Madonna so frequently? Why are window frames so deliberately evident? As Frances Spalding points out the window motif "may reflect on her need for domestic security and on the protected position from which, because of her sex and class, she viewed the world".³⁶ But also the photograph of her mother Julia Stephen

which Bell treasured most of all is a photograph in which Julia is leaning against a window. There is a constant synchronisation of the psychic, the pressure of the autobiographical, together with art conventions throughout Bell's work. To try to fit Bell's repeated photographic and pictorial motifs neatly within a formal modernism negates the pressure of the psychic which equally shapes Bell's work. It is as if two languages often co-exist in the photographs. As Roland Barthes argues in his analysis of photographic messages, photographs can create a "free exchange" of messages. Barthes' example is of the way in which photographs always contain 'denotation', that is mythical uncoded messages and 'connotation' or specific messages.³⁷ Bell's photographs problematize modernist connotations with autobiographical denotation

The maternal and the erotic also inform Bell's photographs of her children. A fresh and powerful engagement with issues of childhood in literature, the arts and education marks Bell's moment of modernity. As Fineberg points out there were many exhibitions of child art at the turn of the century and artists looked at how children drew "as a stimulus to their own work".³⁸ The American modernist photographer Alfred Steiglitz promoted an exhibition of children's drawings in 1912 at his Little Galleries, Fifth Avenue which "was like a commentary on modern art ideas, it recalled some elemental qualities that art has lost and which might do much, if attainable at all, to imbue it with a fresh and exquisite virility".³⁹ In 1917 Roger Fry wrote articles and exhibition catalogues promoting children's drawings collected by their tutor Margaret Richardson. Almost all the modernist movements including expressionists, cubists, futurists and the artists of the avant-garde Russian movements all hung the art of children alongside their own pioneering exhibitions in the early years of the century.⁴⁰ Modernist photography shared this enthusiasm. For example Edward Weston made nude studies of his children particularly *Torso of Neil* in 1925. Clarence White placed

naked boys in classical settings in his *Boys Wrestling* 1908 and Alice Boughton made nude compositions of children in *Nude* 1909.

Bell was herself of course intensely interested in early childhood development and education and attempted to set up and teach a nursery school at Charleston. Together with Clive Bell, Vanessa painted a nursery at 33 Fitzroy Square. But the first and important thing to say about Bell's photographs of her naked son Julian, as well as those of her other children Quentin and Angelica, is that Bell only begins to photograph her son naked not conventionally as an infant but as a young male approximately seven or eight years old. In Album 2 there are erotic photographs of Julian alone spread-eagled across the French windows at Asheham, emphasizing the spectacular quality of his to-be-looked-at young, firm body. Other powerful photographs, again taken at Asheham in 1914, place Julian in chiaroscuro, half-hidden under a shadow of dappled leaves just touching his penis. Sunlight falls on Julian's belly and his face is partly in shadow. The photograph does forefront what Abigail Solomon-Godeau calls a typical erotics of the fragmentary. That is to say the photograph isolates parts of Julian's body in a sexually coded way - a common convention in pornographic photography.⁴¹ Two slightly later photographs continue to utilise these devices. In one Julian stands, legs apart, pensively looking downwards away from camera while sunlight falls fully on his naked figure. In the other Julian and Quentin are rolling naked together on the lawn with Julian poised over Quentin lips distended as if to kiss. The whiteness of both boys' bodies gives each child a further to-be-looked-at specular quality. Such photographs evoke what Jacqueline Rose describes as "the necessary presence of the one who is watching".⁴² In a later photograph, Angelica's friend Judith Bagnell is photographed lying prone, her arm obscuring her face. She is objectified, as it were "available" to a spectator's gaze since Bell obliterates any specificity of daily objects and clothes. Quentin Bell

remembers the chemist Boots' refusal to print certain of Bell's photographs "would Mrs Bell please mark those rolls of film which contained images unsuitable for the eyes of the young ladies".⁴³

The last decade dramatically highlighted issues about the representations of children's naked bodies and how we should spectate or not spectate such bodies. The problematic nature of spectating naked children currently occupies many disciplines including psychoanalysis and legal studies as well as art history. Many contemporary women photographers also frequently use their own and friends' children as naked models for example Sally Mann, Alice Sims, and Susan Copen Oken. Sally Mann photographs the daily lives of her three children in intimate poses and scenes for example a wet bed or her girls' mimicry of women's make-up and appearance. The children's naked presences are substantial and full of vitality. They are self-possessed caught with an "utterly characteristic thought" in collusion with the mother as camera operator.⁴⁴

Mann's photographs, like Bell's, "explore the nature of family love, maternal love and child response" through sequencing the developmental processes of childhood.⁴⁵ The images are corporeal but the sequencing and development of Mann's images produce scripted narratives of childhood rather than voyeuristic distancing.

Similarly Bell's children are clearly comfortable in her world. The juxtaposition of sometimes out of focus snapshot with erotic portrait in the albums, unsettles the erotic photographic gaze. Bell's photographs of childhood narcissism could as easily be read as reflecting back to the child the narcissism he so earnestly desires and needs to perform. As Jacqueline Rose argues in the context of writing "it is a way of 'knowing' the child. Loving the child and knowing the child - the idea is one of an innocent attachment".⁴⁶ Bell photographs reciprocal moments, interconnections between her children and between Bell and her children. Each child seems to exchange what

anthropologists would call the intersubjective moment. There is no soft focus, no glycerine, no muslin obscuring their world. Bodies are not isolated in tight spaces, subjected to harsh illumination or an unreturnable gaze.

Often in Bell's photographs it is children, not adults who have an active gaze for example in the photograph of a naked Angelica standing next to the fully clothed Roger Fry. Angelica looks actively at Fry while Fry is carefully not observing the naked girl. The photograph does not centre any implied relation between clothed adult male and naked girl since Fry avoids the gaze. Kaja Silverman describes how, psychoanalytically, the mother/daughter relationship is one of identification and desire and the endless interchangeability of their positions.⁴⁷ Reading Bell's photograph from within Silverman's framework it could be said that the photograph shows the possibility of interchangeable subject/object viewing positions with Angelica substituting for Bell rather than voyeurism. Vanessa might be describing Angelica as a self surrogate in a letter to Roger Fry in 1923. "I send you a photograph of myself and Angelica to remind you that any rate that there is one very lovely and witty and brilliant and charming creature to be seen in Gordon Square".⁴⁸ There is a harmony of counterpoint in the photograph achieved by Bell's careful spatial composition which brings the two figures into a visual dialogue. The photograph is frontal. Bell brings Angelica and Fry visually towards the foreground into an area of potential intimacy but keeps each sufficiently apart. The contrapuntal difference of the naked Angelica and fully clothed Fry is counterbalanced by their opposite relation to Bell's point of view. Modernism offered Bell aesthetic co-ordinates and by aestheticising the potential voyeurism of camera/spectator Bell is able to safely handle the potentially erotic image.

That Bell and Grant were hugely aware of the erotic potential of photographs is unquestioned. These two photographs are, for obvious reasons, not in Bell's albums.

The first is of George Mallory the Everest explorer and subject of Grant's paintings, the other, which I like very much, is of Duncan by Bell. (Before the Tate Archive moved to its new home and more sophisticated data base this photograph was 'labelled man in yoga position').

Woolf and Bell's albums are marginal to conventional art history but a particularly pertinent site of struggles between the public and the private, between the formally expressive and the everyday moment which occur in other modernist women's work. Their photography brings into modernism's formalism and aesthetic unity the autobiographically repetitive and other identifications. As Luce Irigaray suggests, identification "is never simply active or passive, but rather frustrates that opposition by the economy of repetition that it puts 'into play'".⁴⁹ From a feminist perspective, it could be argued that the sisters perhaps turned so frequently to photography because photography allowed them the freedom of vision. . As Roger Fry argued in his 1922 review of Bell's Independent Gallery exhibition

"She follows her own vision unhesitatingly and confidently, without troubling at all where it may lead her. If the result is not very legible, so much the worse...she realises it is only the unconscious charm of the gesture which counts in the end".⁵⁰

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. 1 1888-1912*, eds. N. Nicolson and J. Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 3.

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³ Sigmund Freud, and Breuer, J., *Studies in Hysteria* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 4; and Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, 17.

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- ⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, 20.
- ⁵ Diana Collecott, 'Images at the Crossroads: The "H.D. Scrapbook"', in *H.D. Woman and Poet*, ed. M. King, National Poetry Foundation Orono: University of Maine, 1987)
- ⁶ Simon Watney, *English Post-Impressionism* (London: Studio Vista, 1980).
- ⁷ Christopher Reed, 'Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics', in *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf*, ed. D.F. Gillespie (Columbus, Ohio: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 21.
- ⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 77.
- ⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J-A. Miller, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 42.
- ¹⁰ Leslie Stephen, *Mausoleum Book* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 58.
- ¹¹ Leslie Stephen, *Mausoleum Book*, 58.
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- ¹³ Regina Marler, ed., *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 67.
- ¹⁴ Regina Marler, ed., *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, 315.
- ¹⁵ Regina Marler, ed., *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, 361-2.
- ¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Change of Perspective*, 374.
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- ¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. 3 1923-8* eds. N. Nicolson and J. Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), 383.
- ¹⁹ Mary Jacobus, *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- ²⁰ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), 52.

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- ²¹ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* ed. J. Schulkind (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 1985).
- ²² André Green, *On Private Madness* (Madison, Conn.: International Universities, 1993), 151.
- ²³ André Green, *On Private Madness*, 159.
- ²⁴ Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), 256.
- ²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Flight of the Mind*, 173.
- ²⁶ Regina Marler, ed., *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, 483.
- ²⁷ Angelica Garnett, Angelica, ed., *Vanessa Bell's Family Album* (London: Jill Norman and Hobhouse Ltd, 1981).
- ²⁸ Laurence Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 359.
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- ³¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 188.
- ³² Vanessa Bell, *Album I*, (London: Tate Gallery Archives, 1896).
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- ⁴⁴ Reynolds Price, 'Afterword', in *Sally Mann: Immediate Family* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1992), 79.
- ⁴⁵ Reynolds Price, 'Afterword', 80.
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- ⁴⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Editions Minuit, 1974), 77.
- ⁵⁰ Roger Fry, 'Independent Gallery', *New Statesman* (1922 June 3rd), 237-8