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## The Invention of Lying: Ways of Looking at and Believing in Images

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The Invention of Lying:  
Ways of Looking at and Believing in Images

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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This project is dedicated to my Grammy Pat, who taught me how to love unconditionally everything from perfect domestic creatures to deeply flawed humans, and to express that love often. May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 would have been her 87<sup>th</sup> birthday.



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## **INTRODUCTION: The World Describes Itself**

Two summers ago my paternal grandmother died. It was my dad who discovered her. She had collapsed on the kitchen floor. He photographed her.

I have never seen these pictures. I only know that they exist because, one day, when I was swiping through my dad's iPhone camera roll looking for a different picture, he stopped me.

"Be careful!"

I looked at him, puzzled.

"There are photos of Grammy Pat on there."

I must have still looked confused, because he clarified: "Her body." I clicked the phone off, and handed it back to him.

I didn't ask him why he took the photos. I recognized the impulse. But even in myself, that recognition doesn't constitute understanding.

Why do we take pictures? A photograph is a very strange thing: it is both descriptive of the world and a part of it. Through the act of description, a photograph becomes an object in its own right. There is a symmetry to this relationship. An oscillation. And also an absurdity to the act of preservation via reproduction. A gloomy person might think that people photograph things so that we can destroy those things without guilt. Maybe this is sometimes the case, but in today's world photography has become so ubiquitous that it is harder than ever to ascribe to it any single use, let alone to pin down its meaning. Meaning is ephemeral. It changes. And so yes, sometimes we photograph things as a sort of preemptive destruction, with the sense that a record of something will allow us to destroy the thing itself. But other times, we photograph things because they are wonderful to look at and we want to be able to look at them forever and carry them in our pockets and show them to other people. OR: Because we fear forgetting. OR: To

commemorate. OR: To honor. OR: To categorize. OR: To archive. OR: To repress. OR: To empower. Photography has as many uses as its referent (though these uses are not always synonymous with those of the various referents.) Because of this, it is very hard to track, moralize, police, understand. Its multitudinous uses are our peril and joy. Very democratic. Not individualistic. Both very capitalist (reproduction, production, ease) and not (no commodity, sharing is caring). A prism. A map of the world that is the same size as the world it represents.

The realm of the visual is a sticky and seductive one, the hum and shimmer and whistle of the world itself... Motion does not mean living. I do not mean to suggest that a picture is a live thing... but maybe that it has a spirit, it moves. Sympathetic magic: objects that have had contact will continue to influence one another even after the contact has ended. Object: world. Object: photograph. Mediating force: light. Light touches the world, touches the picture, the two have now touched. In some early photographic processes, all that was needed to make an image was to lay an object atop a piece of light-sensitive paper and to apply light. This is known as contact printing. Things touch, and leave an imprint.

It is all too easy to read meaning into pictures, to stop at the surface of the picture frame and to go no deeper. I think the best and probably only way to understand the photographic itch, urge, impulse or habit is to look at photographs, a lot of them, all the time, which has never been easier, and then to try to describe them in words.

The act of moving from images into text forces us to reassess that presumed meaning. Maybe if we reassess many times, attempt to interpret many pictures, we can see through the veil of meaning and start to notice a pattern emerging, moving away from the what and towards the why. Paying good attention is its own form of analysis, and the closest we can really get to what a picture means is to describe, carefully, what it looks like.



What does it mean to describe a picture I have never seen? I don't know if I need to see the picture of my grandma's body in order to hold it in my mind. I have, already, every anchor of the picture; my grandmother's face, the shape of her body, the gleam of her linoleum tiles.

I have seen other photographs of dead bodies for which I can substitute her own form. Maybe this is why I wasn't disturbed or even much surprised by my dad's confession that he had photographed his mother's dead body: the practice has a precedent. There was a time, not too long after the invention of photography, when the number of pictures of the dead nearly matched those of the living. Photographs of dead bodies, like all photographs, might fulfill any number of purposes: scientific, artistic, or, most common and most imaginable and most necessary, memorial. Postmortem portraiture was commissioned, in the Victorian era, by the families of the dead, and in this way it was an early sort of family photography. Sometimes the dead would even be depicted alongside the living: a mother cradling her deceased infant, or a child made to hold hands with her dead sister.





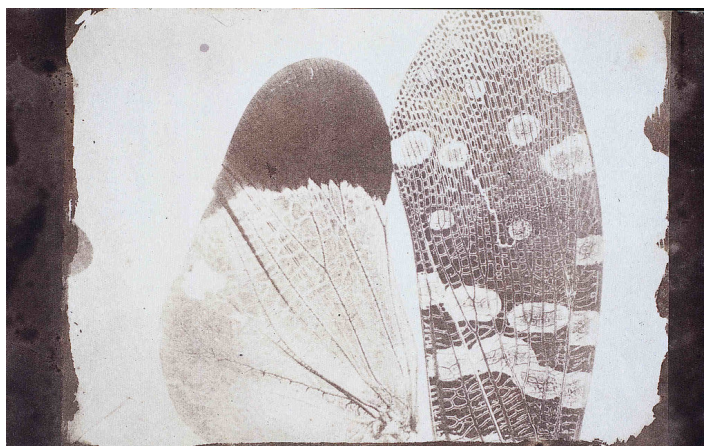
When photography was still a relatively new and expensive medium, postmortem portraits were often the only images people had of their loved ones, the memory of their physical body belatedly sustained after the person had already departed.

I have other senses, too, that I can use to flesh out the picture: the powdery scent of her clothes, the slight tingle of chlorine wafting in from the pool at the center of her apartment complex. Would it really be all that different to witness it myself?

There are photos of that day, the day my dad found, mourned, and photographed his mother's body, that I have seen. They are of her last meal: a half-eaten bag of potato chips, a melted bowl of vanilla ice cream, and a glass of tomato juice, its surface clotted with flies. Her body had been there, we deduced, for a couple of days.



\*



“The infinitely near,” Frederick Sommer once said in conversation with David Levi-Strauss, “is as far as the infinitely far.” This is the feeling conjured by Henry Fox Talbot’s 1840 photomicrograph of the wings of insects, an early entry in the history of photography, and one that brings me to the face of the image, but nowhere further.

The wings are necessarily bruised: Talbot chose a delicate material to record. This early process required the wings to be in contact with the sensitized paper that registered the places where their exoskeletons were thick enough to block light. That paper bears the mark of its

maker's hand, the luminescence expanse of pale giving way to a blotchy border of brown with a suddenness that suggests the fervor of experimentation. Still, its charming sloppiness cannot quite draw me away from the way the thin, rigid lines of the insect's wings are interrupted by floating splotches of white, the way the wings look like the cells of plants, hemmed in by their own rigid membrane, the way things resemble one another, and the way photography does and always has reminded us of these resemblances.

The photomicrograph was an experiment. It was made just a year after the invention of photography was dually announced to the world, nearly simultaneously, in England and in France, though Talbot's patented process would be far less popular than its publicly available French counterpart, the daguerreotype. The cultural preference for the daguerreotype wasn't just due to accessibility. Talbot's "calotypes," printed from paper negatives, were infinitely reproducible, but they also lacked the cleanness of description of the daguerreotype, the slight shine of its polished silver surface, and its singularity. Early in photography's history preferences tended towards the unique art-object. Amongst the public, "daguerreotypomania" swept Europe, and daguerreotypes came to be housed in plush velvet cases bordered by gold filigree. Despite the now-canonized struggle to categorize photography as art or science, the first broad cultural impulse, it would seem, was towards the former. What people wanted was not the practical and inaccessible scientific uses of photography but a means to record and memorialize. Daguerreotypes were special, and unlike Talbot's paper prints, they were objects, not just images.

This is all very quaint to wonder about, and I think I should mention that I am not without a stake in the conversation. I am a photographer, one who has come to like looking at and playing with images more than I like making them, and when I look at Talbot's photomicrograph

I am acutely aware that, though I wonder at the newness of his invention, I also romanticize its crudeness, understand that we now possess the technology to produce far more detailed images, and that I myself could easily mimic Talbot's own process. I'd like to, actually. It's a camera-less process, which means I would get to skip the tedious business of going out in the world and looking for pictures and instead go straight to the darkroom, my favorite part of any photographic process.

For some reason the thing I can never shake is the chemistry—the smell of it sticks around just behind my nostrils, gives me a slight, suffocating headache, stains my favorite clothes and makes my fingertips peel and yellow, intoxicates me (as in, heady; as in, toxic). Looking at a photograph is a visual experience, “the illusion of literal description,” but the making of a photograph is top-to-bottom haptic. It engages the whole of the sensorium. The technical aspects of photography—*how*, exactly, a picture is made, how light registers on silver halide crystals, how those crystals, if kept in the dark, will keep the picture a secret until the right chemicals bring it out—have always been, for me, both the most wondrous thing about the medium and the most frustrating. I really could go crazy in the darkroom: technical perfection is not something that comes at all naturally to me, and though I am not precise, I aspire to be. Of course photography is seductive to me. It can be so *crisp*.

In the dark, the stink of it is sulfuric. This is what I love about photography: a special way of seeing, yes, but more. A picture appears in the dark. We move in coalescence, the chemistry and I. I foment so that the picture will emerge, release its latency. My pupils enlarge to let it in. Even though I know how a picture is made, I never know how it *happens*. This is true mystery: the feeling that the explanation is not sufficiently wondrous enough to match the miracle of what occurs. A picture appears on a blank page: how could knowing ever sum this up?

So I see why we have been misled, to think that questions of photography, both old and new, should concern its role as either art or science, to wonder, if we take it as science, if we can trust that truth, or, if we take it as art, how we can make art out of such a literal means of description. Our confusion makes sense. The camera is a very strange machine. Speculation: photography invented lying. That is, the invention of photography fomented the expectation (misplaced and a little irritable) that photographs can and should tell the truth. When did this begin to be the case? It was not the expectation of Henry Fox-Talbot, who recognized the agency given by photography to the world to depict itself, but did not conflate this agency with any notion of truth. It was not, also, the preconception of Louis Daguerre, who, prior to his own “invention” of photography, was principally concerned with the fabrication of diorama theatres, which used light to suggest the illusion of dimensional space. Meanwhile in England, Talbot’s own invention of photography was born of his frustration with his inability to satisfactorily recreate via drawing the images he saw in the camera lucida, a pre-photographic device which is essentially a camera without film, then used by artists to take “views” from the surrounding world. If only, Talbot thought, the views seen in the camera lucida could be fixed, such that it would no longer be necessary to draw them. When, eventually, this idea was brought to fruition, Talbot called his first book of photographic prints “The Pencil of Nature;” in his own mind, he had done little more as an artist than place that pencil in the hand of nature, such that it could draw itself.

When did we begin to expect photography to tell the truth? The tension has existed as long as the medium has: “The Pencil of Nature,” which was published between 1839 and 1846 as a series of books containing the author’s salted paper prints, implies that photography grants its subject autonomy. The idea of nature drawing itself might suggest, at first, accuracy; the idea

that the inevitably faulty, fleshy human will let emotion or its co-conspirators muddy the clarity of the image, that only a machine can do the thing proper, that the camera has liberated nature of the burden of human description. But in fact to draw oneself, if that is what photography does, is merely self-portraiture, which no one would call accurate. To do so would be to confuse fealty with agency. And photography does carry agency; the mix-up is that its agency is derived not from its accuracy but from its powers of mediation.

In the chapter on “Necessity and Obedience” in “Gravity and Grace,” the collected notebooks of the 20th century religious philosopher Simone Weil, Weil wishes “To be only an intermediary between the uncultivated ground and the ploughed field, between the data of the problem and the solution, between the blank page and the poem, between the starving beggar and the beggar who has been fed.” What exists between the blank page and the poem is the writing of the poem: Weil classes the identity of the intermediary as that of the creator. Mediation is inevitable; this is not a travesty or a destruction of truth because mediation is a creative act. And yet photography, which mediates the world via its reproduction, and creates via recreation, is faulted for not creating a perfect copy.

When photography was invented those who were not excited by its arrival were horrified; engravers, portraitists and illustrators all anticipated the total eradication of the necessity of their labor. This managed, in time, to be both true and untrue. Nostalgia is a byproduct of disuse, and in the absence of their usefulness these fields became luxuries, elevated to the status of art rather than merely practicality just as they were displaced by photography.

In the final lines of his 1991 essay on “Photography and Belief,” David Levi-Strauss warns, “The crisis of belief we are experiencing is much larger than a simple mistrust of photographs. It involves the wholesale, active relinquishing of our right to know. When the

manipulation and control of all forms of public imaging have become this pervasive, this *complete*, it is more than ever necessary to resist, to reassert individual initiative in the production, reception, and use of images, and to find new ways to reinvest images with ‘believability’— before belief itself becomes part of the collateral damage.”

In the nearly three decades since “Photography and Belief” was written, the ability of photographic imaging to propagate falsehood has expanded past the point imaginable even, I would guess, in 1991. With the advance of digital imaging, there is little that cannot be convincingly photographically fabricated. If Levi-Strauss’s stakes are to be bought into, belief itself has inevitably become part of the collateral damage (although— the collateral damage, I wonder, of what?). This is abhorrent, of course. The use of images to circulate untruths under the guise of accuracy is just as bad, morally, as it ever was. But Levi-Strauss is wrong in the timing of his warning. If belief is a peripheral effect of viewing a photograph— something that comes *after* we look at a picture— what does it stem from? The phrase “collateral damage” places belief to the side of the image, something that might be destroyed if we are not faithful in our image-making. But what does it mean to be faithful in this sense? Furthermore, in a world in which everyone both makes and looks at more pictures than ever before in the history of images, what does it mean to look faithfully upon an image?

Belief has never been the “collateral damage” that risks destruction if we do not make “true” pictures, because truth should never have been the onus of photography. Like a child in church, any answers a picture might bestow upon us are but an echoing of that which we have already indoctrinated. The only original information a photograph can provide us with is a question.

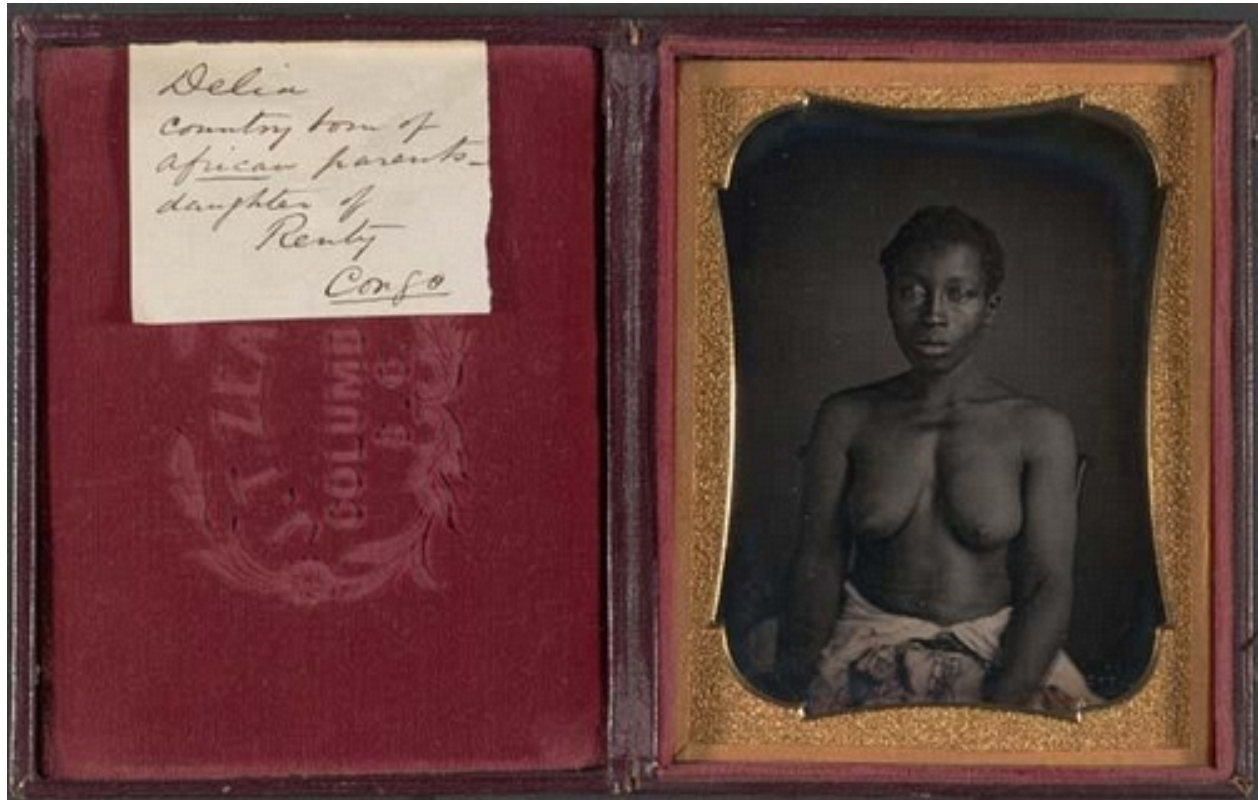


To “believe” a picture means something very different from to “believe in” a picture. I do not believe very many pictures, in that I am skeptical not only of their ability to accurately portray the truth but also in that I do not believe that truth-telling is a responsibility that photography should ever have been saddled with. I do believe in, however, the ability of photography to probe into the subcutaneous layers of what belief is, how it can be navigated, and what it might mean to examine the link between seeing and believing. The ideal of photography, therefore, is less a technology of proof, propaganda, or reification and more a mechanism through which we might pose and investigate questions. Our first response upon being greeted by an image should always be one of friendly skepticism— not a convert but someone who wants, if not purely to believe, at least to examine the stakes of belief itself.

When photography was invented, the initial theoretical tension it faced seemed less concerned with whether or not an image was true and more to do with whether the medium should be classed as Art or Science. Photo historians since then have, on the large, taken this early lack of attention to the truth-quality of photography to mean that early image-makers took the ability of photography to faithfully reproduce the world to be a given. But what if this isn't the case? What if the truth of photography was never questioned because it was never meant to be faithful?

What this means is that we have been asking the wrong questions.

## ON LOUIS AGASSIZ



“LOOK AT HER EYES!” implored the newspaper headline accompanying the first publication of Dorothea Lange’s iconic “Migrant Mother,” a photograph taken while Lange was on assignment for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression. Other images need not beg this attention of their viewers. In an 1850 daguerreotype of the slave woman Delia, the subject’s glassy eyes comprise only a small portion of the portrait, which was taken from the waist up. They may as well be the only thing in the frame. Her eyes are the punctum of the picture, its focal point and the only way in which Delia, stripped bare to the waist, affords herself any agency. Their magnetism forbids that we might break eye contact. Were we to look away, she would not stop looking.

This photograph is not the creation of some long-forgotten or disavowed racial scientist or phrenologist. It was taken at the behest of Louis Agassiz, a Swiss-born scientist who

emigrated to the U.S. in 1846, at the age of 39, and was one of the 19th century's most prominent thinkers.

Agassiz is remembered now primarily for his contributions to the natural sciences, specifically for being the first to theorize the existence of the Ice Age. There is in Agassiz's writings an attention to the wonder and order of nature that recalls thinkers like William James and Henry David Thoreau, both of whom were friends and admirers of Agassiz. In the foreword to "The Intelligence of Louis Agassiz," a collection of his writings compiled and annotated by Guy Davenport, Alfred S. Romer, Director Emeritus of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, writes, "Our attempts at classifying animals, Agassiz says, are not attempts to institute order where none exists, but are, if intelligently done, a striving toward an understanding of an order in the universe which is already there, established by the Creator... All species of animals were created separately, in accordance with a foreordained pattern, in the form in which we find them, and are destined to remain unchanged."<sup>1</sup> For Agassiz, Divine order and science were inextricably linked, the former animating the latter, the latter investigating and revealing the former. But what Romer gestures towards is Agassiz's belief in the theory of polygenesis: the idea that humans of different races are, in fact, separate species of disparate origins. Agassiz's belief in polygenesis is a facet of his scientific methodology that remained seldom remarked upon until the 1975 rediscovery of the slave daguerreotypes (there are, Delia included, 7 slaves depicted in total), which had remained for nearly a hundred years squirreled away in the attic of the Harvard Peabody Museum.

Polygenesis, as defined by Molly Rogers in her article "The slave daguerreotypes of the Peabody Museum: Scientific meaning and utility," was "a pre-Darwinian theory on the cause of

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<sup>1</sup> Davenport ix.

racial diversity, [which] proposed that human beings of different 'racial types' did not share a common ancestor, but were the product of multiple creations - in other words, there was not one Garden of Eden, but many."<sup>2</sup> The "pre-Darwinian" here is only slight; it was well within Agassiz's lifetime that Darwin published his "Origins of Species," and even after its publication Agassiz held staunchly to his theory of polygenesis. Of Agassiz's relationship to Darwinism, Harvey Young writes, "Whereas Darwin embraced portions of Agassiz's studies in his evolutionary theories, Agassiz not only dismissed the findings of Darwin but also may not have finished reading the Origin manuscript. As Gray noted in his letter, four months after having received Darwin's draft, Agassiz had 'read but part of it.'"<sup>3</sup> It seems generous of Rogers to speculate that Agassiz believed in "many" Gardens of Eden— though she does offer that "the theory was controversial, in part because it was championed by slaveholders whose purposes it served, but mostly because it challenged Christian doctrine."<sup>4</sup> If Agassiz's letter to his mother upon his first encounter with black people is to be taken as any indication, it seems more likely that they were, in Agassiz's understanding of human origins, to be left out of Eden altogether. He wrote, "All the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of

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<sup>2</sup> Rogers 39.

<sup>3</sup> Young 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

their palms, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away.”<sup>5</sup>

Agassiz’s racism here is disturbing in its false reluctance— “the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type”— as if he wished to believe in the equality of man but just could not deny the glaring facts of black people’s factual inferiority. His fear and captivation by this initial encounter with the perennial Other is palpable: “I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away;” as if the very presence of black people rendered the scientist immobile and incapacitated.

Maybe this fear— cowardice? — is why, a few years later, when Agassiz was further along in his attempts to gain proof of the biological inferiority of black people, he chose not to be present when, at his request, the daguerreotypist Joseph T. Zealy took a total of fifteen daguerreotypes of seven slaves. As Young puts it, “He might have preferred spending time with the photograph over the person.”<sup>6</sup>

Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty are the names of the seven slaves selected for documentation. The men— Alfred, Jack, Jem, and Renty— who were African-born but from different countries, were chosen because of their geographical diversity of origin, such that Agassiz could prove the difference not only between blacks and whites but even amongst different nationalities of Africans (never mind, of course, that the national lines observed by Agassiz were fabricated and instituted by white men). Their daughters, Delia and Drana, were American-born.

Photography was a dangerously useful tool for racial science because its mode of conveying information— an “objective” visuality— accorded with the highly visual emphasis in the field. This emphasis on visible difference between races was not limited to whites and blacks.

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<sup>5</sup> Agassiz quoted in Wallis 104.

<sup>6</sup> Young 33.

Of Native Americans, Agassiz wrote in a July 1850 essay on “The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races,” less than a month after the completion of the slave daguerreotypes, “The writer has of late devoted special attention to this subject, and has examined closely many native Africans belonging to different tribes, and has learned readily to distinguish their nations, without being told whence they came; and even when they attempted to deceive him, he could determine their origin from their physical features.” The mode of scientific inquiry here is not technical or mechanical: Agassiz is convinced of racial difference because he can plainly *see* the difference in the “physical features” of members of various tribes. Even without the aid of photography, mere visuality alone was, as far as he was concerned, enough to prove racial difference. The very gaze of the learned, respected white man served as proof enough. Rogers claims that “Agassiz's status as an internationally renowned naturalist (and his role as interpreter of scientific 'evidence') contributed to a framework in which scientific meaning could be attached to the daguerreotypes. This meaning was not stable, however. It did not derive from a close association between photography and anthropological science, it did not arise from conventions specifically born of interests common to both disciplines, but emerged from Agassiz's authority as a scientist.” While it may be unstable, photography itself served, too, as an authoritative force, reifying Agassiz's science via its visual faithfulness.

What is least sturdy about the Agassiz-Zealy slave daguerreotypes is the way in which they wobble between conventions of portraiture and of scientific specimen. The images are some of the first taken for the purpose of anthropological “typing,” and as such are devoid of the anthropometric grid and other denotations that would later come to identify the genre. What distinguishes them from mere conventional portraiture, as Rogers notes, is that the subjects are naked and, of course, that they are black. Simultaneously, they are contained in the plush red-

and-gold cases that so specifically connote the daguerreotype portrait, an object small, precious, and unique. The ornate framing of the slave daguerreotypes is at odds with the scientific impetus of their creation, a perversion of an already-perverse science. Rogers argues that this perversity, this lapse in the assumedly desired scientific aesthetic, occurs because Zealy, a daguerreotypist by trade accustomed to photographing upper class people seeking portrayal via the “honorific” rather than the “repressive,”<sup>7</sup> knew no other way of photographing people, even if, in this case, those people were stripped of the designation of human and reassigned as racial “types.” In other words, the only reason the slaves were depicted with any humanity at all is because Zealy knew of no other way to depict them: the photographic aesthetics of oppression did not yet exist. The Agassiz-Zealy pictures began to create them.

Though the slaves are naked in the pictures, the images do not portray that nudity as inevitable. In each of the images the subject’s clothing is visible, bright white. It would have been easy to remove evidence of the slave’s clothing. Instead, the pale fabric floats about the frame awkwardly, appearing here pooled around Drana’s waist, there crumpled by Jack’s feet, an artifact of their forced compliance. Though speedier than nearly all other image-making technologies of the day, the making of a daguerreotype is not a fast process. Beyond the tedious business of coating the plate with toxic mercury fumes and other chemicals, the exposures themselves were often quite lengthy, requiring the subjects to sit extremely still. This may account for the appearance of glassiness in Delia’s eyes; she might have blinked during the course of the exposure. It seems unlikely, then, that the presence of the slaves’ half-cast off clothing is the result of laziness or hurriedness. As the lightest objects in the frame, their strange

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the “honorific” versus the “repressive” in photography, see Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive.”

metallic glow demands attention. Their presence alerts us to the slaves' subjugation, another form of visual proof of their intrinsic inferiority and degradation.

Whether or not the ideas reflected by the daguerreotype process are "true" is hard to parse, as even truth is shaped by time and culture. Separated from its original purpose, the image seems a relic of the ideas it once conveyed— because whether or not an image is "true," its viewers may assume it to be, and in this way belief becomes a sort of truth in its own right. When Zealy captured the likeness of these slaves, the precise resemblance to their actual physicality suggested reality. And while resemblance may look like reality, the camera's ability to reproduce is, at its core, nothing more than mechanics. Assigning meaning to the mechanics of image-making is not a purely 19th century phenomenon, but in this case, the use of a new technology validated the investigation and perpetuation of racist theories.

That photography held a specific power of "proof" with regards, especially, to racial science is confirmed by Agassiz's later expedition to Brazil. Agassiz brought with him an illustrator and a photographer; while the former produced, in the course of their stay, some 800 drawings of the region's natural specimens, the latter took less than 50 photographs, all of them of people. Maybe unexpectedly, Agassiz chose to have drawings, rather than photographs, made of the natural specimens because scientific drawings are more accurate than photographs. This is a pivotal and paradoxical distinction: a drawing may portray something accurately, while a photograph most resembles the thing portrayed, which means something different entirely. What Agassiz sought with his slave daguerreotypes was not accuracy but resemblance. For something to look like the thing it portrays offered power without the necessity of actual proof, a purposeful though hollow sort of bulwark.



Rogers closes her section on Agassiz's Brazil expedition with this phrase: "The daguerreotypes of slaves did not prove the theory of polygenesis, they proved science itself, and in the process legitimized Agassiz's professional standing."<sup>8</sup> It's an extraordinary sentiment, in that it is suggestive of the potency of photographic proof. Photography reifies not merely individual scientific investigations— in fact, it often falls short in this regard (thus Agassiz's reliance on drawings in order to record natural specimens). But the aesthetic claim of visual truth affords it the ability to legitimize the very practice of science. That it has this power should make us question both what it means to take pictures and what it means to do science— or, more pointedly, what it means to believe in the veracity of either.



In 1995 the African American artist and photographer Carrie Mae Weems began her series "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," a collection of some thirty early images

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<sup>8</sup> Rogers 51.

(the Agassiz-Zealy daguerreotypes included) of black Americans that Weems rephotographed, printed in red and covered in text-printed glass and matted frames. “YOU BECAME A SCIENTIFIC SPECIMEN,” the text, emblazoned on glass, reads over a profile view of Drana, “A NEGROID TYPE,” “AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE,” “& A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT,” spelled out over the images of Renty, Jack, and Delia, respectively. The dark circular frames obscure the delicate gold filigree of the original daguerreotype casings, bringing the viewer closer in to the subject just as the dark red pigment of the prints and whitish text bring us back out. This undulation, a movement back and forth between intimacy and analysis, dislocates the viewer. We are made to reconsider. What are these pictures doing? What have they done?

The self-contained phrases marked upon each image are strung together by the images— or is it the other way around? Reading and viewing the text and images, respectively, creates a simultaneity of gaze until it is indecipherable if the text leads to the next line of text, the picture to the next picture, the picture-to-text, or any other patchwork of interaction between language and image. “YOU BECAME PLAYMATE TO THE PATRIARCH,” reads one picture, the letters just obscuring the vulva of a black women reclining on a lace pillow, her legs splayed, her gaze leading up out of the top left corner of the frame. The next: “AND THEIR DAUGHTER.” The pronoun here might be “HIS” daughter, suggesting a specificity of experience: one playmate, patriarch, daughter, each. The plural “THEIR” confuses the earlier choice of “PATRIARCH:” suddenly one patriarch becomes many, multiplies in number and power. The image over which “AND THEIR DAUGHTER” is written is a portrait of a black woman clutching at a small white child. Her larger hand curls protectively, tenderly over the little fist of the young girl. The child, like the “PLAYMATE” to her right, gazes up out of the frame, though

her look leads to the right of the frame, not the left. Her caretaker, however, looks squarely into the camera. The next image, of a black woman in a slinky black velvet gown and jeweled headdress, her heavily made-up eyes cast down towards her clasped hands in her lap: “YOU BECAME AN ACCOMPLICE.” It’s an indictment of sorts, but one curiously vacated of guilt: looking at the child in the previous image, the marks of the lash on Jack’s back (BLACK AND TANNED/YOUR WHIPPED WIND/OF CHANGE HOWLED LOW/BLOWING ITSELF - HA - SMACK/INTO THE MIDDLE OF/ELLINGTON'S ORCHESTRA/BILLIE HEARD IT TOO &/CRIED STRANGE FRUIT TEARS), the role of accomplice seems the best, if not the only, mode of survival for the black image and, by extension, the black person in America. If Delia’s eyes are to be taken as any indication, to be complicit in the forceful procurement of your own image may also be a form of resistance and power. Only under the conditions of oppression might such a paradox occur, and manifest itself visually: complicity and resistance in the same look. Weems’s series, in its careful compilation of such pictures, draws out the paradox, its vitality.

Much has been made of the palpable pain in the slaves’ likenesses: Rogers’s book on the subject is called “Delia’s Tears.” But I wonder if it might not be possible to reread these pictures as not solely repressive, but also honorific. I think Weems’s work allows for the pain of the slaves, and, in the acknowledgment of the reductive nature of that pain and its use to pseudoscientific ends, also leaves some room for something more.

In an episode of ART21, the PBS series about contemporary artists, titled “COMPASSION,” Weems discusses “FROM HERE I SAW WHAT HAPPENED AND I CRIED.” As she moves the prints out of their archival boxes, the artist recounts how Harvard tried to sue her over her use of the images, and how she responded by inviting them to do so. “I

didn't think I had much of a legal case," she says, "but I thought maybe I had a moral one." That same attention to the dissonance between fact and truth. Harvard no longer wanted to sue Weems once they had been formally invited. Instead, the wealthiest university in the world asked to be given a portion of each sale Weems made of the work. When she declined them this, too, Harvard purchased an edition of "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried" in its entirety. As Weems tells the story, she laughs.

It was 2009 when Weems told that story to PBS. The half-life of these daguerreotypes is turning out to be longer than anyone anticipated: in March of 2019, Tamara Lanier, a descendant of Renty and Delia, filed a lawsuit against Harvard University over the possession of the images. Again, the argument made seems to be moral rather than legal, at least according to Lanier's lawyer. On Harvard's side, photo conservationists worry that the daguerreotypes would fare poorly in civilian hands.

Preservation is a distinct type of care: it prolongs the life of the image without regard for the quality of that life. It assumes that existence is better than the alternative. The assumption is that such pictures are meant to be immortal. There is real and vital weight to the consideration that we need these pictures to remember that America's racist past has long been supported by the weight of scientific institutions. But since they have already been copiously documented and commented upon, it seems unlikely that the reallocation of the daguerreotypes themselves would be potent enough to erase our cultural memory. There is something lovely, then, and restorative in a way that is actually destructive, in the idea of pictures taken to the ends of a racist science returned to the descendants of the depicted. Lanier has proposed that, if she wins her case, she might make the daguerreotypes available for public perusal in a traveling show. I like the idea, though, of Papa Renty's daguerreotype, maybe up on the mantle, or hung on a wall, or however

Lanier keeps her family pictures (maybe just in a box somewhere), surrounded by his descendants. His image wouldn't fade all at once. At first there would be just a few blotches obscuring his wrought eyes, his wiry bare body, until finally the filigree gold frame would contain no more picture at all, just pure blackness, a merciful forgetting: not the destruction of history, but the decency to let it die.

## ON EADWARD MUYBRIDGE

Some of photography's most famous instances of scientific revelation have, on the outskirts of their histories, facets of untruth, and I wonder about the implications of these untruths, and of the dubious line between the thing made and its maker. Such a line exists between Eadward Muybridge, the 19th century photographer, and his photographic studies of movement, collected in the book *Animal Locomotion*, which famously solved the quandary of the so-called "unsupported transit theory," which wondered whether or not all four of a horse's limbs left the ground in the course of its gallop. Muybridge's photographs captured, for the first time, the image of a horse completely suspended in the air, "proving" in the eyes of the public that there existed a moment— invisible to the human eye— in which the horse, all of its legs clear of the ground, hovered.

To produce such an image required a new technology of picture-making capable of making exposures at a fraction of time close to a thousandth of a second, which was much, much faster than was typical of photography in Muybridge's era: in the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century, photographers typically exposed film simply by manually removing and replacing the lens cap, counting the full seconds during which the film was met with light. Muybridge's method required the invention of something closer to a modern camera shutter, one that used electricity in order to open and close. The discovery central to Muybridge's fame relied dually on mechanism and motion. It was motion that was the subject of Muybridge's picture. But it was the capturing of this motion— a capture made possible via mechanism— that created the world's as-yet *fastest* picture, and yet one which was, at its root, incredibly still. All pictures, of course, are still, but this was a new type of stillness: one distilled from motion, a sharpness which ran contrary to the speed at which the event depicted occurred. The triumph of Muybridge's horse pictures was in their clarity: the photographic blur had been overcome.

But blur does exist in other of Muybridge's images, and it is, in its own way, revealing, though not in the same way as the *Animal Locomotion* pictures— that is, not of anything precisely new. In 1875 Muybridge travelled to Central America to make a collection of images he would later call the *Isthmus of Panama* series, and sell as stereoscopic slides, an early type of three-dimensional image that worked by placing two slightly different images of the same scene through an ocular lens (like that of binoculars) attached to a wooden device upon which the images rested. One image from the series depicts a person, described in the image's title as merely "Native Woman," standing naked from the waist up, a piece of fabric—her shirt? A shawl? — swinging from her left hand; one end of the strip of fabric has yet to hit the ground, and is still blurred in mid-air, as if just fallen from her fist. There is nothing in this image of the sharpness with which Muybridge would soon still the motion of horses and, later, people. But the photograph's softness is tempered by its ideological precision.



It is not a hard picture to read: the native, "savage" woman, safely distant in her Otherness, and yet also, from the distance through which we glimpse her, erotic. Other images of

this sort—carte-de-visites of harems in Algeria,<sup>9</sup> for example, which were circulated as postcards meant to titillate the colonizing eye— at least attempt to tell a convincing story, the women in them staring coquettishly at the camera, their eye contact at once confrontational and inviting. Here, too, eye contact is made, but the woman's brow is furrowed, the corners of her mouth set downwards into a frown. Like the Algerian postcards, the Panama pictures were very much objects, meant to be displayed and passed between hands. In the case of the stereoscope, Muybridge's subject would be set forward from her surroundings so as to create the illusion of dimensionality, her slouched shoulders protruding out towards the viewer, their eyes peering through the glass.

Even before the images of motion, which would bring him international fame, Muybridge often made careful, beautiful images, most of them landscapes of his adopted home, the American west coast. The "Native Woman" slide lacks his usual precision. It feels rushed and empty. Maybe this is because, bolstered by the exoticness of his subject, he can afford to be lazy in his picture-making, to leave behind evidence of the fact that his subject was clearly asked, likely by the photographer, to remove her top. When Muybridge was providing evidence of the unsupported transit theory to a patron wealthier and more powerful than himself, he pressed into new technology in order to ensure that his success would be airtight. A still, sharp, fast picture was imperative to the idea of scientific *proof*. But in the *Isthmus* picture, the photographic blur of the subject's shirt both incriminates Muybridge's intervention in the "truth" of the image and reveals the fact that he was perfectly comfortable in presenting the visual facts of this untruth, so thoroughly told was the lie he was building upon.

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see Malek Alloula, "The Colonial Harem."



Muybridge told other photographic lies, and usually similarly without consequence. History has, on the whole, been kind to Muybridge. Biographies of Muybridge have not dwelled upon the fact that he murdered his wife's lover, and was found guilty but acquitted. Nor does history recall that, after the subsequent death of his spouse, he abandoned his infant son to an orphanage. Nor is it easy to discover, without a little digging, that the first photograph Muybridge ever published of a horse in motion wasn't a picture at all: it was a painting.



As photo historian Marta Braun notes in her biography on Muybridge, “Muybridge could be accused of perpetuating a hoax, but that would be imposing a very modern conception of just what a photograph is.” Because Muybridge had, in fact, managed to take a photograph of a horse in motion; it just wasn't a very good one. So the retoucher at his San Francisco gallery made a watercolor painting based on the negative, one which Muybridge pasted in a picture of the jockey's face, and sold it as a 5 x 7 inch “Automatic Electro-Photograph.” The jockey's face is the only technically photographic element of this first horse picture. Like Agassiz, who used photography to perpetuate racial typology during his expeditions in Brazil but employed an illustrator for the production of botanical specimens collected during the voyage, Muybridge knew that information obtained photographically could nonetheless be conveyed through other

visual methods. Upon the image's publication, only one contemporary writer noted the apparent falseness of the image. Muybridge did, of course, eventually manage to capture the horse's motion and that of many other living creatures more than satisfactorily. But it is striking that his first published attempt was, if not precisely a lie, at the very least less transparent than it could have been. The fact is that, although in fact a painting, the animal motion described in Muybridge's "Automatic Electro-Photograph" is accurate, and it is based upon visual information that could not have been obtained without photographic technology. Does it really matter that the details were fudged?

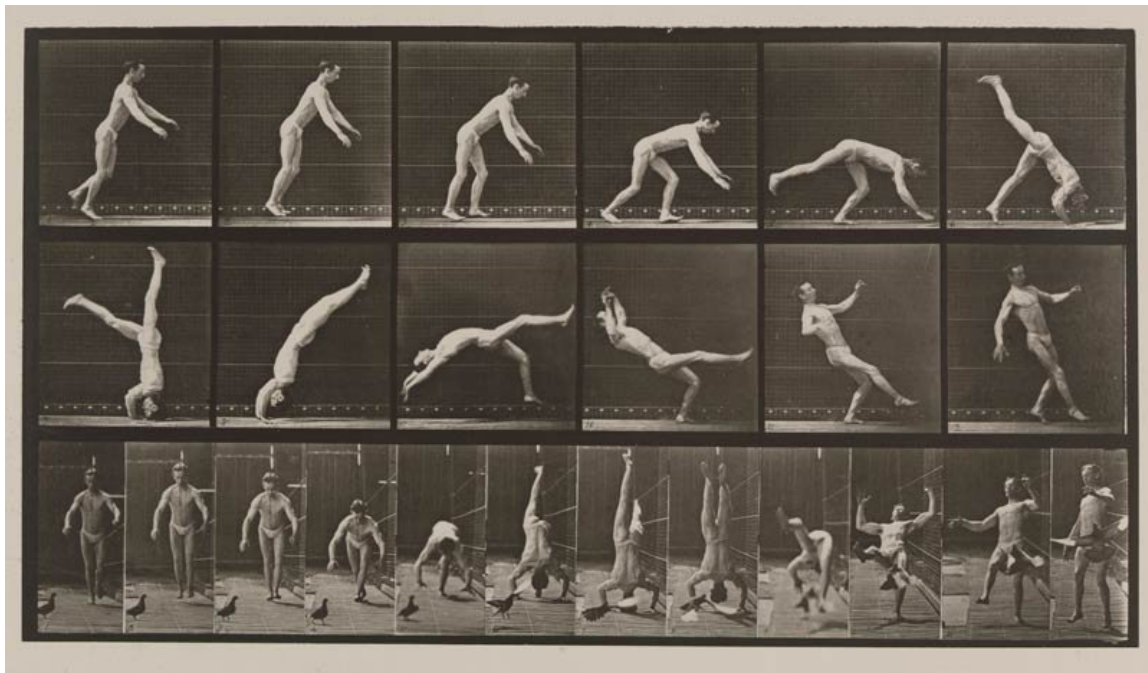
The complete "Animal Locomotion," Muybridge's studies of human and other animal movement, is a behemoth. It is a marriage of the serial and the ridiculous, the way things fall apart up close, like photographic pointillism. Taken as a whole, each grid of images in "Animal Locomotion" shows the procession of a single, mundane task. In his motion picture of the African American boxer Ben Bailey, the model marches across the grid of image with a stoic perfection. We can see the movement of his knees forward and back again across the top and bottom rows, respectively, and the accompanying swing of his arm. The individual frames slice motion so thinly that movement itself becomes fragile. The differences between frames becomes less legible. Here the arm moves forward a bit, here backwards, until we are disoriented so completely that we have to imagine ourselves enacting the same movement so as to recenter ourselves: oh yeah, this *is* what that would look like, if each instant was boiled it down to its utmost essence. The pictures grow stranger in multitudes, such as when sandwiched between page after page of bodies, nude and clothed, running, walking, sitting, sleeping, somersaulting, wrestling, swinging a pickaxe, shaking hands, spanking children, and pouring water out of vases, to name a few examples. They are set largely against an anthropometric grid, a nineteenth

century photographic backdrop used typically in anthropology to measure bodies of people of color. Muybridge's first use of the anthropometric grid followed neatly this eerie practice, as it begins to lurk in the background of his images around the time he photographed Bailey, the only person of color to be depicted in Muybridge's motion oeuvre.

Our removal from the texture of daily life long past is at least partly responsible for the dislocation of our sense of what was once normal. Even the mundane, set back in history and divided up, as it is, into such small parts, acquires an uncanniness: this is how this is used to be done, laundry, washing the dishes, dancing, these things we still do, but differently. The nature of this weirdness, however, is different. It comes not from the off-kilter familiarity of the image but from its apparent purposelessness: motion for motion's sake. The performance of any action without context tumbles forward into the absurd. Of course the movements performed in "Animal Locomotion" are not actually purposefulness, and in fact have the distinct purpose of recording precise visual increments of motion. It is a question, therefore, of perspective (time) and context. A diagram of an atom, the smallest unit of matter, doesn't make sense until you learn it is a part of a whole. But a picture of a table, although it is also a picture of very many atoms, looks different than a picture of a single atom from that table. Muybridge's images rely upon one another similarly. They begin to take on a new look when compounded. Furthermore, they divorce motion from its impetus. The motions, though all recognizable, are without impetus within the frame of the pictures themselves. Though we know their *use*, we do not understand their narrative configuration, because they have none.

Plate 365, for instance, shows a man in a loincloth charging at the camera and executing a perfect handspring, only to be met, upon landing, with a pigeon, the shock of which results in the

final three images in the twelve-image sequence to show their human subject understandably flustered by the arrival of this unforeseen companion.



The tautness of the man's muscles in the first eight pictures is exploded into silliness in the tenth and eleventh, as his limbs splay ridiculously as they avoid the bird and, in the final image, settle into decided annoyance, his arm raised protectively ahead of his disgruntled face, ankles still slightly scrambling for firm footing. The joke, of course, is that the viewer can see the pigeon encroaching from the very first frame, while the subject presumably did not, and as its small dark body marches through the frames its wings finally rise just as, in the ninth picture, the man's legs bend back past his head and find themselves awkwardly splayed just as his hands push off the ground: like the horse *Occident*, all four limbs hover.

Plate 365 does not constitute Muybridge's only trouble with birds, though the more pressing concern than their unexpected impeding on an image of a human body was how to capture their own flight. He was challenged, during his European victory lap following the horse and other animal studies that preceded the *Animal Locomotion* project, for his failure to depict

avian movement, and Muybridge was intent, in the wake of these criticisms, to conquer the image of flight as he had that of galloping. He did, eventually, and maybe even felt the need to overcompensate for his earlier failures, because while *Animal Locomotion* depicts all sorts of animals— pigs, dogs, cats, elk, camel, lions, kangaroos, baboons, elephants, and llamas, amongst others— it pays special attention to birds: at 28 plates, the bird pictures are outnumbered only by those of horses and people. This attention is not always kind. The final plate in *Animal Locomotion*, “Plate 781— *Chickens; scared by torpedo,*” feels a little unnecessarily punitive, the birds exploding into flight in various directions, like maybe Muybridge needed to discipline the birds for their earlier resistance to his attempts. As a motion study, Plate 781 fails. The billowing cloud of smoke, and the camera’s necessary distance from that smoke, largely obscures any meaningful description of the chicken's flight. All we can see is their disarray, their panic, and then they are gone, having flown out of the frame.

Strange in a different way than the content of the images that play pranks on birds are the technical anomalies that run throughout *Animal Locomotion*. In the last row of “PLATE 444— *Two models shaking hands and kissing each other,*” the focus shifts and the exposure blows out, so that for a moment we are met with a lighter, blurrier image than we are accustomed to, an image that almost looks like it was lifted from surveillance footage, or taken by a detective in a noir film with a very long lens, the systematic diagramming of interaction becoming, for a few frames, an illicit glance upon a clandestine meeting.



The set of images begins with the bodies of the two women approaching each other across the grid. As the women move closer to each other so, too, does the frame move in upon them, so that from left to right even as the images shrink the distance between the women's bodies and the edge of the frame remains constant. This consistency does not carry through all three rows of images: in the third row, the first image is, again, cropped further out than the ensuing seven. As a whole, the last row of images in this plate are less lucid than those of the first and middle: the angle of the photographs is such that the differences in forward motion are less evident than when the camera faces both bodies from a lateral angle, rather than one from the back. This shift in the placement of the camera obscures the closing of the gap between the women, and our vantage point lost is their privacy gained. Of course this doesn't matter: the women are performing their motion only for the watching camera. They are not concerned with privacy. But that moment, third from the right in the final row, in which the slight overexposure of the image looks almost like maybe we aren't supposed to be looking at it, like maybe the women's kiss is for themselves. The light, the grain, the slightly soft focus all loosen the rigidity

not of the women's movements but of the way that movement is organized. Their relationship has not changed, but the shift in the quality of the image allows a certain purposeful emptiness that the viewer is meant to fill up, gaps to be filled in. The didactic becomes, then, an invitation—the taut clarity of motion distilled allowing, in moments of slippage, the arrival of a potential narrative.

Like the women it depicts, Plate 444 holds hands with a picture by a very different photographer. Duane Michals's 1972 "Chance Meeting" follows the artist's long-running project of using photography to narrative ends.

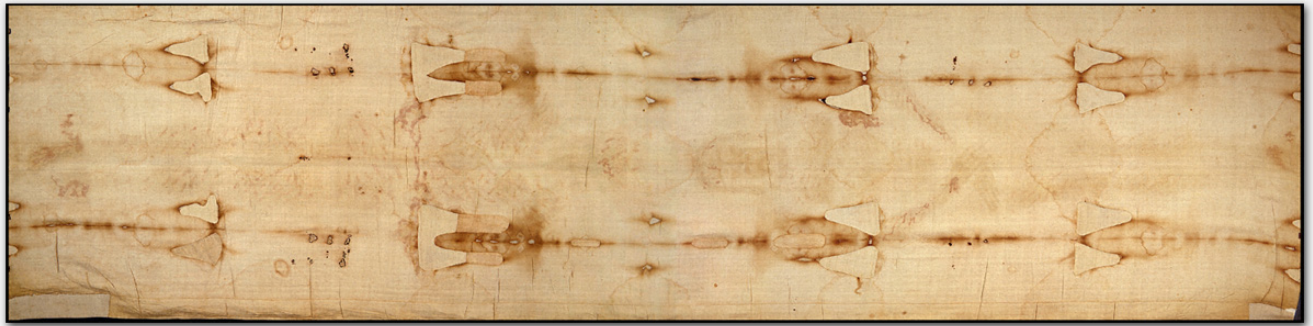


The set of pictures shows “two guys on the street attracted to each other, passing like ships in the night,” a *what if* of a picture. The brick wall that hugs the left half of each frame in “Chance Meeting” is the industrial equivalent of Muybridge's anthropometric grid: both map motion. Two men approach each other down an alleyway, and as they cross, the man moving towards the camera turns his head in the direction of his passerby, the other man's gaze still fixed staunchly

ahead (or at least, the back of his head betraying no such similar shift). As the men continue past one another, the first man twists his head further over his shoulder, his hand guiding his jaw until it is contorted such that he can't turn it any more without the rest of his body following suit. And then he's gone. It is then, in the last image of the series, that the second man finally turns. He is alone, or at least, alone in the picture. We can't see if the first man is still twisted back: if they are making eye contact. We feel that they have not. The gap between Michals's image and Muybridge's otherwise linked images is in this contact dearth, tension in one instance fulfilled and in the other sustained. Looking at Muybridge's image alongside Michals's allows it to shift from the descriptive to the fictitious, and it is a technical anomaly that allows this narrative slippage. That moment of overexposure, the women's contact obscured by their own bodies, permits the viewer to tell herself a story: the bodies of two lovers meet. Though some of the visual qualities that permit it to exist may be, this narrative looseness is not accidental.



## ON THE SHROUD OF TURIN



The Shroud of Turin, believed by many to be the burial shroud of Jesus Christ, is likely neither that (radiocarbon dating places its production to sometime in the 13th century) nor a proto-photograph in the strictest sense of the phrase; that is to say, it was not produced via any technology akin to those of photography. But there is something photographic in the meaning of its production and reproduction.

The Shroud itself is totally unremarkable looking. Holy detritus. A beige, blotchily discolored cloth that definitely belongs more to the realm of immanence than transcendence. In fact looking at the Shroud is a little pointless: it is not useful except for what it is, or rather, what it might be.

It looks like a stain— not the actual blotches, the discolorations and tears, the imprints, which believers take to be the image of Christ; the entirety of it looks like one long blooming stain. What makes it look like a stain is not purely visual. The resemblance resides in the action of noticing. A stain is confirmed by a double-take: before the second look, a trick of the light, a shadow, or seeing spots. Only pawing over the fabric again, stretching it out ahead of the body, ensures that it is grease, or sweat, or blood, or dried food. Like a stain the Shroud of Turin once clung to a body, and like a stain it divulges itself in a series of glances.

If it is not, as some believe it to be, the burial shroud of Christ, could the Shroud of Turin be the first photograph? Likely not; a photograph is an unlikely thing to occur by accident, and

the technology necessary for such an exposure to be created purposefully didn't exist (or at least, no records point to its existence) when the Shroud was created, sometime in the late 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Those who believe that the Shroud is a kind of proto-photograph (as chemist and photographer Mike Ware terms it in his essay "On Proto-photography and the Shroud of Turin"), and have gone to great lengths to attempt to prove it, are not without historical precedent.

Photography, as nearly everyone who has written or read a history of the medium might tell you, could have been invented long before it ever was: all a photograph really requires is light, light-sensitive materials, and a lens, and even the latter is something of a frivolity, a focusing device that makes the process easier but is not essential to image formation. As Kaja Silverman puts it in the opening lines of her great book "The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part 1," "It is as impossible to know when photography began as it is to know when our first ancestors opened their eyes, but if we were able to locate one of these events, we would not have to search long for the other."<sup>10</sup> It's a grand claim, and not an entirely true one— later on the same page Silverman cops to the existence of a "first photographic image," created by Joseph Nicéphore Niepce in 1827; does a first not constitute a type of beginning? So the question is not why wasn't photography invented sooner, but what if it had been? What if the first ever photograph had been a hoax, something purported not to have captured the likeness of the world but rather to have covered the body of Christ? And which would be more remarkable?

In "On Proto-photography and the Shroud of Turin," Ware debunks the idea propagated by Lynn Pickett and Clive Prince in their 1994 book "The Turin Shroud: In Whose Image?" that the Shroud was a self-portrait by Leonardo da Vinci. Pickett and Prince propose that da Vinci created a cast of his head (made necessary by their suggested exposure times, which would be longer than any human could sit still) and placed the Shroud (at that time, just a

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<sup>10</sup> Silverman 13.

sensitized linen cloth) in a box camera. It's a seductive claim, until Ware notes neatly that, although all the technology necessary for such a process existed independently during da Vinci's lifetime, "there is no evidence that da Vinci ever put a lens on a camera obscura."<sup>11</sup> The parts were not yet brought to a whole.

Though da Vinci may not have invented photography, at times it seems he thought photographically, which is to say that he saw the potential for the world to record itself. Photography is like this: it has as many potential progenitors as actual inventors. Silverman, in the first chapter of her "Miracle of Analogy," pays attention to da Vinci's preternatural awareness of the world's sly tendency to create images— "Leonardo," she notes, "did not view image-making as a strictly human activity," and then gifts the reader with this luscious quote from one of da Vinci's notebooks: "Every body fills the surrounding air with infinite images of itself."<sup>12</sup>

Every body fills the surrounding air with infinite images of itself. If bodies emitted light, air was a lens, and all non-bodily material was able to both receive and fix an image, this would be true. As it stands, da Vinci's point is about contact: a body touches the world around it, and it leaves something behind. A hair, a thumbprint, a stain. These are all proto-photographic images. And eventually, the Shroud of Turin, though it is neither photo nor proto-, was photographed.

The Shroud is a hoax. It is not almost everything that its venerators claim it to be: photograph, Christ's burial shroud, the rediscovered, renamed Mandylion. But an object so long venerated takes on its own sort of aura: the sacred has never relied on the factual. Christianity is not primarily a religion of pilgrimage, and it has no central site. Still, when, in 2010, the Shroud

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<sup>11</sup> Ware 265.

<sup>12</sup> Da Vinci in Silverman 16.

was placed on view for the 18<sup>th</sup> time since its “discovery,” more than two million people came to see it in a span of less than two months.

The Shroud cannot be viewed by a casual believer or skeptic on a day-to-day basis; it is, after all, very old (though not old enough) and, as old things tend to be, it is sensitive (not only to light but also to climate). Still, it can be visited: either the object itself, which is kept at the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Turin, Italy, or a replica, on permanent display at the Museum of the Shroud, just a few blocks away.

Access was not always so restricted. As photo historian John Harvey notes, “Prior to the invention of photography, the disparity or discontinuity between the relic and its simulacrum was recognized and bridged by a process akin to direct-transfer printing: the surface of paintings representing the Shroud were pressed against the surface of the relic. It was believed that, in doing so, its sacred aura would ‘rub off’ onto the painting, as, it would seem, did paint onto the Shroud... Pseudo-photographic relics (such as the Shroud and the Veil) forged an indexical link with, and preserve a visual residue of, their subject. They distinct from other forms of relic, such as the physical remains of saints or artefacts of holy persons, in that they represented the extant shadow of the real rather than presented the thing in itself. In pseudo-photographic relics the shadow precedes the reality, reversing their customary chronological relationship in biblical typology, wherein the shadow comes first.”<sup>13</sup>

Looking at pictures of the Shroud, however, is a different experience than that pilgrimage would be. On May 28, 1898 the Italian photographer Secondo Pia became the first man allowed to photograph the Shroud (the photographs he produced that day were some of the first to be taken with light bulbs as their primary light source, the new and the very, very old, the oldest!).

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<sup>13</sup> Harvey 40-41.



He gasped when he processed the images and held the negative up to the light. Because what he saw was the image of Christ's face, clearer than it had been on the Shroud itself. The first photographic acheiropoieta (but all photographs, in the interplay of light on silver, on the catch of that light, on its embedding in the crystals, are made without hand).

## ON F. HOLLAND DAY

A Bible passage once hung on a sign above the 19th century Pictorialist photographer F. Holland Day's apartment: "This is the Day the Lord hath made." A similarly flagrant moment of self-worship lurks above the artists "Seven Last Words," a series of seven images of his visage as Christ in agony, his gaze cast variously about the sequential frames, up and pleading, sidelong and defeated, up and agonized, and, finally, it would appear, dead, his neck and eyelids slack. Day's neck twists sinuously from frame to frame with a serpentine agony. An inscription along the top of the frame contains the Seven Words, which are known in scriptural terms as Christ's final recorded remarks. Day's reproduction of these holy phrases reads as follows: "FATHER FORGIVE THEM THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO TODAY THOU SHALT BE WITH ME IN PARADISE WOMAN BEHOLD THY SON SON THY MOTHER MY GOD MY GOD WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME I THIRST INTO THY HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT IT IS FINISHED." In Day's rendering, however, a dot separates each word, and one such dot severs to- from day-, such that the phrase reads "THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO TO DAY," that is, to Day.



The above-described series of pictures are close-ups, a vivid reenactment of Christ's final, agonizing moments, and the immediacy of Day's visage helps to elevate our palpable sense of his suffering. Less effective is another image in the Christ series, in which Day is strung up on

the Cross. Day did not literally crucify himself for the sake of his art, which would be fine but for the fact that he decided to try to look like he had.



To support the weight of his frail body, an awkward triangle of wood had to be affixed just under Day's feet in order to support his body. The image is taken, oddly, in profile, so that we can see especially clearly the wooden ledge jutting out from the front of the cross. What we cannot see is

Day's face: a mess of curls obscures it, and, unlike in "The Seven Last Words," we are left without Day's acting to convince us of his agony. So: no tormented countenance, no painfully suspended body. There is simply nothing in this picture to convince us of any sense of pain or drama. Even the landscape is uncomfortably plush, a hearty tangled clump of foliage at the foot of the cross leading into the gentle slope of a hill, a hazy line of trees in the distance. No other bodies people the frame, and their absence is felt. Much of the image is comprised solely of the admittedly tonally perfect gray expanse of sky, a technical perfection that is undercut by the fact that there is just too much of it, and too little of everything else. The sky provides a dull backdrop for the Crucifixion, which was a dramatic event, not merely in its heightened emotionality but also in the interplay of actors. Many medieval and Renaissance paintings of the Crucifixion are carefully orchestrated scenes in which Christ on the cross stands as the center around which copious other action vacillates: Mary with neck tilted in quiet despair, St. John the Baptist, a multitude of angels and worshippers and sometimes even Lance the Longinus, the soldier who posthumously pierced Christ's chest in order to check if he was really dead. Day's own Christological images were inspired by actual theater, specifically his experience witnessing the Oberammergau Passion Plays, a decadent theatrical production of Christ's final days that the artist travelled to Germany in order to see. His homage to the plays, however, erases any sense of the theatrical, and puts nothing in its place. Of course there are many images of Christ alone on the cross, but in these the framing is such that we can see Christ's face, his slack jaw and twisted body. In Day's rendition all that is granted to the viewer is the sight of a man crouching on a narrow bit of wood.

Christ's Passion ends, of course, with the Savior's death, and the narrative of Day's images follows faithfully (though not in the religious sense) this procession. In the final



photograph of the series, Day's body lies stiffly on a long, low table swathed in dark fabric, a live man's imitation of *rigor mortis*. His "corpse" is directly perpendicular to the entrance to a marble crypt behind him, the crypt's black maw tracing Day's protruded ribs, sunk-in stomach, and cloth-swaddled pelvis, an inelegant diaper. Again, the images composition is unconvincing, a passive depiction, rather than an enactment, of that most singular of events.

F Holland Day was not a Christian. He was not, in fact, very religious at all, beyond a particularly Victorian preoccupation with Spiritualism that tended, at least in Day's particular case, towards the social: gatherings of artists engaged in séances and other parlor tricks. Christianity is a social religion, too, but in a different way: the sociality of Spiritualism constituted not an embedding in the tautly woven fabric of belief or an adherence to the social contract of sin, but a spectacle, a sense of festivity. Spiritualism was one of the few particularly American belief systems, and also has the strangest and deepest ties to photography. The so-called "Spirit photographs" of the 19th and early 20th century are unmatched fraudulence but also in fervor. Even for the era in which they were made, spirit photographs look laughably fake: in one image, the medium Eva C. emerges nude from between two black curtains, her lips tucked in towards her teeth, eyes screwed up in concentration, her outstretched arm cutting through the torso of what is denoted in the images caption to be a "fully materialized" ghost, but is actually just a life-size cutout of an illustration of a man, his handlebar mustache curling ridiculously above a Faustian beard, a caricature of the demonic.



In another picture, that same goofy lip movement is matched by the whimsical upward cast of her eyes, which gesture towards another cutout, this one made minorly more captivating via its suspension in a floating puddle of “ectoplasm,” which really resembles cheesecloth far more than it does any paranormal emission.



How could anyone ever have been convinced by these pictures? They are actively difficult to believe in, and yet many did believe them. Belief in spirit photography arose precisely because of the technical fidelity of photographs. Here, finally, was proof of belief. The camera itself was still such an instrument of wonder that for it to be capable of falsehood was an idea just beginning to emerge in the lexicon of photographic discourse. Like the Agassiz pictures, early Spiritualist photographs took the very existence of the image as proof in and of itself, reification via mechanism. But unlike Agassiz, Spiritualists did not have scientific acclaim and a close affiliation with Harvard to bolster their beliefs. This mattered little for their project. Spiritualists were not trying to prove to anyone but themselves the existence of a realm beyond the living, and, with little to prove, they created some of the most inventive investigations into belief that photography has yet seen. Spirit photographers took the simplest of photographic tricks (often that of the double exposure, in which a single negative is twice exposed in order to produce a second, “ghost” image) and lifted them to the height of a recordable phenomenon. For Spiritualists, photography was a means of getting at the mystical through the mechanical, a reaching outside of the realm of the seen via the visible.

But this was not the aspect of Spiritualism, nor of photography, with which Day was concerned. He was also radically unconcerned with the technical aspects of photography—he refused to learn how to print his photographs until late in his career and, in an article entitled “Art and the camera” published in *Camera Notes* in July 1898, he implored “*Permit yourself to read absolutely nothing relative to the technical production of photographs.*”<sup>14</sup> His religiously-themed works were not printed by Day himself but by Frank W. Birchall, who produced many of Day’s prints until the artist learned to do so himself. Birchall struggled to print the wildly

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<sup>14</sup> Day quoted in Roberts 18.

overexposed negatives of the pictures taken out in the landscape— Day, a meticulous and emotive master when it came to studio portraiture and lighting, was not accustomed to exposing for sunlight; he was, as biographer Estelle Jussim puts it, “a hot-house species that flourished only indoors.” Still, Birchall must have somehow found a way to compensate for that overexposure, because he was able to afford the sky in the Crucifixion picture that coveted “middle gray” tone. This is because the chemistry used in late 19th-century recorded the color blue much more quickly than other hues, and so photographers found themselves repeatedly frustrated with blown-out skies, the prints being paperwhite as a result of the nearly black portions of the negatives.

Day’s rejection of the technical wasn’t just obstinance. In the late 19th century, photography was still just teetering between art and science. Even those who, like Day, took for granted photography’s status as a fine art still found themselves saddled with the task of situating where within the art world photography might reside. For Day and his peers, photography was like painting: a unique, irreproducible art concerned with classical ideals of aesthetic beauty. Based on these ideals he and like-minded contemporaries founded the Pictorialist movement, which was characterized by printing techniques that allowed for a softness of depiction. Though it may be hard to imagine, now that his legacy has faded considerably, Day was one of the most famous and influential photographers of his time, matched only by Alfred Stieglitz, whose emphasis on clarity of the photographic image ran counter to Day’s blurrier philosophy of art. Stieglitz and Day were peers and even friends for a time; it was in a letter to Stieglitz that Day referred, off-hand, to the geographically accurate props he had collected for a very special, very labor-intensive project, as “sacred stuff.”<sup>15</sup> But it was Stieglitz whose aesthetics of photography

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<sup>15</sup> Day quoted in Jussim 123.

came to eclipse our cultural memory of the time when a tension between the hard and soft, the objective and the aesthetic, predominated in the discipline. Maybe because of this, it seems strange to consider the photograph as a unique art object, but for Day this was photography's very essence, and it was because of this belief that he resisted the staunch technicality of Stieglitz and others. If there was something to which Day was devout, it was beauty, the site where, for him, objectivity and divinity joined.

It was 1895 when Day began his Christ series, a project that would span several years and involve dozens of assistants, elaborate props and costumes imported from abroad, and the artist's own self-starvation in order to accurately represent his subject: himself as Jesus Christ on the cross. Over the next four years Day produced over 250 negatives reenacting the Crucifixion, all featuring a straggly-haired, emaciated Day as the images' central figure. The divine, for Day, resided in the beautiful, and so he could afford to perform flippancy towards more indoctrinated forms of divinity, and, more pointedly, to instrumentalize the aesthetics of religion towards his own ends as an artist. Day, like Christ, was a threshold figure. The threshold to which Christ found Himself bound was that of the cross, the boundary between mortality and divinity. Day's concerns were less cosmic, but must have felt urgent enough to him that they merited the use of such an image. Topically, Day's use of Christological imagery seems parodical (Oscar Wilde was one of his icons), a use of religion for aesthetic ends that evacuates the images of any real sense of piety. The Wilde link is significant to understanding the precise nature of Day's assumption of the Christ costume. In the essay by James Crump accompanying the 1995 monograph of Day entitled, fittingly, "Suffering the Ideal," Crump notes,

"As Christ, Day became what Oscar Wilde called in *De Profundis* 'the most supreme of individualists.' Day's self-portraits as Christ were not symbols of personal redemption,

nor naively meant to conceal his own ‘sinfulness.’ Rather, they utilized sacred suffering as a critique for what Day perceived as increasing homogenization in his century. Day’s photographs turn on the relation of the ‘true life of Christ’ and ‘the true life of the artist.’ As a typology of artistic martyrdom, Day’s suffering conveyed the alienation and spiritual loneliness faced by those questioning the order of modernity. Like Wilde, Day saw in Christ a spiritual icon whose profundity had been diminished by the ‘dead rules’ of organized religion, prescribed morality, and social convention.”

Despite Day’s deeply felt expression of individualism, he still assumed the guise of the casual in his imitation of Christ: this was the “sacred stuff” to which he referred in that letter to Stieglitz. But despite Day’s characteristically playful sacrilege, there is a sense that, in his attempts to prove that which was most vital to him, Day sought the most canonical subject that exists—one which had yet to be translated photographically.

And yet the pictures, especially when read against other of Day’s images, contain something more of “realism” than seems appropriate for a Divine figure. That the literality of Day’s Christ images was cause for offense seems to indicate that belief requires a level of abstraction: not that the Divine cannot be visualized, but that visualization must be an imaginative and, indeed, an interpretive act, not a theatrical documentation of a performance. Unlike mystical visions of Christ, which arrive to the receiver in some fugue state, Day’s images are careful, clear, and premeditated. Their clarity sets them out of line not only with Christian experience, but also with much of Day’s own work. This brush with realism is nearly isolated to the Christ images: even Day’s other forays into religiosity, such as his earlier images of Saint Sebastian, possess the same haziness as the rest of his body of work.

This specificity of description is tied to the about-ness of the Christ pictures, which sought to present Christ as an allegory for the suffering artist-as-martyr. Day had something to say, a sentiment that he couldn't afford to obscure with his usual Pictorialist sensibilities of softness and blur. Although his practice typically sought an essential disruption of the purported objectivity of photography, when it came to questions of belief even Day could not quite afford to reject the weight of realism outright. He leaned on— needed, even— a cleanness of description as a bulwark for his most controversial, most forthright images. In presenting the artist as a Christological figure, Day declined to risk misinterpretation. Ironically, it was this very reliance on literalism that made the pictures his least cohesive, and the most criticized, of his career. As Crump cites, the editors of *Photogram* wrote of the pictures that “the living Jesus, with face illuminated by the Divine Inspiration [was] beyond the power of the camera.” The problem, then, was not Day's unlikely pivot to realism, but the fact that his subject existed outside of the realm of the visible, or, at least, beyond the mechanical abilities of photography. Day's blasphemy was not in his photographs specifically, but photography itself as a medium through which to attempt representation of the Divine.

Still, Day was meticulous in his recreation of the Crucifixion on levels beyond the mere aesthetic of realism. According to Jussim, “Certainly few photographers could have afforded Day's elaborate staging or purchased all the authentic props from far off places. The crown of thorns, ordered specifically to his direction, resembled those used by Rubens and Van Dyck in their crucifixions. The wooden nails were carved by a Syrian. The costumes, as Day claimed to the press, were ‘such as were used at the time of the actual crucifixion, and procured from designs furnished by archaeological investigations.’”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jussim 123.

If we read Day as an artist concerned principally with beauty, radically uninterested in technical mastery and in fact interested in the disruption of the clear, “objective” image, and additionally as a non-believer, someone comfortable casting himself as Christ for the aim of his own artistic project, why, as Jussim notes, are his Christ images so meticulous? To what higher power of objectivity did even Day, that most aesthetic and unbelieving of artists, feel he must remain pious? There’s a dual contradiction at play here: that of Day’s devotion to an “accurate” (that is, aligned with art historical tropes) depiction of the Crucifixion, and his uncharacteristic use of the aesthetics of realism. Maybe all of this, the contradiction, the messiness, can be attributed to the fact that Day was not a believer, and so his instrumentalization of Christ ultimately falls flat. The Crucifixion suited Day’s purposes because it contained the special singularity with which Day sought to imbue every image he made. But it was also a sacrifice, in the strictest sense of the word, whereas Day’s recreation of that sacrifice sought only to further his only philosophy of art.

The uncharacteristic visual realism of Day’s images of Christ undercuts their mystery and thus their effectiveness. They are not good pictures, and they evoke no sense of wonder, no ecstasy, agony, divinity. Like a dislocated limb they hang awkwardly off of Day’s body of work. This awkwardness is born not of their dealings with the sacred, but of Day’s own disloyalty to the aesthetics of Pictorialism that he otherwise utilized so lovingly, so beautifully, and so totally. Another of Day’s series deals with religious iconography, but without the bare, bright clunkiness of the Crucifixion series.





In his depiction of Saint Sebastian, the model's pierced body is rendered in a creamy gray haze. There are the signifiers of pain here: an arrow to the pelvis and chest, the glow of white rope binding the man's body to the trunk of a tree. But the prevailing mood is not one of torment. Day's imagination of Saint Sebastian is reverent, lush and sexy. Even the framing of the image is more assured than that of the Christ images, the subject's torso blooming into the gentle parting of his upward-tilted lips, which glow with the fuzz of the hand-colored platinum print.

In another image, a scantily-clad young man holds aloft in one hand some sort of reflective orb (obsidian? Dark glass?); in the other, wrought metal flowers twist out of the frame. His gaze meets the camera haughtily. His pouting lips fade, towards one side of his face, into shadow, so that the line between his body and the images backdrop ceases to exist. He melts into the picture. Softness of picture and of body: the youth's torso is not the slender, muscled abdomen of Day's "Saint Sebastian." He has, even, a slight paunch, full cheeks, and eyebrows

that reach across the bridge of the nose to meet in the middle. “BEAUTY IS TRUTH,” reads the title of the picture, a line lifted from the final stanza of John Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” and of this, at least, I feel that Day was convinced.



## ON TED SERIOS

“I don’t take pictures of the world to represent the world. For me the world is already a representation of something that can’t be photographed.” — Barbara Ess



The dark shadow of the man’s raised fist on the wall behind him quivers with the anticipation of descent. He tilts his head upward so that his eyes might alight on the much taller man before him, who is holding at waist-level a polaroid camera that he also touches with his other hand. The smaller man excitedly mutters something inaudible at the camera-operator, and then he drops the fist and squeezes his eyes shut, letting out a satisfied *yeah*, like an unlikely rockstar. They pull the film out from between the rollers, carefully peel back the paper to reveal the exposed film. No luck: the picture is all dark but for one small white speck. The next image (“*KAH!*” shoots out of the man’s mouth as his head jerks violently towards the camera) is also a bust. Or, in the next instance, the agitated, now-shirtless man sits perched on a stepstool and, with a cigarette between his lips, lets out a strained “*Uuuu-UHH!*” When an image is finally successfully made, he seems quietly pleased, and murmurs his assent.

The footage is from one of many experiments in which Ted Serios, an unemployed former Chicago bellhop, attempted to register his thoughts on polaroid film, a practice he called “thoughtography.” In this instance and many others Serios’s attempts are supervised by the psychiatrist Jules Eisenbud, who wrote an entire book on the “thoughtographer.” Eisenbud’s book on Serios is called “The World of Ted Serios: ‘Thoughtographic’ studies of an extraordinary mind,” a title as simple as the phrase “thoughtography” as it is incongruous with its implications.

The language with which Dr. Jules Eisenbud discusses Serios in his book is imbued with a sense of loftily high stakes, a jaunty sort of potential peril more akin to gambling than to, say, the religious fervor of Pentecostals writhing on the floor, slain in the Spirit, whose physical expressions of faith nonetheless resemble Ted’s creative process. When Ted was able to produce, in a single session, more than one thoughtograph he was “hot,” successful (that is, legible and existent) images were “hits,” their opposites “misses.” Most of Serios’s images were neither hits nor misses but neutral in-betweens deemed “blackies” or, in some of Eisenbud’s session notes, “black cats”— again, that wry wink towards the paranormal. Or the device that Serios required in order to produce his thoughtgraphs: a small tube made of rolled up paper, which, in order to dispel the obvious doubt that the use of such an object inevitably aroused, Dr. Eisenbud assures the reader was meticulously examined on numerous occasions by both himself and other witnesses, and which Ted called the “gizmo.”

Beyond imbuing the phenomenon of Ted Serios with a distinct playfulness, what this self-contained language does is to help to build a world in which the extraordinary and unlikely is rendered possible and concrete, familiar, even. The emphasis in the title “The World of Ted Serios: thoughtographic studies of an extraordinary mind” is not on thoughtography itself but on

Ted Serio's world, which is the only place where thoughtography can exist. Belief, Durkheim says, is social. In attempting to legitimize his subject's incredible abilities Dr. Eisenbud collects the presence of all sorts of scientists, doctors, para- and regular psychologists, the first few of which he refers to as the "Four Horsemen." This cornucopia of scientific professionals serves not only as forces of reification but also as agents of wonder and amazement. Eisenbud is concerned not solely with the documentation and legitimization of a recordable, repeatable, provable phenomenon but also with the propagation of that phenomenon. Much emphasis is placed in Eisenbud's book on Ted's eccentricities: his unreliability, which Eisenbud attributes to his alcoholism, and his insistence on drinking while producing (in their second meeting, Eisenbud will not allow Serios to drink until he has successfully produced a "hit," and, when the hit is finally made, rewards him with a double Scotch on the rocks). That he was often unemployed and a bellhop, the mundanity of his biography amplifying the unlikeliness of his unbelievable capacities. That he sometimes bled from the nose during a particularly trying session. None of these facts seem to be fabricated by Eisenbud. But the way in which they are delivered, the special attention that they are payed, seems all too obviously meant to build up an aura around Serios, the unlikely medium, the eccentric prophet.

Even when Ted is elevated, as he is by Eisenbud, to a figure of mythological strangeness, his presence in his own story is overwhelmed. When reading "The World of Ted Serios" it is hard to resist the urge to flip blithely past Eisenbud's pages and pages of dated, often silly parapsychological jargon until finally landing on one of the pictures, which are misty, perfect abstractions. Another of Eisenbud's anxieties arises over Ted's use of "target" images, often selected from magazines or other pop culture paraphernalia, which Ted would then attempt to replicate through his thoughtographic process. Could Ted not have somehow reproduced the

images, Eisenbud worries, and then used those reproductions to somehow (he can never quite pinpoint how) tamper with the photographic film? The more interesting question to me is not if Ted tampered with or somehow faked these uncanny rephotographs but, regardless of how they were produced, what it means for an image to have passed through a man's mind (whether literally or figuratively) and to have emerged out the other side transfigured. Series's photographs, though differing in subject matter to encompass photos of buildings, iconic and mundane, household objects, Ganymede (the largest of Jupiter's moons), and, occasionally, the artist/fraud/clairvoyant himself, are all distinctly recognizable as his own. He has, apparently without intending to, developed that thing that so many artists covet: a style. Eisenbud marks Series as a kind of holy fool, a drunken, usually unemployed sometimes-bellhop who nonetheless possessed a hearty narcissism and a desperate wish for his abilities to be recognized verified by scientists, whom, Eisenbud notes, he rated "only slightly below saints and supermen." I don't know if this characterization is quite fair. At the very least, it would seem a bit less slimy if Eisenbud, who often gave Series pocket money and supplied him with ample drink during thoughtography sessions, would acknowledge a bit more transparently his own complicity in Series's behavior— Eisenbud seemed to care far more about the work produced than the man producing it, even when Ted shared such intimate and obscene details as the fact that he often bled from the ass after a particularly trying session.

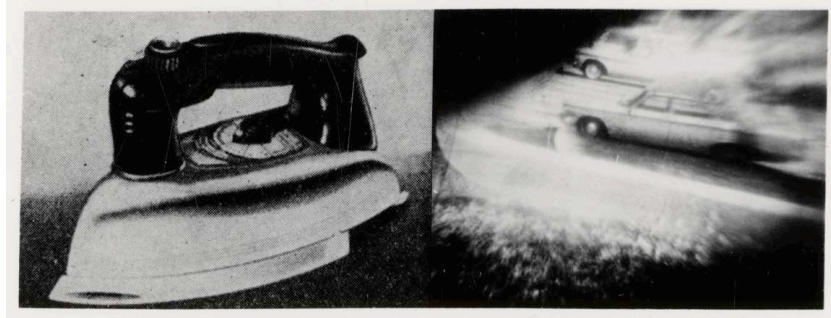
In the introduction to "The World of Ted Series," Eisenbud uses an amazing phrase to describe his qualms with psychology's so-called "replication crisis," the ongoing problem that the results of many canonical psychological studies, when reproduced, often don't have the same results. Especially with regards to parapsychology, Eisenbud doesn't exactly see this as a problem; in fact, he argues, it's something of an inevitability. "A truly repeatable experiment in

this field,” he writes, “was inherently impossible. One of the chief reasons for this, as I saw it, was that such a result would be in essential contradiction to certain still poorly understood features, which we need not go into here, of *our mysteriously hung-together but nonetheless remarkably predictable universe*” (Eisenbud 12, italics my own). Could Eisenbud not have afforded this generous understanding of the universe’s strangeness and order to his own subject? Could he not have given him a little more agency? I feel for Serios, who wanted so desperately some form of approval from science, a field that, if his abilities were, in fact, real, is still today somewhat far beneath having the capability to verify that extraordinary trick. So why, if he possessed a talent so remarkable as to be beyond the scope of scientific verification, did Serios want our lowly human attempts at pinning down “truth” to turn its eye onto him? If science could prove or even concretely disprove something like the ability of a bellhop to produce pictures on photographic film using only his mind, then that, I think, would constitute a lot more than the the making or breaking of the psychic career of Ted Serios. It would be an elevation, an expansion of, the limits of what science can do, of what can and cannot be proven or disproven.

And if it was a hoax? I’m still looking at the pictures. How could I look away? Why is the subconscious associated with the blur? Why do we hold memories at arm's length, like looking through water or fog, some medium, some separation, veil, film? Many of Serios’s pictures have a vignetting, a softness around the edges, if not a more explicit sort of frame, such as the iron picture, or another picture of a mere white blur in the shape of a rocket ship or a bottle, as if the square is the wrong frame for a photograph of a thought. Visually, Ted’s pictures have more to do with vernacular or snapshot photography than they do with the earlier spirit photography with which his work is usually classed. Their suddenness is like a reversion, a refusal of the ever-accelerating improvement and advancement of photographic technology. Far

more usual than a clear image from Ted was an unclear blur, if anything at all: existence is far less probable than nonexistence. His pictures are the opposite of the technical clarity Muybridge strove towards, yet just as instantaneous. A thought moves faster than a horse, but it registers on film, it would appear, with far less frequency.

My favorite of Ted's pictures was produced after a target image of an iron (left).



The image was hidden from Serios prior to his attempt to reproduce it, sight unseen. His resulting photograph (right) is, like the others, blurred, but it is unmistakably framed in the shape of an iron. The picture inside the shape, though, is of two cars on a street. The metal, the frame, even the motion of the machines, forward and reverse: he was so close. This is a picture of what it means to associate. An iron is not so far from a car, is not so far from so many things it resembles or shares characteristics with. Again, photography reminds us of the similarities in things just as it depicts their differences.

No one has really theorized how Serios might have produced him images beyond trying to prove that the means were not paranormal. It is far more interesting, for me, to speculate how to take a picture of a thought than it is to think about whether one man actually did. It's the same problem as writing, or any other means of description and observation: are we pinning down butterflies? Is something destroyed in the act of documentation? Or is something created?

I picture Ted's thoughts leaping out of his strained and sweaty brain to land, ectoplasmic, on the film, the thoughts for a moment mashing together with the goo of the chemistry until



some authoritative hand pulled the paper backing off of the polaroid film. Interesting that the cameras used to capture Ted's images were always Polaroids, which are instantaneous, the entire chemical process of image formation occurring on-site. Though it sometimes took hours for Ted to produce a thoughtograph, the moment with which the finally successful image arrived was really no different than any other. Could the right brain produce a thoughtographic long exposure, a series of thoughts? How might that register on film? Could you take a digital thoughtograph? Polaroid images, like all other photographic processes, require light for image formation. Is the implication of Serios's process then that perhaps our thoughts contain enough light to stimulate photosensitive chemicals? Did only some of Serios's images register because some thoughts are brighter than others?

There is an unspoken and annoying habit amongst fine art photographers of rejecting the typical designation of a photograph as "taken" and instead to refer to it as "made." "I made a picture in 1997..." they'll say, and the implication is clear: that the artist is the sole creator of the image, rather than a thief who takes the image from the unwitting world. An insecure vestige of the old is-photography-art dilemma... I'm sure, for example, that F Holland Day liked to say that between 1895 and 1898 he "made" his Christological images. All this to say that sometimes photographs are taken, but in the case of Serios, if he is to be believed, they are truly made. Manifested, even. This is the opposite of Talbot's contact printing. The thought leaps out of psychic's mind and manifests on film without anything ever having touched.

In December of 1990, the artist and photographer Barbara Ess organized an exhibition of Serios's images at Marta Cervera Gallery in New York City. In her statement accompanying the catalogue for the exhibition Ess writes of Serios's images, "Most of them are shot at a skewed angle from above— a vantage point often described by people who have had out-of-body

experiences. Looking at these photos you get the sensation of flying past or hovering over these icons of human endeavor which here seem fragile, fleeting, distant and somehow sad. The bird's-eye view gives a vertiginous glimpse of a world spied on, not participated in. These are not intimate photographs. The world is just barely glanced at from a distance, longingly."

The same could be (and has been) said about Ess's own work. Her monograph "I am Not This Body," a series of pinhole photographs, comprise a vertiginous glance at a world that Ess exists both within and without, undulating between states of presence and alienation. The *whoosh* and whirl of images hurtling through space to arrive before me. "Patterns," Ess says, "make the world tolerable,"<sup>17</sup> but looking at her picture of stuffy floral wallpaper is suffocating. The distortion of the lens as the flowers creep down towards the bottom of the picture elongates them, stretching them out until the printed petals are dripping nauseatingly into the swampy dark green vignetting that marks the picture's edge. The tilt of the picture frame is such that as the flowers get longer, they also get larger. Towards the top of the page they are tight, pressed up against each other like a field in full bloom, but by the bottom they are bulbous, drooping, wilting things, distended and sad.

Or: another untitled image of the edge of a book shoved into a stretch of foliage. The pictures on the book's pages are silhouettes of birds perched on tree branches, crisp dark blobs of fixed dimensions and shapes. The branches on the page are inky black lines. The real ones, the ones behind the book, are less certain. They bleed into one another, become a teeming mass of aliveness rather than a clearly articulated set of live beings. Their specificity becomes a general stretch of leaves branches and vines. Though one is definite and the other windswept and startled, both sets of trees and branches are pictures.

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<sup>17</sup> Ess 26.

What Ess hits on in her analysis of Serios's work is the potent sense of estrangement in Serios's thoughtographs, like looking through a hole in a door rather than passing over the threshold of the door frame itself. Loneliness in the image and its maker: if it was fame or acceptance that Serios sought, he largely failed. Though he has gained attention posthumously as a cult figure of the phenomenal—his collected works have, like the daguerreotypes of Agassiz, found their way into the hands of a large research university—it is still difficult to obtain details of his life in the post-Eisenbud period, during which, according to Ess, he experienced a prolonged dry spell, and was, at the time of her exhibition, living in a pick-up truck with his dog, “somewhere in Colorado” (still lurking around Denver, Eisenbud's hometown and the site of Serios's most prolific period of production?). Serios reportedly died in 2006, though I could find little information pertaining to the cause of his death, nor to his later years. We often neglect our prophets, false or otherwise.

In a video made for the Discovery Channel sometime after Serios's years spent as Eisenbud's test subject, the aging psychic tries to produce a thoughtograph. He has not done so successfully in years. He is older, not as handsome, with less roguish charm. Unlike all of Serios's thoughtographs, the video is, disorientingly, in color. Beige curtains and a potted fern hanging in the corner. His tongue creeps out from between his lips, flexes to a point, then darts back in. Shoulders go up again. He raises his hand, this time with fingers outstretched, palm exposed, like he's going for a high-five. Hand sweeps downward. “*OH!*” The instant it is done he glances away, disappointedly, lets out a “*GUH!*” He knows that it has not worked.

## ON SALLY MANN

In her series “Immediate Family,” the contemporary Southern photographer Sally Mann renders her family with a fervidity that is at turns gentle and pulsing. The passion of Mann for her children is felt and feral in “River Dance,” the greenish water bouncing bright gold light onto the bodies of the kids, one submerged up to the knees and the other balanced miraculously on a floatie against the rocky overhang of a mountain wall, their yellowed figures like starfish in trance. Or in “Orange Virginia,” the girl’s arms spread out, Christ-like, as she leans back in a grown-up’s arms, their hand clutching protectively under her armpit, just to the side of a temporary tattoo of a heart pierced with an arrow, and everything suffused with dark and glow. Virginia’s eyes are closed, gravity pulling her young upside-down face down towards her falling curls, which spiral just out of the edge of the frame. There’s also “Bloody Nose,” which has, as nonfatal injuries sustained in childhood tend to, a sense of gory fun: the boy’s mouth, thick with blood, agape in a shocked, smug grin. The quieter “Busted Ear” shows the titular orifice plugged up with cotton gauze that matches the clouds that occupy the upper half of the frame; it’s a more somber picture, Mann’s son gazing at a book just cropped out the edge of the frame, but that symmetry, of gauze and cloud, still suffuses the scene with a gentle levity.

“Cut Leg” shows Mann’s son Emmett in the bathtub, a small red wound visible on his right leg, as is, slightly larger, his small child’s penis, his arm against his side. The image on the next page is called “Water Play,” and it is of, again, Emmett, this time outside, his hands holding erect a hose which rises just above his thrown-back head, his teeth and nostrils agape. The green line of the hose draws a line through the young boy’s body that cuts just to the left, to the viewer’s orientation, of his bellybutton. His face is ecstatic. One hand curves languidly around the last of the green of the hose, the other lays in sloppy prayer against the beginning of its brass spout. The hose looks like a penis, and it is placed next to a photo of one. Again, the presence of

the nude is not necessarily sexualized, though it is punned on. And why not? Penises are funny, especially to little boys, and, more pointedly, they exist on bodies, and to a mother are as part of the everyday landscape of a Virginian family as the Appalachians.

Mann's photographs have been criticized for depicting her young children naked and, at times, mildly injured. In 1992 the New York Times Magazine ran a cover story with the title "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann." Much of the article is dedicated to the response to Mann's pictures, and to Mann's justification of her photography. "The nudity of the children has caused problems for many publications, including this one," the article reads. "When The Wall Street Journal ran a photograph of then-4-year-old Virginia, it censored her eyes, breasts and genitals with black bars. Artforum, traditionally the most radical magazine in the New York art world, refused to publish a picture of a nude Jessie swinging on a hay hook. And Mann's images of childhood injuries — Emmett with a nosebleed, Jessie with a swollen eye — have led some critics to challenge her right to record such scenes of distress. "It May Be Art, but What About the Kids?" said the headline in an angry review in The San Diego Tribune." Even the Times' own reporter wondered, "If it is her solemn responsibility, as she says, "to protect my children from all harm," has she knowingly put them at risk by releasing these pictures into a world where pedophilia exists? Can young children freely give their consent for controversial portraits, even if — especially if — the artist is their parent?" Though these critiques come from an understandable worry about the excessive eroticization of children, they are ultimately misplaced. Because Mann's photographs are not erotic in the sense of the aberrant or perverse. What they are is passionate. Passion is different from eros. The latter refers to sexual love, but the former derives from "the sufferings of Jesus in the last days of his life, from the Last Supper

to his death; the Crucifixion itself.”<sup>18</sup> Suffering courses through all of Mann’s images, which is not to say that they are not often joyful, or loving. Her gift resides in her ability to recognize the constant coexistence of these feelings, and to allow them to exist alongside one another visually. The “Immediate Family” pictures are also generous enough to encompass the entirety of her children’s early lives, and, in doing so, to acknowledge that at times childhood *is* erotic. To eroticize children is, yes, often a crime. But Mann’s more erotic photographs of children don’t exist to the ends of getting anyone off. Rather, they notice the already existent erotics of childhood, of a mother watching her children beginning to realize the full potentialities of their growing bodies. Mann herself has commented on the question of eroticism in her pictures. In 1992 she told the New York Times, “I don’t think of my children, and I don’t think anyone else should think of them, with any sexual thoughts. I think childhood sexuality is an oxymoron.” An essay penned by Mann for the Times in 2015 expanded on this claim: “I did not mean my children were not sexual; all living creatures are sexual on some level. But when I saw their bodies and photographed them, I never thought of them as being sexual; I thought of them as being simply, miraculously and sensuously beautiful.”

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<sup>18</sup> “Passion,” The Oxford English Dictionary.



My problem with Mann's photographs is not that they are perverted (they aren't) but that they seem, at times, a little corny. Take, for example, "Candy Cigarette," which is often cited by critics as needlessly sexualizing Mann's preteen daughter, who appears in the image in a frilly halter dress, her hair swept in a perfect curl over her eyebrows, lips in a slight pout, and one hand holding, performatively aloft, the titular candy cigarette. It's more than a little on the nose: the sexualization of a child, a child imitating an adult, but with the central symbol— that of the cigarette— inverted by the fact that it's just, after all, candy. If anything, the image seems a critique of a larger cultural sexualization of children. Mann's kid pictures are at times sexy because many of the things we deem sexy are also facets of childhood: high lisping voices, long blonde hair, smooth poreless skin. It's an act of double imitation, the kids putting on the cartoonishly large heels and clownishly red lipstick, the grown-ups aspiring for impossible baby plumpness. And it's a pervasive enough sentiment that mothers, too, might fall partially prey to

it; my own mother loves to tell the story of how, at the end of one summer when I was child, she took me to get a haircut, and how all the hot Los Angeles 30-year-olds told their stylists that my sun-lightened locks were exactly what they wanted. My mom tells the story to convey that she hates Los Angeles, but also that she loves me. Mann must have known that, as a symbol, “Candy Cigarette” was a little ridiculous. She might also have thought that her daughter looked beautiful.

Corniness is something Mann cops to, another emotional facet of her work that is intrinsically linked to the Southern landscape. And it seems, at least in part, to be linked to sex. In the section of her memoir *Hold Still* on arriving at boarding school in Vermont, she writes,

I was suddenly living in another country where my currency was worthless, where all my hard-earned stock was downgraded. I tried to interest a few of the more likely boyfriend prospects in my wheelbarrow loads of devalued charm and sexual allure, but was met with perplexity and occasionally humiliating disdain. Confused, but not defeated, I began to mint a new currency based on qualities valued at Putney: creativity, intellect, artistic ability, scholarship, political awareness, and, most importantly, cool emotional reserve. Through it all, trying to sort out a whole new life, I ached for home... I missed Virginia, where sentimentality was not a character flaw, where the elegiac, mournful mood of the magnolia twilight quickened my poetry with a passion that, even read in the hot light of the next day, was forgiven.<sup>19</sup>

The hot and heady, often senseless passion of youth is, in this moment, entangled with “the gentle, ancient Blue Ridge and the easy sufferance of the gracious Shenandoah Valley,” an unlikely interconnectedness that runs through all of Mann’s work.

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<sup>19</sup> Mann 31-32.



But the sentimentality I'm unmoved by is not that of the nostalgic or excessively emotional. Actually, I find the unabashedness with which Mann captures her family to be the most stirring quality of her work, that same reconciliation of opposites. What is less effective is her nostalgia for photography itself. None of Mann's work is made digitally, and most of it is produced with a large format camera, which is, as the name suggests, large, clunky (though also very precise), and slow. For a photographer whose best work is focused on children, who are fidgety, impatient subjects, the view camera is a counterintuitive choice. In order to take a photograph on a large format camera, you must set it up on a tripod, focus it through the trying "ground glass," which shows the world in front of the lens flipped upside down and dimly (view cameras are, unlike most other cameras, mirrorless), adjust for distortion through the moveable "rising front" to which the lens is attached, change the plane of focus through various "swings" and "tilts". This is all very technical photographic language, and explaining what all of it means will not deepen our discussion of Mann's work. I mention it only to say that the view camera is slow and tedious, and because of this, it is ill-suited for capturing the oft-discussed "decisive moment," a term coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson to refer to the instant, in photographic seeing, in which every element of the photograph aligns. Necessarily, the scene captured in the view camera is at least partially staged: it can't capture the decisive moment. And yet Mann does. The felt emotionality of her work runs counter to the fact that the equipment she uses requires a certain fiction, a tension that she resolves with the same ease as that between suffering and joy.

Still, Mann's use of technologically dated photographic processes at times makes too evident the emotion she seeks to convey, so that it lays awkwardly atop the picture plane, rather than within it. Most often these moments occur in her more explicitly staged images, those that might constitute standard "portraits." The view camera itself is not the problem: only the trained

photographic eye could note the technical giveaways that reveal the analog nature of her images. When she plays with process, though, things get dicey.

“Proud Flesh,” Mann’s 2003-2009 exploration of her husband’s aging, ailing nude body, utilizes the wet collodion process, a photographic process used most notably by Civil War photographers such as Timothy O’Sullivan and Matthew Brady. The Civil War link is not insignificant. Much of Mann’s work grapples with the bloody, brutal legacy of her beloved Southern landscape, the scars of slavery and of the continued subjugation of black people. Collodion itself was first used to wrap wounds on the battlefield during the Civil War. As a photographic technique, wet collodion was tricky because the chemical goo was only light sensitive while still damp. Because of this, plates had to be coated on site, in a portable darkroom, after which an exposure would hurriedly be exposed and processed. Because of the finicky, time-sensitive nature of the process, many Civil War photographs are staged, with the bodies of soldiers moved or posed after the moment of battle. Mann’s use of the process embraces the characteristic flaws of collodion, the way the chemistry is apt to peel, bulge, and bubble, to curl over itself, leaving inky blackness or stark white blotches on the glass negative. In “The Beautiful Lie,” a streak of collodion sags just below the folds of Larry’s aging belly, a stark contrast to “Hephaestus”, an image produced a year earlier in which Larry stands contrapasso, one veiny hand resting in a fist on a tabletop just below his pelvis, the other hand with fingers splayed seductively, stretching out across the table’s surface. The smudges of collodion here are more significant than the slight droops in “The Beautiful Lie.” Here, the collodion explodes across Larry’s chest in crystalline spheres of misty gray. The lattice of chemistry almost resembles armor, a protective obscurance that clings to Larry’s shoulder, upper torso, trailing down past his pelvis and ending in a swirl at the table. “Proud Flesh” is wrought

with the same symbolism as Mann's earlier "Immediate Family" works, but it wears that symbolism a little less lightly, and as Mann and her husband age, I can feel her attempts to reconcile the passage of time through both process and content. There's a strained quality to the work. It doesn't have to do with the labor—the many years over which Mann shot, processed, and printed "Immediate Family," was a laborious process, too. But those images *feel* effortless, which is their trick and our delight.

These pictures have none of the shimmer and pulse of "River Dance," none of the quiet *ouch* of "Busted Ear," the humid reverence of the divine "Orange Virginia." They show their hand. They're tricks, and not in the delightful Ted Serios sense. They rely on a nostalgia for now-dated photographic processes, visual nostalgia, to convey a deeper nostalgia for the passage of familial time. But the memory of photography is different than that of a family. Mann is too good at the side of photography that captures immediacy to need to lean on that other, more conceptual side, that which deals with chemistry, texture, process. There's meaning in both. But one deals in the way that silver receives light and the other on the way light plays on someone's daughter's twisted, yellow, happy body as she dances in the river with her sister.

In Mann's early 2000s series "Matter Lent," the by-then world famous photographer visited the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center, or "Body Farm," the sole place in the United States where anonymous bodies are permitted to decay in order to allow for the academic study of their purification. But their decay is not merely recorded or observed: it is also at times interfered with, or accelerated. According to the accompanying essay on "Matter Lent" in Mann's monograph "The Flesh and the Spirit," "the bodies are buried in shallow graves, deposited in the open air, hidden in wooded areas, covered with plastic wrap, submerged in pools of water, or placed in rusting cars. Some are clothed but more often they are naked; occasionally

they are subjected to fire, chemicals, and other artificial effects.” The images lack Mann’s typical eroticism not only because they are of dead bodies, though the subject matter of course plays a part. There is nothing in “Matter Lent” of the gentle rhyme of gauze and cloud in “Busted Ear”, the alacrity of “River Dance.” I don’t like the way that Mann has, in the first untitled image presented in “The Flesh and the Spirit,” somehow altered the development process of her large format negative in order to produce a ghostly fog that swirls out across the image. It’s a cheap trick of a death picture, especially when you squint past the fog and notice the swaths of skin missing from the body’s shoulder, its leg and hip, the way its face is obscured, pressed into the dirt. The body does a good enough job depicting its own demise without the hollow, hackneyed evocation of a departing spirit, and even if it didn’t, those missing chunks of flesh tip the viewer off to the fact that this body’s spirit is already long-departed.

The better picture, and the one I really cannot look at for very long, is the one of a head of beef jerky-like maroon flesh coated in so many maggots like sesame seeds. It might be bearable if not for the hair, which is gray and tenderly damp. The skin that doesn’t resemble cured meat creeps over the back of the subject’s shoulder, like cobwebs or mold. It is pinker than I would like it to be.

Or, two pages later, an old man lying face-up on some brown leaves. Maybe it is the fact that Mann has photographed him from farther away than the other bodies, so that his decay is obscured by distance, maybe it is his Harvard sweatshirt, his cherry-red sweatpants, his gray socks, but he looks better off than the rest of the Body Farm corpses. He is still a *he*, not yet an *it*. He might have just collapsed. He might, in the genderless lump of his death, be my grandmother. So might be all the other bodies, but I can’t see it. Most of the other “Matter Lent” pictures, too, plunge their figures into a thicket of branches, leaves, undergrowth that obscures the scientific

impetus that permits their decay. This isn't so in the picture of the woman in red: a wooden fence stretches the horizon of the image, just a couple of yards past her figure, and behind it unlit street lamps hang above what looks to be a parking lot. The domesticity here transports this picture from the sort of iconic depictions of death into something which almost feels like it belongs more to the works of "Family Color." Emmett got a bloody nose. Grandma fell down dead on some brown leaves in the backyard. It's a more familiar morbidity than the blatant awful decay that marks the rest of "Matter Lent," and so a more stirring one.

"Matter Lent" is not Mann's first encounter with dead bodies. In 1988, when Mann's father died from an overdose of sleeping pills, "it took him hours to die." This prolonged death afforded Mann, amongst her grief, to do the same thing my father did when he discovered his mother's body prone on the kitchen floor. It enabled her— prompted her, even— to take a picture. As in so many pictures of death, Mann's photograph of her dead father looks as though he might be sleeping. In this picture, however, he really *might* be. The hours that stretched between her father's consumption of the sleeping pills and his death were marked by the deepest of sleeps, his sleep growing deeper and deeper until it became final. He is wearing a maroon robe over pale blue-trimmed pajamas. His head makes an indentation on the white pillow, trimmed with floral detailing at the edges, on which he rests his head. The couch is a hideous corduroy orange, the type of ugliness that might reside in everyone's aging parents house. Just under him someone has tucked a protective plastic covering, which emerges with the same diaphanous obtrusion as ectoplasm, an interruption of the death scene— "Who did this?" Mann wonders, "It could have been Daddy, so afraid of incontinence, but cynically, I thought: 'Mama. She loves that sofa.'" Against the bleak domesticity of this scene, someone has tied a small bundle of buttercups and clovers around his wrist, their stems poking up at the sides like the veins of his

hands. Mann details, in her memoir, those final hours, sitting beside her father as “his chest barely [rose] with weak inhalations.” She does not, however, specify when she took the picture, whether it was before or after “the last breath lightly shuddered from him.”

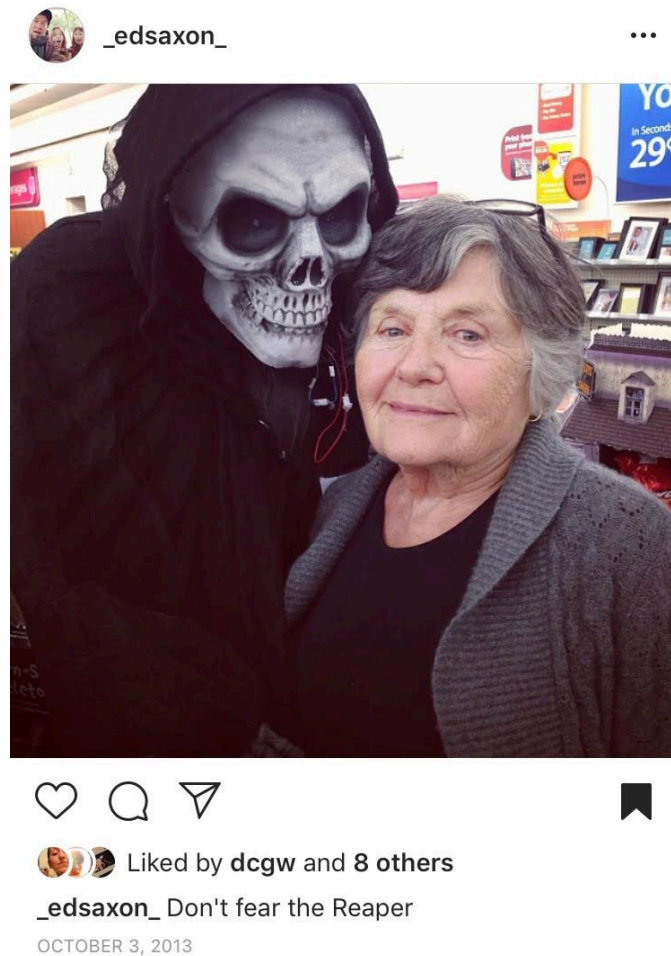
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When my grandma died, my dad and I wanted to print a picture of her grinning next to a Halloween automaton Grim Reaper, big, to hang at her memorial. Mom wouldn't allow it. Being an in-law gave her a little more distance and so a little more decorum, though she loved her mother-in-law fiercely and vice-versa. I wonder at the fact of my grandma's dead body, now residing in ashes in a dark green urn on a roll-top desk just past our front door. I wonder at the difference between a live picture and a dead picture, whether a picture immortalizes or kills, whether I'd rather be remembered or not.

What's the difference between a picture of a live person and a picture of a dead person? My dad and I are in a taxi cab, and he, like always, is talking to the driver. He mentions that his mother has recently passed away, that he was frustrated at having to call the proper authorities to take care of her corpse, that, legally he couldn't do it himself. Who has the right to a body, to pictures of a body? “She's just meat at that point,” my dad says. “Right,” says the driver, “like the pork tenderloin I have at home in the freezer.” “Right,” my dad says, “and that's my mom!”

I am sixty-four years younger than my grandma was when she died, but there are probably already more pictures of me than there ever were of her, and certainly photos of me taken by me outnumber her own self-portraits, if she ever took any. The Grim Reaper photo is on my dad's Instagram, posted sometime before her death. I can return to it whenever I please.

Reading glasses pushed up on her hair, a vestige of her vanity. Her slight knowing smirk. Her placid blue eyes.



The bodies in “Matter Lent” are, irrevocably, corpses, but a person does not have to be dead for a picture of them to be. There are dead pictures of live bodies. No one has ever described a dead picture to me better than this: in my sophomore year of college, Barbara Ess assigned portraiture. “Sometimes a picture is of a person,” she told our class, “and sometimes it’s just of—” and here she began slapping her forearms, “the meat,” hitting up towards her shoulders, her freckled sagging skin, her thighs, the backs of her hands, “the meat, the meat, the meat.”

## CONCLUSION: Close Up and at a Distance

“There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described.” — Garry Winogrand

Pictures contain no truth beyond that which we ascribe to them, which is to say, pictures contain a lot of truth. What they do not contain is *proof* beyond evidence of our belief. Our belief in the picture is nothing more than our belief in our own convictions, our belief in the idea that things *can* be proven at all, whether those things be the existence of the son of God or of the farthest planet, felt as but the faintest twinge on our satellites. Symmetry: existence looks much the same close up as it does from the furthest possible reaches of vision.

Recently, the New Horizons Spacecraft brought us back a picture from as far away as it could get. It is a picture of the oldest thing we can access, the trans-Neptunian object Ultima Thule. Ultima Thule is roughly 20 miles across, and from December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018 through January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 New Horizons went from being 2 million miles away from the object to approaching it at a distance of just 4109 miles. Earth, the spacecraft’s point of origin, was at that time 4.1 billion miles away. At the time of writing, the picture of Ultima Thule was taken 120 days and 10 hours ago. New Horizons has been in transit for 4848 days and 20 hours; it departed Earth in 2006 and has, in the 13 subsequent years, travelled past Pluto and into the Kuiper Belt, a “swarm” of celestial bodies at the far reaches of our universe.

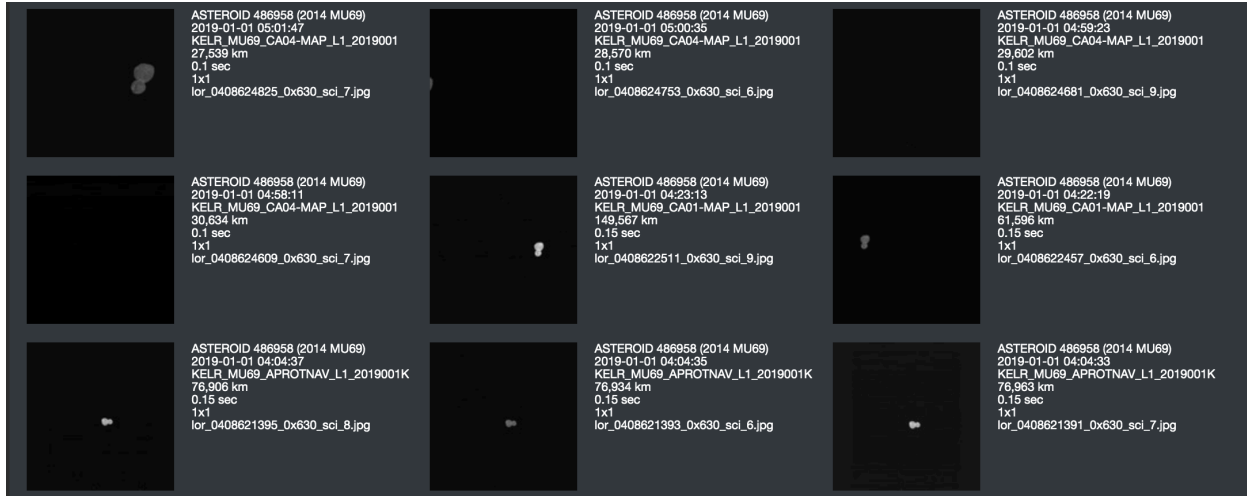
Photographing Ultima Thule is a very different project than the work of any of the artists, scientists, or psychics described in the above pages. It is, above all, a group effort. In a sense, the image is authorless. It took an entire team of scientists many years to develop the technology that would bring us back pictures of Ultima Thule. New Horizons has operators, not photographers. The “photograph” itself is actually a composite image of nine different pictures.





It was taken six minutes before New Horizons' closest contact to the object.

On the New Horizons website, civilians can see the images taken in the days prior the spacecraft's "arrival" at Ultima Thule. At first the pictures just look like clumps of dusty white specks. Until, like a print in a tray of developer, an image starts to appear. One of the specks gets brighter and bigger. Like in Muybridge's motion studies, the grid of images captures even the slightest of changes. Here, too, the exposure is brighter in some pictures than in others. Ultima Thule becomes a legible blob. We can see it! It is bigger at one end than at the other, and its position dances around from frame to frame, here vertically oriented, so that the larger bulb is pointed towards the top of the picture, here sideways, here just a blur of light, here nothing at all.



Then, we are there. Ultimate Thule is before us on the computer screen, translated from 4.1 billion miles away in pixels and light. A lucid, luminescent mound of gray. And then it is gone again. It moves out of the side of the frame, disappearing for the next few images until we get our last glance: just the slightest cast of a shadow, the very edge of what might be considered a “picture.” The last frame is black.

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