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THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT: DIRECTIONS  
OF MEANING AND THE INEFFABLE (1970 – 2005)

by

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A Doctoral Thesis

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# THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT: DIRECTIONS OF MEANING AND THE INEFFABLE (1970 – 2005)

## ABSTRACT

This thesis uses the photographic portrait as an example of contemporary art practice to examine developments in aesthetic sensibility and constructions of meaning with particular address to ineffable qualities in both the subject and in the photograph. It examines the contribution of practice to a wider cultural debate, predominantly described as poststructural.

Thomas Ruff's contention that it is impossible to photographically depict an individual,<sup>1</sup> establishes a methodology that interrogates assumptions and directs examination toward reconfiguring issues of theory and practice. In the photographic portrait, what is 'essential' equates with the expectation of visual statements that are definitive and what is 'ineffable' is that which transcends words. The persistent premise of capturing the 'essence' is dependant on the notion of 'presence', the certainty of pure perception or essential meaning, now undermined by poststructuralism in terms of conceptions of meaning and authorship. If essential depiction is problematic, how might a correlative adjustment to conceiving and validating photographic meaning be framed? How are essential or ineffable qualities displaced, formed and manifested? What constitutes the contemporary 'meaningful' portrait?

Realigned as 'depictions of people', the 'portrait' serves a complex function, adjusted in the light of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism and visibly manifested as metaphor for contemporary consciousness. With particular reference to texts by Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard, this thesis demonstrates photographic practice as a form of discourse that visualises implicit truth-values, and participates in debate. It asserts figural interpretations to photographs over literary systems like narrative, and immanent property over aspirations to 'transcendence' or 'essence' and proposes reconfigurations of psychological, critical or poetic 'fiction' as alternatives. It repositions the ineffable as a conceptual domain of possibility that assimilates the dynamic of *differance* as its poststructural equivalent and proposes a conceptual aesthetic that celebrates aspects of poststructuralism and is rooted in what the photograph provokes rather than what it depicts.

**Keywords:** photography, portrait, poststructuralism, ineffable, conceptual, meaning, fiction, Derrida, Baudrillard, Kristeva

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<sup>1</sup> Wulffen, T., 'Thomas Ruff: Reality So Real It's Unrecognisable', an interview with Thomas Ruff, *Flash Art*, Jan/Feb 1993

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## *Preface*

The subject of this thesis emerged during the course of my photographic project that attempted to portray the essential qualities of a series of friends. Around the same time, in 1996, I visited the exhibition of Jeff Wall's work at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. These stunning photographs awakened my interest in the possibilities of meaning production besides those made by authorial signature. In contrast in 1998 I saw the exhibition *Snapshots, The Photography of Everyday Life 1888 to the Present*, curated by Douglas R. Nickel at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Here I was curious as to how such insignificant images could be so powerful; how did they work? Always fascinated by what and how intangible qualities occur in material works such as drawing, these two experiences, responding to two very different sorts of photographic works, confirmed a pursuit of the extension of 'intangible' in the more philosophical implications of the 'ineffable'.

# INTRODUCTION

## *CONTEXTS*

This thesis uses the example of the portrait as a focus in art photography to examine constructions of meaning with particular address to ineffable qualities in both the subject and in the photograph. This is not a history of the photographic portrait, nor a reiteration of approaches to the portrait throughout the C20, but an examination of developments in the constitution of aesthetic sensibility and ineffable effects in attempts to present 'others' photographically. It uses the photographic portrait as an example of contemporary art practice to scrutinize the directions of content and emphasis that might contribute to a wider cultural debate, predominantly described as poststructural.

In their writings on the photograph, both Roland Barthes at the onset of poststructuralism, and Jean Baudrillard as a central figure of postmodernism, confront notions of 'realism' and make reference to a delight and 'ecstasy' that is entirely personal and provocative. Baudrillard in particular, challenges on a number of levels, in terms of his utopian vision of contemporary 'reality' and more specifically with statements about the photograph that entirely contradict endeavours to describe the appearance or 'essential' nature of an individual: 'It is impossible to bring someone into focus photographically when you are so little able to get them into focus psychologically'.<sup>1</sup> The photographer Thomas Ruff also denies the possibility of being able to represent a 'person or character': 'They are not depictions, they're just images'<sup>2</sup> [fig.1] and thus it is Baudrillard and Ruff who provoke my central question. If essential depiction is problematic, how might a correlative adjustment to conceiving and validating photographic meaning be framed? How are essential or ineffable qualities displaced, formed and manifested? What are the possibilities for the contemporary photographic portrait? What constitutes a meaningful portrait? Does visual practice contribute to an understanding of the contemporary condition and discourse?

Using Ruff's position of refutation, I establish a methodology that directs examination toward disassembling and reconfiguring issues of theory in relation to photographic practice, by interrogating assumptions and expectations, by reviewing recurrent themes and strategies, and by identifying developments in reaction to an established photographic aesthetic. It necessitates simultaneous address to the phenomenon of the photograph as a text that can be read and interpreted, the nature of meaning in the photograph, and the nature of the relationship between the photographer and the 'subject'. It raises a number of key problematics. Baudrillard's assertion

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality...'. In Wiebel, Peter (ed.) *Photographies 1985-1998 Within the Horizon of the Object, Objects in this Mirror*. Hatje-Cantz Publishers, 1999, pp.136-7

<sup>2</sup> Wulffen, T. 'Thomas Ruff: Reality So Real It's Unrecognisable', an interview with Thomas Ruff, *Flash Art*, Jan/Feb 1993. Thomas Ruff, born in Germany, 1958, taught by Bernd Becher at the Dusseldorf Academy (as too were Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth). In 1981, he began a series of portraits of friends and students.



challenges the expectation of visual statements that are both definitive and transcend words, which equate with what is 'essential' on the one hand and what is 'ineffable' on the other. The persistent premise of capturing the 'essence', being dependant on the notion of 'presence', the certainty of pure perception, interaction or essential meaning, is now undermined by poststructuralism in terms of conceptions of meaning and authorship. Thus the photograph itself serves as a metaphor for the perpetual debates of realism and truth, arrested in tautological self-referentiality. The 'portrait' as metaphor for a mirror of consciousness and as such suitably positioned to visually demonstrate our response to others and the world, confronts the phenomenological experience of the encounter, and psychoanalytically, the exchange between the photographer and photographed subject.



Fig. 1 Thomas Ruff, *Portrait*, 1988

In examining the ineffable in relation to the photographic portrayal of an individual, this thesis rests on the complexities arising in the amplification of how the indefinable is presented in the photograph, by the elusive quality of 'face'. The history of aesthetics repeats the premise that 'some part of any work of art is ineffable'<sup>3</sup> and in this respect 'art photography' expects a dimension of 'meaning' suitable to this context. As the ineffable condition contradicts the photograph's property of resemblance, it indicates that the manner of description is significant and needs to be addressed, and interpretations of the quality of the ineffable recur in different forms throughout the thesis. The term 'ineffable' touches the possibility or impossibility of speaking of a thing; the condition of 'naming' and being named. If one assumes that what remains unnamed can retain its ineffability, then it follows that once named, a 'thing' becomes known and transparent. If the principle of 'naming' is applied to the photograph – where an object is 'named', by virtue of its resemblance, one could assume that the photograph will reveal its meaning transparently in that

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<sup>3</sup> Kelly, Michael, editor in chief, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.493



imitation. But there are elements in photographs *besides* the naming of objects that I seek out here in *how* these elements occur and *how* they are ineffable.

Barthes's *Camera Lucida*<sup>4</sup> contains descriptions of photographs too full of visual meaning to verbalise and it is this impossibility of significance that articulates the ineffable and is central to the thesis. Barthes's *punctum*, as the ineffable element that inserts what is potent in a photographic image, characterises a condensation of meaning, a dependency on details and incidentals that provoke me to ask how might this phenomenon be formed and manifested? As most 'things' depicted in a photograph have a 'name', it would seem that these elements will reside in those qualities that result from attributes / capacities / concepts which have not been assigned a 'name'. This as a photographic characteristic is not confined to 'art' but is evident in snapshots and it is pertinent, that in recent years, artists have sought to emulate and eventually subsume properties of the vernacular photograph. Without notions of 'good' in an aesthetic sense, the snapshot<sup>5</sup> indicates the derivation of an aesthetic that avoids the more formal and 'traditional' approach to 'bringing someone into focus photographically'.

The notion of the photograph as a reflector of our encounter with reality provides a substantial background of ontological debate.<sup>6</sup> But using a specific aspect of practice – the 'portrait', I can more easily identify characteristic strategies that avoid too great an emphasis on metaphorical implications derived from the physical phenomenon itself and examine its possibilities as text instead. How does the image insert something else about the relationship between the photographer and subject? How does it articulate the implicit? In order to address such questions, my theoretical investigation has run interdependently with a visual project that aims to portray an intimate friend. This subject matter examines the external appearance of individual existence and what is internal, hidden or implicit; what aspects of internal motivation can be perceived in the photograph, what is constructed in one's mind when looking and interpreting and what they confirm for us as responding individuals. The project confronts both subject matter associated with the snapshot and the 'artistic' pretensions that are hard to relinquish. It serves to situate theory within the real process of description and the real encounter with another individual.

This thesis is structured thematically and is founded on a re-configuration of ideas in relation to the photographic portrait rather than an attempt at a comprehensive survey. It avoids reiterating aspects of theory already clearly articulated in the context of photography (e.g. semiotic translations,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida* [1980], trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1993

<sup>5</sup> Nickel, Douglas R., *Snapshots, The Photography of Everyday Life 1888 to the Present*. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998

<sup>6</sup> For example see Jeffrey, Ian, 'Fragment and Totality in Photography'. *History of Photography*, Vol. 6, No.4, Winter 1992, pp. 351-356; Iverson, Margaret, 'What is a Photograph?'. *Art History*, Vol.17, No.3, September 1994, pp.450-464; Charlesworth, Michael, 'Fox Talbot and the 'White Mythology of Photography''. *Word & Image*, Vol.11, No. 3, July/September, 1995, pp.207-215

<sup>7</sup> For example Eco, Umberto, 'Critique of an Image' [1970]. In Burgin, Victor (ed), *Thinking Photography*. London: Macmillan Press, 1982



perspectives framed by the ideas of Lacan<sup>8</sup> or Foucault<sup>9</sup>) and uses the photographic portrait as a form of text that is influenced by, and speaks to, psychoanalysis, phenomenology and poststructuralism. As different sorts of theoretical writing frame implications provoked by the question, my choice of texts relies on interdisciplinary modes of thought emerging from earlier French poststructuralism that introduces the reading of culture (including the visual) as text, and redefines thinking in a way that questions assumptions. Following the position of uncertainty and contradiction provoked by Jacques Derrida's critique of logocentrism and the endearing introduction of subjectivity by Barthes, there evolves a more fluid process of seeing, which acknowledges the impossibility of objectivity. Derrida's procedures, in particular the fundamental premise of *differance*,<sup>10</sup> frame my central emphasis in terms of the assertion of difference over identity and certainty, and the disruption of temporality and spatiality. Overall, Derrida's ideas, as they circumvent *presence* in discussions of the supplement and (point)lessness, are pertinent to my project of chasing the indescribable and contribute a number of angles from which to explain it. The significance of *differance* not only provides a model that embodies changes in attitudes to visual representation but also parallels a chronology in the development of ideas affecting uses of the photograph (Derrida's *Speech and Phenomenon*, translated into English 1973, Martha Rosler's *Bowery* 1974).

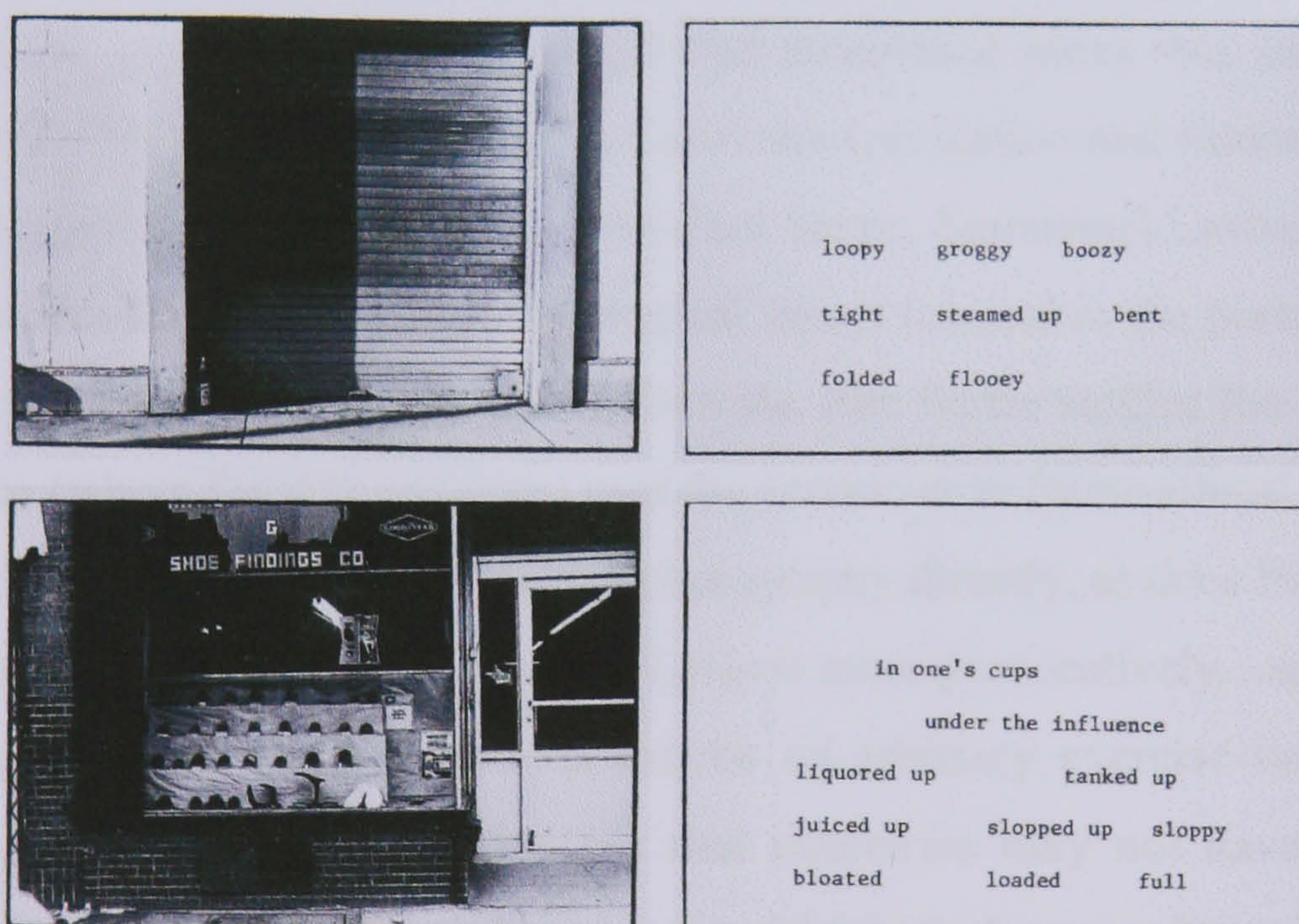


Fig.2 Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, 1974

There are a number of chronological parallels that one could follow, with no clear distinction between them; ideas emerging concurrently and ideas that can be seen as an influence. As this study is restricted to a Western tradition of photography, and as it aims to make connections between verbal and visual poststructural practices, any parallel relies on the availability of texts in English. Derrida's paper 'Structure, Sign and Play', delivered at the John Hopkins University

<sup>8</sup> For example Burgin, Victor, in *Thinking Photography*; Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. In Wallis, *Art after Modernism*, reprinted from *Screen* 16, no.3, Autumn 1975

<sup>9</sup> Tagg, John, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. London: Macmillan, 1988 and Tagg, John, *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Speech and Phenomenon* [1967], trans. David B. Allison, Evanston: North Western University Press, 1973



(1966) marks a significant point of transition and heralds the American appropriation of 'deconstruction' in the following decades. In this regard I largely restrict my frame to the move of instability indicative of ideas becoming influential in UK and United States following translation in the early 1970s, which also marks a point of change for photography with regard to authenticity, authorship and meaning. Derrida's teaching divided between Paris and US universities physically illustrates the significant cross-Atlantic exchange of ideas, which in terms of the influences of photography, tends to work in reverse. At about the same time, in the context of art history, Joseph Kosuth demonstrates art as a form of theory in *practice*; his essay *Art after Philosophy* (1969) questions aesthetic formalism and *One and Three Chairs* (1965) articulates similar concerns to Derrida, of differentiation. Ideas introduced by Gilles Deleuze invite an alternative investigation, but as these are generally not available in English until later (1980s, 1990s), I do not pursue them here. Principally it is the challenges to thinking initiated in the 1960s, changes to conceptions of practice emerging in the 1970s and most particularly those established in the 1980s, 1990s, in which I am interested. By which time art practice has assimilated the influence and *knowledge* of both Conceptual art and models of poststructuralism.

Because this thesis relies on the premise that practice enters the post-structural debate, I construct a framework of interconnecting visual and theoretical ideas that support this premise and have deliberately chosen specific texts that provoke speculation and extension in the context of practice. I employ texts by Julia Kristeva, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Barthes and Derrida, all of whom have confronted phenomenological issues (central to the portrait encounter) and who inter-relate on several fronts throughout; Derrida, like Sartre tackles the encounter in a personal way; Levinas (whom Derrida critiques) uses the encounter to frame ethical thought. Sartre's encounter is appropriated by Barthes who tackles photography directly, as does Baudrillard, whose later writing echoes much of Barthes, Derrida and Levinas more provocatively...and so on. Applying theories to photography from other contexts can be an arbitrary exercise but can generate a number of questions in the reading of images that otherwise may not have been asked.<sup>11</sup> For example Kristeva's address to the creative process and 'poetic language' provides a useful perspective from which to look at images. And in some instances, as a methodological device, I have appropriated, paraphrased and reconfigured texts in a more personal or photographic context in an attempt to firstly, amplify the potential exchange between different discourses and secondly, verbally translate the simultaneity of visual meaning. It is a contradictory strategy that points to the mismatch between verbal and visual description.

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<sup>11</sup> Bal's 'narratology' applies theories such as *focalization*, derived from narrative literature to paintings. Bal aptly notes that applying verbal abstractions and terms to visual experience is in itself contradictory and smacks of logocentricism. She also neatly identifies three aspects of Derrida's work most pertinent to art history as intertextuality, polysemy and the shifting location of meaning. See Bal, Mieke, *Looking In, the Art of Viewing*. Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001, p67



Kristeva aptly suits my discussion of subject portrayal because of her simultaneous address to aspects of subjectivity and the development of meaning. My choice of Levinas's texts focuses on his metaphorical use of 'shadow' and 'face' that assigns images to the description of complex ideas. He provides a more limited perspective to the discussion of interaction within the bounds of portrait than for example Maurice Merleau-Ponty's materiality in looking,<sup>12</sup> which opens up developments in thinking about different forms of embodiment developed in later feminist poststructuralism. Discussion could alternatively proceed, from this and Kristeva's consideration of corporeality, to other examinations of subjectivity that break down the logocentric in different ways, such as Luce Irigaray's possibilities of the female imaginary or Judith Butler's performativity.<sup>13</sup>

As my focus lies with conceptual reverberation, my discussion of theorists' engagement with art practice is deliberately confined to subtleties of concept (e.g. the *parergon* essential to the ineffable in the photograph), except where the concern is with photography itself as with Baudrillard's writing or Derrida's demonstration of reading photographs in *Droits de Regards*. Direct address by thinkers to specific art practices (for example Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze to painting) can prove problematic as they introduce values and expectations that are not relevant to photography or digress from my point at issue and dissipate my conception of possibilities. Whilst I discuss Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* as it indicates a positive motivating force, I avoid her address to instances of art practice as it incorporates troublesome assumptions. The notion of a link with subjectivity and borderline states – of perversion, ugliness and fragility that are 'scandalous', is interesting. She suggests them as 'research' in 'the anticipation of the difficulty of living' but then also suggests that these 'traumatic states' can be swallowed up by 'almost documentary style photography',<sup>14</sup> which implicitly she sees as failing to invest in new thoughts.

Discussion is restricted to the context of fine art, as distinct from other functional uses of photography such as 'journalism' or 'fashion'.<sup>15</sup> 'Art photography' encompasses both the history of art that in recent years has subsumed the use of photography and by default, the history of photography that has aspired to be 'art'. My choice of photographic texts is framed by a history of complex exchange between notions of 'art' and ideas of 'realism'. As my context is the development of the photographic aesthetic and the possibility of cultural exchange reframing practice, links between theory and practice are similarly rooted in this inherited culture. As the

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<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm'. In *The Visible and Invisible* (1964), trans. A. Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, pp.130-155 and *Signs* (1960), trans. McLeary, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964

<sup>13</sup> See for example Rosi Braidotti who outlines the challenge of transforming conceptions of subjectivity initiated by poststructuralist thought in *Nomadic Subjects, Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.99 'The acquisition of subjectivity is...a process of material (institutional) and discursive (symbolic) practices.' 'Feminist thought rests on a concept that calls for deconstruction and deessentialism in all of its aspects.'

<sup>14</sup> Zivancevici, Nina, An interview with Julia Kristeva, Paris, March – April, 2001, <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/kristeva.htm>, Accessed April 4<sup>th</sup> 2005. In 1998, the Louvre invited Kristeva to curate an exhibition *Vision Capitales. sacrifice, decapitation, representation*, which she describes in 'Capital Vision'. *Art Press* 235, May 1998, pp.20-27

<sup>15</sup> As with for example G. Kippen, 'The Critical Language of Photography', Ph.D., Manchester, 1997



paradigms of modernist photography were determined largely by American photography and its extension in Europe and as I scrutinise the practice following modernism, so it is that my choice of photographers emerge from a succession to this tradition and, with the exception of Boris Mikhailov and Arsen Savadov from the Ukraine, all were born or educated (Yokomizo in London, Lee in New York) in the US or Western Europe. This tradition, supported by its institutions and cultural histories, to some degree dictates both what is showcased and my choice as they have been featured (thereby available and validated) by significant UK venues such as the Whitechapel, Photographers' and Saatchi Galleries. It is notable that its influence extends increasingly to include Asia, promoted by such publications as *Imago* (Slovakia), *Photofile* (Australasia) and exhibitions as *Between Past & Future: New Photography & Video from China* at the V&A, 2005 or *Araki: Self. Life. Death* at the Barbican in 2006.

A revised aesthetic emerging in the 1960s secured an authoritative position for photography. This confidence was attributable in some degree to John Szarkowski's 1966 New York exhibition *The Photographer's Eye*,<sup>16</sup> which promoted photography's potential to transform the everyday into the transcendental. Photography and its history continues to be influenced by such ideologies. One can see that themed exhibitions, such as *Cruel and Tender* (Tate Modern, 2003), significantly adopt metaphoric umbrella terms to render disparate practices more coherent. *Cruel and Tender*, derived from Lincoln Kirstein's description of Walker Evans's work, defines the discourse by referencing the authorial conflict of portrayal (distance and intimacy, objectivity and subjectivity). As with the *Family of Man* exhibition in 1955 (exemplifying a modernist humanism) and *Pictures* in 1977 (defining 'postmodernism'), *Cruel and Tender*, by collating in 'obvious' thematic groupings, confirms a coherent overview of the state of play and presents one dominant aspect of photographic vision that underlines 'realist' traditions and the 'masters' of C20 Western photography. It reiterates aspects of the 'everyday' and perpetuates the central photographic theme of revealing the hitherto unseen. Whilst we may applaud the first photography exhibition held at the Tate as at least heralding the arrival of photography as a proper form of art, it also maintains the position of being named in order to be legitimised.

Douglas Nickel<sup>17</sup> identifies the agenda for the history of photography as being more dependent on changing technologies and a concern to confirm its status as a fine art than by its content, which has remained secondary. Appraisal of the history of photographic art is unpractised in terms of content, thought and ideas, and persistently confirms values derived from a judgement dependent on the equivalence of integrity with its physical properties.<sup>18</sup> For example, Beaumont Newhall,<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *The Photographer's Eye*, exhibition curated by John Szarkowski (appointed as director in 1962) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966

<sup>17</sup> Nickel, Douglas R., 'History of Photography: The State of Research'. *History of Photography*, September 2001, p.554

<sup>18</sup> Newhall, Beaumont, *History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949

<sup>19</sup> Newhall, Beaumont, *In Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography*. Bullfinch, 1993, pp.45



reappraising his own earlier history admits his bias towards 'realism' and failure to discuss pictorialism. Nickel points out that commentators follow each other's conceptions of photography without question so that the assumed necessity to define 'photography's essence' and subsequent reconfigurations of 'essences' are constructed by previously reiterated assumptions, ideologies and consequent omissions.<sup>20</sup> There follows then the possibility of aesthetics being disturbed by ideologies or theories. Just as Szarkowski established a respectable base for modernist photography, so writers (Krauss,<sup>21</sup> Burgin and Tagg) contributed a repositioning of photography as central to postmodern criticism and legitimised photography by turning it on its head and assigning anti-aesthetic procedures to its evolution. 'Photography theory' established the beginnings of a critical history of the photographic image but as Nickel explains it, what the present has inherited from the 1970s and 1980s, is photography as a cultural subject over one of aesthetic analysis and that much of the ontological debate was actually but a metaphor for something else, 'never truly photographic at all'. Nickel identifies the central issue determining perceptions of photography's history as being the suspicion of theoretical interpretations over the possibility of aesthetic values, which in effect amounts to a reiteration of a continued debate circulating round photography as art or not. Where art photography in the 1990s might have still been reiterating modernist pretensions to authorship and expression, the assumption of photography into mainstream art practice, has only in some respects displaced this philosophy with one that forefronts 'idea' over expression. That this has caused tension is evident in references to the 1970s-1980s era as one burdened by too much theory and in an undercurrent of resentment in audiences at recent photography conferences in the UK for example.<sup>22</sup>

Generally the construction of any aesthetic articulates its derivation from various fields of knowledge and understanding and what makes it persistent is its link with that knowledge and the subsequent political impact.<sup>23</sup> As the divisions between criticism, history and practice have become less rigid, so the relationship and exchange between them has shifted in the development of what is termed 'visual culture'.<sup>24</sup> In the wake of 'New Art History',<sup>25</sup> we understand that practitioners do not function by themselves, do not operate without 'interest', and do not establish reputation and response without being influenced by a very selected exposure. John Roberts discusses the role of intention and agency as crucial and is careful to warn against a social or psychic distance between author and critic. And following the recognition of feminist approaches (e.g. Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Griselda Pollock) and the interdisciplinarity of visual culture, the remit of content has

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<sup>20</sup> Nickel relates Batchen echoing Newhall's 'desire to make pictures' 1937 in *Burning of Desire: the Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997

<sup>21</sup> See for example Krauss, Rosalind, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces'. In *The Originality and the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986

<sup>22</sup> *What Happened here? Photography in Britain Since 1968*, conferences held at Derby University and Tate Britain, 2005 (e.g. Simon Watney's paper typifies the mood - 'Tunnel vision: photographic education in Britain in the 1980s' reproduced in *AfterImage* 1/1/2006.

<sup>23</sup> de Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. 1984, p.264 cited in Roberts, John, *Art has no History! The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*. London; New York: Verso, 1994, pp.31-32

<sup>24</sup> Roberts, *Art has no History!*, pp.2-3

<sup>25</sup> For example Harrison, Jonathan, *The New Art History*, London; New York: Routledge, 2001



effectively been extended. The insertion of culture to the discussion of aesthetics changes the parameters of aesthetic determination by challenging and compromising its boundaries. It moves the consideration of practice from the more abstract and isolated reaches of theoretical aesthetics and resituates it in relation to a wider debate, suggesting at least that practice is more centrally responsible for changes in understanding. Running parallel to the critics' careful theoretical positioning is the artists' ultra self-consciousness of role in this same process. The study of art practice potentially becomes another means to understand the role that ideologies play in history. More fundamentally the conjunction of aesthetic, cultural and political concerns are now part of a visual discourse. Thus writers such as Roberts and Tagg<sup>26</sup> reframe the terms of art history that support a view of photography as critique and as an important means of challenging the grand narratives of modernism – as fictions. And a conversation between Cheetham, Holly and Moxey<sup>27</sup> typically recognises an evolutionary theory of artistic development that implicitly requires that attention should be paid to what is neglected in commentary and practice in order to trouble what may have been seen as the 'story'.<sup>28</sup>

Attempts then to understand the process of meaning are not possible within the context of philosophies alone, and stand dependent on preceding theories such as those inserted by Conceptual art in 1960s. Conceptual art is particularly pertinent to photography (and to this thesis) as it questioned the apprehension of a work of art as being dependent on mimetic reference, which the photograph embodies. It shifted the emphasis from the material and visual to the conceptual content – a shift from looking to reading (Terry Atkinson) and posited that the idea itself can be considered as art (Joseph Kosuth). Sol LeWitt represented a version of art that placed the idea and the visual as being interdependent where the process of conception and the process of visualisation are of equal importance.<sup>29</sup> In the 1960s, the adoption of photography to effect ideas runs parallel to mainstream photography; Ed Ruscha introduces an indifference to the skill and integrity of photographic conventions in presentations of subject matter (*Twentysix Gasoline Stations* 1963) 'as a system, an economy mirrored in its structure';<sup>30</sup> artists such as Allan Sekula and Rosler assimilate the methodology of using photographs to discuss concerns beyond what is depicted; *Bowery* refers to homelessness and the city 'as a set of relationships....a geopolitical system'.<sup>31</sup> One could say that Conceptual art liberated the photograph and enabled photography to develop in other ways, away from its own aesthetic; it provided for example the ideal means for visual intertextual reference.

<sup>26</sup> Tagg, John, *Grounds of Dispute, Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field*

<sup>27</sup> Cheetham, Mark, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, 'Visual Studeie, Historiography and Aesthetics'. *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol.4 (1), 2005, pp.75-90

<sup>28</sup> Moxey, *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol.4 (1), pp. 86-87

<sup>29</sup> Kelly, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, pp. 415-416

<sup>30</sup> Wall, Jeff, "Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art' (1995). In Fogle, Douglas (ed.) *The Last Picture Show, Artists Using Photography*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 2003

<sup>31</sup> Rosler, Martha, 'Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint'. In Wallis, Brian (ed.) *If you lived here: the city in art theory, and social activism: a project by Martha Rosler*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1991, p.15. Martha Rosler, born 1943 Brooklyn, New York, has worked with photography, video, photo-text, performance and written criticism since the early 1970s and has been influential on forms of documentary and commentary.



Subsequently photography has facilitated, and to a large degree defined, many of the familiar aspects of what is commonly termed 'postmodern art' practice more generally, which assumed the role of critiquing representation via intervention and provocation. The spate of reviews in the 1980s<sup>32</sup> both constituted and reiterated what has become recognised as the characteristic features of appropriation, irony, seriality, simulation, with repeated reference to works by Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince. But whereas more recently Peter Muir provides a useful review of the impact of *October* in defining histories,<sup>33</sup> relating procedures of deconstruction and marking the breakdown of normative conceptions of the photographic, and Howard Singerman<sup>34</sup> an interesting perspective of Levine as 'art historian', there is little in the way of review of practice *post* poststructuralism beyond references to the same tired features. There is little discussion of more subtle traits that have developed, which betray poststructural themes.

I emphasise a feature of poststructural discourse as the inter-relationship between theory, consciousness and (photographic) art practice; if philosophical / theoretical discourse concerning our consciousness affects conceptions of 'reality' and its representation, then its influence affects cultural (including visual) debate and will be reflected in the attitudes that drive practice. The profound influence of ideas such as the emphasis on intertextuality or the rejection of transcendental signification can be located in conceptual shifts of understanding and ultimately our aesthetic assumptions. It can be seen in the impact on modernist photographic certainties and subsequently aspects of current photography – in strategies that dictate the manner of depiction. Looking at depictions of people over the last twenty years, a pattern emerges, which is unstated but evident in the concerns and the methods used. Current photographic themes echo poststructural concerns, such as non-determinacy, and circumvent the impossible task of making definitive photographic statements – assuming methods of avoidance / obliqueness / blandness / ordinariness / artificiality / attenuation / contradiction. A reciprocal effect is evident in photography's continuing contribution to the evolution of the aesthetic framework and what is considered tradition.

I need to clarify my conception of photographs as 'text'. By 'text' I do not imply that photographs can be translated literally into verbal text, but that they can necessitate a 'reading' that requires the reader to be more actively engaged than 'looking' passively, and can be considered in terms of an interrelation with aspects of theory. My argument depends on the premise that understanding artwork is a reciprocal process that cannot be separated from or subsumed by theory. Indeed terminologies become misleading as borderlines are blurred; if 'practice' using images can be seen

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<sup>32</sup> The history of postmodern art photography can be traced back to such essays by Douglas Crimp, 'Pictures'. *October* No. 8, Spring 1979 and 'The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism'. *October* No. 15, Winter 1980; Craig Qwens 'The Allegorical Impulse' 1980; Hal Foster, 'Re: Post'. *Parachute* 26, 1982 and his volume *Anti Aesthetic*, 1983; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Playing the Fields of the Image'. In Wallis, Brian (ed.) *Art After Modernism*. New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984 and 'Photography after Art Photography' 1984; Burgin, Victor, *The End of Art Theory*, 1986; Steve Edwards, 'The Shooters of History', 1989

<sup>33</sup> Muir, Peter, 'Signs of a beginning: *October* and the *Pictures* exhibition'. *Word & Image*, vol. 20, no.1, January-March, 2004, pp.52-62

<sup>34</sup> Singerman, Howard, 'Sherrie Levine's Art History'. *October* 101, Summer 2002, pp.96-121



to *theorize* then 'theory' using words can be seen to *practice*. A conception of theory *practicing* can be seen in Kristeva's work for example, and recent years have seen an interest in alternative forms of writing criticism to the linear and didactic, to synthesis and the conclusive. Such writing relates to Derrida's work in the way that it encounters aesthetic categories, and challenges the boundaries between disciplines and the rational and the subjective.<sup>35</sup> This thesis thereby tests instances where both practice and theory inform each other and contribute to a discourse of ideas. But I do assume that photographic discourse is determined by the specific nature of photography and its histories of representation and truth. Because it is not verbal, the visualisation of attitudes implicit in practice is one that contributes a different understanding – one that is sensed rather than verbalised. One logical way to demonstrate this would be presentation in the form of photographic essay without words. However, I endeavour to discuss the manner in which photographs can present ideas without resort to words; how photographs can explore subjectivity via procedures like seriality and adjustments to the conception of authorship or the manner of control (described in Part One); how photographs argue by means of their visual dynamics (described in Part Two); how photographic works participate in the debate; how they can theorize.

My expansion contributes an assimilation of photography's histories into the broader context of cultural practice and seeks to emphasise two things - recognition of the conceptual shift that enlivened photographic practice in the 1980s, but which appears to have been neglected in reviews since, and the contribution that *practice* makes not only to changes in aesthetic consciousness but to conceptual configuration more generally. As I am concerned to explore contemporary works in relation to written theory, with the exception of Walker Evans (whose work performs a recurrent theme), examples of photographic practice are largely restricted to the last thirty years. I restrict discussion to an era of portrait photography that tests what might be termed 'portrait', that takes either one of two stances, both of which 'play' with convention and formality: extreme instances of intimacy or positions of distanced and irreverent banality. Whilst a range of photographs is cited to establish context or history, I focus on a limited selection for analysis, as representative of key trends and in order to concentrate discussion on content. And I focus on ideas associated with the photographic encounter as they mirror attitudes more widely. I seek out the more subtle themes that reverberate around the limits of intimacy and distance and the possibilities of the ineffable in insignificant content or those that are determined by their extreme strategic direction. In some

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<sup>35</sup>Peggy Phelan's 'performance writing' has responded to Derrida's *Postcard* (1980), which addresses the relation between philosophy, speech and writing or *Glas* (1974) which suggests possibilities of thinking through ideas, non-oppositionally and in parallel. Phelan's response (*P.S.*) attempts to bring critical and creative imaginations together, to insert critical theory with a 'certain affective emotional force' in *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 2(3), pp.291-302). With a background in architecture, Jane Rendell emphasises debates around space and subjectivity, and draws on aspects of conversation as a mode of writing art criticism, ('Research Project at CRASSH', <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/fellowships/2004-6/biorendell.html>. Accessed 4th November, 2005). Yve Lomax's writing practice is concerned with the relationship between the physical and conceptual, which is paralleled by her photographic works that similarly create a multiplicity of directions and interplay. Works such as 'Better Than' (*Camera Austria* 53, 1995, pp.3-19) and 'Common Notions' (*Camera Austria*, 62/63, 1998, pp. 44-52) present dialogic expansions that travel through a range of notions that bring together visual practice and theoretical writing and confront assumptions held about them.



instances photographs amplify the written text and in others they determine the direction of discussion. In both instances written and visual texts parallel each other's themes.

I establish a realignment of practice in the light of psychoanalysis and the influence of poststructuralism. I demonstrate the interface between visual practices, philosophies and interpretations and establish that current visual practice presents a discursive reflection of the contemporary condition. I introduce Baudrillard's and Derrida's writings about photography as summarising contemporary attitudes to making and reading photographs. In confronting the compulsion to seek out 'essential' meaning, the thesis forefronts the poststructural disturbance of certainty, phenomenological address to self and other and psychoanalytic motivations. It explores how meaning resides outside 'likeness' and argues that the contradictory aspects of the non-literal are central to our understanding photographs. By examining conceptual configurations of the image, I assert figurative over literary interpretations like narrative, and immanent property over aspirations to 'transcendence', 'truth' or 'essence' and reconfigure a conceptual aesthetic. I move increasingly toward Lyotard's conception of 'figural' force as a term that exceeds the literary implications of the term 'figurative' and encompasses a number of the dynamics I describe. I reposition a conception of the ineffable that assimilates poststructural ideas and propose a view of practice, more appropriately termed the poststructural portrait, which celebrating these aspects, is rooted in what the photograph provokes rather than what it depicts.

This introductory section proceeds to outline the implications for any discussion of 'portrait' and its terminologies. It identifies assumptions and expectations, explores their boundaries and establishes a base from which following sections can question conventions and explore aesthetic changes. I use Nelson Goodman to clarify aspects of photographic terminology and Max Kozloff represents the extensive commentary on the 'photographic portrait'. I introduce Walker Evans's Polaroid portraits as one of the key photographic texts used in this thesis. Part One outlines the influence of phenomenology on the relationship between photographer and subject. It identifies Levinas, Kristeva, Derrida and Baudrillard as offering alternatives to the existential view of objectification and examines directions in which the contemporary portrait deviates from it. It relates aspects of psychoanalytic theory that impact on the particular condition of the 'portrait' using my engagement as a photographer and, with reference to Kristeva's texts particularly, I affirm a dialogical and participative engagement both in constructing the 'portrait' and in the reading of photographic texts. Part Two explores dynamics of meaning in photographic representation, *post* poststructuralism and situates them in relation to Derrida's procedure of *differance* and to theories of metaphor, principally those of George Lakoff and Paul Ricoeur. It establishes the conceptual space of the photograph as motivating the ineffable and as an alternative to validating meaning through literary forms such as narrative, rather than the properties of the photographic. It collates



writings that explain the ineffable in images, draws parallels between the different terminologies and establishes the key property of 'resonance'. I re-assert a conceptual dimension to photographs over that of mimesis and the dominance of 'thing', and offer alternative readings to those of narrative and transcendence. Part Three examines directions in aesthetics that counter expectations of the 'portrait'. I consider the literal and the non-literal in photographic presentations and the assumption of strategies of practice as having assimilated aspects of poststructural thinking such as indeterminacy. I position practice in relation to motivations that destabilise meaning, and appraise contemporary practice in the light of Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'postmodern', Jeff Wall's 'photoconceptualism' and reviews of postmodern practice.

### *THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT*

An examination of more contemporary directions in the photographic portrait requires firstly a review of ideas *about* the photographic 'portrait', principally of traditions, of expectation and of the function and problematic of the 'pose'. The tradition of the 'portrait' goes beyond simple record or document and carries with it the myth of revelatory vision, of showing the person beneath the 'mask' and of the consequent role of the photographer as the expressive agent in that event. 'Portrait' brings to mind a certain formal configuration, and because I encompass notions of 'portrait' in the broadest sense, I favour the word 'depiction', which is less value-laden and avoids more formal traditional aspects. Therefore, throughout this thesis when I use the word 'depiction', I am referring to a generic form of photograph portraying an individual or individuals with the expectation of it conveying meaning and not merely 'denoting', whilst avoiding the paraphernalia of a more specific photographic tradition associated with portrait. And when I use the term 'portrait', as a convenient shorthand for the longer label 'depictions of people', I am qualifying this with the quote marks of irony and contemporary application. But even 'depiction' bears the legacy of, for example, Goodman's analysis of classification, or is shown to be fraught with the self-consciousness of media analysis, such as is implied by Thomas Ruff's statement 'photographs aren't depictions they're just images'. Such a statement alerts us to the fact that 'depiction' refers back to the person depicted and the questionable possibility of describing them, and 'image' refers us to the image in front of us. Ruff's logic insists that the whole affair must be pared down to its minimum, thus avoiding the impossible project of *description*, which necessitates interpretation. His belief that one *cannot* portray an individual leads us to the opposing, but contingent, positions of the *definition* of portrait being '*likeness* of a real person' and the *idea* of portrait incorporating *desire*.

The portrait as motif has become so established that it could be seen as metaphor for an ultimate formal statement of judgement, maintaining the relation of power between 'subject' and 'object'. I

do not intend to give an exhaustive account of the status or history of 'portrait photography', but shall concentrate here on indicating expectations, of description, reality, likeness, expression and objectivity that determine our understanding of 'portrait' and which impact on current reactions in practice and the disturbance of the genre. Moving on from a review of assumptions of what a portrait 'is' or 'should be', I shall look more closely in Part One at the implications of the 'pose', the key problematic of the dynamic between photographer and the depicted-subject, and later at the features, which maintain an insistence on depicting fellow human beings, but which deviate from those expectations in the many forms of subversion of the 'portrait'. This introduction indicates that the 'portrait', having lost the certainty of its genre category, has come to serve a much more complex function, or rather its function is adjusted in the light of psychoanalysis and the influence of post-structuralism.

I need to clarify, at the outset, some of the terminology used in discussion. Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1969) makes sense within the parameters and constraints of structuralism, and provides some definition to the structure of meaning in pictures, but is devoid of psychological considerations and is prior to Althusser's influence (1971)<sup>36</sup>, which introduces the essential significance of social condition, of the 'subject' as merely agent within it and subsequently the need to identify the particular 'horizon of thought' that is required in its analysis. Thus Goodman's analysis, when applied to art photography, is stretched to its own limits and raises questions of the relevance of classification and of what sort of analysis is possible. Art photography, which I suggest, has itself contributed to the development of the wider cultural debate with regard to meaning and representation, does not fit comfortably within the constraints of this sort of structural analysis. However, contemporary uses of photography have confused (often deliberately) all manner of category, genre and function and Goodman's definitions at least help to identify the derivation of confusion.

There are very few facts that one can attribute to a photograph – in contrast to what may be popularly believed. It is a 'dense' structure of features that indicates meaning on a number of levels and which is modified by the context in which one is looking. Few photographic properties are merely informational, and yet with the facility of the medium of photography, we very easily will state a property as fact when it is not. At the outset, the photograph presents contradiction and deceit. Goodman clarifies some important and obvious facts in the abundance of terminology used to describe elements of 'visual language' and he usefully distinguishes between the different functions of meaning operating in the image, and what they are termed varies accordingly. He uses 'picture' (for which I shall substitute 'photograph') as the generic term, which he classifies in

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<sup>36</sup> The influence of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault has been discussed extensively in Tagg, John, *The Burden of Representation, Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave, 1988 and 'Ideology and State' Althusser, 1971 cited for example in Burgin, Victor, *The End of Art Theory*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave, 1986, p.17



various forms. Most importantly he states that what the (photograph) denotes does not determine the kind of (photograph) it is and that representation is more complex. Denotation (the most literal or 'obvious' meaning) and representation can be equivalent only as far as we can say that a (photograph) represents (denotes) 'the object so described'. Representation depends on the *relationship* between references and on the kind of representational system within which it is seen. He defines representation and description as being forms of denotation. Depiction (visual) and description (linguistic) refer to objects and events and each are independent of resemblance. Descriptions are distinguished from depictions by belonging to articulate, rather than dense, schemas.<sup>37</sup> Expressions (of feelings) and exemplifications (of properties) lead us away from more articulate references. Exemplification depends on what properties are important in the system at that time. Description necessarily involves interpretation in its articulation and an expression would require rather more words with which to describe it adequately, as there are 'no set tolerances' with which to measure an expression. A description might be less ambiguous but is more laden with intention, whilst 'density' may be more ambiguous and using Barthes's terminology, more connotative. Importantly Goodman clarifies the distinction between reference, property and feeling and identifies a key condition of relationship between these and context. Thus a photograph possesses certain properties and refers to certain objects or events and expresses by 'metaphorical exemplification'. But this kind of comfortable schematic separation is later to be problematised by Derrida. This and the implications of the photograph's metaphoricity will be discussed in Part Two.

Goodman classifies representation, as being of three types. One of which is literally fictive, whilst significantly for the 'postmodern photograph', all may be classified as aspects of fiction. 'A picture that represents a man denotes him; a picture that represents a fictional man is a man-picture; and a picture that represents a man as a man is a man-picture denoting him.' Goodman here confirms the importance of classification to our perception of the depiction, which is both denotation and classification simultaneously. Thus 'portrait' will be recognized as a category of photograph even if 'resemblance' is poor. However, what describes in some systems, depicts in others. In a more informational context, a photograph may be descriptive, although it is doubtful that a photograph can be merely informational. In the context and history of 'portrait' photography it may be depiction constrained by classification, and in the history and context of fine art, it may be the *idea* of 'portrait' and thus a sort of fiction. Any reference to history in the image itself (such as in a Ruff portrait) complicates and makes it more dense. In Goodman's terms, if denotation is equivalent to saying and spelling out meaning without ambiguity, then the photograph, contrary to popular expectation, is more a *display* (an 'exemplification') than description, more ambiguous, possessing properties of simultaneous differentiation and discontinuity, which disrupts simple denotation. He defines 'picture' as provoking two questions – 'what it represents or describes and the sort of

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<sup>37</sup> Goodman, Nelson, *The Languages of Art: an approach to the theory of symbols*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp.26-30, p. 230



representation it is'. The photograph inserts further questions relating to our understanding of the reality (or fiction) it describes. *What it is*, is insufficient to classification, firstly *post* 'conceptual art' and the subsequent insertion of an additional dimension to aesthetic apprehension beyond the perceptual qualities of mimesis, expression and form,<sup>38</sup> and secondly, *post* post-structuralism and its troubling of the certainty of essential being and definition. Classification of the 'portrait' category is insufficient now as a category, as most photographic portraits are complex amalgams of a number of categories and the reliance on this procedure – the determination of *what it is*, is insufficient when recent cultural debate has disturbed the simple procedure of determining '*what is*', reliant as it is on the existence and definition of the 'essential object'.

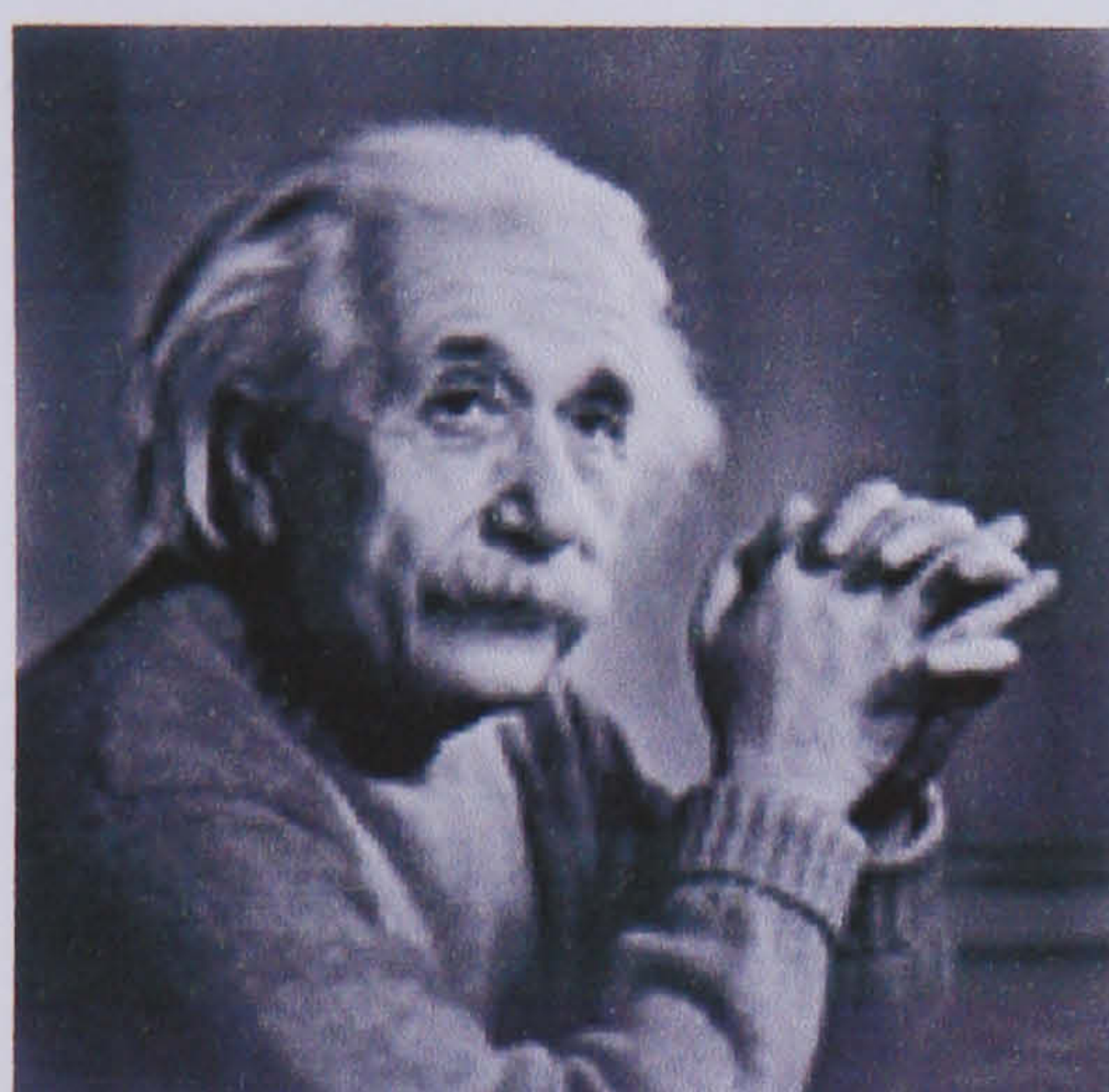


Fig.3 Yousuf Karsh, *Albert Einstein, physicist*, 1948

We might say that the portrait in photography over the last thirty years has introduced new classifications, which can in turn be subdivided (documentary-style-portrait, snapshot-style-portrait, 'subversive'-portrait-style). Much of the classic modernist 'portrait' genre presents a definitive example of 'representation as', for example Yousuf Karsh's *Einstein* 1948 'man as thinker' [fig.3] or *John F. Kennedy* 1960, 'as visionary'<sup>39</sup>. This too is an easy instance of objectification. But when the classifications become more subtle, elusive and subdivided, it is more difficult to determine the level of objectification. 'Representations, then are pictures that function in somewhat the way as descriptions,'<sup>40</sup> for example man-as-genius, woman-as- hispanic (Nikki S. Lee)<sup>41</sup> etc. [fig.4] But such classification is insufficient in explanation of what happens in a Tina Barney photograph that depicts individuals 'as' an aspect of society and which, in using members of her own family, injects poignancy, fiction, irony and reality<sup>42</sup>. [fig.5] And the contemporary

<sup>38</sup> Seamon, Roger, 'The Conceptual Dimension in Art and the Modern Theory of Artistic Value'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59:2, Spring 2001

<sup>39</sup> For example Yousuf Karsh's *Einstein* 1948 as 'thinker' or *John F. Kennedy* 1960, as 'visionary', viewed at Tom Blau Gallery, London October 2002

<sup>40</sup> Goodman, *The Languages of Art*, pp.26-30.

<sup>41</sup> Nikki S. Lee. Born in Korea, moved to the USA and graduated from NYU in 1994. Her working process for the *Project* series is to infiltrate an identifiable group, gain the trust of her subjects, adapt her looks, mannerisms and behaviour accordingly and 'become' one with them, adopting an appropriate persona. As she also studied fashion as a student, she says that she is influenced by picture spreads such as *Vogue*, which use mannered and quasi-narrative poses. Her projects include *Punk* 1997, *Yuppie*, 1998, *Hispanic* 1998, *Seniors* 1999, *Exotic Dancers* 2000, *Schoolgirls*, 2000, *Hip Hop*, 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Tina Barney. Born in 1945, New York. She is known for large-scale portraits of her well-to-do family and friends. They appear to be snapshots but they are actually staged and formally prepared using a large format camera. Her work is in MMA, NYC, MFA Houston and George Eastman House collections. The series to which I refer is *Theatre of Manners* series, 1981-1997. Her more recent project *The Europeans*, picturing wealthy families across Europe was shown at the Barbican, 2005.





Fig. 4 Nikki S. Lee, *The Hispanic Project*, 1998



Fig. 5 Tina Barney, *The Christening*, 1992



Fig. 6 Ulf Lundin, *Picture of a Family series*, 1996

portrait that represents an individual, in a certain defined and isolated mode, is a common strategy of subversion, avoiding the possibility of humanism and sentimentality, as for example, Ulf



Lundin's pictures of the man 'as a family man', 'as ordinary man'.<sup>43</sup> [fig.6] Any form of description functions by focusing on some aspect and leaving out others. In writing, 'the man' would be classified with the use of words to label him and verbs to describe his behaviour, and photographs of men are similarly classified with 'pictorial labels'. 'Representation as' incorporates the tendency toward transparency in seeing the man, as we look through the individual toward a category that is familiar and convenient for our ordering of the world. Goodman is pointing out the importance of the nature of the representation that defines him as a category, a type of representation. Thus a photograph of a man can be defined as a 'portrait of....', framing response to the photograph already in terms of the preconceptions of 'portrait'. If we can dispense with this preface 'portrait of' then it may be possible to achieve a different sort of representation. Goodman's categorization is useful in indicating some assumptions but the more convoluted structures come unstuck when applied to some contemporary works, where Barthes's terminology that distinguishes between denotation and connotation is more useful.

The photograph, over sixty years old....depicts her as a young girl of twenty-four. Since photographs are likenesses, this one must have been a likeness as well...But were it not for the oral tradition, the image alone would not have sufficed to reconstruct the grandmother...All right, so it is the Grandmother, but in reality it is any girl in 1864. The girl smiles continuously, always the same smile, the smile is arrested yet no longer refers to the life from which it has been taken.<sup>44</sup> (1927)



Fig.7 Robert Adamson and Octavius Hill, *Mrs Elizabeth (Johnstone) Hall, Newhaven fishwife, 1843*

<sup>43</sup> Ulf Lundin, born 1965 Sweden, lives and works in Stockholm. The *Pictures of a Family* series, 1996 records a family over the period of a year. Lundin makes a contract with an old school friend that allows him to photograph them at any time as long as they do not know he is there: 'He still lives in the town where we grew up and now he has a wife, two sons, a home and a steady job. The security of his life appals me and attracts me at the same time. It is difficult to point a finger at the choices (if we made any) which have determined our present lives.' <http://www.photonet.org.uk>

<sup>44</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, 'Photography' (1927) cited in Mehring, Christine, 'Kracauer, Siegfried's Theories of Photography from Weimar to New York'. *History of Photography*, Vol.21, No.2, Summer 1997, p.129. Mehring cites the translation by Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995



Another terminology describes the effect of 'representation as' as 'motif'. Speaking of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer with respect to Octavius Hill's fishwife [fig.7], Christine Mehring points out Benjamin's assumption that the photographic image will make the woman into something that she is not – a representation of something *more*, 'something that cannot be silenced'<sup>45</sup> and that Kracauer does this also, but with a difference; suggesting that the girl becomes *all* girls – something more than the one individual. A photograph fabricates symbols particularly as time passes – the girl becomes a 'representation as' a girl of such and such era. She becomes a *motif* and immortalised, divorced from the particular, but an idea of *a* girl rather than *that* girl. She moves into another dimension as the image doesn't describe the individual anymore, but the idea of an idea, objectified. This is how mythology is created and formed, by a 'condensed' form of information. Subsequently she can perhaps only be reconstructed as a *subject* in the sense of an individual, with the addition of words. Max Kozloff describes this as a *neutral* state that is recognizable as an ideality: 'Motifs are perceived in a kind of neutral zone that is set up between the "there" where the figures hold forth and the "here" where the viewing is done', where the individual becomes a sign for something else; glamour, stardom, intelligence, integrity, bravery etc.; where they have shifted beyond themselves or have been perceived as such and not as their individual self. When the function or condition or attribute overrides the individual, we see the role, the desire, the age, the representation over and above the detail.<sup>46</sup>

Goodman's distinction between 'representation' (of objects) and 'expression' (of feelings) as both being species of denotation,<sup>47</sup> but where representation is of the concrete and expression of the abstract, clarifies common confusion where we might say that a picture 'expresses' a feeling when strictly speaking the photograph presents a metaphor that *alludes* to a feeling.<sup>48</sup> Goodman's statement: 'Actors can *represent* sadness but may not express it' (my emphasis) is an interesting notion when translated in the context of portrait, where the gestures and expression that are recognized to signify 'sadness', fail to convey 'sadness' in a powerful enough way or seem contrived. Where the 'subject' may indicate what is understood to mean something, but does not in effect meet the expectations of that meaning – so it is neither 'effective' and does not match intention or expectation nor is it powerful in any way and is mechanical only. Ruff's portraits provide an example of this distinction in operation, of the 'portrait' that confounds attempts to categorise and structure. These are examples that appear to be simple 'portraits' (they are photographs 'as portraits'), but they are confusing in the face of expectations, where the subject is expressionless, where the 'portrait' is clearly stated but the relation and 'setting' is removed. They

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<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin 'a something that cannot be silenced, which demands of the person who lived there, who is still real' cited in Mehring, 1997

<sup>46</sup> Kozloff, Max, 'Variations on a Theme of Portraiture' *Aperture* 114, Spring 1989 and reproduced in *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames*, Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 1984, p.23

<sup>47</sup> Goodman, *The Languages of Art*. p.50

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

neither represent expression nor do they denote or refer to expressive qualities in the person portrayed. The qualities that are possessed by the photograph (and here photograph refers to the more generic term than specifically portrait) express more abstract qualities that are not expressed by the face. Ruff's pictures deny the expectation of expression in the face depicted, but express through the *motif* of the face, a face that is not real. Facial expression is thus abstracted from reality to express – something abstract in property. One would say that Ruff's portraits are articulate and descriptive and yet they are problematised by their attenuation (the opposite to Goodman's 'repleteness'). Ruff's portraits are contradictory in their attenuated density. What is clever about Ruff's use of the category 'portrait' is the use of simplicity that is descriptive and denotative and devoid of expression, but is replete in meaning.

This may be an appropriate point to acknowledge the question of the photograph as being 'transparent' to the world. This notion touches Goodman's 'representation as' and, as we will see, Sartre's position of 'seeing'. Kendall Walton's premise,<sup>49</sup> that 'when I look at a photograph of my mother, I see my mother', takes little account of 'seeing' via a photograph, beyond its indexical reference. Jonathan Friday discusses the implications for aesthetics<sup>50</sup> in accepting photographs as 'putting us in perceptual contact with what they depict'. His premise refers to the photograph's 'representational qualities', which cannot include 'expressive qualities' as being a property of the photograph, as they 'cannot be pinned down to a specific location'.<sup>51</sup> Thereby 'expressive quality' cannot be part of any transparent access to the 'real' world. What Friday sees as a problem is not the fact of representing transparently, but that it might interfere with perception of the photographer's 'artistic creation' and the photograph's consequent aesthetic significance as a representational medium. He is intent on defending the photographic medium as being aesthetic against what he calls the 'sceptic reasoning' of those (for example, Roger Scruton), who contend that it 'is the world transparently represented that captures and sustains interest and not the representation of that world.'<sup>52</sup> Friday does clarify the confusion somewhat<sup>53</sup> by explaining that 'photography is an expressive art that merely happens to be representational' and that the 'contingent possibility of representation is wholly irrelevant to the aesthetic significance'<sup>54</sup> and if we accept that direct perception is mediated through our internal mental reference system in order to understand what is in front of us, then it makes no difference when looking at a photograph, which is mediated similarly. But the argument omits the selective frame of the photograph, the possibility of its own fiction and the ungraspable qualities that are termed as 'expressive', and neither does he encompass changes in the photographic aesthetic since 1970. It might be the case

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<sup>49</sup> Walton, Kendall, 'Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism'. *Critical Inquiry*, 11, December 1984

<sup>50</sup> Friday, Jonathan, 'Transparency, representation and expression', Ph.D. thesis 1995 and *Aesthetics and Photography*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, pp.67-69 and discusses Walton's theory, pp.49-57

<sup>51</sup> Friday, 2002, p.82

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82



that, when looking at pictures for information, 'the viewers primary encounter is with the world and not the photograph for its own sake', but when looking at art practice, we come from a different place and look for our expectations to be met in different ways, with the knowledge that we are *not* looking at the world. It is the *additional* supplementary element to that 'real' world that is without 'specific location' that is all important to this thesis. In my view, the shaky condition of 'transparency' is exposed as problematic by the inconsistencies encompassed in the work, for example of Ruff, described above. And if one accepts the premise of 'seeing as', it is not possible to entertain 'transparency', as we will always mediate the simplest depiction.<sup>55</sup>

The supposed 'norms' of reality<sup>56</sup> account for many underlying assumptions derived from the signifying process, from photographic properties and from the state of simulation. Our mediation of photographs depends on what is the dominant ideological 'norm' and assumes a specific condition or property as 'norm'. In Western culture, it might be the dominating and defining 'subject'. More specifically in art history, it might be an aesthetic that dictates criteria, as for example, beauty, resemblance, spectacle or concept, and photographically it might be the modernist conception of truth behind appearance or a 'postmodernist' expectancy of fiction. It is, as Barthes states,<sup>57</sup> that the current genre dictates emphasis and assumption and each genre carries implicit purpose and expectation, which will be defined in turn by that genre. The process very quickly becomes self-perpetuating and even tautological. So that what is 'real' is 'normal': what is 'normal' is 'real'.

The peculiar condition of photographic indexicality compounds expectations, which equate what is 'real' with 'truth' or what can be verified, and where verification may be assumed to be visual evidence. As is the way with assumptions, they can be stated as fact and lead to further string of assumptions. So that resemblance is equivalent to verisimilitude. 'Reality' is associated with 'what really happens', which is what photographs are supposed to record. The truth of the thing resides in its 'thingness', its substance, as opposed to what it lacks or is absent. Photographs do not 'need any independent justification' and the having-been-there of things is a sufficient reason for speaking of them'.<sup>58</sup> Descriptions are therefore sufficient in themselves and do not need any further function. A photograph simply relates what is there and is transparent to the world. The 'real' appears as 'obvious' and organized and self-evident. It does not reflect for example the simultaneity and chaos of thought. Photographic descriptions verify the appearance of the empirical world, are simple and truthful and can be universally recognised as confirming what is 'known', what is understood and what is familiar. Resemblance is equivalent to the 'real' (despite theories that clarify resemblance

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<sup>55</sup> There are a number of essays that expose the 'fallacy of transparency' e.g. Simon Watney, 'Making Strange: the Shattered Mirror' in Burgin, Victor, (ed.), *Thinking Photography*, London: Macmillan, 1982

<sup>56</sup> The term 'real' in this chapter is used in the sense of general notions of 'reality' rather than in the sense of the pre-discursive 'real' of Lacan and Kristeva.

<sup>57</sup> Barthes, Roland, 'The Reality Effect'. In Todorov, Tzvetan (ed.) *French Literary Theory Today*, trans. R.Carter, Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp.11-17

<sup>58</sup> Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', p.15

as not being necessary to representation), so that whatever is depicted photographically is understood to be 'real'. What is 'real' is understood to be the equivalent to what is depicted – the 'subject matter'. Whatever is signified is recognised as signifying what is 'real'. 'Realism' is a system of representation that depends on what and how I have seen them depicted in the past, is the equivalent of what things look like, which is equivalent to what is 'real'. Thereby there is an habitual expectation of 'realism'.

In such a manner the photograph follows contiguous assumptions of the depiction of 'reality', of authenticity, of the transparency of meaning and of the universality of meaning and reinforces our conception of the photograph, which underlines our conception of 'reality'. This last condition of 'realism' is doubly pertinent and ironic, as we have come recently full circle to the point where commentators suggest that we are now *returning* to a 'postmodern realism',<sup>59</sup> following a period of being concerned with something else (e.g. appropriation) and having left realism behind. In this respect I suggest that not only is it doubtful that we have moved far from the slow process of finding alternatives to 'realism' but that 'appropriation' is *assumed* to be not 'real'. As will be discussed in later sections, what has been termed 'postmodern photography' tends to be restricted to but a few properties. This palindromic condition of the photographic real is further complicated by the need to constantly translate into language – we are intent on translating what is happening, what is felt, what is seen into words, which in turn becomes evidence of what we understand as reality. Traditional attitudes to what is understood as 'real' assert the dominance of the literal over the figural. Content is translated as literal 'thing' or 'subject', rather than more obscure reverberation or more 'figural' possibilities. This is a 'real' that is comfortingly familiar, tangible and understandable. Expressing the 'real' in this way is celebratory and in terms of photography's history, equivalent to 'straight' photography, which is seen as 'authentic', and only what is 'authentic' is judged to be worthy.

Ultimately a photograph looks like anyone except the person it represents. For resemblance refers to the subjects identity, an absurd, purely legal, even penal affair.<sup>60</sup>

'Likeness' in portraiture is a complex mixture of expectation and desire for significance. Andre Bazin acknowledged that we may be drawn by a desire to replicate the wholeness of a person, to find a complete definition, to preserve bodily appearance, 'to snatch it from the flow of time', which helps us to simply remember the subject, helps us create 'an ideal world in the likeness of the real'.<sup>61</sup> Allan Sekula identifies this desire 'for completeness', as being particularly evident in

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<sup>59</sup> Bate, David, 'After Thought'. *Source* 40, Autumn 2004 asks 'Is an end to the discussion of postmodernism the end of ideology?' and suggests the current era of 'neo-realism'. Jurgen Habermas prefers to label reaction as 'anti-modernism' in 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project' in Foster, Hal, (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*. London Pluto Press, 1985, (originally published as *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 1983).

<sup>60</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.100-109

<sup>61</sup> Bazin, Andre, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image'. In Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays*





Fig.8 August Sander, *The Hodcarrier*, 1928

archive, in the compulsive need to categorise and is one of another set of interesting assumptions that include the notions of universal language, empirical truth, inventory of appearance.<sup>62</sup> August Sander's archive, which Sander himself termed 'exact photography', provides a particular example of the contradictions of objectivity and meaning, contained in likeness and which continues to provoke debate concerning the degree of resonance held in the work. [fig.8] Sander's work is identified as being an interesting phenomenon because of its awkward position 'between narrative and categorisation',<sup>63</sup> between an open ended mode and one that defines. It points to the contradiction of the then prevalence of placing photography alongside 'truth and reality' and consequently aligning the physical distancing of this process with 'objectivity'. Barthes suggests resemblance may be more imaginary than factual, something that we expect or imagine,<sup>64</sup> as with Nan Goldin who states that it is not the likeness that she is looking for in her images, but what the subject means to her.<sup>65</sup> [fig.12] Barthes describes this something beyond 'banal appearance' as *air*, a singular quality and without mask; what Susan Sontag calls 'thereness' or 'rightness of look'<sup>66</sup> or Kozloff calls 'psychological resonance' or Goodman might classify as 'repleteness'. 'The air of a face is unanalyzable...The air is not a schematic, intellectual datum, the way a silhouette is. Nor is the air simple analogy - however extended- as is "likeness". No, the air is that exorbitant thing which induces from body and soul, good in one person, bad in another.'<sup>67</sup>

Photographic 'likeness', in describing the physicality of a person, is only part way to the possibility of a comprehensive description of that person. Sontag points out that while a photograph may be

<sup>62</sup> Allan Sekula cited in Baker, George, 'Photography between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait'. *October 76*, Spring 1996 from Buchloh and Willie, Halifax Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 1983

<sup>63</sup> Baker, *October 76*, Spring 1996

<sup>64</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp 100-109. There is some similarity to Sartre's reference to resemblance in Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), trans. Hazel E. Barnes, London: Routledge, 2001, p19

<sup>65</sup> Nan Goldin, born 1953, Washington. Her work includes the series *The Cookie Portfolio* 1976-89, and *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* 1981, *I'll Be Your Mirror* 1995, *Devil's Playground and Heart Beat* 2001 and Goldin, Nan, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, New York Aperture Foundation, 1986

<sup>66</sup> Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, Penguin, 1979, p.77

<sup>67</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp 100-109



said to show or present, it does not ever, properly speaking, 'describe' and proposes that passages, say in Dickens or Nabokov, describe the *implications* of a face better than any photograph. By this she means an inventory of implications and feeling 'expressed' by that face at different times. Physical likeness is an unsatisfactory definition then and not what we're looking for and it is more in the region of expression or indefinable quality that captivates what that person means, that is 'the right look' or Barthes's 'air'. However, as Kozloff points out, there is the difficulty in determining who the 'right look' might be for – for me as viewer or the desire of the photographer or in terms of a more general, more culturally recognisable meaning. Can I, as a viewer for example, appreciate an image of someone that I don't know? – what can someone else's personal meaning provide for me? – how can I relate it to my own life? – what sort of meaning is it? – what sort of resonance? – what will I look for? – what does it represent as motif? – memories? – similarities? – my story? – what I cannot know? – what sort of 'rightness of a look'? Perhaps separating these two regions; separating the singular from the universal will facilitate exploration of 'the right look' and how images may define psychological aspects of the individual. Kozloff points to the fact that despite our understanding of traditional canons, compositional references, codes of the image etc., 'beyond this lies something that defeats understanding...here is exactly where critical interpretation begins - in bewilderment'. Which leaves us with the fact that many images of people classed as portraits, do *not* possess that non-definitive quality and that when they do, the term 'portrait' might not be adequate. Benjamin confirms this view in his affirmation of what Sander's archive<sup>68</sup> was attempting to do in the face of what he considered to be kitsch elements in conventional photography, at that time: 'And suddenly the human face entered the image with a new, immeasurable significance. But it was no longer a portrait. What was it?...The observation is certainly an unprejudiced one, but clever, also, and tender and sensitive.'<sup>69</sup>

The genre of the photographic portrait, in demanding more than simple physical likeness, expects an 'idea' assigned by the photographer. Kozloff's series of essays<sup>70</sup> defining the portrait, provide a survey of assumptions about the function of portraiture: for example that the subject must be central to the image and that it is the business of photographers to reveal, by means of their special vision, the hidden, indefinable quality that captivates who that subject is. A portrait then, must reveal the person beneath the mask and include qualities beyond appearance, another dimension of 'psychological resonance'.<sup>71</sup> Kozloff states that portraits 'make statements about people', suggesting that an author's comment is imperative and implying that a portrait must be definitive or should at least strive to be. An assumption that a remarkable portrait *has* to show character via

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<sup>68</sup> August Sander's project *People of the Twentieth Century*, 1927, 'set out to create a typologically oriented documentation of the social structure of his time in the form of portraits'. His first book *Face of our Time* was published in 1929 and the plates for which were seized and destroyed by National Socialists in 1936.

<sup>69</sup> Benjamin, Walter, *A Short History of Photography* (1931). In Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays*, pp.210-211

<sup>70</sup> Kozloff, Max, 'Variations on a Theme of Portraiture' (1989) and 'Real Faces' (1988). In *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames: essays on photography*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994, pp. 76-89

<sup>71</sup> The term 'resonance' is used by both Max Kozloff and Max Black also and its significance is amplified in Section Two



expression, position and pose has led to very deliberate portrait strategies: Portraits that elaborate, ‘perform’, ‘capture’ the character or create a mythic representation (e.g. Karsh’s *Einstein* ‘as genius’) or an isolated ironic moment (Eve Arnold’s *Marlene Dietrich* 1952, candid and ‘cute’ with one shoe off<sup>72</sup>). This desire for character has motivated the prevalence of construction through performance, typified in its extreme form by such portraits of celebrities as signs of themselves. In order to effect this further dimension, it is required that the photographer, in seeking to reveal the subject’s character, has some ‘idea’ about the subject, affirming a particular value to meaning, whether it be glamorising, mythologizing, authenticating, summarising, as motif or permanent icon<sup>73</sup> and in so doing determine a meaning already translated by the photographer as author. The *event* of portraiture being suitably acknowledged by the participants, establishes boundaries in the relationship between the photographer and the one photographed. Kozloff discusses the ‘discreet social and psychological relationship between the subject and the viewer’ and the proper distance considered necessary in maintaining the clear, distinct positions between the photographer as ‘director’ and the subject as ‘directed’ and subsequently ‘performer’, where they may become a sign for the viewer, a *motif*. Kozloff repeatedly describes the nature of the confrontation, between the photographer and the subject, as ‘a battlefield’<sup>74</sup> of criteria and concepts and idea, which is the dynamic of the ‘great portrait’ so that the definition of portraiture has been, in a sense, the confirmation of a game, the purpose of which is for the sitter to reveal herself to us.<sup>75</sup> He defines portraits in terms of their intended function that confirm the category called ‘portrait’, which excludes those that are not made with ‘intention’. Thus it is intention that is central to the condition of portrait. Resemblance is not the issue but the ‘representational value’, the ‘recognition of authenticity’, determined by the spectator. When we know the subject, we can accept or reject ‘that the person in the photograph is ‘really him or her’, but when they are unknown to us, ‘we become ‘voyeurs’ of a dialogue’. But it will be the spectator’s response that determines whether the ‘conflict’ is a meeting, a hunt, predatory, aggressive or a dialogue.

Photography’s facilitation of representation as *motif* lends itself to the fabrication of stereotypes in the reproduction of fragments, which are in fact only moments in time, but which come to be seen as typical and can soon become cliché. Kracauer emphasises the reduction to appearance, where ‘a person’s history is buried under a photograph as if under a layer of snow’<sup>76</sup> and ‘meaningful’ imagery eventually becomes overworn and sentimental and the ‘past is reduced to a style’. As a result of their focus on appearance, photographs eliminate the context of their reference and reduce reality to a spatially and temporally isolated fragment. For example the photographic portrait eliminates the social embeddedness of the private sphere – the portrayed figure appears in front of

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<sup>72</sup> For example Eve Arnold’s *Marlene Dietrich* 1952, candid and ‘cute’ with one shoe off or *Peter O’Toole* 1963, caught in the process of fooling around and ‘reckless’, viewed at Zelda Cheatle Gallery, London, November 2002

<sup>73</sup> Kozloff, ‘Variations on a Theme’

<sup>74</sup> Pere Formiguera, ‘Confrontation – Portraiture’, <http://www.source.ie/is/artconpor.html>, accessed 22/9/02.

<sup>75</sup> Kozloff, ‘Opaque Disclosures’. *Art in America*, October 1987, pp. 144-153, 197

<sup>76</sup> Kracauer, ‘Photography’ cited in Mehring, p. 130



an increasingly 'blurred background'. Seeing the condition of the photograph as such, moving easily, and in contradiction, between the extremes of realism and fabrication interprets it as picking, choosing, fragmenting and fictionalising. Mehring suggests that Kracauer's earlier concern, that of reality becoming an image, that 'the world itself has taken on a 'photographic face',<sup>77</sup> anticipates a postmodern view of photographs as constructed representations, emphasising a view of reality as simulacrum,<sup>78</sup> where 'all visual information becomes arbitrary, one image replaces another, none sticks with us'. Whereas, Kracauer's later ideas contribute to the notion of the photograph as having to be respectful, pure and real, an attitude which has dominated C20 photographic modernism. He states that 'the essence of the photographic medium its basic aesthetic principle, is its realism: the representation, revelation and penetration of physical reality.' Here he sees the photograph as a means 'to think through things', of lessening differences, to familiarise ourselves with the world and facilitating 'the way to a common life of mankind.' Sontag provides extensive discussion of the attempts of successive generations of photographers to show us 'reality' through new, 'photographic' eyes and writing in 1973, seems to have anticipated most assumptions presented to us by photography. Hers is a very common sense view that demonstrates humanism as being the leading ideology because it hides the confusions of 'about truth and beauty underlying the photographic enterprise'. Photographers can be seen to be recyclers of visions, analogies and meaning, contributing to obsolescence, cliché, anaesthetizing and defining reality for the purposes of power: 'as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers) it substantiates a ruling ideology, 'fix(ing) the fleeting moment...appropriating reality and...making it obsolete'.<sup>79</sup>

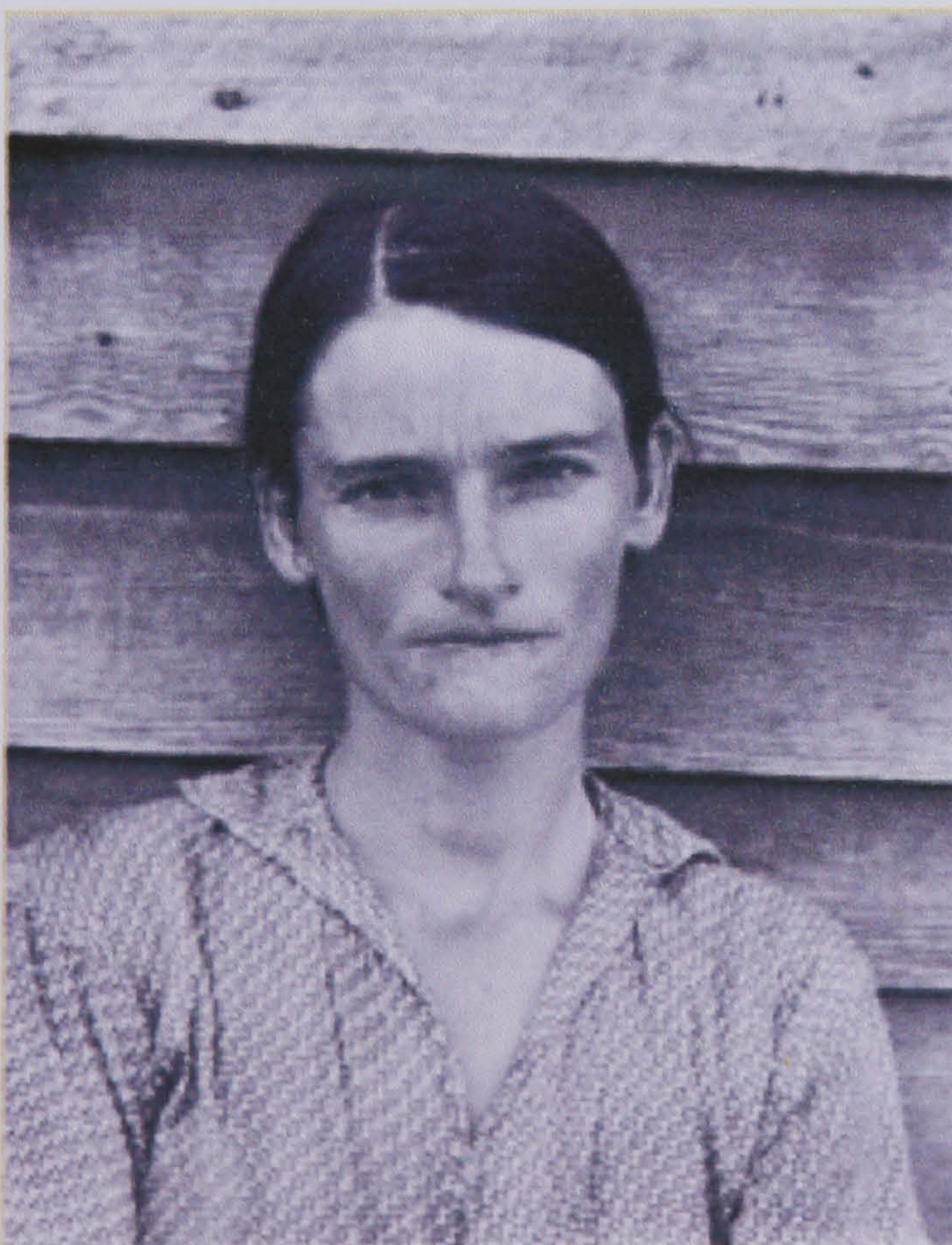


Fig. 9 Walker Evans, *Allie Mae Burroughs*, 1936

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<sup>77</sup> Mehring, p.129

<sup>78</sup> Mehring, p.133

<sup>79</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, pp.178-179



Photographic images of people are powerful in their very ubiquity; leaving us bereft of discrimination; readily responding to, or ignoring, the beautiful, the pitiable and the horrific. We have seen the ease with which 'an ugly or grotesque subject may be moving because it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer.' It has become the purposeful photographer's obligation to cut through blandness<sup>80</sup> and, in so doing, run the risk of elevating the subject, as the photograph can so easily transform a subject into an object of display, as with 'the beauty of the poor'. 'Notwithstanding the declared aims of indiscreet, unposed, often harsh photography to reveal truth, not beauty, photography still beautifies.'<sup>81</sup> Both she and later Baudrillard are demonstrative in their acknowledgement of photography's ability to misrepresent and be used as a substitute for a real connection to the world.

I move now to the disturbance of the genre 'portrait'. Walker Evans was amongst those championed as a pioneer of modernist photography and fitted comfortably within the canon that verified the photographer as defining the subject with meaning and certainty in such a way that is 'unchallengeable', elegant and metaphoric<sup>82</sup> and whose only responsibility was to the 'good picture', endorsing particular genres as requiring this or that to be great. Descriptions of Evans as author have set a tone, an attitude that Evans himself vocally reasserts in his own writing, for example in his catalogue of requirements for photographic 'quality'.<sup>83</sup> In a sense Evans was the complete 'author' forging 'new direction', self-assured, opinionated, inspirational, very much the (anti) hero of US photography, slightly at odds with the mainstream approach and stubbornly reiterating his own manifesto. 'Walker Evans' becomes a sign for his own construction as 'author' and his certainty, instinct and authorship contribute in turn to the construction of genres, of both portraiture and documentary. [fig.9] With the acknowledgement of Evans's stature in legitimising genre, I deliberately use his work as a pivotal example of changes in genre and aesthetic emerging in the 1970s. What is additionally significant about Evans is that he comes from the tradition of photography as opposed to others who were using photography in more conceptual ways such as Ruscha. Kozloff's element of 'bewilderment' indicates an area of portrayal that is more ambiguous, more dangerous and Evans introduces a bewildering alternative direction that is soon to become commonplace. In 1973-5, Walker Evans took around a 1000 portrait photographs of friends and students, using an SX-70 Polaroid camera in a peculiarly impulsive and uncontrolled way. [fig.10] This body of work is both distinct in terms of its extraordinary quality and effect, and from the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p.15

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.102

<sup>82</sup> Szarkowski, John, 'Introduction' in *Walker Evans*, catalogue for exhibition at Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1971, pp. 10-17

<sup>83</sup> This is the first of a number of references made to primary research of Walker Evans Archive, acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (WEA, MMA,), New York in 1994 from the artist's estate and catalogued and kept by the Department of Photographs. WEA, MMA, 1994.250.54 notes on 'quality' for his chapter on photography where he makes lists of what is important to good photography and describes the work of Sander, Nadar and Hine among others in Kronenberger, Louis (ed.) *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*. New York: Atheneum, 1969.



work for which he is best known and respected. This thesis presents 'Walker Evans' as a key figure in discussing both the peculiarities of the encounter and the developments in the uses of photography, which move away from a confident modernism.



Fig.10 Walker Evans, *Nancy Shaver*, 1973

Scrutiny of this series repeatedly questions what is assumed to characterise the genre of 'portrait' and what is assumed to be 'good'. As we have seen, an expectation of the photographer's role is to construct a meaningful portrait that 'captures' some quality in the subject that may be recognisable or universal. Given these constraints, Evans's Polaroid images present themselves as something other than portraits and are therefore problematic. They are accidentally produced, positionally confused and do not appear to be motivated by any clear vision. More traditional 'portraiture' at least requires the photographer to interpret the individual via expression, position and pose, to affirm a particular value in the portrayal, which comments or defines. In its extreme form it motivates deliberate fabrications of iconic representation. Supporting information for the 2002 exhibition *Richard Avedon: Portraits*, reconfirms the assumed value of portraiture as being the construction of character above all else as a sign for 'the ineluctable poignancy of the human condition'. Avedon's distinctive series of individuals in the American West,<sup>84</sup> are made special by gesture, prop, expression, perfect isolation, complete focus and become indeed 'perhaps the grandest portraits ever staged'. [fig.11] Evans's misalignment with the assumed values of 'distilled photographic portraiture'<sup>85</sup> suggests instead parallels with Andy Warhol's obsessive scrutiny and disregard for photographic tradition, with whom he shares a significant deviation from the special event of portrayal, towards a more ambiguous placement of the photographed subject somewhere between intimacy and formality. 'Judged on the basis of traditional genre, such photographs would be dismissed as inferior or even as botched attempts. The images have the look of bad amateur photographs...deliberately celebrated his apparently indifferent application of technique. He

<sup>84</sup> *Richard Avedon in the American West 1979-1984*, exhibition catalogue, University of Arizona Centre for Photography and published by Fundacion "la Caixa", Granada, 2001

<sup>85</sup> Publicity material for the retrospective exhibition *Richard Avedon: Portraits* in Maria Morris Hambourg and Mia Fineman, 'Avedon's Endgame', Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2002, [http://www.metmuseum.org/special/Richard Avedon](http://www.metmuseum.org/special/Richard_Avedon), accessed 19/1/2003.



denied the importance of manual craftsmanship and technical expertise in order to eradicate the impression of a specific artistic vision...(these) snaps do not provide thoughtful interpretations of what is seen, nor do they capture 'decisive moments'.<sup>86</sup> If one applies this description of *Exposures*<sup>87</sup> to that of Evans' portraits one can see the same disturbance in process. Together these works are indicative of a radical conceptual change, validating a more oblique method, significantly moving away from a search for personality or anything at all, making no attempt to mythologise.



Fig. 11 Richard Avedon, *Ronald Fischer*, 1981

If we accept that our knowledge of a genre will affect our response to the work, then what appears to reside in that particular genre, however aslant the work might appear, will be viewed with reference to that particular 'symbol system'.<sup>88</sup> It is very difficult to step outside the genre of portraiture, once it is identified. The language of portraiture has become obvious and natural.<sup>89</sup> Thus, what we might presume to be of importance can be very noticeably distorted. The use and application of a photographic genre rests on what is believed to be centrally important in defining that genre, for example, the framing, the care and the decisive vision 'catching' the character. In Evans' late portraits the pursuit of character is underplayed or not played at all and in this sense they are remarkably passive. The difficulty in situating these images resides in the expectation that normally a portrait should encompass a comment, should endeavour to shape 'an extended meditation on life' and that failure to do this may leave us with an image that serves as a fetishistic representation and which is merely therapeutic. Here the frame is between the centre and the margins of portraiture, residing in an accident or in a kind of happy snap. In this case the genre of

<sup>86</sup> Butin, Hubertus, "Oh When Will I be Famous, When Will It Happen?" Andy Warhol's Society Photos'. In *Andy Warhol Photography*, Zurich and New York: Stemmler Publishers, 1999, pp.249-250

<sup>87</sup> See the series *Exposures* 1976-87 in *Andy Warhol Photography*.

<sup>88</sup> Goodman, *Languages of Art*

<sup>89</sup> Rhonda Lieberman, 'Jacques Le Narcissiste', *Artforum*, (October 2002) 35-36. In this article about the film *Derrida*, Derrida is quoted as saying, in what is almost a paraphrase of Barthes in 1957, 'deconstruction sets out *not* to naturalize what is not natural. To *not* assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions or society is natural'. Reference then is made to Heidegger's inference that anecdote is inferior to thought. Thought in this case perhaps being the equivalent to 'original' seeing' or photographic thought, rather than historical or biographical understanding. For Derrida, what is important is the question of narration, or the manner of telling. Derrida extends notions about seeing, by permitting us to actively question what appears at first natural.



portraiture is very obliquely alluded to in that these images are, only in a literal sense, portraits and do not conform to what is expected.

Evans's earlier 'documentary style'<sup>90</sup> is readable and gives information. Not only that, it is documentary sanctified and touched with expression. This late series of portraits is not in the familiar 'documentary style', is not easily readable (or identifiable) and sits uncomfortably. If they appropriate any mode, it is that of the vernacular, adopting the extreme spontaneity and thoughtlessness that the Polaroid camera provokes. Geoffrey Batchen, in the course of editing *Vernacular Photographies*,<sup>91</sup> asked a range of people to respond to questions about the nature of the 'vernacular photograph'. Definitions by different respondents describe many of the qualities of Evans's late portraits, placing them as touching the vernacular: 'visceral', 'immediate', 'without consequent ambition', 'naivety', 'lacking self conscious expression', a 'non-category', 'confusing', 'inarticulate'. In the same article, Elizabeth Hutchinson suggests that definitions of the vernacular depend on 'subjectively determined formal qualities in the images' that are in turn thought to be 'more "authentic" and "direct" than those...of art photographs'. Evans' are exactly 'direct' and apparently 'authentic' in that they do seem alarmingly naïve. If one accepts that the term vernacular cannot be ascribed to the work of a professional photographer, then one can describe it as 'vernacular style', as Daile Kaplan suggests, much in the way that Evans adopted 'documentary' as indicative of most of his work.

In 2005, portraiture is no longer constrained by definitions which state that 'any dilution into unselfconscious activity, any immersion within the subject's own time'<sup>92</sup> weakens the 'idea' of portraiture. Instead, the contemporary portrait actively endeavours to use strategies that encourage such 'immersion'. Kozloff again, speaking of Goldin's work, hints at a development in portraiture that 'demonstrates a fluidity of raw contact before any hint of performance rises up to intervene in and conclude the portrait'<sup>93</sup> and indicates a move away from prescriptive, performative portraiture and towards a method where the subject is photographed whilst preoccupied and their attention and involvement is elsewhere. Goldin's work [fig. 12] holds a significant place in the story of 'realism' and with regard to descriptions of photographic aesthetic as vernacular. Her diaristic approach started in the early 1970s with *The Cookie Portfolio* and *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and were shown as slideshows with music in the 1980s. Her work is known for an uncensored

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<sup>90</sup> Evans, Walker, 'Lyric Documentary', transcript of a lecture delivered at Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, March 11<sup>th</sup> 1964, p.38 in *WEA, MMA*.

<sup>91</sup> Batchen, Geoffrey, 'Vernacular Photographies'. *History of Photography*, 24:3 (Autumn 2000) 262-271. Batchen interestingly and coincidentally touches on a number of aspects relevant to this argument. His respondents include Daile Kaplan, Douglas Nickel and Elizabeth Hutchinson.

<sup>92</sup> Kozloff, 'Opaque Disclosures', p.146

<sup>93</sup> Kozloff, 'Real Faces' (1988) in *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames*, pp.76-89





Fig.12 Nan Goldin, *Siobhan on our bed*,  
NY 1990

documentation of friends and lifestyle, inseparable from her own experience and suggest a sensitivity derived from the relationship itself rather than appearance.<sup>94</sup> This approach, and more specifically the use of series demonstrates a position where the portrait does not remain static but encourages this ‘raw contact’ and continuing relationships that emerge within and between images. It moves away from an isolating procedure and provides an example of portraiture, which subverts our expectations of the genre by a number of means: highlighting a literal ordinariness of subject and context, disrupting narrative and special event, rupturing the relationship between author and subject with intimacy, removing the author’s ‘idea’ or vision. One could say that a search for ‘realism’ – and elusive ‘quality’ is the ultimate quest – motivating the most banal and bizarre constructions that perpetuate and celebrate evermore crude versions of the ‘everyday’ – Henry Peach Robinson’s ‘the glorification of the *Unessential*’ – ‘bare, bald, and ugly’.<sup>95</sup> Raw and unbeautiful realism has become a kind of trope for ‘truth’.

The ‘compulsive desire for completeness’ is one aspect evidently missing from the purpose of many contemporary photographers. Boris Mikhailov,<sup>96</sup> [figs. 24, 47-51] for example presents work that is open ended, clumsy, unresolved. Just as Szarkowski, in 1963, suggests that Sander was to be seen again as a refreshing contrast to much photography at *that* time with its focus on the

<sup>94</sup> Goldin, ‘I’m usually engaged in activities that I’m photographing’, video of interview *In My Life*, Whitney Museum exhibition 1996-7, shown at Whitechapel exhibition *The Devil’s Playground*

<sup>95</sup> Peach-Robinson, Henry, ‘Idealism, realism, Expressionism’. In Trachtenberg, p.93

<sup>96</sup> Boris Mikhailov. Born 1938, Charkov, Ukraine, lives and works in Kharkov and Berlin.





Fig.13 Thomas Struth,  
*The Horsfield Family*,  
1989

'ephemeral' and the 'moment',<sup>97</sup> so too photographers now, such as Mikhailov, stand in contrast to much photography *since* Sander. And in a very different way, Beat Streuli's depiction of people<sup>98</sup> [fig.55] would echo both Sander and Szarkowski in approaching 'expressive meaning of the prototype, of a sense of permanence, of stability. In learning how to photograph that which happens, we have forgotten how to photograph that which exists and prevails.'<sup>99</sup> Thomas Struth,<sup>100</sup> [fig.13] Rineke Dijkstra [fig.14] and Ruff have all used the genre of portrait; photographed series of individuals taken with their knowledge and with, in different degrees, their complicity. They all rely on the baldness of pose and provide extreme examples of the photographed subject being very aware of the *event*. But these are examples where the formality of the portrait genre has been appropriated as a 'style', where the genre of portrait itself and aesthetic value has assimilated an extreme form of self-awareness.

The condition of 'portrait' amplifies a particular corner of structuring representation of the individual, versions of which will be described in the work of a restricted selection of photographers throughout this thesis and establishing a number of recurring themes. The photograph is constrained by the constraints of ideology, just as we are determined by the constraints of others, which the portrait amplifies. To engage in analysis of the 'portrait', requires acknowledgement of the legacy and influence of phenomenology as explaining the immediacy of experience and requires that this is positioned with respect to structures 'bigger than' and containing the individual, which the individual does not experience directly but which influences

<sup>97</sup> Alfred Steiglitz's 'moment of equilibrium', Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment', Robert Frank's "'n-between moments' catching reality off guard and revealing disequilibrium.

<sup>98</sup> Beat Streuli 1957 Switzerland. Lives in Dusseldorf and New York. Streuli's studies of people in large cities around the world, New York, London, Sydney, Tokyo. They are presented as installations, large-scale colour or black and white photographs, slide projects and films.

<sup>99</sup> John Szarkowski cited in George Baker, 'August Sander: the Portrait as Prototype'. *Infinity 12*, no 6, June 1963

<sup>100</sup> Thomas Struth. Born Geldern, Germany, 1954. Struth is known for a number of photographic series one of which is that of portraits of friends and acquaintances in their own environment.



and shapes any form of text, in this case the photographic. To represent the former, I refer in particular to Sartre's existentialism and the latter, Derrida's deconstruction. The process of psychoanalysis demonstrates the difficulty of authenticity subject to the opacity of our unconscious. Post-structuralism confirms that we can be authentic only within the bounds of a constructed ideology.



Fig. 14 Rineke Dijkstra, *Tia*, 1994

What follows is an investigation of the direction of change, of what constitutes the 'horizon of thought' that contains the 'portrait', no longer simply a vehicle of 'man as agent of humanism' but a complex compilation of subtle variants on projects using the convention of the portrait, from formality to banality to super-banality. Before returning to the constructions of meaning in Part Two, Part One scrutinizes the ambivalence of the 'pose', the implications of the encounter between the photographer and the one photographed, the issue of objectification and alternative possibilities of 'telling' portrayal.



## PART ONE: THE EVENT AND THE ENCOUNTER

### Introduction: PHENOMENOLOGY

As the relationship between the photographer and ‘subject’ is fundamental to the photographic portrait, and as an instance of one-to-one encounter, it is necessary to look at its phenomenology, its conditions and its consequences for the ‘pose’ and the central issue of *subject:object* relationship. Part One identifies elements that derive from the particular nature of the encounter itself, in order to examine factors governing the degree of subjectivity / objectivity and the nature of a supposed objectification in any particular relationship. The photograph affords the opportunity to explore the meeting of subjectivities in the formation of an image, which is governed by them.

This section discusses the portrait session, founded in existential experience, as demonstrating the difficulties concomitant with the ‘pose’ of presenting anything that ‘resembles’ the individual, untouched by others. I use the term ‘event’ to describe the occasion of a photographic portrait session as an alternative to ‘moment’, ‘shot’, ‘instance’ (amplified by Cartier-Bresson’s ‘decisive moment’,<sup>1</sup> which presumes the privileging of that moment) and which does not allow for a more protracted encounter that extends before and beyond the shutter release. I want to suggest that the encounter implies the possibility of, at the very least, an *exchange* between the photographer and depicted-subject and to emphasise that the portrait, as its manifestation, can be seen as a profound event on two levels – in the original encounter of two people, face-to-face, and in the reverberation of meaning in the subsequent encounter of viewer and photograph. Thus the resulting image presents positions of two phenomena simultaneously – the exchange between two individuals and the enigma of the image that depicts that exchange. ‘Event’ is a term derived from Derrida’s reference to ‘photographic event’ in *Droit de Regards*, and echoes Levinas’s reference to the face as a ‘fundamental event’. It serves to underline a conception of photographic portrait as paralleling Levinas’s ambivalent use of the term ‘face’, which is both literal reference to an actual face that we might know,<sup>2</sup> and metaphoric.

Phenomenology, in as far as it attempts to make ‘sense’ of the world as it is encountered, and to describe our experience *of* the world and our experience of ‘others’ *in* the world, indicates a number of points at issue for the photographic portrait. In this section, I position the portrait with

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<sup>1</sup> Cartier-Bresson, Henri, ‘The Decisive Moment’ (1952). In Goldberg, Vickie, (ed.) *Photography in Print, Writings from 1876 to the Present*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981

<sup>2</sup> Wright, Tamra, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainley, ‘The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas’. In Bernasconi, Robert, and David Wood, (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas. Rethinking the Other*. London and New York, 1988, p.168



regard to the conditions suggested by phenomenology, firstly in the way we understand thinking and perceiving and secondly in the way that we experience and understand our constitution in relation to others, which informs the essential relationship between photographer and the subject-photographed in the process of the portrait. The first is pertinent to the way we look at a photograph of another person and the second to the way we position ourselves when being photographed.

A phenomenological conception of the subject refers back to the work of Husserl, who has been critiqued by Sartre, Kristeva, Levinas, Derrida and Lyotard and aspects of this analysis are pertinent here as they identify conditions that determine the nature of the 'pose'. For example, Kristeva speaking of process, Levinas flattening out subject / object and Derrida of division and dissemination. Levinas's description of Husserl's phenomenology is one of the most succinct:

A methodical disclosure of how meaning comes to be, how it emerges in our consciousness of the world, or more precisely, in our becoming conscious of our intentional rapport with the world. The phenomenological method enables us to discover meaning within our lived experience; it reveals consciousness to be and intentionality always in *contact* with objects outside of itself, other than itself. Human experience is not some self-transparent substance or pure *cogito*; it is always intending or tending towards something in the world that preoccupies it. The phenomenological method permits consciousness to understand its own preoccupations to reflect upon itself and thus discover all the hidden or neglected horizons of its intentionality...phenomenology enables us to explicate or unfold the full intentional meaning of an object.<sup>3</sup>

Levinas describes phenomenology's evolution from Husserl's 'abstract and ponderous'<sup>4</sup> approach to Heidegger's reference to 'real' feelings that we can recognise, and to his analysis of 'anguish' as being the fundamental mood of our existence. So that human moods such as guilt, fear, anxiety, joy or dread are no longer considered as separate physiological sensations or psychological emotions, but are recognised as the ontological way in which we feel and find our being-in-the-world, grounded in daily experience.

Above all, it is the self-consciousness of phenomenology that is most pertinent to the portrait encounter, as the photographer's attention and intention magnifies a reciprocal awareness of the other. Part One presents a series of different perspectives that formulate attitudes to self and other from which to interpret the photographic encounter. The following chapters present variants on the theme of 'being', 'becoming' and 'disappearing' demonstrated in self-reflection and in the direct experience with an other person. I start with Derrida's description of an encounter that serves as an

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<sup>3</sup> 'Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney' in Cohen, Richard A., (ed.), *Face to Face with Levinas*. State University of New York Press, 1986, p14

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas*, p.15



illustration for the fluid nature of thought. Following Sartre's oppositional stance, which could be described as the norm for modernist photography, they present increasingly radical departures. Their significance indicates the break with the humanist tradition and introduces the instability and ambiguity of the poststructural condition. Each attitude introduces a version of uncertainty that suggests equivalent responses in the photographic encounter, to questions such as how do these conceptions of being inform our response to images of others and how are they made manifest in the photograph? How do contemporary strategies contend with the awareness of subjectivity or objectification?



## Chapter One: BEING

### BEING-DIFFERENT



Fig.15 Shizuka Yokomizo, *Stranger series no.10*, 1999

A current trend of very deliberate methodology provides a background that betrays self-conscious attitudes; I cite three such instances and ask what are they saying implicitly about assumptions, knowledge or desire? Shizuka Yokomizo fabricates a situation whereby, having sent her subjects a letter inviting them to be photographed at a prearranged time, she photographs them looking out from an illuminated window, anonymously (*Stranger series* 1998-2002) [fig.15].<sup>5</sup> Marjaana Kella<sup>6</sup> has photographed people from the back (*Reversed Portraits* 1996-7) [fig.16] and under hypnosis. Both manufacture the avoidance of interaction with their subjects entirely. Bettina von Zwehl<sup>7</sup> adopts elaborate methods to control the appearance of her subjects and to limit the variability of expression or mannerism; in one series they are told to hold their breath and in others are presented in a highly prescribed and artificial manner. [fig.17] Each artist adopts a bald portrait methodology as a frame, which entirely contradicts their appearance as 'portraits'. They betray an awareness of the latent opposition implicit in the portrait encounter. Yokomizo and Kella display an anxiety to demonstrate subjectivity untouched by directorial control and tackle the encounter in a way that circumvents confrontation; they avoid being accused of objectification. They are implicitly intent on demonstrating the *difference* in subjects not reduced to a reflection of themselves and thereby

<sup>5</sup> Shizuka Yokomizo, born in Tokyo 1966, studied in London from 1989-1995. Lives and works in London. Her subjects receive a letter: 'I would like to take a photograph of you standing in your front room. A camera will be set up outside the window in the street. If you do not mind being photographed please stand in your room and look at the camera through the window for 10 minutes. I will take your picture then leave'. Ali Davies, BBC South Yorkshire, on the occasion of an exhibition at Site Gallery, Sheffield. 2004, describes her as 'working in the gap between self and other'.

<sup>6</sup> Marjaana Kella, born 1961, Orimattila, Finland. Lives and works in Helsinki. Her series of works include *Interiors* 1997-97, *Reversed Portraits* 1996-7, *Hypnosis* 1997-2001

<sup>7</sup> Bettina von Zwehl, born 1971, Germany and studied photography at London College of Communication and Royal College of Art. Now lives and works in London. Other series include *Anatomy of Control* 2000, *Rain* 2003, *Alina* 2004



the same. One can see a determination to challenge the oppositional dilemma in accepting it as inevitable. Each instance is indicative of strategies that swing between control and lack of control, and explain the event as being of necessity fundamentally an invention – fictive. Ultimately they reiterate the theme of distance versus intimacy (perpetuated in *Cruel and Tender*) and of photography's oscillation between extremes; one that confuses photographer and photographed subject and here of distanced stand-off.



Fig.16 Marjaana Kella, *Reversed Portraits*, 1996

Derrida's oblique account<sup>8</sup> of the encounter introduces the predicament of coming to terms with being-different from others with a playful demonstration of self-division, which can be equally 'read' in visual texts as above, in images that confront uncertainty and which begin to explain the 'impossibility of representation'. His thinking articulates a number of themes that emerge from his conception of being and thinking in the presence of another, with regard to the photographic encounter and to the inter-changeability of narrator, character, reader when looking at photographs. His articulation of the initial disarray and mobility in the internal experience of thought introduces the phenomenological pre-condition of our face-to-face encounter with others and the fundamental condition for the photographic portrait. The process of differentiation from others requires firstly recognition that we are *of the same* (human) and secondly comparison and reflection to understand that we are not the same, and that its articulation is complex. With regard to describing our encounter with others, Derrida, finding inconsistencies in Husserl's text for example, exposes perception and representation as being more complex than straightforward, and inseparable from subjectivity, culture and history: 'They, (the other *egos*)...are not simple representations or objects

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<sup>8</sup> Lecture given by Derrida *What is called not thinking*, Loughborough University, November 10<sup>th</sup> 2001. A reference to Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* Lectures delivered at the University of Freiburg during the winter and summer semesters of 1951-2 and translated by J. Glenn Gray, New York, Harper & Row, 1968



represented within me, synthetic unities of a process of verification taking place ‘within me,’ but precisely ‘others’...subjects for this same world...subjects who perceive the world...and who thereby experience me, just as I experience the world and in it ‘others’.<sup>9</sup> Further to this he points to a certain absurdity in Levinas’s critique of Husserl, which articulates the complexity of interaction in our engagement with others: ‘there is the same and the other, and then the other cannot be the other – of the same – except by being the same (as itself: ego), and the same cannot be the same (as itself: ego) except by being the other’s other: alter ego. That I am also essentially the other’s other, and that I know who I am, is the evidence of a strange symmetry whose trace appears nowhere in Levinas’s descriptions.’<sup>10</sup> Derrida rejects Husserl’s descriptions of an ideal ‘objectivity’ of the object and insists that the ‘presence’ of the present is unsustainable, that consciousness is not self-contained, not an ‘undivided unity of the present moment’<sup>11</sup> and just as perception requires memory and anticipation, consciousness requires representation, discourse and alterity to recognise itself. Derrida’s attitude introduces a state of being that reflects a subject who is reflexive and divided, ‘irremediable self division and difference itself’, and which is worked upon day-by-day, for example, by speaking with others.



Fig.17 Bettina von Zwehl, *from Untitled II*, 1998

Derrida’s lecture *What is called not thinking*, demonstrates self-division in operation and the self as ‘radically discontinuous’, as profoundly influenced by others, both for-himself and for-others. As a display of reflexive dialogue, it takes the form of commentary on his thinking that takes place whilst in verbal exchange with an other. The resulting questioning follows the interaction with his experience, with the other, and with the implications of the process. Derrida describes this process

<sup>9</sup> Husserl quoted in Derrida, Jacques, ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ (1964). In *Writing and Difference*. London and New York: Routledge, 1978, p.154

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p.160

<sup>11</sup> Howells, Christina, *Derrida, Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p.22



of *not* becoming, but of *being* moment-to-moment something different, in *following* his own speech, as a sort of ‘psycho-phenomenology’, a meta-narrative that has ‘intrinsic multiplicity’ and mobility of thought and intention. He is at once narrator/ character/ author/ reader / writer/ written about – all interchangeable – following each other – all acolytes. He asks: “what truth is there here?” And assuming the possibility of a substitution of one for the other, the supposed truth of the ‘we’, he demands that the other understand him: “put yourself in my place”.

*What I did, what I said, what I did not do, what I would have done, what I could have done. Saying other than what one thinks, misleading the other deliberately, I display the simultaneity and disarray of thought – the discontinuity. I distinguish between moment A and moment B – what happens is that I can be different in each moment. In another moment. I have changed – everything has changed and I am unable to account for how it has changed. Changing every instant, infinitely and at every instant forgetting what I was and what I have thought of. “Everything is clear from that moment on”. I blurt out something without thought – the words leap out. I am the person for me and the person for you – what am I doing here? – I am dislodged from identity. Each time there is an interruption, my relation to you changes – there is no relation without this break – it is necessary. I let myself be surprised by the pull of another – the necessity coming from another. Meaning what we say – what we do when we don’t think: “I didn’t mean it”. I meant something else. Not meaning it intentionally. There are many voices in me. Sometimes another voice speaks through me. There are a number of inhabitants in me. If I can’t write a text with one voice, then I use a number. For someone to mean what they say – the possibility of saying something else must remain open. If you close this possibility then there is no language. For the truth to be true meaning, to be meaningful, the possibility of a lie must remain open. My identity with myself – as subject – is how I see or understand myself or what I do with myself? The tete-a-tete between two friends – I ask the other to understand, yet I can never know her. Can she ever understand me as I can never know the furthest extent of myself. And if she did know me it is one aspect only – not my aspect. “Put yourself in my place” – can I do that? “Disappearing at work in the phenomenality of appearing” – as we appear, we disappear. “The person for me and the same person for others”. How they are different, different ‘I’s, different subjects.<sup>12</sup>*

Others speak of thought as if it is continuous, perhaps not logical, but understandable and clear – as with one thought at a time. Husserl’s view is that interior monologue presents the ideal of unmediated self-presence because “I understand what I say as I am saying it, or even before I say it”. Whereas Derrida demonstrates that “I don’t know what I think until I hear what I say, or only one aspect of myself at the moment that I hear the words come out of my mouth.” He demonstrates

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<sup>12</sup> This is the first example my appropriation of a text. In this instance spoken. I have paraphrased and reconfigured fragments and thereby liberally interpreted the lecture given by Derrida *What is called not thinking*, Loughborough University, November 10<sup>th</sup> 2001



that we cannot entirely control what we think or what we say or how we say it. It is as multi-faceted as it is simultaneous, disrupted and lateral. “Everything is clear from that moment” when we speak, but we can be different at each moment as we continue to speak. The words in the company of others lead the way, without pre-thought. There is an “essential discontinuity”, an “eternal interruption” in being different, which cannot be accounted for. Essentially the other makes a difference to what one thinks and says, letting oneself be surprised or swayed, watching what follows and what does not follow in interruptions, allusions, in metonymic snapshots. Derrida displays the necessary state of being-different, to both oneself and to others at each moment, as an *event* of thinking that is not so very different from fiction. He demonstrates the multi-subjectivity, the absence of univocity as an opportunity that is the simultaneity of idea and possibility. This condition of fiction and possibility, which is nascent in thought, is necessarily present in aesthetic statements, both singular and collective. What is implied for the photographic portrait in Derrida’s self-division and multi-subjectivity is that the ‘pose’ must always be ambivalent, that any moment can only be incidental, as it is but one of many alternatives available to the subject. That the subject follows herself, watches what she says and what she does, constructs what she appears to be to others, creates a fiction of herself on the basis of arbitrary decision. The process is discursive. Verbal or visual statements, of which one is the portrait, establish what someone becomes. What is suggested also in the arbitrariness of either-this-or-that is an adventure not to be feared, is positive. This mesh of uncontrolled, unpredictable factors parallel what must be involved in the making of a photographic portrait and it is the very haphazardness that suggests its fictional property over any pretensions to ‘truth’.



Fig.18 Annelies Strba,  
*In the Kitchen*, 1995

Because we can relate to what we imagine is our direct experience of the world, irrespective of the complex sociological and ideological frameworks that encompass it and the psychological interior that colours it, direct experience appears to be undeniable and simple; what we feel we experience



is what we feel we experience. In such a way we construct a convincing conception of reality.<sup>13</sup> Phenomenology attempts to put aside the personal and subjective in order to examine what is



Fig. 19 Richard Billingham, *Ray's a Laugh series*, 1996

universal. The legacy of phenomenology and its search for a purity in direct experience underlies much of the ideal of 'pure photography' (Paul Strand's 'absolute unqualified objectivity').<sup>14</sup> The modernist photograph, reliant on the properties of the medium itself, and its peculiar access to the 'real world', and the 'straight' and direct objectivity that is available to it, holds a certain reverence for the photographer who can bracket off subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> Similarly the privileging of the present and absolute moment idealised by Husserl's phenomenology, is echoed in photographic ideals such as 'decisive moment'. However, Strand's assumptions of honest objectivity acknowledge the photograph's limitation and anticipate the contradiction that inhabits its potential for 'both objectivity' and fiction that I discuss in Part Three. Photography has inherited the legacy of 'real feelings' and day-to-day experience, which can be seen as a 'sign' for a contemporary reality found in the depiction of extreme ordinariness for example.[fig.18] We may have rationally absorbed the post-structural adjustment that there is no 'truth' outside representation, that we do not experience the world and others in a simple osmotic process of the senses, unpolluted by the structure of the world in which we exist. And if we acknowledge 'the theoretical, cultural, social and emotional content of the photograph',<sup>16</sup> we must accept that one logical reaction might be the abandonment of responsibility and control, not only from interaction with the world but at least from notions of authorial control [fig.19]. In the context of my own photographic project, such a consequence disrupts any search for an original essence or quality. But the photographic portrait struggles still with two notions: the existence of an essential individual and the possibility of objective

<sup>13</sup> Burgin, Victor, *The End of Art Theory*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 1986, p.16. 'In the same movement in which the phenomenological world is transformed into the 'real', so the real is transformed into reality-in-ideology.'

<sup>14</sup> Strand, Paul, 'Photography and Photography and the New God' (1917). In Alan Trachtenberg, (ed.) *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980, pp. 141-142. 'This is an absolute unqualified objectivity. Unlike other arts which are really anti-photographic. This objectivity is of the very essence of photography, its contribution at the same time its limitation.'

<sup>15</sup> Walker Evans talking about detachment, in interview with Jonathan Goell in his studio Brookline, Massachusetts, August 4, 1971, p.19: 'Well, its like a surgeon. It's psychologically determined. A surgeon has to be detached from the human pain when he's going to cut into somebody or detached from gore and its effect on him.'

<sup>16</sup> Burgin, Victor, (ed.) *Thinking Photography*, p.9



representation. So that the search for ‘truth’ persists, albeit the only one possible must be constituted by me, as Derrida relates, in the process of my relating to my own experience – as it was then, is now and will be in the next moment.

Derrida’s monologue serves as a representation of the complex exchange between two people and an introduction to the state of uncertainty that I want to pursue in this thesis. Derrida’s multi-faceted and discontinuous attitude demonstrates the susceptibility of self to the whims of chance, circumstance and the idiosyncrasies of encounter, which demand either subsumption or resolute assertions. This condition underlines two things; firstly the nearness of any presentation, however self present, to fiction. And secondly one could say that our ‘radically discontinuous self division’ is the first place of the ineffable, which we both seek to escape and to retrieve, and that all representation seeks reconciliation, clarity or compensation from that initial disarray - in some form of pictorial resolution. The question for this thesis is how this might be achieved, retaining a position alongside and not in absence as with Yokomizo or Kella.

Derrida’s procedure of multi-positional dialogue is one that I adopt intermittently in Part One as a reflection of that initial state of reality and of our ‘intrinsic multiplicity’, before linguistic ordering takes over. In contrast I move now to Jean-Paul Sartre’s stance, which epitomises the extreme consequence of division and difference that is enlarged and validated in the context of photography by Barthes’s adoption of it in *Camera Lucida*.

### *THE EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTER*

I decide to “let drift” over my lips and in my eyes a faint smile which I mean to be “indefinable”, in which I might suggest along with the qualities of my nature, my amused consciousness of the whole photographic ritual: I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but...this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality.<sup>17</sup>

The ‘pose’ is exemplified here by Barthes’s description of his derivation of ‘existence from the photographer’. As an exploration of ‘pose’ requires a preliminary survey of notions of ‘subject’ and ‘object’, concomitant with the event of looking, I briefly review here the experience of looking and being looked at, as described by Sartre and Barthes and its implications for the photographic event more generally before returning to more specific instances of photographic practice. Since *Camera Lucida* has initiated so much review already<sup>18</sup>, reference to it is confined to specifically significant

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<sup>17</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida* [1980], trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1993, p.11

<sup>18</sup> For example Shawcross, Nancy M., *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Tradition in Perspective*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997



passages for this thesis. I am concerned to describe the nature of the encounter between the two protagonists and the kind of displacement of the subject that occurs in the event of the photograph.

I will first clarify uses of the term 'subject' in this context. Applied metaphorically, the grammatical subject lends it its most easily understood meaning, that of the nominative part of the sentence, which names something else, that assimilates the 'object' in the sentence. We then have the distinction between 'subject' as *subject-matter* (Goffman's *model*<sup>19</sup>) as a study that is 'treated' or 'handled',<sup>20</sup> and 'subject' as an *individual*, psychological subject. Subject-matter, identified as a state or role in text, is defined by preceding texts and ideology, akin to motif and as there are many subject positions according to context, it follows that 'subject' as subject-matter is not static, but in process or simultaneously multi-faceted as suggested by Derrida. When specifically applied in the context of photography, the *subject-depicted* is that which is the object (intended) and object (purpose) of the artist to 'treat' or 'handle' with the aim of 'expressing' an intention that is projected (intended) on to the subject so treated and which is 'contained' by the subject-depicted as subject-matter. Derrida consistently uses the term 'subject' in the sense of specific subject-matter, Kristeva makes a distinction between 'unary subject' as a complete and defined whole, as opposed to a 'subject in process' and Baudrillard uses both these senses and moves between the two throughout his writing on photography. His premise 'disappearing as a subject' is meant in the sense of relinquishing the position of being 'the mind which thinks', thus becoming object. Barthes more precisely distinguishes between three subject positions: *operator* (the photographer), *spectrum*, (the one photographed), *spectator* (the viewer) and provides a convenient shorthand for clarifying the uses of the term subject. He himself defines his position as *spectator* or *spectrum*, whereas Baudrillard tends to talk from the position of *operator*.

All of sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure.<sup>21</sup>

Barthes essentially locates Sartre's existentialist view in the specific instance of personal encounter with the photographer<sup>22</sup> and extends the analogy of encounter to that of photography itself; thus the

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<sup>19</sup> Goffman, Erving, *Gender Advertisements*, London: The Macmillan Press, 1976, p.11

<sup>20</sup> The Chambers English Dictionary defines 'subject' thus: 'opposite to the object about which it thinks, a thing existing independently, that part of a sentence denoting that of which something is said, the mind regarded as a thinking power' and the word 'object' as 'a thing presented to the senses, that which is thought of as being outside, different from the mind (opposed to the subject), that upon which attention, interest or some emotion is fixed... the part... upon which the action of a transitive verb is directed'. In contrast it is also used in the sense of purpose or goal, or as the object of discussion (subject-matter).

<sup>21</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), trans. Hazel E. Barnes, London: Routledge, 2001, p.259-261. 'I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am alone and on the level of non-thetic self-consciousness. This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them. They are in no way *known*; I *am my* acts and hence they carry in themselves their whole justification, I am pure consciousness of things and things, caught up in the circuit of selfness, offer to me their potentialities... a pure mode of losing myself in the world, of causing myself to be drunk in by things as ink is by a blotter... But all of sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure... First of all, I now exist as *myself* for my unreflective consciousness... I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me... it is recognition of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging'.

<sup>22</sup> *Camera Lucida* is prefaced 'In Homage to L'Imaginaire' His debt to Sartre is evident throughout.



photographic pose becomes metaphor for the encounter with others and the choices that are presented to him. Sartre's description of looking through the 'keyhole' demonstrates a pure act of self-absorption in the process of looking, without reflection or awareness, as if consciousness *is* the act of looking itself, until that is, there is awareness of being seen by another.<sup>23</sup> The major factor in the constitution of self awareness that defines our relation to the world and others is the co-dependent position of 'being-as-subject' or 'Other-as-object'. Barthes describes the experience of being photographed as so influenced by the photographer's intention, so immersed is he in the inevitable performance, that the 'disassociation of consciousness from identity'<sup>24</sup> necessarily results in him becoming 'object' and ex-posed.<sup>25</sup> Because to maintain oneself as subject, consciousness and identity have to remain together and once being is contained in the 'landscape', of the photograph, it is possessed, appropriated and no longer itself: 'once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing". I instantaneously make another body for myself. I transform myself in advance of the image.'<sup>26</sup>



*My series of 'A', 2003*

Sartre's position of self-absorption is important in distinguishing between being photographed without knowledge or consent and being photographed knowingly and consciously. If I am *not* aware of the event, I am free to simply and purely act. If I *am* aware, I am forced into assuming a

<sup>23</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.359

<sup>24</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.11

<sup>25</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.259

<sup>26</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.11. 'Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes... The transformation is an active one'.



position, and ‘so I discover myself in the process of becoming a probable object’. Barthes’s ‘performance’ presents the balance that exists between two contradictory positions and the inherent conflict between *operator* and *spectrum*. On the one hand, he describes being ‘prone to the other’s possibilities’<sup>27</sup> and deriving ‘his existence from the Photographer’,<sup>28</sup> being forced to assume some arbitrary countenance that will define him in some way. In this extreme state of awareness, Barthes insinuates that he is constructed by the photographer who does not allow him the neutral ‘body that signifies nothing’, his ‘profound self’ and is forced to present a *someone* who signifies something. On the other hand, Barthes engages in a mischievous game with the photographer, taking the opportunity to reconstruct himself in an ‘active transformation’ and as performer, he becomes absorbed in the construction of self as he wants to be, counteracting the objectifying look with a self-subjectifying performance that is *active* and not passive.

I am fixing the people whom I see into objects; I am in relation to them as the Other is in relation to me. In looking at them I measure my power. But if the Other sees them and sees me, then my look loses its power.<sup>29</sup>

Sartre’s complicated set of interactions<sup>30</sup> of reciprocal constitution is neatly applied to the context of self-conscious photographic portraiture, where a balance of power creates a state of interesting conflict, looks, concessions and assertions. Sartre’s notion of consciousness is that of either total subjectivity, separate from the world in unreflective, absorbed looking or aware of ‘a look fastened upon us’ and thus unable to imagine or project elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> In this state, as object, self-containment is disturbed and fractured, identity is placed ‘out there’ and he disassociates himself from himself, watches himself. Barthes’s description of dissociated consciousness illustrates one of the inherent contradictions of possibility in the photographic encounter. He is both posed and ex-posed, on display and exploring himself, re-stating himself, taking control in his self-awareness. Barthes (trans)poses Sartre’s description and amplifies the dimension of opportunity as playing with position and (dis)position. Here is a fissure in the certitude of objectification – at the point where the subject-depicted controls the photograph. Barthes emphasises the ambivalence of ‘becoming’, indicates a *process* of transformation, rather than a clear division between one state and another. He describes the photograph as representing ‘that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming object’.<sup>32</sup> This metaphor very simply describes the balance of control involved, being neither in control of the

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<sup>27</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 265 ‘This is the shock which seizes me when I apprehend the Other’s look... I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities’ and Barthes echoing this concerning the photographer as the other’s look: ‘the essential gesture of the operator is to surprise something or someone...and that his gesture is therefore perfect when it is performed unbeknownst to the subject being photographed.’ p. 32

<sup>28</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp.11-12, ‘If only photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing!... I am doomed by Photography always to have an expression: my body never finds its degree zero, no-one can give it to me’.

<sup>29</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.266

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.223 ‘as the subject of knowledge I strive to determine as object the subject who denies my character as subject and who himself determines me as subject’.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.235

<sup>32</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.14



resulting image, nor out of control of its presentation of self. He is neither one thing nor the other; he is 'of parenthesis', somewhere in-between self possession and the photographer's appropriation of him as fodder for meaning, used to represent something more universal beyond the individual. It engenders a neither-nor, in-between state that leads to a wobbly, unstable potency in the image that serves as a displacement of meaning for others, as *spectators*.



Applying Sartre's thesis to my own experience in photographing A exemplifies the interplay of control, assumptions and possibilities in the course of this process. Kozloff's 'battlefield' suggests that the condition of 'director' and 'subject' effectively produces two events in conflict, the resulting manoeuvring creating a dynamic – a space of uncertainty. In my own example, my agenda is counterproductive. I want to remain impartial, I want to produce interesting images. I want to find the essential character of A but as much as I might try, my work is reflective and analytical rather than spontaneous. My relationship wrestles with my desire to 'picture' – not so much a battle between I-photographer and my-subject, as between my conflicting intentions. The image expresses my response to A, my idea of A. So that A's position, as both herself and my-subject is unclear. A-as-subject, confronted and looked at is obliged to make decisions, to look back at me-as-photographer in some particular way and it is in this place that her position can change – be that of compliance or defiance, challenge or duel, of submission or assertion, vulnerability or



power. And if one switches focus; in my own self-consciousness I am watched and in a sense object of the encounter also.



*Throughout the photographic session, A is extremely uncomfortable. My insistence on a close and direct focus does not allow her to escape my look. The occasion forces the focus on the event itself and forces her to be centre stage and the object of my attention. I am looking at what she looks like. I am searching for something undefined and she knows that I am searching for something and not being sure what that something is, she is not sure if she wants me to see it. I might find something that she doesn't want me to find, something hidden, even from herself. Even prepared, she cannot hide everything and she recognises that perhaps something unexpected will be revealed. She is between certainty and uncertainty; uncomfortable. The all-important fact is that she is being looked at with intention, both as an object simply being looked at, and more subjectively with an unspoken idea in mind. She is the object of my*



*concentration; my attention being determined by my intention. Because I am the one doing the doing, I am the subject and she becomes object; she knows that she is being interpreted, being re-presented. In the course of this event of being looked at, her awareness of her own existence alters. She is both subject and object (in control and out of control), in herself and for the other (me). In recognising that I am there as well as herself, her perception is, not only of her own relation to the world, but that my relation to the world is affected in turn by her and subsequently her relation to the world and so on. We are in a shared world and she is no longer central to it, despite being the centre of attention. She is a particular sort of centre of attention for me the photographer. She is possibly, at this point, more important to me than she is to herself. As she is under my direction, she is in my control. As she knows me so well, trust may not be an issue, but it is still unknown territory and ever so slightly dangerous.*

The legacy of the existential encounter perpetuates the hierarchy of subject, notions of conflict and violation and confirms prejudices and constraint associated with the 'pose'. Three implicit conditions of existentialism (the inherent suspicion of others, the contradiction that, despite being free subjects we are determined by others and the centrality of the 'I' as an individual) contribute to notions of power and possession commonly associated with photographing people, advanced by Barthes and Sontag, and appearing persistently throughout photographic theory and critique.<sup>33</sup> If we accept the positional norm of subject-to-object relation as deriving from the metaphoric equivalent of the nominative and accusative in grammatical structure, the photographic portrait visualises the position of power as residing in the transitive role of the one who 'takes the picture'. In consequence, because we are vulnerable to the penetrating look and in the fear of revealing ourselves, we erect a barrier (a mask). The state of the 'pose' is one of extreme ambivalence, complexity and possibility embedded in statements of 'obvious' fact that perpetuate the idea of the 'mask', as its pre-condition. The many contradictions that Sartre describes, such as the desire of the lover to possess the other (whom once possessed, is found to be a mask only),<sup>34</sup> have obvious parallels in photography. Sontag points out that violation is implicit in the language of photography<sup>35</sup> (being 'taken' or 'shot') and asserts its predatory nature. Conversely, Barthes attitude to the situation is more opportunistic, one that 'allows (me) to see "myself as other"<sup>36</sup> and which confirms 'my ambivalent position in the world'. This more equivocal view asks 'to whom does the photograph belong?'<sup>37</sup> The level of power and possession, if it exists, stems from the relationship at the point of taking the photograph and the roles assumed by each position. It is not adequate to state the *operator's* or the *spectator's* or the *spectrum's* position as certain; they each

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<sup>33</sup> See for example Pace, Alessandra, Interview with Beat Streuli, 'The total possession of the other takes place when the latter is unaware of being seen, is caught in the most complete solitude, not wearing a mask to respond to someone's presence or gaze', *Portraits 98-00, La belle estate*. Torino: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 2000

<sup>34</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.393

<sup>35</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p.14

<sup>36</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.12

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13



fluctuate between positions. The question of vulnerability and power, in terms of being photographed, depends on the expectations and boundaries assigned to the 'I', the relationships of the *operator* and of the *spectrum* to the world, the state of the relationship between them and whether there is conflict or exchange, the photographer's attitude – of sympathy, curiosity, amusement..., the *spectrum's* attitude – of acceptance or participation, and whether those photographed are taken with or without the subject's knowledge.



If we are compelled to re-constitute ourselves in every encounter, then each time we unravel ourselves *differently* and try another version in response to the other. And if this re-constitution is interpreted as violation, then it is a normal, necessary consequence of interacting with others. As reciprocal 'seeing' establishes this procedure as a sort of exchange, the issue rests with the degree of exchange, or the extent of difference between the positions, attitudes or expectation, in each instance. Sartre refers to the situation of interaction as a 'disintegration of the universe,' 'a little particular crack in my universe',<sup>38</sup> a crack that creates uncertainty and thereby vulnerability, the place where one person's world collides with another's. My focus here resides in this 'crack' of uncertainty and the possibility for disturbance of the positional norm via its visualisation. As indicated by contradictions suggested by Barthes's parenthetical 'becoming', possible subversions of subject-to-object work through self-absorption, reciprocity, protection, re-construction and disturbances of control, intention and desire. Photographs can record that 'crack' in which the relationship intervenes and turns predictability around. Avoiding reiteration of the 'moment', I prefer to describe this point as the one that allows the positioning process to display and

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<sup>38</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.256 'a little particular crack in my universe...'





Fig.20 Walker Evans, *Caroline Blackwood*, 1973

reverberate. One can see this occurring in Evans's Polaroid portraits<sup>39</sup> for example, where interdependence and counter-positioning determine the image. Here deliberate 'posing' sessions follow a distinct pattern, which appear to have been directed in a conventional manner. But this 'posing' deviates from convention in a number of ways. It is opportunistic and careless, the level of closeness to the subject is alarming and the degree of intrusive scrutiny is obsessive. The images give the appearance of a luminously focal isolation as the subjects stare up at him, startled,<sup>40</sup> sometimes distorted as he pushes the focal length to its limit. [fig.20] The pattern of interaction with the camera is visible as one can see the sessions starting fortuitously, denying formal preparation, and proceeding with the subject's insouciant participation, when the images are more telling. It is the singular nature of each exchange and the order of reciprocation beyond the photographic event that distinguishes one series from another and which directly relates to their raw quality and energy.

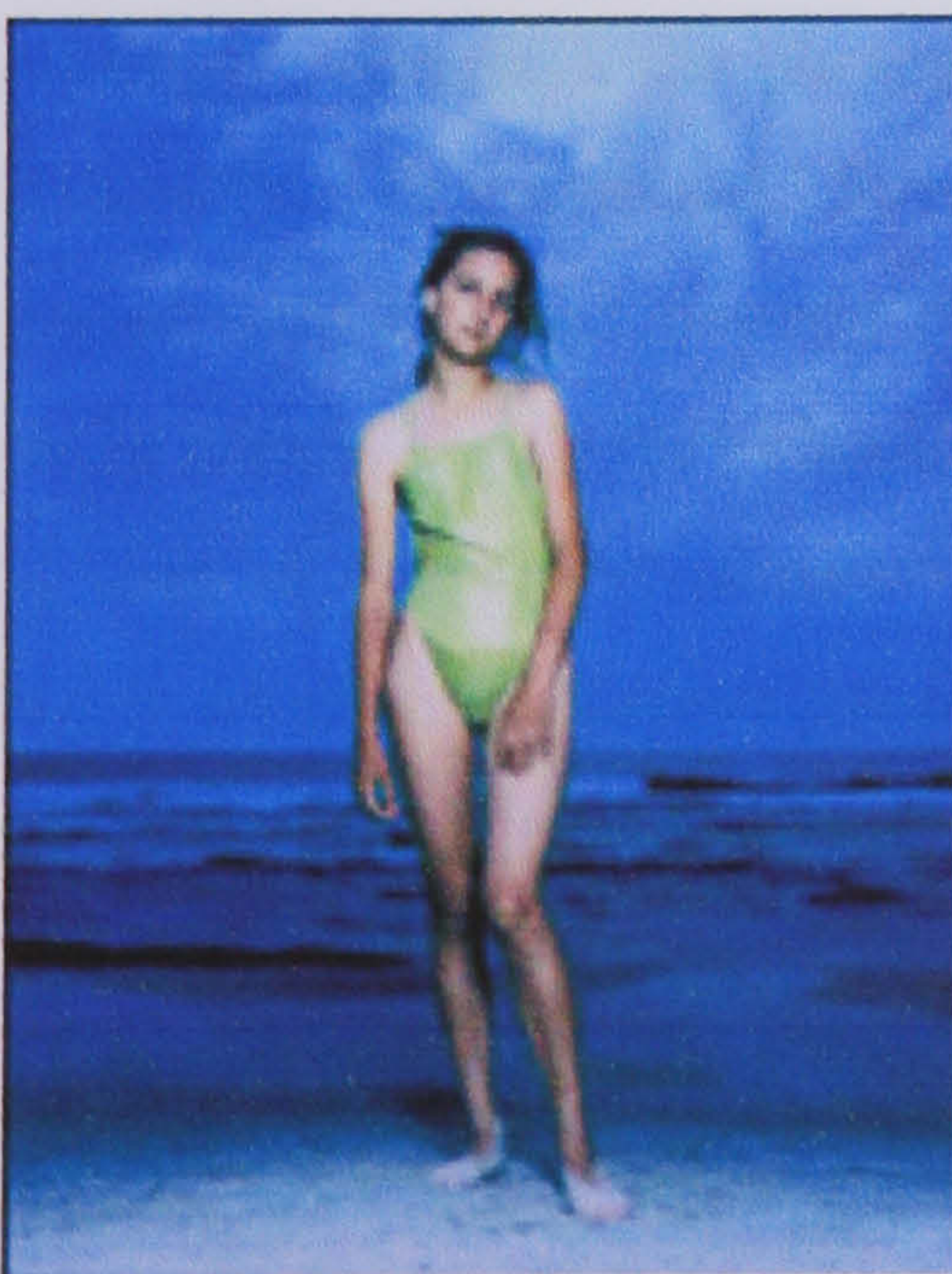


Fig.21 Rineke Dijkstra, *Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26 1992*

<sup>39</sup> During the last two years of his life, in 1973-1974, Walker Evans took around a 1000 portrait photographs of friends and students, using an SX-70 Polaroid camera. The photographs discussed are kept in the Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>40</sup> WEA, MMA, D.1994.262.124, Joyce Baronio, October 11<sup>th</sup> 1974, startled or D.1994.262.191 Gay Burke, May 4<sup>th</sup> 1974



The crucial factor determining ‘possession’ or ‘objectification’ requires the photographer’s insular detachment,<sup>41</sup> and a look of authorial intention with the purpose of construction; nominating, classifying, fabricating. The portrait work of Struth, Ruff and Dijkstra belies the appearance of simplicity with complex self-consciousness. These portraits confirm and question the existential position of ‘objectivity’ by adopting formal procedures that accentuate the event, isolate the subject and utilise the elaborate preparation and paraphernalia of studio photography as a strategy. This level of process transfixes the encounter, which serves as a frozen metaphor for fear and uncertainty, inherited from theories of ‘being’. But they each disturb the binary logic of the process in some way. Dijkstra’s metaphoric ‘formality’ fabricates an opportunity to see ‘photography transform(ing) subject into object’<sup>42</sup> so that we see in its operation their becoming ‘a certain icon’.<sup>43</sup> [fig.21] Dijkstra uses the subjects’ state of self-consciousness (for example the bathers, nearly unclothed and awkward in the extreme awareness of their bodies) as the event around which to focus her subjects. She deliberately chooses occasions of vulnerability in an attempt to reveal something else. In terms of Sartre’s equation of consciousness with self-awareness, her method uses self-consciousness to reveal what the subject themselves are not aware of, what is ‘unconscious’.<sup>44</sup> Dijkstra is looking for a place where emotion is more ‘tangible’.<sup>45</sup> Like many before her, she is ‘looking for a kind of purity, something essential from human beings...how people distinguish themselves from each other’.<sup>46</sup> However in Dijkstra’s portraits, the notion of a photograph as containing the subject, constructed by another as an ‘idea’, is one that is confused by a double-take of self-consciousness that offers an interesting combination of traditional constraints with contemporary psychological strategies with respect to the degree of com-posure or ex-posure of her subjects. Formality is no longer innocent of the play of subject-object positions. Ruff and Struth subvert apperception of meaning by reduction, whereby strategies of objectivity produce the *signs* of objectivity. Strategies that relinquish directorial involvement in the determination of the image seemingly relinquish the photographer’s subjectivity, simplistically understood as being quirky, inspirational or emotional. Struth’s images appear, in all respects, to adopt the traditional studio portrait [fig.22], but beyond determining the frame, he allows his sitters to position themselves in whatever way they choose within it, in contrast to a situation that frames (conceives) ‘a certain idea of the sitter’. Struth uses the tension created in the theatre of isolation and artificiality, in an attempt to make the encounter more ‘charged and intense’<sup>47</sup> to ‘reveal a slice of nature’ and the results sit somewhere in the ‘crack’ between individuality and motif. Struth and

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<sup>41</sup> Walker Evans talking about detachment, Jonathan Goell interview in his studio Brookline, Massachusetts, August 4, 1971, p.19

<sup>42</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.11

<sup>43</sup> Rineke Dijkstra in the interview with David Brittain, in *Creative Camera* ,April/May 1999, ‘I isolate them, so they become a certain icon or symbol’. Dijkstra, born 1959, Sittard, The Netherlands. Her portrait subjects have included *Almerisa*, a Bosnian refugee 1994–2003, Portuguese bullfighters 1994, mothers, 1994, Israeli soldiers 2002-3 and beach portraits taken across Europe and America 1992-6. She uses large format cameras that require a formal preparation.

<sup>44</sup> Dijkstra, *Creative Camera* , 1999

<sup>45</sup> Dijkstra cited by Julian Rodriguez in ‘The Art of Business’. *British Journal of Photography*, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1999

<sup>46</sup> Dijkstra, *Creative Camera*, 1999

<sup>47</sup> Gisbourne, M. Interview with Struth, *Artist’s Monthly*, May, 1994



Ruff's emotional minimalism and obtuse analogy takes us somewhere toward the metaphoric use of portrait.



Fig.22 Thomas Struth,  
*Anci and Harry Guy*, 1989

In considering how we might configure conceptions of the 'essential individual', I move now to Sartre's earlier work *Psychology of the Imagination*, which usefully describes how we might imagine a known individual, or conceive of and respond to that person's image. As with the 'keyhole' experience, he typically grounds his thesis in anecdote, in an experience that we can relate to. This time he describes various encounters with *Peter* and utilises the metaphor of photograph to effect an understanding of imagination. He suggests that in terms of feelings provoked by a person in reality, we respond similarly when looking at an image of that person in as much as that the sensation that is evoked in direct apprehension, is evoked again when looking at their photograph. Thus in terms of registering my relation to the person or of how I understand them, I do not distinguish between the image and the person herself. Sartre's affective sense is useful, because it identifies the possibility that Friday's 'expressive qualities' are inserted into the photograph by us in response, rather than by the photographer. Sartre talks about the 'essence of the image'<sup>48</sup> by which he means the 'idea' of that person beyond the physicality of appearance. The fact that Sartre uses 'image' in the sense of both imagined and photographic, is significant in that it legitimates focus on an internal (imaginative) conception of that person sufficient to determine feeling, quality or response. It is in effect in direct opposition to Walton's condition of transparency as a result of 'looking through' to the person, because here the recognition focuses on my feelings, rather than the requirement of physical presence. So that when describing *my* response to an image of someone, I am in effect talking of *myself* – of *my idea* of that person held in the image. The idea of a reciprocal 'seeing' proceeds from a constitution in being looked at, toward confirmation of my

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<sup>48</sup> Sartre, *Psychology of the Imagination*, p.2



'feelings, ideas, volitions, character'<sup>49</sup> as reflected in others. The photograph could be said to recount and summarise *my* response, rather than being a summary of *them*. And so I approach the possibility that my conception of A is more abstract, more fictional than having any basis in reality.



#### *'Affective' Projection*

*It is my friend, A. It is A tempered by me. The picture delivers A although A is not there. A is like that; she has such brows, such a smile. Everything I perceive enters into a projective synthesis, which aims at the same true A, a living being who is not present. Every feeling I have about A, every certain quality of A is involved and projects upon her image a certain indefinable quality of what A means for me, which gives her that affective meaning for me; that certain density; that intrinsic individuality. I construct her by means of my feelings towards her. My image of her depends on my construction and I could construct different ones according to my feelings at the time – as playful, as irritating, as affectionate. My feeling of irritation is not the consciousness of irritation; it is of A being irritating. In that way, my feelings are intentional and project onto my object A. They are qualities in myself rather than in her. They constitute the sense for me of her. My feeling towards her constitutes my understanding of her as that person. This is the same sensation as in my dream; whilst I may not 'see' her, I 'sense' it is her by means of her 'qualities' or the feeling I have toward her. I recognise the feeling in me rather than what she looks like. My feelings 'represent one way of self-transcendence'.<sup>50</sup>*

Our understanding of a thing is given to us 'through the order of its qualities',<sup>51</sup> which determines its essential character. I pick up different perceptions, some visual, some not, in succession as conceptual attributes, so A for example, appears uniquely to me as someone in relation to me in size and quality, as disordered and sharp, small and contrary, her head to one side. This 'affective'

<sup>49</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.223

<sup>50</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Psychology of the Imagination* (1940). London: Methuen, 1972, pp.13 – 77. This is my 'translation' using Sartre's model of describing Peter, to the context of my relationship with A.

<sup>51</sup> Sartre, *Psychology of the Imagination*, p.77 'These qualities are in a sense not properties of the object, so that basically the very term 'quality' is inappropriate. It would be better to say that the qualities constitute the sense of the object, that they are its affective structure: they permeate the entire object.'



sense comes close to the term 'projection' used in psychoanalysis to indicate that feelings or qualities that we 'see' in others, are often more a reflection of what we ourselves feel but do not recognise. It comes down to recognition of a feeling that the object arouses in me, so that looking at an image will arouse recognition of certain qualities, which are indefinable but evoke a particular feeling in me, for example the gesture of her hands: 'white hands...at the same time the feeling reproduces most poignantly what there is of the ineffable in the sensations of whiteness, of fineness etc'<sup>52</sup>



Sartre explains that in passing from perception to the image, the individual conceived, 'acquires a certain generality'<sup>53</sup> in the sense of the most typical characteristics. In apprehending the various qualities of the representation, each exemplar characteristic stands for a mass of qualities. The further removed from my original perception, the more A becomes an object of imagination and coloured by my accumulated knowledge of her, moving further toward her 'equivalence' for me.<sup>54</sup> Sartre's 'prototype'<sup>55</sup> is particularity, rather than a generality, an idea of A that holds all my experience of her to date, which is different from a conception as motif that aspires to a more universal application. Sartre's affectivity goes some way to explain the aspect beyond 'likeness', which adds the dimension as *air* (Barthes) or 'psychological resonance' (Kozloff) and which identifies what is ineffable in that person as residing in myself rather than in the photograph. The desire<sup>56</sup> to re-create a sensation of *feeling*, rather than image, suggests that the origination of my

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.81

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.58

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.59

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.58, 'What we are looking for by means of the photograph is not Peter as he might have looked for us the day before yesterday or on such a day... it is Peter in general, a prototype which serves as a thematic unity of all Peter's individual traits'

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.80, 'Desire is a blind effort to possess on the level of representation what I already possess on the affective level; through the affective synthesis it aims at a "beyond" which it pursues without being able to know it; it directs itself upon the affective 'something'



motivation to photograph the 'essential' character of someone (and that the reality of photography) is the search for that elusive, indescribable quality that provokes an equivalent sensation. To present 'diverse appearances'<sup>57</sup> of the subject is ultimately 'intentional synthesis' of my own desire. Looking for the 'essential nature', for signs of perpetuity, constancy and truth<sup>58</sup> in what is in fact momentary and incidental in evidence of a certain mood in A, is an approach that requires intimate knowledge of someone. With subjects less familiar, something incidental and infrequent can become a convenient attribute that suffices to convey 'evidence of internal states'. It is in this way that the 'candid' image of an individual can display the contradiction that one feature, which is uncharacteristic in the subject, can become emblematic of the photographer rather than of that subject.

Sartre's view of consciousness makes sense – we can relate to it. He affirms long established conceptions of power in relation to the Other, the Same and grounds them in situations we can recognise, confirming them as common sense. The relationship between photography and existentialism is mutually confirming. Sartre's affective sense is useful in that it indicates the ease with which constructions move from an 'honest' desire to find something 'essential' to a fiction that thinks it is essential. What Sartre importantly signifies is the possibility of a conception that is independent of the person, which holds a collection of qualities as a kind of fictional construction and suggests that an image may depict the photographer's subjectivity rather than that of the subject's. It is a conception that anticipates my discussion of metaphor in Part Two. I move now toward less predictable premises that determine attitude and position, in reciprocity and participation, in opportunity and reconstruction, in non-oppositional encounter.

### *THE NON-OPPOSITIONAL ENCOUNTER*

Alterity is not at all the fact that there is a difference, that facing me there is someone who has a different nose than mine, different colour eyes, another character. It is not difference, but alterity. It is alterity, the uncompassable, the transcendent. It is the beginning of transcendence.<sup>59</sup> Levinas offers alternative possibilities for the relationship of photographer-to-depicted-subject and presents this possibility by means of the ambivalent term 'face', which establishes a recognition of the other's equivalent difference that neither reverses, nor submits, to power. In discussing how we are affected or disturbed by 'the face of the Other', like Sartre, he places his thinking in the material situation of the encounter, where it is impossible to divorce the notion of alterity from the

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which is now given to it and apprehends it as the representative of the desired things. So the structure of an affective consciousness of desire is already that of an imaginative consciousness, since here, as in the image, a present synthesis functions as a substitute for an absent representative synthesis'.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.13

<sup>58</sup> Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, p.7

<sup>59</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, 'The Paradox of Morality an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas' with Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainley, trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright in Bernasconi, Robert and David Wood, (eds.) *The Provocation of Levinas*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988, p.170



more personal and subjective. But it is a very different view to Sartre's oppositional position. Levinas's fundamental addition to the condition and possibility of the encounter is that of a non-oppositional difference and a de-centring and repositioning of subject. In Levinas's version the position and possession of power reverberates.

Coming from the tradition of phenomenology, Levinas questions, provokes and subverts the fundamental givens of philosophical thought – the centrality of the subject and 'truth', pivotal also to conceptions of the photograph. His use of language plays with its inherited assumptions 'to deconstruct what it has constructed and unsay what it has said...interrogate or challenge its own concepts, its own terms or foundations.'<sup>60</sup> Acknowledging Derrida's work of deconstruction, he establishes the root of perpetuation lying in language that equates 'truth with an intelligibility of presence' and attempts to avoid the habitual processes of thinking, which is ingrained in us, such as comparison and judgement, the insistence on goal and the focus on the 'I'.<sup>61</sup> This then challenges the habitual stand-off position in the confrontation between two people. Most significantly for the state of the encounter, Western philosophy has forced the 'Other' to be assimilated or subsumed by the Same (what is understood to be 'Me') by assimilating into my-self that which lies outside myself, and reducing the Other to my understanding thus avoiding the 'shock of alterity'.<sup>62</sup> It is habitual to make the unfamiliar, familiar. But Levinas sees the other as utterly alien and 'unable to be assimilated';<sup>63</sup> his aim is to assert 'a non-allergic reaction to alterity'<sup>64</sup> and to allow a questioning of the Same provoked by the very strangeness of the Other. He seeks an encounter, which maintains this strangeness and which does not involve dominance or control,<sup>65</sup> and locates his critique of these issues in what he calls 'face', both a material and metaphoric place, somewhere above, alongside or between confrontation.<sup>66</sup> In Goodman's terms 'face' is 'representation as alterity' – what is not me. The implications of this resound in the photographic encounter as an encouragement to confound, to allow peculiarity and abjection, rather than reducing the subject to my framework, transforming the other as 'vehicle' for 'my idea'. Levinas's insistence on maintaining the strangeness of alterity, requires that in some way, we must distance ourselves from ourselves sufficiently to 'receive' the other.

With the use of the word 'face', because it is so particular, Levinas introduces physicality into a discussion that usually speaks more abstractly and ambiguously (as with Heidegger's *Dasein*). The

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<sup>60</sup> Levinas in dialogue with Richard Kearney in Cohen, Richard A. (ed.), *Face to Face with Levinas*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986, p.22

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p.19, 'Perhaps the most essential distinguishing feature of the language of Greek philosophy was its equation of truth with an *intelligibility of presence*. By this I mean an intelligibility that considers truth to be that which is present or copresent, that which can be gathered or synchronized into a totality that we would call the world'.

<sup>62</sup> Davies, Colin, *Levinas, An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, p.40

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24

<sup>64</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay in Exteriority* (1961), trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, p.47

<sup>65</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.43

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203



concept 'face' is not 'fixed and given'<sup>67</sup> but is instead a dawning of meaning, 'an epiphany', 'a breach within what is known and knowable', (Sartre's 'crack'). Levinas's 'face' is a fundamental conceptual shift that is sensible and unintelligible, both abstract and material,<sup>68</sup> a metaphor for what we cannot know, for what is ineffable. 'Face' is not specific in the sense of individual psychology,<sup>69</sup> not objective but a phenomenal potential between individual psychology and object. Levinas uses several frameworks for his 'face', which evoke contradictory parallels. As a 'fundamental event', 'the action of the face' makes it active rather than passive object. He describes it as demanding rather than questioning, 'irreducible' and not known and yet compelling, both vulnerable and authoritative. It has the propensity to be both unpredictable and potent.<sup>70</sup> This sort of attitude is less resigned to objectification than Sartre's conception and if we apply these conditions to the portrait, it suggests a 'subject' that is defiant, elusive and ambivalent, certainly not submissive, and not necessarily revealing their psychology. Levinas's manner of thinking is fundamental to this thesis in problematising our basis for perceiving things and conceiving ideas. It signifies that for contemporary photography, the portrait can lie somewhere between psychology and object, between sensation and concept and be both abstract idea and material reference.

The eyes break through the mask – the language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble. The eye does not shine; it speaks.<sup>71</sup>

Importantly for the development of photographic aesthetic and alternative conceptions of portrait, Levinas disturbs the dominant position of vision in our understanding the world and in interacting with others with metaphoric reference such as 'the visible CARESS of the eye' and 'one sees and hears like one touches'. He disassembles vision in a way that creates a kind of intransitive action of the eye that is commensurate with hearing. He associates seeing the face with touch – and in seeing your face, I am touching you and am touched by you. In such a way, he fragments the subject so that I am both subject and object. The eye sees – looks out and is 'intentional'. In looking at a face there is an intentional exchange, but in touching, it is more material, more visceral, less detached. I touch and am touched and in hearing, am receiving as well as putting out. The encounter becomes a metaphorical seeing; seeing literally, seeing-as-understanding and now seeing-as-exchange, as is inevitable with touch. In challenging the supremacy of vision, he subverts the supremacy of Eye/I and the seeing of the 'I' as central. Levinas's is a more positive apprehension of the other – in the sense of 'understanding'. In establishing the encounter as an exchange, Levinas realigns the power base of response with responsibility. As we are compelled to respond so we are compelled to be responsible. 'The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility...the face is not in front of me but above me. Our presumption that we have the right to exist is challenged by the

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<sup>67</sup> Davies, Colin, *Levinas. An Introduction*, Polity Press, 1996, p.47

<sup>68</sup> Levinas, *The Provocation of Levinas*, p.174.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-9

<sup>71</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 66. This attitude is referred to as 'embodiment' in current terminology and is cited more commonly as deriving from Merleau-Ponty.



existence of the other. I cannot find meaning on my own...the other's right to exist has primacy over my own...The ethical rapport with the face is asymmetrical in that it subordinates my existence to the other'.<sup>72</sup> The intransitive eye suggests a passive approach to 'taking' images, an abdication of direction that depends on looking. The suggestion of exchange shifts the balance between the two protagonists and promotes a sort of sensitivity other than looking, perhaps deriving from the relationship itself, such as has become familiar in the work of Goldin. Alternatively it suggests the possibility of a photographic exchange that shifts focus from the subject-as-matter toward re-situating the *experience* as oblique.



### *Facing Another*

*It is not a particular quality or collection of qualities that describes the alterity of A. She does not simply have different qualities from me, but has all that is not me as a quality itself. It is not clear whether I am looking for dissimilarity or I am looking ideally for some sort of fusion. My relationship with her identifies a collective representation, a common ideal or common action. In recognising similarity with myself in many ways, "we" become a sort of collectivity. It is a collectivity formed around what is common to us both, a 'third term' which serves as an intermediary. We become "we" rather than you and I. It is this collectivity of "we" that makes her appear alongside me rather than opposite, facing me and is in contrast to the "I-you". The "I-you" is the fearful face-to-face situation of a relationship without an intermediary. Here the interpersonal situation is not the reciprocal relationship of equivalents, two interchangeable terms. A and I. We are not interchangeable, but our positions to each other are. A is not only an alter ego; she is what I am not; she is*

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<sup>72</sup> Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, pp.23-4



*the weak one, whereas I am the strong one. She is not where I want to be. If I want to be strong then she must be weak and she is the stranger, the enemy and the powerful one. What is essential is that she has the qualities by virtue of her alterity - she is not me.*<sup>73</sup>

It seems that we may be in some way a collective “we.” We are different and difference implies that self and other can only be in opposition, but Levinas disrupts this; his avoidance of opposition is key and similar to Derrida’s, as not opposed, not even different, but separate.<sup>74</sup> In contradiction to a straight either or subject-to-object position Levinas describes the other in comparison as the paradoxical condition of possessing opposing attitudes to the other; she is the weak one and she is the powerful one – the same and not the same. His thinking starts from the same premise as Sartre in that I continually reconstitute myself in response to the world and others, but inserts a more positive interpretation that is a constant process. The realignment of the ‘I’ that is oppositional, controlling and reducing, indicates the condition of postmodern dislocation, assumed later by Baudrillard with regard to ‘disappearance of the subject’.

Levinas’s insistence on non-oppositional difference results in a flattening out of subject and object positions. He deviates from Sartre’s encounter that expects conflict and violence, whereby I give meaning to the face of the other, I project myself onto the other and the meaning is fundamentally about me. Like Derrida, Levinas doesn’t see the loss of some final presence, or of centrality of the subject, as problem or threat<sup>75</sup> and instead represents encounter and alterity as a positive affirmation of strangeness and uncertainty that is opportunity. Levinas accepts as inevitable the dilemma in encounter that cannot find resolution and sees ‘the impossibility of reducing the other to myself’ as an advantageous responsibility to the other. He seeks to restore subjectivity, not in terms of an idealism that centres on the Ego,<sup>76</sup> but by avoiding the reduction of the Other to the limitations of the subject’s own experience and knowledge. Neither does he seek to replace one hegemony with another, but aims to dissipate the opposition as a non-confrontational acceptance of what is outside the self. He suggests instead a position of difference whereby relation to alterity does not exclude, familiarise or alienate – an assertion of subjectivity and of alterity, which is mutually affirming.

What Levinas contributes is a way of looking at the photographic encounter metaphorically, as his use of the term ‘face’ is ultimately one that challenges the more obvious connotations of actual face-to-face encounter. He stretches this to what cannot be materially evidenced in encountering alterity. Levinas’s discussion of the ‘Other’ presents the antithesis of phenomenology, which relies

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<sup>73</sup> My ‘transcription’ of Levinas, ‘With Another and Facing Another’ in *Existence and Existents* (1947) trans. A. Lingis, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995, pp.94-5

<sup>74</sup> Davies, *Levinas, An Introduction*, p.42

<sup>75</sup> Levinas, *Face to Face with Levinas*, p.22

<sup>76</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 26





Fig.23 Thomas Ruff, *Portrait*, 2001

on, and describes what appears, what is normally associated with perception and knowledge and intentionality that positions the other as becoming an object. The 'face' (as Levinas uses it) is more than appearance.<sup>77</sup> Significantly for the photograph, what may at first appear to be a phenomenological encounter presents us with an anti-thetical situation that is something else beyond appearance, between individual psychology and object, between 'real' person and abstract concept, between familiar and strange. Levinas's 'face' confirms the conclusion, derived from Sartre's affectivity, that any meaning must be mine only (and has little to do with A and remains separate from her). Struth states that he wants his portraits to reconcile with his own projection, based on his own knowledge and experience of the subject.<sup>78</sup> Ruff's images are baldly clear but overtly inauthentic. His authenticity lies with the primacy of the image. He constructs his vision, his ideal, his own version of purity in total artifice and replaces representation with production and fiction [fig.23]. The control and consistency in Ruff's presentations, the pose, the size, the regular background, the proportion within the frame reduce individuality to abstraction. So that every thing in the image assumes enormous significance; she is wearing a choker and red T-shirt or she would be bare-necked or she would be naked. In this absence of psychological narrative, we are bound to read meaning into the least clue, the least sign, where the smallest detail becomes significant in our search to understand the girl's individuality. We seek prescriptions for response; expression,

<sup>77</sup> Levinas, *The Provocation of Levinas*, p.171

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Struth interviewed by Mark Gisbourne, 'Struth'. *Art Monthly*, May 1194, pp.3-9



character, individuality, narrative and Ruff denies us them all. Ruff presents a face with as little indication of the other's individuality or ego as possible and gives us image and surface only. Very like Levinas's insistence on discussion of 'the face' not referring to the physical face but to something that is not describable and not knowable – the ultimate Other.



Fig.24 Boris Mikhailov, *Case History*, 1999

The existential stand-off (either face-to-face or in a photograph) is challenged by Levinas's simultaneous possibility of the same *and* strange. Because we think of alterity as difference, we cannot easily comprehend something that is both the same *and* strange, without looking toward resolution, without 'totalising meaning'. Looking at someone's face presents essentially contradictory positions; the compulsive search for what is recognisable and familiar in something that is strangely different and unknowable; the possibility of possessing both power and vulnerability. Such dissymmetry balances out the 'I' and the 'you' to something more ambivalent, less arrogant, less certain – suggests an attitude more of exchange. In the context of the photograph, the possibility of non-oppositional encounter problematises and realigns the 'natural' assumption of power of subject-photographer over the other as subject-depicted. An encounter that is non-oppositional impacts on the photographer's approach to subject and can be seen in fundamentally different authorial attitudes for example in Goldin's work or Evans's Polaroid portraits where the



reverberation of subject-to-object power is visible. Struth and Boris Mikhailov<sup>79</sup> provide perhaps surprising alternative examples of what I might call a challenge to opposition. Mikhailov's *Case History* [fig.24] documents aspects of poverty and social disintegration, specifically the life of the homeless (BOMJI), following the collapse of the Soviet Union; his work has consistently challenged ideologies using controversial subject matter and irony. *Case History* being particularly confrontational and precipitous, reverses the generalised humanist position of compassionate presentation and confronts the assumptions of power position in patronage, as it affronts our condition of comfortable privilege recognising those less comfortable and more vulnerable than ourselves. Instead of bringing others nearer to us (the Same), Mikhailov keeps them and the experience separate – strange. This 'strangeness' holds specific histories of Stalinist Russia; the politically manufactured stigma attached to unemployment, the subsequent lack of sympathy for the unemployed and homeless. Mikhailov's theatricality amplifies the strangeness: 'I took the pictures displaying naked people with their things in hands like people going to gas chambers.'

Levinas's approach marks a fundamental shift from striving for unity toward acceptance of alterity. He suggests that it is better that we fail to 'totalize meaning', because thereby we remain open to the possibility of 'irreducible otherness of transcendence'. He offers radical alternatives in two respects. With regard to the encounter, the possibility of accepting differences rather than assimilating them and with regard to meaning, the possibility of the awkward and unfamiliar, rather than the bringing together of uncoordinated fragments in comfortable aesthetic forms. In terms of the resulting image it suggests an excess of content or meaning that cannot be contained in the indexicality of the image and one that negates or denies any predictable intended 'idea'. The arena that makes possible an excess of meaning and content is essentially what I am pursuing here.

The key points here that impact on portrayal are the lack of control as a result of the irreducible 'face' that exceeds my possession and the inevitability of fictional construction. Fundamentally poststructuralism establishes phenomenology's concern to describe a consciousness independent from a 'straightforward' perception, as a problematic central to the experience of the portrait, both in its making and in its reading; it can be seen in photographic strategies that exploit awareness of authorship and objectification. Levinas's attitude is a radical departure from the habitual discussion of power and possession and his promotion of strangeness opens the door to what is not under control. Derrida's articulation of a primary state of uncertainty in the event of thinking, signals representation of others as subsequently reflecting that self-division, purposelessness, disarray as if by chance, and not being very different from fiction. Similarly Sartre's affectivity suggests portrayal as something constructed independently from the subject, confirming Ruff's assertion. The inherent mobility, multiplicity and discontinuity in the engagement imposes an interesting

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<sup>79</sup> Boris Mikhailov, born 1938, Charkov, Ukraine, lives and works in Kharkov and Berlin. Winner of the Hasselblad award, 2000 and Citybank prize, 2001



prospect for photographing others and suggests that the notion of 'definitive' portrait can only be 'fictive' and any 'truth' likely to be singular.



## Chapter Two: IN PROCESS

### 'SUBJECT IN PROCESS'

Kristeva's writing provides a background of psychological origin to motivation, and to the pervasive influence of psychoanalytic theory on attitudes adopted by both interpretation and practice. Her approach is relevant to portraiture with regard to the subject 'becoming' as *process*, and to the dynamics of meaning. In contrast to Sartre's cerebral existential encounter and Levinas's metaphoric face-to-face, Kristeva offers a position that identifies the derivation of 'subject' as being grounded in the materiality of the body and its ultimate autonomy.

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of the milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. 'I' want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it...that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that 'I' am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without ever wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer it, it reacts, it abreacts, it abjects.<sup>1</sup>

This description demonstrates the drive that is repressed psychologically but is bodily irrepressible, as it surfaces involuntarily in encountering the substances of the world. Such experiences are what establish and define us as individuals as being distinct and separate from both other substances and other persons. Kristeva's thesis combines psychoanalytic theory and structural analysis in her account of the process of meaning. Importantly for this project, her writing concerns the constitution of the subject *and* the constitution of meaning and demonstrates the difficulty in disentangling the processes of meaning from our own bodies and desires and from the processes of becoming, as they are simultaneous.<sup>2</sup> Through her readings of Freud and Lacan, Kristeva repositions the 'energies that operate between biology and culture'<sup>3</sup>, and which precede language as being fundamental to its emergence and dynamic in practice. Her insistence on the presence of the

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<sup>1</sup> Kristeva, Julia, 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection' (1980), trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982. Reproduced in Clive Cazeaux, (ed.) *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 543

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 30

<sup>3</sup> Oliver, Kelly, 'The Crisis of Meaning' (1998). In Lechte, John and Mary Zournazi, (eds.) *The Kristeva Critical Reader*. Edinburgh University Press, 2003, p.39



'body' and its manifestation in utterance, of rhythm, tone, sound and touch is useful in approaching an explanation for the qualities of meaning that cannot be quantified, for aspects of meaning besides the linguistic, that are ineffable.

Kristeva uses a number of terms to explain her approach. *Semiotic* refers to the organisation within the body of instinctual drives and its function has the dimension of being an affective motivating force in language and practice, in process and interaction. *Semiotic* conjoins the pre-symbolic<sup>4</sup> and the social in language and meaning (visual and verbal), and is useful in the explanation of the dynamic, which maintains meaning as beyond knowledge and thereby alive and challenging. The kinetic function 'chora' defines that which is prior to reason and logic. It is the modality of significance, which is not yet articulated, and designates the pre-linguistic origins of subject and signification. As explicated in Kristeva's account above, the subject must separate from its surrounding objects in order to identify itself 'from and through its objects'.<sup>5</sup> The 'thetic' phase of the signifying process is the stage where the subject distinguishes itself from objects and the inception of developing language through predication as the subject identifies and names. Thus all enunciation requires an identification and is *thetic*. At the 'threshold of language',<sup>6</sup> the *thetic* is evident in the child's use of holophrastic enunciations such as "woof –woof", which incorporates both in its sound and signification the 'concept' of 'dog' and all that that might mean in the child's experience. It signals the metonymic force that emerges from the primal stages of signification.

Kristeva emphasises that the 'identifiable subject', which is located in systems of signification, originates in an heterogeneous unpositioned subject that is unpredictable and contradictory, and determined by repressed bodily experiences. Thus the mind/body dualism that underlies modern thought is rooted in processes of the abject body. The subject, divided by such repression, is not a unified whole, is consequently unstable and inevitably is continually in process. She challenges the principle of a static subject. Like signification, the subject is in a constant process of oscillation between instability and stability, or negativity and stasis. She refines the notion of being, constituted by another and makes it mobile – a *process* – more natural, and situates other ideologies (e.g. structural analysis, phenomenology) as being relevant but not exclusive – part of the *process*. With her notion of the 'subject in process', she articulates an ethical relationship between conscious and unconscious, self and other, citizen and foreigner, identity and difference.

I see a face. A first differentiation takes place, and thus a first self-identity. This identity is still unstable because sometimes I take myself to be me, sometimes I confuse myself with my

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<sup>4</sup> Kristeva's use of the term symbolic relates to syntax and structure. Lacan's use is a much broader term. Kristeva's 'real' is derived from Lacan's psychoanalytic use, as distinct from the 'symbolic' and the 'imaginary', is pre-discursive and distinct from more general notions of 'reality'. The 'real' is very much drive-based and can incorporate shock and violence both of which bypasses signification. Lechte, *Critical Reader*, p.210

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 26

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43



mother. This narcissistic instability, this doubt persists and makes me ask ‘who am I?’, ‘Is it me or is it the other?’ The confusion with the maternal image as first other remains...the interpretation of people’s speech presupposes that you apply yourself to the meaning of what they say. I saw that there was no neutral objectivity possible in descriptions of language at its limits and that we are constantly in what psychoanalysis calls a ‘transfer’.<sup>7</sup>

Kristeva is drawn to states of instability *because* they are normally repressed. What she calls *semiotic* is a ‘state of disintegration in which patterns appear but which do not have any stable identity: they are blurred and fluctuating.’<sup>8</sup> The notion of a fixed identity is an illusion, and in the context of a photographic portrait is a kind of fiction or a metaphor for a revelatory event, such as Lacan’s mirror phase. Her use of the term *process* incorporates ‘the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question’.<sup>9</sup> The photographic event manifests both subjects on trial in an instant and provides a revelatory confrontation as if it were a mirror, except here an ‘other’ is ‘reflected’ for us in place of ourselves. It calls into question what we stand for and can provoke feelings to surface that are normally repressed. These ‘others’, usually taken for granted, are here paused and highlighted. So that the event, rather than focusing on the ‘subject’ of the photograph on a personal level, or ‘artistic’ or ‘ideological’ level, can become a trial for the *operator*.

Already there are a number of concerns that parallel mechanisms in this thesis: the constitution of the subject as being existentially and visually played out in the photographic pose, the constitution of meaning and ‘subject’ experience in reading a photograph, the notion of the subject as a mobile oscillating process, lending a different perspective to the tradition of the definitive portrait and the dynamics of illogic and the unspeakable. Kristeva’s emphasis heralds a portrait depiction that is less dramatic, more incidental and participatory and which becomes crucial to the critical dynamic of dialogic process in the making and reading of photographs.

In outlining the legacy of Husserl’s phenomenology, its importance for signification / meaning and in judging what is ‘real’, Kristeva (as with Levinas and Derrida) points to what she sees as its limitations, in its reliance on the transcendental ego, the unity of the subject, which, while a valid element of subjectivity, is not total or contained and only a part of the process of becoming and meaning. Phenomenology explains the ‘object’ as given identity by a judging subject, but does not allow for the contradictory force of heterogeneity, which is a central dynamic to a concern that encompasses a relation to an ‘other’ or the formation of meaning, beyond individual subjectivity. Simply put, we need others to both make and to ‘grasp’ meaning. She shares with Levinas an ethics of communication and sociability explained as the compulsion of the face-to-face and in his terms

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<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, ‘A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview’ (1986) in Rice, Philip & Patricia Waugh (eds.) *Modern Literary Theory Today, A Reader*. Third edition, London: Arnold, 1986, pp.132-3

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, ‘A Question of Subjectivity’, p.133

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p.133



– responsibility. In consequence the ‘psyche’ represents the bond between the speaking being and the ‘other’. But a process that is dependent on interaction with others, or the interference by others, results ultimately in a frustration that fundamentally motivates.

In discussions of the constituting process of individual and signification, Kristeva speaks more of the psyche, Derrida of the intellect and Levinas of the absolute. Kristeva is more practical, more *matter*-realistic and uses the term ‘transubstantiation’ of the living body’ as a visceral version of transcendence, a transcendence evident in the body of the subject. With an acknowledgement of the reality and significance of the body, comes the reality of a divided consciousness and disordered meaning that mirrors the confusing coming-and-going of thought, identified by Derrida. Her emphasis is on the unlimited generative *process* – the backwards-and-forwards exchange of subject and productive *process*, as opposed to a system that prefers definition and that represses the *process* of signification. Kristeva speaks instead of a *subject in process* as a positive explanation of separation and rejection, as an acceptance of the pre-symbolic function as necessary and pleasurable, which explains the ‘child’s move to signification’.<sup>10</sup> Thus the transition to language is less traumatic and less of a threat than Freud and Lacan indicate, or than is evident in Western philosophical tradition exemplified by Sartre’s fear of the ‘other’. Kristeva sidesteps this threat and offers something more positive. Instead of lamenting what is lost or absent or impossible, Kristeva, like Levinas, affirms what is contradictory and superficially negative, as useful and essential.

Kristeva’s themes signal what will be seen as a recurring dynamic throughout contemporary photographic texts, of possibility, of neither/nor, of in-between, paralleled by the oscillation between individuation and identification, in ‘posing’ and becoming, Barthes’s being-himself-for-himself, and being-himself-for-others, Derrida’s non-oppositional stance of ‘both/and’ and the elusive edge between effective and full meaning. With regard to the photographic portrait itself, a particular dynamic is to be found in the photographic exchange, in an interactive process that refuses objectification, and which heralds a move towards participatory exchange, in a dialogic process.

### *DIALOGIC PROCESS*

I move now to the implications of this divided subject and of the destabilisation of norms for the construction and interpretation of meaning, and indicate the mechanisms that challenge established forms of art practice and signal the possible impact on a photographic aesthetic. As indicated, any psychoanalytic dimension to the reading of texts is bound to introduce a breakdown of the strict roles of exchange by way of transference and identification. Here I explore possibilities of ‘telling’ psychological focus by other than linear or fixed means in relation to two texts; Evans’s *Polaroid*

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<sup>10</sup> Oliver, ‘The Crisis of Meaning’, p.41



*Portraits* and Annelies Strba's depiction of her daughter *Sonja* as two instances of narration, placing the divided subject in the context of artistic practice. Both use a diaristic approach that depends on its presentation in series, an accumulation, which invites multiple meanings suggested by process. The method of series questions the nature of expression as it depends on a discourse between images. The now common strategy of seriality rather than sequentiality allows the presentation of experiences simultaneously, traversing chronology, perception and psychological dimensions. Both series mix the genres of snapshot and portrait and display an indirect, de-centred approach. Both use careless methods; Evans's is particularly intrusive and regard-less of the 'subject' and Strba's, now later assumed as a conventional sign of reality, is also regard-less and hardly distinguishable from daily domestic trivia.



Fig.25 Walker Evans, *Joyce Baronio*, 1974

Evans's *Polaroid Portraits* [figs.10,20,25-28] present an intrusive, obsessive scrutiny, which display a participative collusion with his subjects. Lying somewhere between a conversation and a formal 'portrait' session, they question expectations of the photographer as director, and photographed subject as performer. The singular nature of each exchange and the order of reciprocation beyond the photographic event distinguishes these images for their particularly raw quality and energy. They describe the continuous and subtle interaction in what is going on *besides* the posing, in the complexity and interdependence of relationship, of oppositional parallels. The subjects are neither preoccupied with the event of presentation nor fully self-absorbed; they appear to waver between presenting what they imagine is wanted and staying with themselves, thus maintain an individual, yet aware, autonomy.<sup>11</sup> The images appear to be intimate portraits, yet point to the movement between the extremes of intimacy and distance and it is this instability of role that determines their peculiar quality of displacement.

<sup>11</sup> WEA, MMA, D.1994.262.50 Virginia Hubbard, August 6<sup>th</sup> 1974





Fig.26 Walker Evans, *Virginia Hubbard*,  
1974

The collection presents a series of contradictions. Firstly they indicate a seismic shift away from work for which he is known; where before he advocated distance,<sup>12</sup> now his intrusion is palpable. In contradiction to detached manner, the respective positions of photographer and 'subject' are so confused that Evans's own integral subjectivity becomes evident and dictates the method.<sup>13</sup> The photographer's selection is that of a collector's objectivity, a distanced appraisal, in its motivation, but is subjective, psychologically determined, in its fixation and involvement. He appears to have been attracted to his subjects in a very literal and uncluttered way, in an obsessive compulsion to possess. There is an urgent searching for something, an expression of need. Complexity of feeling is contradicted by the direct baldness in the method, creating tension between possession (objectivity) and emotional need (subjectivity). An evident delight in observation of detail and insignificance disrupts and feeds a rapid, reckless process, facilitated by the easy phenomenon of Polaroid technology. The close shooting demands an element of abandon that denies the possibility of intention or definitive statement about the subject depicted. The resulting images confront the viewer, making no concessions, and eschew the notion of shared universality. They are without sentimentality, are uncompromising in their plain statement and have no pretensions via narrative, comment or metaphoric reference. They are without the wistfulness so common in 'meaningful' portraits as they do not show individuals, presenting some visible transcendence. There is no attempt to make them relevant to the viewer, making no obvious concessions to the viewer at all. They are confronting; so close are we that the intrusion put upon his subjects results in an intrusion on us as viewers. If one recognises the 'subject' as being both a model (representing the

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<sup>12</sup> Evans, Walker, 'Walker Evans on Himself', transcript of talk given at Harvard, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1975, in Caplan, Lincoln, *Exposure, Society for Photographic Education*, 15.1 (February 1977), p.6 'I believe in staying out...I don't think you should intrude. It's rude in a way to say 'This is the way I see things'. It infers that you ought to see it that way too.' and Evans, Walker, in 'Interview with Walker Evans' 1971 Katz, Leslie in Goldberg op.cit., p.360: 'the non-appearance of the author, the non-subjectivity. That is literally applicable to the way I want to use a camera and do.'

<sup>13</sup> Ferris, Bill, *Images of the South: Visits with Eudora Welty and Walker Evans*, *Southern Folklore Reports, No 1*, Memphis, Tennessee: Centre for Southern Folklore, 1977, p34. Evans talking to students about going into a community and photographing 'I would say just get in there, and really get into it and do it, up to the hilt. Thoroughly. Everything. Even people going to the bathroom. The whole damn business... After all what we are interested in is people and how they really live. I'm a realist and I'm interested in the deepest reality of life and social life.'



photographer's brief or vision) and an individual, then these images are positioned between the two.

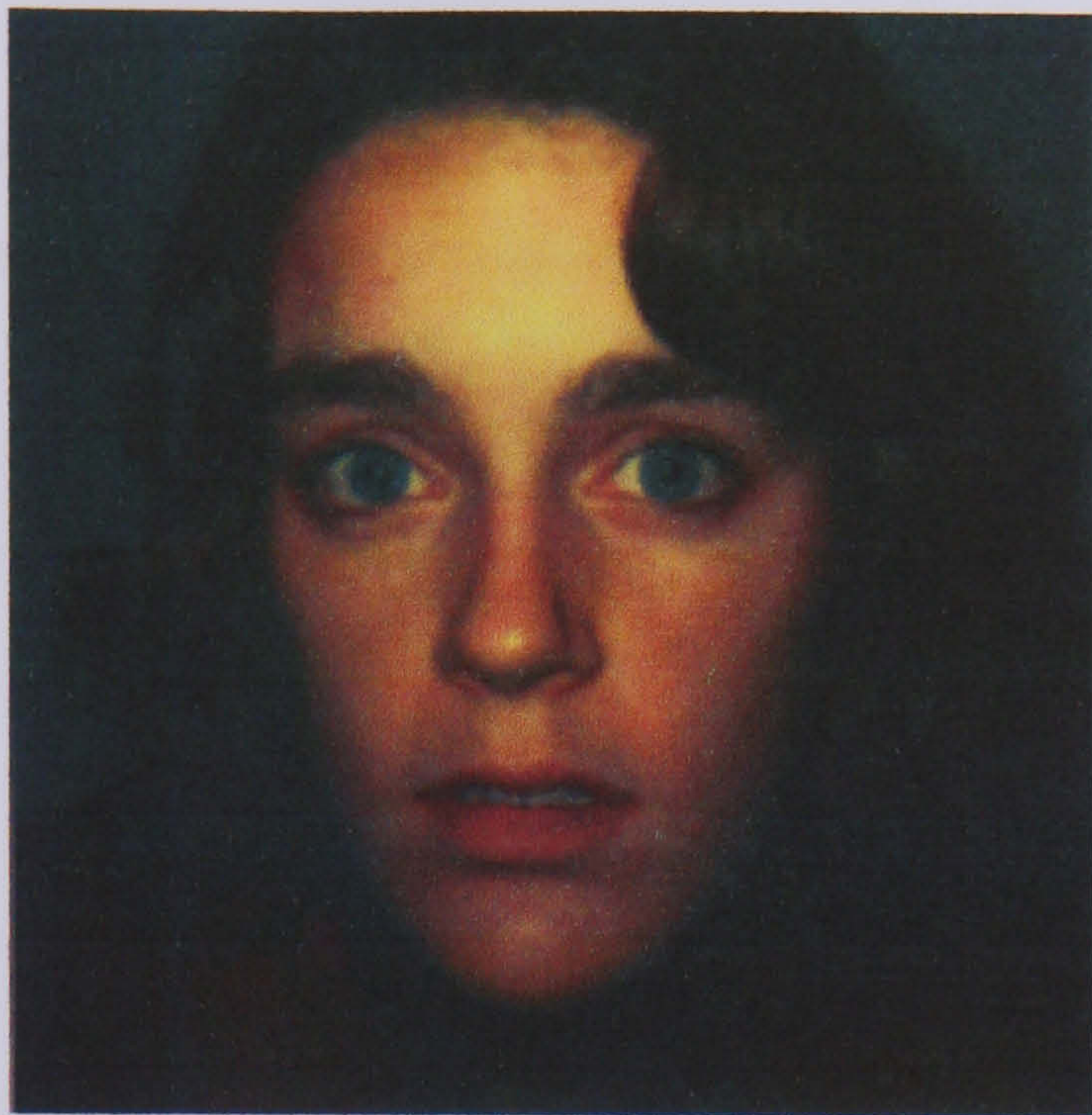


Fig.27 Walker Evans, *Jane Corrigan*, 1974

Relinquishing the photographer's vision, Evans does not impose his 'idea' of the subject as the concern is for something besides style or meaningful 'good portraiture', is more literal and simple, without a calculated agenda. Somehow this frenzy of personal compulsion and un-thoughtful method, allows the subject-depicted to dominate. In allowing chance to dictate the making of the image and being totally dependent on instinct, this process becomes interestingly unique.<sup>14</sup> It is this in between place of carelessness and thoughtlessness that disturbs. They are clear statements as 'portraits' without 'artistic pretension',<sup>15</sup> clumsy but with some quality beyond a 'snapshot', somewhere between the two. Their quality verifies the ambivalent positioning between the subject as photographer and the subject depicted, the quality evident in the tension between them and the resonance that appears. They do not explain themselves, they do not narrate clearly, but are discursive in a more surreptitious way. On first sight, this work might appear as simple, slight, not serious, but it raises many issues: from emotional distance to confrontation, from the nature of the casual shot to the construction of resonant images. Evans can be seen to contradict the 'objective' portrait, confuse intimate and professional roles and present instead an ambivalent exchange between photographer and subject, the surrender of objectivity to the appropriation of subjective desire, where the photographer is lost within the self-obsession of a totally egoistic engagement, of the self conscious task of 'taking' an image of the 'other'. It is an example of an 'interwoven' encounter where the subject and other and history and speaking come together.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Instinct' is a recurring theme for Evans, something of which he is very certain. He describes the 'act of photographing' as instinctive and not conscious; asked how he came upon images, he replies 'By instinct, like a bird, entirely by instinct. Like a squirrel too, burying and hiding... But I find it inhibiting to discuss this. It suggests speculation'. He talks about it this and the notion of objectivity frequently and seems to align 'objectivity of treatment' with instinct, which is the opposite to a predetermined 'phoniness'. And yet he describes himself as a 'collector' who 'falls in love' with something and pursues it compulsively; an attitude which does not seem at all 'objective'. 'An Interview with Leslie Katz' (1971), in Goldberg, Vickie (ed.) *Photography in Print, Writings from 1876 to the Present*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981, pp. 358-369.

<sup>15</sup> Evans, Walker, Notes for 'Lyric Documentary' on cards, WEA, MMA, 1994.250.6 (11) 'Clarity is without artistic pretension'.



Psychoanalysis explains our experience of the world as dependent on the relationship of the psyche to the body and in turn to others, where the emphasis is more visceral than phenomenological explanations of an abstract 'existence'. For example, even when citing real encounters, Sartre (via Peter), takes no account of psychic drives or emotional clutter. Psychoanalysis encourages a concern to locate displaced meaning that lurks behind any articulation of experience. It accounts for the emphasis on individual expression that has shaped 'art' practice in C20 and contributes to



Fig.28 Walker Evans, *Nancy Shaver*, 1973

the notion that language (visual and verbal) reveals unbidden clues, which point to, rather than represent, our unconscious motivations. Thus, in an image, meaning is revealed in the detail and what is not said – what is absent. This is a different conception of meaning from 'finding' what is 'truth' and suggests an alternative model of reading and experiencing can be borrowed from psychoanalysis, which does not seek to find any *one* 'hidden meaning'<sup>16</sup> and that 'interpreting art' can adopt a similar approach, in a way that sets out to discover (not anything in particular), that sets out to 'trouble' the text, but not teleologically. In this process all that is presented is useful, there is no privileged meaning, all details and gestures being equally fruitful and meaningful, or meaningless. Because, if 'meaning' indicates that there is an answer in some sense, then in psychoanalysis there is no-thing that is unanswered, there is no 'meaningless'. One can identify significance in any number of ways that are equally and simultaneously valid. One 'answer' can implicate as much as another. The notion and the naming of 'uncovering' meaning that is 'hidden' is mistaken, as psychoanalysis knows that there is nothing to be 'found', certainly no essential 'truth'. In this sense, psychoanalysis in *practice* demonstrates what Derrida seeks to expose in and through texts.

In psychoanalysis the analysand transfers desires onto the analyst, whilst the analyst is, in turn, keeping track of her own desires in response; tracking, tracing, trailing. This counter-transference of analytical discourse parallels a different kind of reading texts from the norm of interpreting

<sup>16</sup> Lechte, John, *Julia Kristeva*, London: Routledge, 1990, p.212



stable meanings.<sup>17</sup> In this scenario, both the text and the subject reading the text, are in *process*. The 'artwork' is a text that is a different form of psychic space. Kristeva's concept of identification is one that suggests an artistic process that is 'open to the other', that is willing to face the challenge (of confrontation), to put itself (oneself) into question, to risk the possibility of non-meaning, and to face one's own hell in a similar way to the process of psychoanalysis.

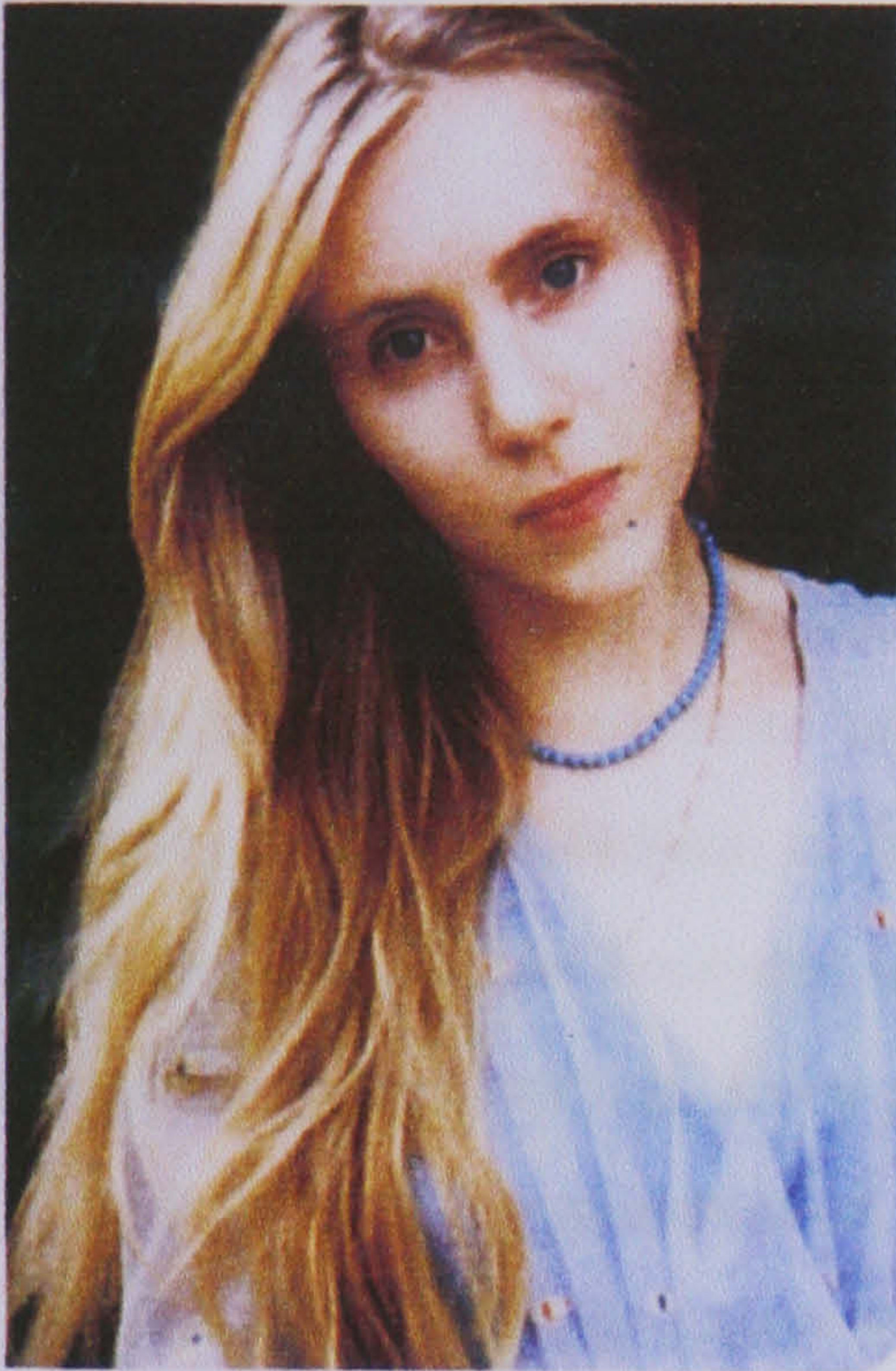


Fig.29 Annelies Strba, *Sonja*, 1996

Annelies Strba's slide presentations and the book entitled *Shades of Time* (1997), continue a tradition which originated with Goldin's first showing of the *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* in 1981.<sup>18</sup> *Shades of Time* [figs.29-31] started as a private document and represents the boundaries of the private broken by its later public display. It presents the detail and singularity of her family over a twenty-year period and Sonja, one of her daughters, features throughout. Images of Sonja explain the characteristics of her work, as the qualities of uncertainty, contradiction, marginality. Strba's method of depiction can be described as diaristic in that it records day-to-day events, and dialogic in the way the collection as a whole tells of relationships and the nuances of dialogue between herself and her subjects. Strba abandons formal posing strategies and creates an un-eventful space where the very familiar supersedes the specialness of portrayal. Instead, the presentation of the individual is simpler, more incidental, functioning as dialogue between intimate exchange with her mother, formal requirements of photography and the happy accident that is recognised as a family 'snap'. In a process borrowed from psychoanalysis, each participant speaks, so that stories emerge from the position of the photographer (Strba), from the position of the one looking at the image (myself), and from the position of the subject photographed (Sonja).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 212

<sup>18</sup> Goldin, Nan, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. New York: Aperture Foundation, 1986

<sup>19</sup> This section contains three imagined scripts, speaking from three perspectives. The images described are all from the series *Shades of Time* reproduced in Annelies Strba 'Shades of Time', text by Ilma Rakusa, Lars Muller Publishers 1997. *Sonja with a Glass* 1991, *Sonja* 1996, *Sonja* 1984, *Sonja in the Bath* 1985, *Sonja* 1983, *Sonja with Ashi* 1988, *Linda and Sonja* 1991, *Linda with Sonja and Samuel-Maria* 1996, *Sonja* 1977, *Sonja's birthday* 1990, *Sonja at the stove* 1987, *Sonja with Samuel-Maria* 1994, *Combing hair* 1995.





Fig.30 Annelies Strba, *Sonja with Asha*, 1988

*'There are many pictures of my daughter, in which I recognise my mother or myself. I experience this dissolution of boundaries'<sup>20</sup>... She is an extension of myself, she is not a stranger and yet she becomes someone else in the image, no longer a daughter, but Sonja as she prepares herself. Even prepared, she cannot hide everything and she knows that perhaps something unexpected will be revealed. She is between certainty and uncertainty, uncomfortable. As she knows me so well, she trusts me, it is familiar territory but it is still ever so slightly dangerous. She knows that she is being interpreted, being re-presented. In the course of being looked at, her awareness of her own existence alters. At that time she is both in control and out of control, in herself and in suspension for me, in recognising that I am looking at her. She changes herself as I look at her, because I look at her. I construct her 'image' as confirming my sense of her, my feelings towards her, my imagining, for me not for herself, which is not Sonja. Neither image is Sonja. I could construct different ones. My feelings project onto her. They are qualities in myself rather than in her. My feeling towards her constitutes my understanding of her as my daughter.*

The series depicts *Sonja* repetitively, but does not indicate that varied positions or contexts might eventually manufacture the ultimate image or characteristic. Just as the tone in a voice can weight a statement, so can the direction of these images; she is questioning, presenting, dejected, preoccupied or concerned. Each version of *Sonja* explores different sides to her visage and character. And as there is no search for *Sonja*'s essential depiction and as they are repetitive in context, Strba's images speak in different ways, with each encounter, with each spectator. The collection as a whole is dialogic in its method of describing the complex exchange that occurs in Strba's relationship with each of her daughters and their relationship with each other. This is a dialogue that operates internally, wordlessly. It tells no-one's complete story and ultimately

<sup>20</sup> Strba, A., This passage starts off with an extract from a conversation between Strba and Crista Ziegler, Photographer's Gallery, April 1998, [www.photonet.org.uk/programme/past/conversation.html](http://www.photonet.org.uk/programme/past/conversation.html), 13<sup>th</sup> January 2001



because the effect is accumulative, if there is one story then there are many, which are concurrent and divergent, even contradictory. My interpretations, *my* story can be seen to be implicit in my use of language. Mieke Bal<sup>21</sup> describes interpretation as being interrelated, as being embedded first in the image and then in the language describing the image. Strba's images and my interpretations can describe Sonja in countless ways: looking *penetratingly* at me, sitting *dejectedly* at the tea table on her birthday, *unreservedly* naked to the waist in front of the stove in the corner of the room, sitting *alone* on a chair displaying the child, combing her sister's hair, *preoccupied*. I see her as looking at me, just as she was looking at her mother. My feelings project onto her and are qualities in myself rather than in her. They constitute the sense *for me of* her. My feeling towards her constitutes my understanding of her.

*She knows that I look at her; her mouth is held together and reminds me of that concentration when looking at oneself in the mirror; when something happens to the mouth and lips; they 'purse'; they pout. Sonja performs. She adopts a beautiful pose. Sonja presents herself, content that she looks like she does. Her mouth performs again - or so I imagine. I am dismissive of this pretty, wistful position. Sonja likes to be wistful. She's interrupted, standing in the kitchen, arms loosely down by her sides, looking at me. She seems to be very separate from the kitchen paraphernalia that is behind her, as she looks intently out and away from it. Her eyebrows are tidy. Her face is almost accusing and confrontational and calm and accepting. She's naked in the bath. She sits on the bed, cradling the cat in her lap. She looks coyly at me in her best dress. She is totally distracted and moving out of the frame.*

Sonja appears to wait to be photographed; she is always ready. She visibly moves between acceptance and resentment, ignorance and confrontation. She can be seen to be purposeful, resigned, determined. As she looks at her mother defiantly or submissively, her face changes slightly, imperceptibly for the pose. She steadies herself, changes herself. In taking the photographs, Strba allows little time for preparation or for the subject to perform a directed character, but creates a small space where the 'subject' can just about determine a position. In giving her this space, she tests the self-conscious and unconscious masks, played out in Sonja's demeanour. Sonja is very conscious of herself, her appearance, her image and is rarely caught not aware and nearly always looks at the camera. But because Strba interrupts her and disallows the formal pose, Sonja is not quite able to present a 'theatre', a special version of herself, is not allowed to become what she wants entirely. Sonja is held in a place between pose and non-pose. It is as if she stops momentarily, suspends herself, pausing and allowing the photograph, as if compelled to do so. Sonja illustrates two sorts of relationship reflected in two sorts of presentation: the prepared and the unprepared pose, in relation to herself and the changing relationship with her mother

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<sup>21</sup> Bal, Mieke, 'Seeing Signs'. In Moxey, K. (ed.) *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.79. There is correlation between Bal's readings and those of Kristeva, both of whom refer to Bakhtin.



respectively. She demonstrates an oscillation between the two stances of preparedness and unpreparedness (reminiscent of Barthes in parenthesis) and how, in each, they describe something different in her. She precariously hovers between these two positions as each photograph could so easily be one or the other. She is both at the same time.

*Here I am; this is what I am doing. Look at me. I am in the bath. I am naked. I am interrupted. This is private. I feel vulnerable. I want to hide myself. My left leg is lifted a little and rests over my right knee. I am nearly covered, but you can see me. I am trying to cover myself, but it is too much effort and I want to please you and I want to display myself. Look at me. I am young. I am perfect. I want to appear as my perfect self. My adult self. My strong self. I do not feel strong. I am interrupted. I am waiting. My hands are open and waiting to hold something. My head is forced uncomfortably forward by the cold back of the bath. I have to look up at you as my head faces down. What do you think you are doing? I am not your child anymore. I am as powerful as you. How can I refuse? I want to display myself. I want to hide myself. I am frail. I am vulnerable. Look back at me. I am looking back at you. I will hold your look for as long as you look at me. Take this moment if you can. What can you take from me? It is my moment. I hold it here with me as long as I am looking at you.*



Fig. 31 Anneleis Strba,  
*Sonja in the Tub*, 1985

Strba's avoidance of interpretive staging, of pictorial framing or affirmation of her own 'idea' of the subject, removes her as controlling subject and results in Sonja asserting her own idea of herself, her own voice. Strba avoids the precept of the photographer as author, creating a situation where the photographed subject can become author. It is a method that relinquishes power and a substantial part of the traditional position as photographer, by not preparing images for the viewer and placing more emphasis on the role of the photographed subject. This is a significant turnabout of emphasis, allowing the subject to reassert herself and inverting the responsibility for determining meaning by allocating power to the viewer.



## DIALOGICAL MATRIX

The following convoluted passage is important because it explains a breakdown of the fixed oppositions of author/reader and signifier/signified. This text, which articulates Kristeva's exploration of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism and carnivalesque<sup>22</sup> describes literary signification, offers a version of the positional relation between the three protagonists in fiction and explains my readings of Strba, Sonja, and myself given above. When translated into photographic portrait fiction, it inserts a fascinating perspective that brings some clarification. It serves to unify discussion of text, authorship and relationship between all protagonists in the photographic event and to reiterate a 'becoming' presented in conjunction with a description of reading as 'dialogue'.

*We may consider narration, beyond the signifier/signified relationship, as a dialogue between the subject of narration (photographer) and the addressee (reader<sup>23</sup>) – the other. This addressee, quite simply the reading subject, represents a doubly oriented entity: signifier in relation to the text (photograph), and signified in the relation between the subject of narration (photographer) and herself. The addressee is a dyad, whose two terms, communicating with each other, constitute a code system. The subject of narration (photographer) is drawn in and therefore reduced to a code, a non person, to an anonymity as author and subject of enunciation, mediated by a third person, the subject of utterance (the subject depicted, spectrum). The (photographer) is thus the subject of narration, transformed by having included herself within the narrative system; she is neither nothingness nor anybody, but the possibility of permutation from (photographer) to (reader), from story to discourse, and from discourse to story. She becomes an anonymity, an absence, a blank space. At the very origin of narration, at the very moment when the author (photographer) appears, we experience emptiness...On the basis of this anonymity, this zero where the author is situated, the character (spectrum – subject-depicted) is born...Emptiness is quickly replaced by a "one", a named (subject matter) that is really twofold, since it is subject and addressee. It is the addressee, the other, exteriority, whose object is the (photographer) and who is at the same time represented and representing, who transforms the subject (photographer) into an author. That is, who has the subject (photographer) pass through this zero stage of negation, of exclusion, constituted by the author. In this coming-and-going movement between the subject and other, between photographer and reader, the author is structured as a signifier and the text as a dialogue of two discourses....The*

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<sup>22</sup> Kristeva describes and analyses the work of Bakhtin in 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' in *Desire in Language*. Bakhtin's work proposes an 'intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning)' as a dialogue between the writer, the addressee and the 'character', context and history; an attitude that has had an enormous impact on art history. Thus using Bakhtin's terms, the 'status' of the image would be defined *horizontally* by the photographer and reader and *vertically* relating to other photographs – historically and contemporarily. And a text described as a 'mosaic of quotations' and an 'absorption and transformation of another', in the context of photography, can be detected as emerging in early uses of 'post-modern' art practice as 'appropriation'. Much of Bakhtin's thinking has been since translated into the mechanics of the visual by Mieke Bal and is recognisable in *Narratology* and *Looking In*.

<sup>23</sup> Barthes's term *spectator* is now redundant as it disallows participation.



*constitution of the (subject-depicted) manifests a disjunction between the (photographer) as active subject and (photographer) as subject of utterance (contained in the photograph). At the level of the text, in the dialogue between the (photographer) and the (spectrum), we find also this dialogue of the subject with the addressee around which every narration is structured. The (subject-depicted), in relation to the (photographer), plays the role of the addressee with respect to the subject; it inserts the (photographer) within the (fabrication) by making the (photographer) pass through emptiness or 'elocutionary disappearance' (Mallarme). The (subject-depicted) is both representative of the (photographer) and represented as object of the (photographer).... The (subject-depicted) is 'dialogical', both author and reader are disguised within it... a dialogical matrix.*<sup>24</sup>

My interpretation of the term 'narration' in photographic text is in the sense of 'relating' and 'telling' a person and is not, as might be implied, that of linear diachronic narrative (where the power remains with the author). This understanding derives from alternative conceptions to those of 'univocity or objectivity'.<sup>25</sup> Psychoanalytic readings force alternatives to the linearity and stasis of 'epic monologism', which as causal, follows the familiar 'vertical, hierarchical linear structure' and 'retains the transcendental signified as 'self presence', that which is questioned by Derrida. In contrast, 'dialogism' 'presupposes an intervention by the speaker within the narrative as well as an orientation toward the other'. It inserts the psychological aspect implicit in even the most literal depiction, as the internal dialogue with oneself and in the author's 'distance from himself, as a splitting of the (author) into subject of enunciation and subject of utterance.' The essential point here is that of the dual roles assumed by each of the protagonists in the event of the photographic portrait. The author (in this case the photographer) becomes both subject-as-author, *and* object, manifested in her own photographic expression (the photograph) and as 'author' named by the reader. The photographer is contained within the photograph and becomes object. She is drawn into the matrix as she is mediated and constituted by the subject-depicted, is transformed, a split subject as author-subject *and* mediated-object. In appearing as author, she *disappears* as being-other-than-herself and at this point the subject-depicted becomes someone else as defined and constructed by the image; becomes another active persona derived from both the photographer and the reader. The subject-depicted becomes object for the reader and the photographer *and* active subject in contributing to the *disappearance* of the photographer, and in the making of an 'other' version of herself in the photograph. The reader is active subject as interpreter of the text *and* passive object as defined by the photographer in fabricating the text for her. The constitution of the subject-depicted as an 'other' manifests a change in the relationship between subject-depicted and the photographer. The subject-depicted becomes 'dialogical, both author and reader, disguised within'

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<sup>24</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' (1969). In *Desire in Language*, p.74 – my 'translation' in the context of photography of Kristeva's text, my inserts in brackets.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', p.74



her own photograph. Thus dialogic structure invites a more complex and confusing interrelationship than that of simply subject and object.

Dialogism presents us with an alternative process of meaning to many of the assumptions I itemised as 'real' in the *Introduction* and incorporates many properties that counter the existential; non-oppositional, non-causal, non-diachronic. Aspects, reminiscent of alternative conceptions of the 'real', deny comfortable versions of narration and provide a structure that ignores 'substance, causality or identity... [and] which exists only in and through relationship.'<sup>26</sup> In parallel, much photographic work appears to strongly move against 'monologism' to adopt a more dialogic involvement of character, despite 'storytelling' being hard to resist.

### *PERQUISITION*

Kristeva clearly identifies the photographer as inserting a kind of fiction into the image by way of enunciation. *Word, Dialogue and Novel* confirms a contra-narrative move and importantly demonstrates the link between Derrida and Kristeva with respect to reading, responding and the generation of meaning. It invites a discursive manner of telling, which demonstrates 'interminable narration' as a contradiction in terms and a psychological perspective. Derrida's *Droit de Regards* is essentially the same approach that describes, above all, the reading of photographs as an *active* procedure, as a dialogue between the photograph and the reader and demonstrates the text as changing and contradictory. I shall restrict commentary here to Derrida's procedures of reading rather than his response to the specific content of the images. *Droit de Regards* is exemplary in its argument with 'presence' and as a post-structural move against the urge to make sense. Derrida likens photographs to a 'back to front construction', as provoking, diverting, confusing, and to 'constructions in psychoanalysis', where once spoken or stated, the original is distorted or changed.

*Camera Lucida*, introduces the conflation of the theoretical and the emotional in the reading of images. Derrida extends this possibility in *Droit de Regards* where, via extreme speculation in his examination of Marie-Francois Plissart's photographic sequence, he demonstrates a non-definitive logic as 'interminable' narrative that contradicts, challenges and interrogates what appears at first 'natural' and our 'desire for stories'. His analysis takes the form of a contradictory reflection, which allows every detail to have significance and each participant to have a voice. He steers us away from a definitive account, denying us the certainty of closure and demonstrates methods of looking and understanding through his questioning of implicit interpretation. *Perquisition*<sup>27</sup> (pursuit, inquisition, search, inquiry) is the term Derrida uses for the sort of scrutiny he gives to this search and represents a shift in the purpose of looking at photographs, an alternative discursive

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.78

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Right of Inspection [Droit de Regards]* (1985) with Marie-Francois Plissart, trans. David Wills, *Art &Text* 32, 1989, p.25



manner of telling as opposed to one of causal narrative. *Droit de Regards* is a translation of photographic text in which the discontinuity of thought is applied to the looking at photographs in a way that allows response to images to follow the sequence of thought. It is a performative manner of 'thinking' about meaning that echoes the uncertainty and messiness of thought as a process and provides a focus for his thesis of 'implicit multiplicity' in metaphoric significance in texts.<sup>28</sup> His procedures for looking and analysis demonstrate the mediation of perception, thinking and association and describe what one sees as entirely imaginary, symbolic and inseparable from perception. Hence 'there never was any perception'.<sup>29</sup> It is typical of the rhetorical performance that demonstrates his critique through the manner of his writing and, as will be seen in Part Two, exemplary of elements that explain *differance*. Whilst they are not systematic methods as such, there are two active procedures, which characterise the approach. The first is the use of words (*photogrammar*) that split and contradict themselves throughout the text and make use of photographic terminology as meta-metaphor for meaning and understanding. For example, the use of the word 'develop' – the physical process of making a photograph works as metaphor for the process of understanding and finding meaning. *Photogrammar* functions as a dynamic destabiliser in the text, keeps the meaning mobile and ambivalent, promises implication beyond the literal text.

The second procedure is his dialogic structure, which extends his discussion of *parergon* that subverts the opposition of outside and inside, by speaking about the photograph from a number of different points of view, (looking at the photograph) from outside, and from a number of imagined points of view (as protagonists) inside the frame of the photograph. The play with words incorporates both noun and verb functions, so that qualities can exist and be static (as a noun) or can actively disturb and influence (as a verb). Words such as pose, pause, compose, propose, position, relate what the subject depicted does (the one assuming a position) with what the photograph does (the place of meaning) and what the photographer does (in presenting a position). Like Kristeva's dialogical matrix, this play-function allows him to speak from either the position of reader or from one of those depicted in the photograph, to move between them and to tell the story from every point of view, each taking their turn as nominating subject. The one who is subject may be ....I, you, he, she, we, you, they, in turn. In such a way he uses the displacement of words to contradict himself and to change his view (opinion/viewing position).

Derrida's rhetoric holds the meaning in the very structure and expression of the writing and effects a demonstration of non-naming and non-presence by 'holding' meaning in words as a place of ambivalence rather than definition. Confronting our desire to find ultimate meaning, he tries instead to describe, as with an inventory, to make 'a true description', naming and not naming things that are left out, things that are not there (parallels depictions such as Martha Rosler's

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<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *What is called not thinking*, Loughborough University, 2001

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), trans. David B. Allison, Evanston: North Western University Press, 1973, p.103



*Bowery* where the subject is absent). He does not relate what he imagines to be the experience of characters, but restricts himself to designating 'objective' situations, indulging in lengthy description, which, in its avoidance of intentional interpretation, cannot fail to interpret. He argues with himself about qualitative description, about speculation, invention, about the implications of possible motivations and his compulsion to interpret. This manner of speaking to photographs assigns a series of interconnected qualities and conditions, active properties that repeat and reoccur within evocations suggested throughout the text. The series of associations hypothesise and extend meaning, generating a process of understanding between text and reader. The practice suggests a similarity with art practice in which visual meaning can reverberate and *avoid* both verbal explanation of the visual and visual illustration of the text. It amounts to a performance of qualities providing a conceptual framework: suspending, holding, generating, telling, speaking subject to subject, positioning, performing.

The photograph is a machine for making talk...inexhaustibly... that has an altogether different relation to any spoken word...The photographic event has another structure.'<sup>30</sup>

Photographic speculation cannot distinguish between what you see and what you imagine and thus power resides in the photograph, not as possession, but in the meaning invoked by utterance and dialogue, of what is absent, of imagination and interpretation. The photograph is like a palindrome that can be read in many directions, 'concurrently and cursorily'; 'there is reversibility, irreversibility, diachrony, and simultaneity'<sup>31</sup> and diversion, deflection, deferral. In this process, a photograph is a matter of reflection, negating time, denying history, an event that happens when I look at it, rather than a retelling about another time. In this kind of description, a photograph is active in generating thoughts, in studying and describing at the same time as being described in a way that supports alternative subject positions, often contradictory. The goal of speaking to a 'unified subject' is perhaps then a pointless one. The goal too of establishing what subject matter is, is also pointless. Pointless in terms of believing that there is a point (endpoint), a conclusion to find. Not pointless in exploring the meaning in the text, and not pointless in terms of exploring where the 'point' (*punctum*) might be found or where it may be from the 'point of view' of different protagonists – reader, photographer and depicted 'subject'; not pointless in terms of satisfying desire. And Derrida would in no way advocate that we should not look. If we can remove ourselves from reading photo-texts as from within an already determined system, as for example as 'portrait or 'picture', but instead as a text that allows simultaneity, our reading may catch up with some examples of practice, such as Ruff's tautological absence and as we shall see Rosler's absence of subject. If one performs a more rhetorical viewing (*perquisition*) that incorporates views (of perspective and opinion) simultaneously and anticipates via its play function, then we operate in advance of the verbal articulation that follows and which reduces possibilities in its formation. I

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<sup>30</sup> Derrida, *Right of Inspection*, p. 25

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42



suggest that photographs are able to present ideas in a way that exceeds those expressed by words and in this sense they may anticipate debate in much the same way as Derrida's multiplicity of thought ranges round possibilities of verbal articulation.

Both Kristeva and Derrida demonstrate meaning as inseparable from the inter-relationship of thought, imagination and perception, the consequence of which refutes the possibility of 'disinterestedness' in determining quality. Instead both assert a position of discursive process as a positive adventure instead derived from our internal construction, which when translated in the reading of photographs begins to articulate a conceptual procedure. I move now to Baudrillard's discussion on the construction of the image dependent on the author's position.



## Chapter Three: DISAPPEARING

In order for the object to be grasped, the subject has to relinquish his hold. But this turns out to be *the subject's last adventure*, his last chance – the chance of a dispossession of self in the reverberation of the world in which he henceforth occupies the unseen site of representation.<sup>1</sup>

Baudrillard's writing on photography becomes a figurative explication of his general project that seeks to upturn the basic premise of causality and reason and of the supremacy of the subject and 'objectivity'. As such it echoes Derrida's, Levinas's and Kristeva's concerns and locates it conveniently in the context of the photograph. Relevant to the 'portrait' photograph specifically, he presents a provocative and extreme alternative to the power of the photographer on the one hand and the objectified depicted subject on the other, in what he calls 'disappearance'. He is adamant that 'it is impossible to bring someone into focus photographically when you are so little able to get them into focus psychologically',<sup>2</sup> and challenges the tradition of photographer-to-subject and provokes an exploration of alternative methods. His advocacy of 'mutual disappearance' becomes an epic of photographic exchange and indicates a reciprocal process, which anticipates a kind of equality in the photographic encounter. Baudrillard's project serves to introduce some of the central contributors to this thesis as it encompasses themes paralleled by many photographers over the last twenty years. Qualities such as absence, rawness, blankness and banality are in the main characterised by negation of meaning, interpretation, intentionality and control.

Recognising the non-literal within Baudrillard's provocatively literal manner of writing and responding to his invitation to play with his ideas<sup>3</sup>, I adopt here a similarly 'literal' approach in order to amplify his didactic expression and to explain without describing. I identify Baudrillard's photographic project as a moral tale in the form of a set of 'instructions', which serve to itemize and confront many of the issues concerning the 'portrait' and which I assume as a manual for achieving a 'true photograph'<sup>4</sup> and as a measure with which to test the possibilities of portrait depiction. It is a contradictory checklist in many ways, as the terms 'subject' and 'object' are often characteristically and pertinently interchangeable. His writing on the subject is made more significant by the fact that he takes photographs himself, that betray a certain naivety with regard to photographic aesthetic.

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality...' In Wiebel, Peter, (ed.) *Photographies 1985-1998, Within the Horizon of the Object, Objects in this Mirror are Closer than they Appear*. Hatje-Cantz Publishers, 1999, p. 133

<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard, 'For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality...' In *Photographies*, pp.136-137

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'When Reality Merges with the Idea', interview with Mike Gane and Monique Arnaud, November 1991 in Mike Gane, ed., *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 205

<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'It is the Object that Thinks Us'. In *Photographies*, p.146



*THE SUBJECT'S LAST ADVENTURE: HOW TO TAKE THE TRUE PHOTOGRAPH, (after Baudrillard)*

*Empty my mind, hold my breath, immerse myself*

*I must distinguish between the point of taking the photograph, without any calculation, and the retrospective process of making representation. Thus I can avoid interpretation by immersing myself in the process of taking the photograph and allowing the 'object' to dictate me. It is the activity itself, rather than the prospect of the image, which must interest me and which I must seek 'to practise harshly', keeping the activity crude and uncontrolled, as an 'objective meditation', 'a mental process',<sup>5</sup> so that, in the act of taking a photograph, I allow the possibility of 'disappearing' as a subject.*

*Disappear as a subject and enjoy my own absence*

*As I press the shutter and as the picture is taken, both the 'object', and myself as 'subject', disappears. 'It's in this reciprocal disappearance that a transfusion between the two occurs'.<sup>6</sup> This occurrence invites the 'object' to emerge from its disappearance in a different form; transformed; in a 'poetic situation of transference or a poetic transference of a situation'.<sup>7</sup> Here then is the possibility to retrieve a response in my interaction with the world, neither of alienation nor of indifference, and contrary to the manner expected and explained by Sartre. In my fear of the 'fact that people and things tend no longer to signify anything for each other'<sup>8</sup> and in my concern to avoid indifference, I usually force myself into creating some sort of meaning, indiscriminately and sometimes in desperation. In removing myself as directing subject, the photograph can achieve a dimension of the real that escapes the complication of 'representation' and thus I can get nearer to producing no meaning at all. By 'representation', I mean my involvement in discourse and interpretation, which can complicate the object with moral packaging or my personal fabrication. If I allow 'an insignificant object'<sup>9</sup> to intervene and change me as I photograph it, ultimately, I can disappear as an interpreting subject.*

*Do not attempt to represent reality*

*What I am trying to achieve is 'the primitive dimension of the object as opposed to the secondary dimension of the subject (me) and the whole domain of representation. It's the immanent presence of the object, rather than the representation of (me) the subject.'<sup>10</sup> It is a letting be; allowing a thing to present itself; escaping any vision that I might have. It is a*

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<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Photography' 1993, an interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg in Zurbrugg (ed.) *Jean Baudrillard: Art & Artefact*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, p. 34

<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, 'It is the Object...' p. 147

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 148

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 148

<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Photography', p. 33

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 33



*process of capturing in the sense of 'some kind of non-occurrence', which presents intimations of what has taken place or what is about to take place, of capturing this moment of suspension, rather than the object.*

#### *Abandon the instinct to interpret*

*I must actively avoid control, interpretation or vision and seek 'the way objects make themselves visible'<sup>11</sup> and the way that objects become active themselves. So far as is possible I allow myself 'to be viewed by the object, rather than an attempt to capture the object'.<sup>12</sup> To describe more accurately, more pertinently, it is necessary that the image be less accurate, direct or overt. It needs to be more oblique.*

#### *Suspend my judgement, my gaze, my vision*

*I must let my attention slip so that the image can invent itself and become a fiction for me. To 'render the incommensurable', I have to allow a situation to reveal the unexpected, to 'hold', but not represent. I have to allow the object to reveal itself. I will have to exorcise my own gaze and revel in my own absence. 'It is not the object of the photograph who must pose', but I, the photographer who must hold my breath in order to create a blank region both in time and my body. I must also refrain from breathing mentally, and empty my mind, so that the mental surface is as blank as the film.*

#### *Do not seek an image*

*I must not see myself as a representative being, but as an object working, 'without any concern for mise-en-scene, in a kind of frenzied circumscribing of self and object'.<sup>13</sup> To arrive at a more meaningful and potent image; a harsh and raw image, approaching punctum,<sup>14</sup> requires silence, time and isolation, lack of insight, lack of agenda, lack of intention. And to bring out an ironic, spiritual dimension I need to resort to anything that removes the 'object' from its realistic, ideological context or my interpretation; anything that surprises, anything that is not anticipated.*

#### *Defy all resemblance and look elsewhere*

*'It is very difficult to photograph individuals or faces...Human beings are sites of such mise-en-scene, such complex (de)construction, that the lens strips them of their character in spite of themselves. They are so laden with meaning that it is almost impossible to separate them from that meaning to discover the secret form of their absence...They say there is always a moment*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard, 'For Illusion isn't', p.134

<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard makes several references to Barthes's punctum, 'which is the poignant moment of the object...the one that is the very moment of the photograph, of the instant in which it is taken, which is immediately past and gone and can never be found again' in 'It is the Object...' p.151



*when the most commonplace or the most masked - person reveals their secret identity. But what is interesting is their secret alterity. And rather than seeking out the identity beneath the mask, one should seek out the mask beneath the identity.<sup>15</sup> Considerations of resemblance or of expression in the image are inconsequential and won't amount to anything in the end; they will only register absence. So if the person will not be revealed in their resemblance, will it be in my knowledge of them, or in their story? Taking photographs of individuals is an impossible project 'because there would be an excess of meaning.'<sup>16</sup> 'Instead of transfiguring and idealising the image as the camera usually does, the lens disfigures and decimates the character. The human being is masked, and the most difficult subject to capture is not so much their reality or their resemblance, as their mask'.<sup>17</sup> 'What is needed...is to make (her) a little more enigmatic to (herself) and to make human beings in general a little stranger, (or more alien) to each other as with Levinas. It is a question not of treating them as subjects, but of turning them into objects, into something different – that is to say treating them as what they are.'<sup>18</sup>*

#### *Struggle to assert myself, yet lose control*

*'The dramatic quality of the photographic image comes from the struggle' between my resolve to impose myself and disturb 'its discontinuity and immediacy.'<sup>19</sup> There has to be at least a struggle in my attempt to achieve what I am looking for, my vision, even though inevitably I'll lose the conflict and lose myself. The photographic event has to retain this ironic confrontation. 'The photographic act is a duel. It is a dare, launched at the object and a dare of the object in return.'<sup>20</sup> It is a confrontation between this other and myself as we face each other and to some extent I, as photographer, am manipulated and subverted by her. It demonstrates my inability to communicate with her – and others – the way I fire out and miss and she fires back and misses. But then 'I only become defined as a subject when faced with another subject.' My 'inability to photograph human beings is clear proof of the manipulation of the photographic subject by its object'<sup>21</sup> and I feel the same unease when being photographed myself: I am waiting /playing/ acting/ removing myself from the event. In photographing a series of different subjects, will I be defined as a different subject each time? Will each subject define me in a different way? The impossibility of the photographic portrait is a metaphor for our inability to communicate with others.*

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<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard, 'For Illusion is not', pp.136-137

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Photography', p. 34

<sup>17</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Art of Disappearance' in Zurbrugg, p. 29

<sup>18</sup> Baudrillard, 'For Illusion is not', p.137

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.132

<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'Photography, or the Writing of Light' (1999). Trans, Francois Debrix in *The Impossible Exchange*. Paris: Galilee pp. 175 -184 and *Ctheory*, 1999 [cited 12<sup>th</sup> April 2000] Vol. 23, No. 1-2, available from [www.ctheory.com](http://www.ctheory.com)

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Art of Disappearance', p. 29



## LOOKING FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL FOCUS: ANONYMITY AND INTIMACY

Baudrillard uses the event of photography to confirm and illustrate his theories about signification, 'abusive representation', 'the weariness of being oneself', and his idealistic view regarding 'the emptiness and fragility of exchange'. His approach is especially pertinent to this thesis as he radically disturbs conceptions of the photographic encounter, both metaphorically and literally. His manifesto for the 'true photograph' pushes the subject/object relation to the limits, towards a reversal. He suggests that we must look for meaning elsewhere, not only *in* others, but *for* ourselves invoking the other to exist, in order to make oneself exist: 'Tell me what I am, tell me what I desire, tell me what I think'.<sup>22</sup> Baudrillard's texts suggest methods other than those of the inspired photographer or the concerned commentator in examples of documentation, which address objectification in a simple way and that mark some sort of psychological 'reality' in the presentation by one individual of another individual. Baudrillard's provocation approaches innocence, a relinquishing of knowing construction, toward territory that is undefined and unfamiliar. In advocating the object over subject, he topples the centrality of the subject, but reverses hegemony and fails to achieve the non-oppositional or dialogical position of Levinas and Kristeva. In photographic practice this reversal achieves a knowing avoidance of 'knowingness', an artificial and fabricated lack of control. I introduce here explorations of versions of the photographic encounter, suggested principally by Baudrillard's metaphor of *disappearance*, 'which gives the object its full intensity'.<sup>23</sup> Studies in this chapter focus on the nature of the confrontation between the photographer and the photographed subject. This first section, '*ANONYMITY AND INTIMACY*' looks at the encounter, as defined by the contrasting extremes of intimacy or anonymity. The following section, '*OBSCURE AND ASLANT*', focuses on extreme positions of 'authorship' by way of desire and intention, as opposed to distance and obscuration in the works of Ulf Lundin and Larry Sultan.

Luc Delahaye's *Metro*<sup>24</sup> and Walker Evans's *Subway* series provide extreme examples of photographs taken with anonymity, whilst the work of Goldin and Strba depend on an intimate relationship between *operator* and *spectrum*. I propose that both extremes result in a 'disappearing of the subject', in a manner that could be seen to avoid intentional positioning and thereby objectifying those photographed. Both methods are a means of relinquishing power as each assert the dominance of particularity over generality; both methods question the mask of self-consciousness and that of unselfconsciousness, and undermine intentionality.

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<sup>22</sup> Baudrillard, 'Poetic Transference of Situation'. In Delahaye, Luc & Jean Baudrillard, *L'Autre*. London: Phaidon, 1999, unpaginated

<sup>23</sup> Baudrillard, 'Poetic Transference'

<sup>24</sup> Delahaye, Luc, *L'Autre*, London: Phaidon, 1999



Baudrillard describes photographers as predators, plundering that which doesn't concern them and infecting others with 'the image virus'.<sup>25</sup> The method of anonymity, of 'the subject's disappearance' is advocated as refreshing at least; 'not the transparent, interactive thing it normally has become',<sup>26</sup> and liberating at most, 'presenting people in their destiny.'<sup>27</sup> 'To do this the photographer must be both non-existent and one with those she is photographing.'<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard despises 'realist' photography as documentary or testimony of 'real situations', the sort that, in the 'pursuit of naturalness',<sup>29</sup> presents, for example, regrettable situations, because it captures not what exists, but what, according to moral convictions, 'should not exist'. It presents us with only one version of events. In addition, images, intended as testimony, merely convey information, which is 'the most trivial, debased form of meaning'<sup>30</sup> and photography that is 'aestheticised, calculated and composed'<sup>31</sup> does not approach what is interesting. Few photographs escape this 'forced signification'.

All the artistic preparations of the photographer and all the design in the positioning of the model to the contrary, the viewer feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now... In such a picture, that spark, as it were, burned through the person in the image with reality.<sup>32</sup>

The notion of mask and the reality or true identity behind the mask embodies many of the expectations of the portrait, expressed here by Benjamin, who suggests that the 'spark' will be perversely sought elsewhere than in the 'presentation' in spite of the photographer's efforts. Provocatively Baudrillard takes Benjamin's intuition to its extreme conclusion and suggests that any photography with purposeful intention, loses its potential for potent quality (*punctum*); the untranslated integrity of the photograph, which defies verbal elaboration and is at its most powerful. In contradiction to what is generally held as a desirable aim in portrait photography, Baudrillard suggests that what is interesting *is* their outward appearance, their 'secret alterity' and that 'one should seek out the mask beneath the identity'.<sup>33</sup>

Evans and Karsh represent two attitudinal poles. On the one hand Evans, who in many ways consistently sought an alternative artistic route to the establishment, denied that there was any 'reality' to be found in portraiture. What he actually denied was the very conscious and deliberate posing ('all the artistic preparations of the photographer and all the design in the positioning of the

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<sup>25</sup> Baudrillard, 'It is the Object that Thinks Us', p.149

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.149

<sup>27</sup> Baudrillard, 'Poetic Transference of Situation'

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard, 'It is the Object that Thinks Us', p.149

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.150

<sup>31</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Photography', p. 35

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, Walter, 'A Short History of Photography'(1931. In Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.) *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980, pp.199-216

<sup>33</sup> Baudrillard, 'For Illusion is not the Opposition of Reality', p.137



model') and the very mannered pretensions of, for example Karsh,<sup>34</sup> and claims of catching the psychological power centre of his famous subjects; his grandiose 'search for greatness'. Karsh claimed that 'the mask we present to others...may lift for only a second to reveal the power in the unconscious gesture, a raised eyebrow, a surprised response, a moment of repose. This is the moment to record'.<sup>35</sup> This is what Benjamin despises and what Evans and Baudrillard acknowledge as being the impossibility of the project; that we cannot *lift the mask* and suggest instead that what we must capture *is* the mask. The works of Karsh, now so much a caricature of 'portraiture', are presented with accompanying texts extolling the subject's virtues, verbally explaining the power *and* with amusing anecdote. The 'portraits' remain illustrations of the story and the myth, which they amplify and confirm. In contrast, Evans repeatedly struggled and played with the dilemma of wanting to 'do things as they were'.<sup>36</sup> In so doing his photographs pass through three phases of anonymity, followed by a later dimension of more ambivalent encounter. *Let us Now Praise Famous Men (1935)* displays a disparateness of the separate standpoint of the photographer and *Subway (1938-41)* attempts a total anonymity repeated by Delahaye in 1994-5. Evans wanted to allow the individuals to be themselves and not be manipulated, and to achieve this he had to remove himself from the encounter so that there would be no interaction with them. *Detroit (1946)*, taken uninhibitedly, but visibly and yet uninvolved, sees the individuals as 'elements in the total image', not individuals, not portraits, but objects, again as sought by Baudrillard, and anticipating Ruff's approach. His late *Polaroid Portraits (1973-74)* allow the opposite position of intrusion, 'to do things as they were'.

Annelies Strba: 'When I push the shutter release. I close my eyes'<sup>37</sup>

Luc Delahaye: 'I hold my breath and let the shutter go'<sup>38</sup>

These two statements demonstrate extreme forms of relinquishing power, reminiscent of Baudrillard's instructions. They both assign a degree of significance to the *physicality* of the event and allow it to dictate the nature of attention given to the photographic event, which importantly is very little. Delahaye, by secretly concealing the camera, controlling the shutter from his pocket and not looking through a viewfinder and Strba by shutting her eyes. In taking no part in constructing any sort of event other than the decision to press the shutter, one could say that they both 'disappear as a subject.' Beyond the shutter release there is nothing to mark the occasion. There are direct contrasts and similarities in the position of the photographer to the photographed in each case; Delahaye is anonymous; Strba is intimately known. Both positions result in an uneventful

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<sup>34</sup> Evans, Walker, interview with Paul Cummings, recorded at his home in Connecticut, October 13<sup>th</sup> 1971: 'I really disapprove of photographing celebrities... the worst of it is something like Karsh'. pp.37-38

<sup>35</sup> Karsh, Yousuf, *Karsh Portraits*, Boston: NYGS, 1976

<sup>36</sup> Evans, Cummings interview

<sup>37</sup> Strba, *Shades of Time*, p.326

<sup>38</sup> Delahaye, Luc in 'Poetic Transference of Situation' in *L'Autre*. Luc Delahaye, born France, 1962, is known principally as a Magnum documentary photographer. Such series include *Winterriese* documenting contemporary Russia (published London: Phaidon, 2000) and *History 2003* that includes photographs of Iraq, Afghanistan and Ground Zero New York. He received the Robert Capa gold medal in 1993 and 2002 and awarded the Deutsche Borse Photography Prize organised by Photographers' Gallery 2005.



space for depiction, where the photographed subjects are less diminished by the photographer's power.



Fig.32 Luc Delahaye, *Metro series*, 1995-1997

Delahaye has made several portrait series that experiment with photographic properties as a recording process (*Portraits 1* 1996, *Memo* 1997 and *Metro* 1999). Here his series of people seated in the *Metro*, tests Baudrillard's thesis to some extent. Because Delahaye hides himself, 'the image then shows itself for what it is: the exaltation of what the camera sees in its pure self-evidence, without intercession, concession or embellishment. Captured at their simplest and divested of that identity which weighs upon them like a frame, people are for a moment, - the moment of the photograph - absent from their lives, absent from their misfortunes, raised from their misery to the tragic, impersonal figuration of their destiny.'<sup>39</sup> Like Evans, he relinquishes responsibility for any sort of image construction and cannot ultimately 'see' what he is looking at or what the camera is 'seeing'. Having to hide in order to take the image, he is absenting himself from the confrontation and raises questions about who is being objectified here. It is an extraordinary collection of images; they all stare away, vacantly; many are defiant, only a few seem resigned or sad; only some look 'thoughtful'; only three have their eyes closed; none appear to be looking at anything and no one smiles. Following Baudrillard's 'instructions', one would think that this must be the ideal situation, ripe for revealing 'the mask beneath the identity', as there is no intention in the framing by the photographer and yet, Baudrillard comments still: 'There is no bringing these people into psychological 'focus'. We cannot imagine what they are thinking or what their stories might be and we are not in the real presence of the object (the Other).'<sup>40</sup> Catching the person unawares, whilst

<sup>39</sup> Baudrillard, 'Poetic Transference of Situation'

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



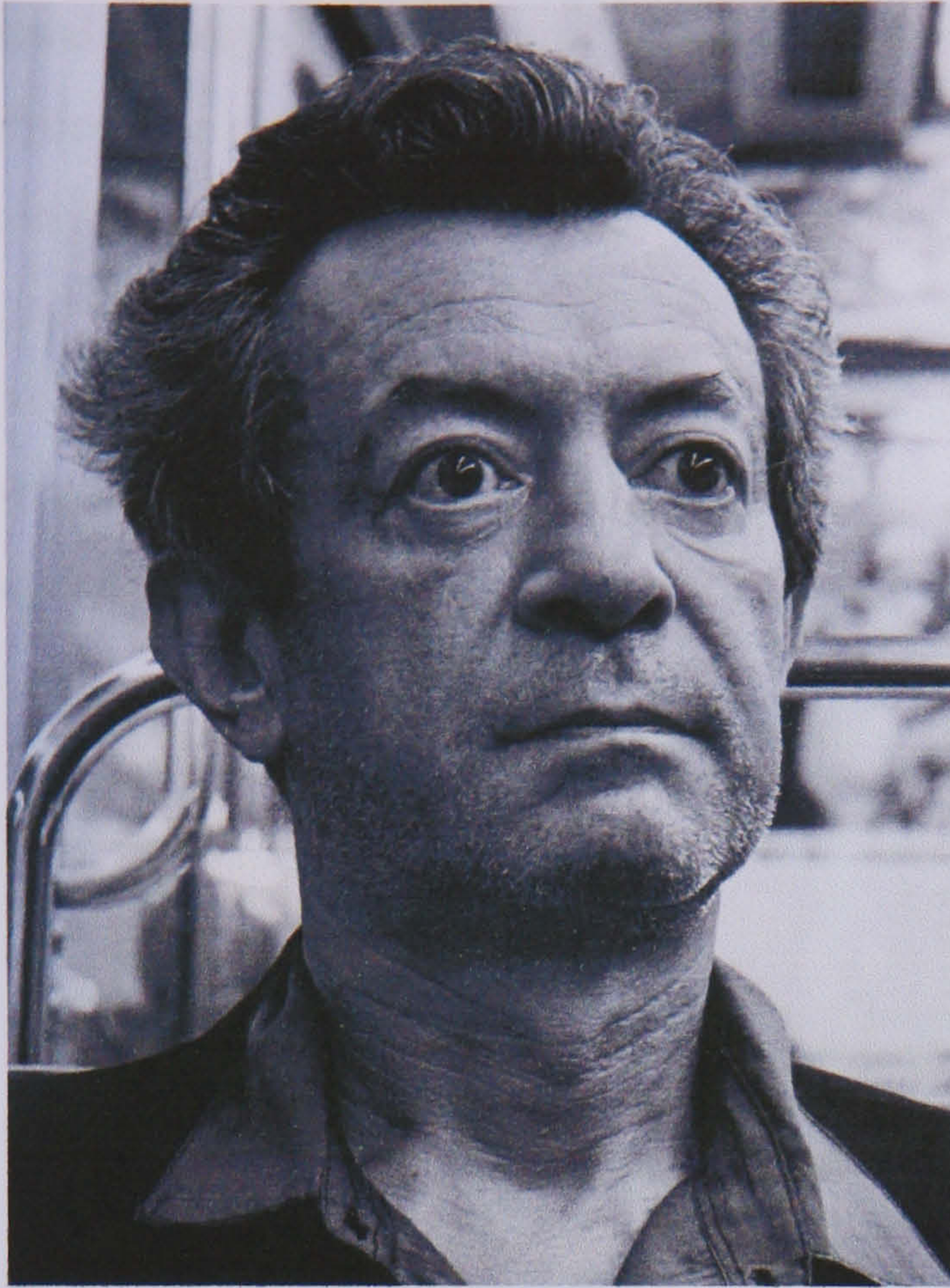


Fig.33 Luc Delahaye, *Metro series*, 1995-1997

producing an intense image of absence, will not define 'psychological focus'; we will not be able to see them or know them or where they are. Each of these series point to the contradictory contrasts, similarities and confusion between subject-object positions and the event of confrontation. In Delahaye's *Metro*, there appears to be contradiction regarding the 'absence' of those photographed who, although the camera is hidden, could be seen to know it is there, if only unconsciously and be complicit in a strange joint enterprise. How can they *not* know that he is taking a photograph of them? Delahaye appears to concede this element of collusion to the point where he mirrors their behaviour: 'I am sitting in front of someone to record his image, the form of evidence, but *just like him I too stare into the distance and feign absence*'.<sup>41</sup> It is the 'non-aggression pact',<sup>42</sup> which explores the unspoken contract; an ironic confrontation of absence-presence between the unself-conscious mask of absence and the presented mask of self-consciousness.

Strba's method of immersing herself in the physicality of taking the photograph is pertinent. The photographer's voice disappears as she abandons both control of the image and of interpretation. As she shuts her eyes, she creates 'a blank region'<sup>43</sup> and absents herself from any 'special' event, giving what is there to be seen literally no attention, thus denying the intention of the 'photographic eye' and allowing the intimacy of the relationships and accident to dictate the eventual image. It is both intimate and anonymous. Using instinct as strategy, she is clearly not driven by observation,<sup>44</sup> but rather the evocation of sensation, of the relationship and what Sonja signifies for her, as mother, rather than appearance and what that might signify for others. Strba side steps the

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> Darr, Jen, Review of *L'Autre*, Philadelphia CityPaperNet, [www.cpcn.com/articles](http://www.cpcn.com/articles)

<sup>43</sup> Baudrillard, 'For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality', pp. 128-142

<sup>44</sup> Morrissey, S., 'Annelies Strba'. *Portfolio*, 29 (1998), p.71. Morrissey suggests that she creates 'photographs out of relationships' not observations.



oppositional display of 'portraiture' between the photographer and the photographed 'subject', yet still confronts the uncertainty of communication, the elusiveness of direct dialogue, the positional separation between individuals. There can be no distance between the photographer and the subject, no objectivity, as both roles are confused and blurred by their shared intimacy. It is a subjective diaristic telling as it integrates the photographer's, Annelies's, self-reflection.<sup>45</sup> Just as Sonja reveals different aspects of herself, of waiting, playing, acting, removing herself, the photographer, Annelies, might also be changing in response to her subject, Sonja.

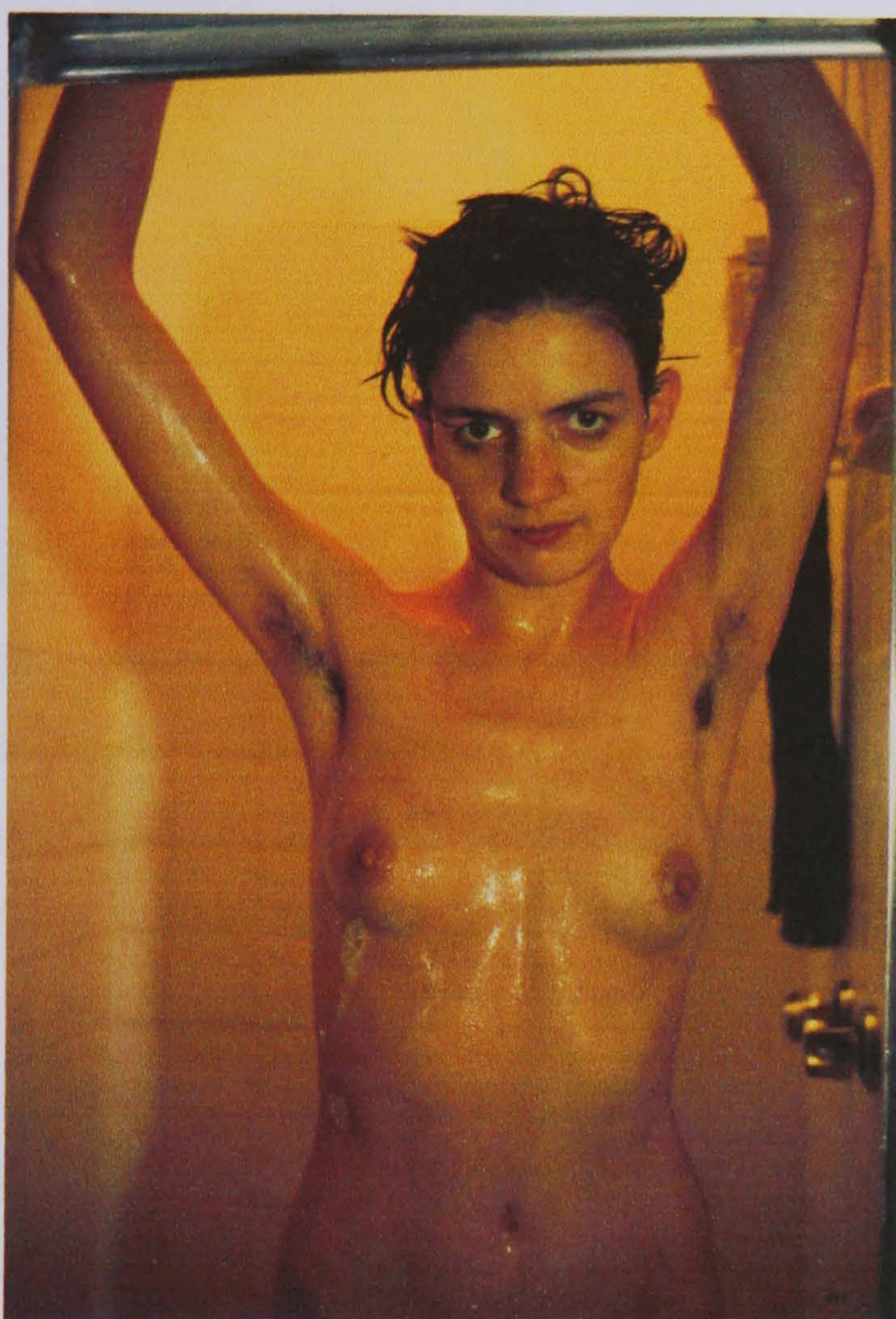


Fig.34 Nan Goldin, *Siobhan the Shower*, NYC, 1991

Looking at series by both Strba and Goldin, it has been helpful to concentrate on just one 'subject'; 'Sonja' and 'Siobhan' respectively, amplifying the focus on the individual, their appearance on each occasion and how different they can be. Goldin's work actively addresses the nature of her relationships and is much more explicit than Strba's. She says that whilst the pictures are specific, the concerns are universal and whilst others may not *look* like these particular individuals, they are about 'others': 'it's about the nature of relationships' rather than what they might look like. Particularly sexual relationships. She talks about people being strangers to each other, of their desire to make relationships, however destructive they might be, of different emotional realities and languages, which cause disruption in relationships. Strba's work provides a tighter arena, a more confined context for characters and a more longstanding and obvious intimacy within the family,

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<sup>45</sup> Strba, A., Extracts from a conversation between Annelies Strba and Crista Ziegler, April 1998, Photographer's Gallery, 1998, [www.photonet.org.uk/programme/past/conversation.html](http://www.photonet.org.uk/programme/past/conversation.html), 13th January, 2001



more specifically associated with the 'snapshot'. They are less eventful than Goldin's images, less shocking, less prone to accusations of objectification<sup>46</sup> and ultimately more ordinary. Both Goldin



Fig.35 Nan Goldin,  
*Siobhan at the  
Paramount Hotel  
NYC, 1993*

and Strba involve a struggle between themselves and their 'subjects' and both invite reciprocal confrontation that produces more equality in the construction of the image. Goldin wants them to 'stare back'; wants them to actively confront her, resulting in images that betray a shared vulnerability where defiance or resentment is barely visible.<sup>47</sup> Strba gets a more complicated response from her daughter, who has a particular investment in her behaviour towards her mother. Strba depicts over years, a one to one struggle of independence and separation. There is an element of flux between performance and non-performance throughout the series, which is not evident in Goldin's work. Strba's work, 'without documentary pretensions',<sup>48</sup> doesn't set out to substantiate anything or prove anything and Goldin strives to view from the inside looking out, as opposed to the outside looking in, as she says documentary does. Their images hold the contradiction of outward and inside views, displaying secret lives and the contradiction of the simplicity and directness of the image summoning meaning. Baudrillard describes the photographic act as a duel; a reciprocal 'dare', where the subject (the photographer) might potentially be defined by the *other* subject. This is nowhere more evident than in Strba's work where each time a different aspect of the photographer is confronted, just as each photographed subject reveals different aspects of themselves despite the achievement of reducing the level of unease in being photographed; waiting, playing, acting, removing oneself.

<sup>46</sup> See Buchloh's discussion of the possibility of victimization of the subject in Buchloh, B.H.D., 'Portraits/Genre: Thomas Struth'. In *Portraits, Thomas Struth*, Mosel, Munich: Schirmer Art Books, 1998, pp. 150-162

<sup>47</sup> Goldin, Nan, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. New York: Aperture Foundation, 1986, p.6

<sup>48</sup> Rakusa, Ilma, *Shades of Time*, 'Annelies Strba's photographs have no documentary pretensions. They do not substantiate individual cases, they do not submit proof that "this is what it was really like". On the contrary they eschew the topos of arresting, of freeing a moment in time, of letting it snap shut. They eschew the historical past.' p.336



In contrast *Metro* shows individuals in an abandoned, separation from us; staring, eyeless, focus-less, somewhere else, with no apparent awareness of being looked at or of the *ab*-normality of the event. In Strba's work, invariably, the subject is looking at her, but not as a photographer, not as a stranger, but in terms of familial involvement, as an extension to themselves. She and, more especially, Goldin have introduced the camera in such a way that allows their 'subjects' to just be.<sup>49</sup> Evans, Delahaye, Goldin and Strba each create conditions that allow the 'subjects' to present themselves and keep the activity crude and uncontrolled.<sup>50</sup> They themselves, have 'disappeared' as interpreting subjects<sup>51</sup> as far as is possible perhaps. Baudrillard's rethinking of the primacy of the subject, of the possibility of objectivity in 'disappearing as subject', suggests an avoidance of an active fabrication of meaning. The methods that these photographers adopt relinquish any room for interpretation or control. The *Metro* and *Subway* series entirely remove the involvement of the subject from those being photographed and, in contradiction, Strba and Goldin achieve the same by their total immersion and involvement with those photographed. All of them take these photographs without calculation or deliberation; they create 'a blank region'. What Baudrillard proposes in theory and what their work performs is that, in the lack of control or search for intentional meaning, perversely meaning is allowed to assert itself and the insignificant comes into its own.<sup>52</sup> The subject-depicted emerges in a different form; is allowed to assume a position without having done anything; the 'poetic transference'.

#### *LOOKING FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL FOCUS: Obscure and Aslant*

Just as we decompose the odour of violets or the taste of tea, each apparently so particular, so inimitable, so ineffable, into several elements whose subtle combination produces the entire identity of the substance, so he realised that the identity of each friend, which made that friend loveable, was based upon a delicately proportioned and henceforth absolutely original combination of tiny characteristics organised in fugitive scenes, from day to day. Thus each friend deployed in his presence the brilliant staging of his originality.<sup>53</sup>

This quote embodies the inability to articulate what might be understood as 'the entire identity of our substance' and that despite this impossibility, there remains in us a compulsion to keep trying. Ulf Lundin<sup>54</sup> and Larry Sultan<sup>55</sup> provide a particular focus within my overall project that tests the possibility of essential photographic description and present me with texts that approach 'original

<sup>49</sup> Goldin, *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, p.6 - 'People in the pictures say my cameras is as much part of being with me as any other aspect of knowing me. It's as if my hand were a camera. If it were possible, I'd want no mechanism between me and the moment of photographing.'

<sup>50</sup> Jean Baudrillard in an interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg in *Art & Artefact*, 1993, p.37

<sup>51</sup> Baudrillard, J., 'The Ecstasy of Photography', in *Art & Artefact*, Zurbrugg, N. London: Sage Publications, 1993, pp.32-42

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography' in Trachtenberg op.cit. p. 202, 'All the artistic preparations of the photographer and all the design in the positioning of the model to the contrary, the viewer feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now...In such a picture, that spark, as it were, burned through the person in the image with reality'.

<sup>53</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977

<sup>54</sup> Ulf Lundin, born in 1965, Sweden. Lives and works in Stockholm.

<sup>55</sup> Larry Sultan, born 1946 New York. Sultan is known for a number of series including *The Valley* 2003 focusing on the San Fernando Valley where he grew up and the subject of pornographic films. In 1977 he and Mike Mandell presented *Evidence*, a series of photographs selected from the files of the Beverly Hills Police Dept. and intended to demonstrate 'objective' photographic evidence as not that simple.



combinations of tiny characteristics organised in fugitive scenes, from day to day'. Each actively quarry scenes of 'everyday life' to effect an overall picture of those photographed. Lundin's series *Pictures of a Family* exemplifies the *deferral* of meaning, apparent in the oblique view<sup>56</sup> and Sultan's *Pictures from Home*<sup>57</sup> describe the desire and search for the ever elusive quality or 'identity of substance'. In terms of psychological focus these are two projects, which in each case include participation of their subjects, but in completely different ways. They both invite collusion in self-description using deliberate staging. In terms of a wider debate, both projects actively 'discuss' the issues of authorship and artistic intention.



Figs. 36 & 37 Ulf Lundin, *Pictures of a Family series*, 1996

Lundin's project seeks to observe 'family life' from a distance. Given permission to photograph an old school friend, whenever he liked as long as they were unaware he was doing so, presents a

<sup>56</sup> Derrida in Kearney, Richard, *Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers*, Manchester University Press, 1984, 'to deconstruct a text is to disclose how it functions as desire, as a search for presence and fulfilment which is interminably deferred'.

<sup>57</sup> Sultan, Larry, *Pictures From Home*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992



contradictory take on anonymity and an ironic form of voyeurism. In this series, there is no communication between the observed and the observer, and yet it seems to highlight some perspective of the relationship between these two. The images themselves point to the striking separation between the individuals depicted and quite literally the rarity of direct communication, the isolation and the independence of their existence, from each other and from us, which the photographic strategy parallels metaphorically. The man always appears to be solitary. He rarely appears to look at anyone else or talk to anyone else, is often walking away from others and doesn't interact with others. He looks downwards always, to what he is doing, is involved in whatever he does. The woman is generally more outwardly engaged, sitting down talking to someone else or occupied with the child whilst he carries on. A number of the images highlight this position of divergence; he is in front and facing right, turning the meat over on the barbecue while she is behind and walking to the left and speaking. [fig.6] He stands still, she moves away behind him. They present a double take on the contradiction of intimacy and anonymity. Intimate in that this man was Lundin's friend in childhood. Intimate in that Lundin must now be familiar with the personal detail and particularity of their behaviour, relationships and peculiarities. Anonymous in that we don't know who this man is or where he is and he doesn't know when Lundin is there looking at him. This is a complicit contract of voyeuristic indulgence and imploded narcissism. It is an example of a photographic 'project', which implicitly understands the questionable position of subject supremacy and the norm of objectification, which Baudrillard is concerned to expose. In literally hiding from his subjects, Lundin embodies the 'subject's last adventure'. What it tells me about 'family life' is fascinating but predictable, as opposed to what it says about the 'the emptiness and fragility of exchange'<sup>58</sup> as it illuminates the nature of the photographic encounter in its very absence. The strategy refuses the essential point of self-constitution – in an exchange with others, and literally presents 'the unseen site of representation',<sup>59</sup> rendering it meaningless in Lundin's absence. It asserts that anonymity, 'subtracts' not only the 'presence' of the subjects-depicted, but also that of the photographer. With regard to the subjects-depicted, the nature of the photographic event prompts questions about not only their relationship between themselves and the photographer, but also between themselves and their own image. Do they forget that Lundin will be sometimes there, just not knowing when? Or do they behave differently or a little self consciously all the time? Is the man, the main 'character', performing? Is he playing the lone hero? Does he subconsciously 'frame' himself as a normal part of his life now? And Lundin, is he aware of himself as he photographs them, comparing himself, his life? Does he see a part of himself in this man, some aspect at least?<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Baudrillard, 'Poetic Transference of Situation'

<sup>59</sup> Baudrillard, 'For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality...' p.133

<sup>60</sup> Ulf Lundin, Photographer's Gallery - [www.photonet.org.uk/programme\\_past](http://www.photonet.org.uk/programme_past) - 'the security of his life appalls and attracts me at the same time. It is difficult to point a finger at the choices (if we made any) which have determined our present lives'.



In contrast, Sultan confronts his subjects (his parents) and actively involves them in the project. They argue about it, they do not understand what he is trying to achieve and yet they try to do their best for him and what ensues is a series of photographs and dialogue that relates this delightful conflict. The book describes a number of things: the conflict and relationship between his mother and father, the conflict and difference of perspective between himself and his parents, particularly his father, different notions of what a picture should or should not describe, the consequent response to the photographer and an account that describes the letting go of 'trying to make pictures'.<sup>61</sup>

She was lying on her stomach with her head turned towards me. I was so apprehensive of waking her that I breathed in rhythm with her. Standing at the foot of the bed, I realised that I had never seen the underside of her foot. I had my camera, so I photographed it. I could see the slight grass stains from walking barefoot that morning to the lake. I wanted to photograph it again and again, to use up the entire roll of film.) Then it struck me that she was not really asleep. That her breathing, like mine, was controlled. We were co-conspirators. Just as I was secretly photographing, she was secretly awake. She felt me looking.<sup>62</sup>

Sultan presents a parallel text to that of the photographs, in the form of a self-conscious commentary on his aims and desires, a diary that logs his experience in a direct way without qualitative comment. Most of it is, day-to-day description, quite tedious and predictable as any ordinary life might be. Irv and Jean, alongside each other, both trying to make a life for themselves in retirement.<sup>63</sup> It gets more interesting when they start talking about each other: his perception of her behaviour and then, her perception of his behaviour, his irritation, her irritation. A familiar tale after a lifetime together, but fascinating in its detailed dialogue that relates parallel and contradictory versions. Sultan's original project was to look at what happens when corporations discard loyal employees and the resulting frustration. But it quickly becomes more simply about his relationship with his father and mother. Sultan desperately tries to contrive a reality for himself, reflected in the life of his parents and, in his attempt, highlights the misinterpretation of what the same activity might mean for the photographer and the depicted-subjects. It is an uncomfortable time for him. He is trying to find some sort of position; what his parents are like *for him*. But he's so busy constructing images that they become something else. In trying to recreate something that approaches, for him, 'that brief moment between thoughts when you forget yourself' or the ideal

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<sup>61</sup> Sultan, *Pictures from Home*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992, p.16

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-105

His mother: 'Those newspapers of his drive me crazy. The big investor. I don't think he ever reads them. If he kept them in his study that would be fine, but they're all over the dining room table and the living room table and the kitchen counter. They're stacked on the floor by the bed, on the living room chair, on the stool in the kitchen. Do you know that we eat on those papers? They have become our dining mats. I'm serious.'

His father: 'She'll be having her juice and while she drinks it she looks out the window. She'll start talking but I'm not sure if it's me or to herself. She says that she has to call this person or that person and do this particular thing. Throughout the day she'll walk round the house saying this, and I hear it so often that I find myself getting sucked in.'





Figs. 38 - 40 Larry Sultan,  
*Pictures from Home series*,  
1992

vision that resides in his memory, he constructs instead what Sultan describes as images with that 'steely eyed look', 'penetrating but impenetrable', indicative of the performance space of the pose. A space where the subject prepares her/himself and presents it as a spectacular mask of being; out there and nowhere.

In the experience of being photographed, Barthes actively revels in the event, whereas Sultan's father, Irv, loses animation and freezes: 'All I know is that when you photograph me I feel everything leave me. The blood drains from my face, my eyelids droop. My thoughts disappear. I can feel my facial muscle go limp. All you have to do is to give me that one cue. "Don't smile." and zap. Nothing. That's what you get.'<sup>64</sup> In being photographed by his son, Irv is trying to be what he imagines Larry wants him to be and in turn, Larry wants him to be what he imagines Irv as

<sup>64</sup> Irv in Sultan, *Pictures from Home*, p.113



being. They both project a vision that will never match up.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, his mother, in a desperate attempt to please, and Larry, in his attempt to capture, proceed through an intimate farce of pretence. He relates encounters that describe the mismatch of perception of them by him, and of him by them, 'she appears to me differently from how she feels; I feel differently from how I look.' The photographs are taken amidst this conflict and are enlivened by the argument. Ultimately the debate regarding understanding and communication is the point, and determines the body of imagery.



'I look at the pictures I've made and I don't know whom I was photographing. It looks like my father but it feels like me.'<sup>66</sup> Sultan here asks the question that might be asked about any photographer of things familial and intimate: is any quest to look at others, close to oneself, ultimately a study of the self? In even responding to others, does one inevitably reveal different aspects of oneself? Each time 'subject' confronts 'subject', another side of each is revealed. Each invents the other; they run in parallel. Sultan's parents exemplify the experience of constituting themselves in the manner of their son's imagination and memory. As Barthes states 'I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it... No doubt it is metaphorically that I derive my existence from the photographer.'<sup>67</sup> And following Barthes, as he invariably does, Baudrillard's

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.113

Irv: 'I don't know what you are doing. You seem to be just as confused as I am. I mean, you pussyfoot around; half of the time the tape recorder doesn't work and you want me to repeat conversations that occurred spontaneously, and on the other hand you take the same pictures over and over again and you're still not happy with the results. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me. I don't know what you're after. What's the big deal?'

Larry: 'A lot of the time it doesn't make sense to me neither. All I know is that every time I try to make a photograph, you give me that steely-eyed look. You know it; penetrating but impenetrable, tough and in control. Or you shove your hands in your pockets and gaze off into some mythical future, which for some reason is about 45 degrees to my left. It's like you're acting the role of the heroic executive in an annual report...Maybe you're looking for a public image of yourself and I 'm interested in something more private, in what happens between events - that brief moment between thoughts when you forget yourself.'

Irv: 'All I know is that when you photograph me I feel everything leave me. the blood drains from my face, my eyelids droop. My thoughts disappear. I can feel my facial muscle go limp. All you have to do is to give me that one cue. "Don't smile." and zap. Nothing. That's what you get.'

<sup>66</sup> Sultan, Larry, 'Reflections on a Home Movie'. *Aperture* 103, pp.32-34

<sup>67</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.11



pessimistic view comes to pass that we look for meaning for ourselves in others and by asking others to define meaning for us: 'Tell me what I am, tell me what I desire, tell me what I think'.

Marianne Hirsch has demonstrated the importance of a late twentieth century foregrounding of family photography and its cultural role. Just as family snaps normally follow conventions and support dominant ideologies, so Sultan's work, whilst seeking to undermine this kind of familial function by looking for something more private, exposes the conflict deeply embedded in his parent's concern to maintain their own vision of what an image of themselves should be. Hirsch refers to the complexity of *the look* in these photographs, of there being 'an infinitely multiple and contradictory series of looks' and a 'complex exchange of looks and gazes'.<sup>68</sup> If we extend this use of the word *look* to include the agenda behind the look, then we can see the enormity of misunderstanding and cross transaction inherent in Sultan's project. Sultan, in attempting to question and utilise the family picture and its established convention replaces one tradition with that of modernist transcendence and returns us to the use of objects to describe an inner meaning; 'a quest for presence' or 'a mythic identification of himself in others'.<sup>69</sup> He appears to seek an image, which is *about* something; 'about memory and reflection, like looking back on your life.'<sup>70</sup> In an indirect way, Sultan perpetuates this 'modernist privileging of inner depth over external appearance'<sup>71</sup> in his appropriation and use of his parents to describe something in himself. He acknowledges this irony to some extent: 'It's only when I give up trying to make pictures and begin to enjoy the time spent with them that anything of value ever happens', but despite this, he persists in trying to achieve some definitive moment,<sup>72</sup> some metaphoric insight: 'I am waiting around for an ending' and 'The image I had in mind seems to be about memory and reflection, like looking back on your life' and Irv puts his finger on it: 'Oh Jesus, not another one of those'.<sup>73</sup>

Aslant: Whatever pertinence there happens to be comes only in the margins, the interpolations, the parenthesis, *aslant*: it is the subject's voice *off*, as we say, off camera, off microphone, off stage.<sup>74</sup>

In *Roland Barthes*, Barthes traverses meaning in notions of interruption, shortcutting, parenthesis, inflection, duplicity, and looks at what is said and not said and what remains undefined. He talks in the third person about himself, exemplifying a subjective self-appraisal that in itself shortcuts and contradicts self-reflection *and* perception by others. Lundin's project similarly presents us with a

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<sup>68</sup> Hirsch, Marianne, 'Introduction: Familial Looking'. In *The Familial Gaze*, Dartmouth College: University Press of New England, 1999, p.xvi

<sup>69</sup> Phillips, David, 'Photo-Logos: Photography and Deconstruction', in *The Subjects of Art History*, Cheetham, Holly and Moxey, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.166.- gives a concise critique of Steiglitz's work as typical of the photographic philosophy of 'presence'.

<sup>70</sup> Sultan, *Pictures from Home*, p.119

<sup>71</sup> Phillips, 'Photo-Logos: Photography and Deconstruction', p.165

<sup>72</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (1952), 'I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strung up and ready to pounce, determined to 'trap' life - to preserve life in the act of living. Above all, I crave to seize the whole essence, in the confines of one single photograph, of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes.'

<sup>73</sup> 'Irv' in *Pictures from Home*, p.119

<sup>74</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Roland Barthes* [1975], trans. Richard Howard, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1977, p.73



fragmentary 'aslant' view; his view (perception) of this 'other' is indirect and covert, whilst the resulting photograph is clear, 'straight' and overt, which similarly shortcuts both view and vision. Baudrillard suggests that 'poetic order requires that the event should not exactly take place'<sup>75</sup> and that there should be a 'fracture in this excessively well-crafted machinery of presentation'.<sup>76</sup> I would argue that Lundin's oblique, sideways look at the appearance of an individual, rather than Sultan's more active search for depth, reveals more of that individual. Ultimately Sultan's careful management returns us to strategic attempts to achieve photographic transcendence as a 'means for keeping social relations to an abstraction'.<sup>77</sup> In so doing, he disallows the messiness, the uncertainty, the interference of contradiction and obscurity and struggles to maintain his own position of power by an 'assertion of subjective and symbolic effect' in the face of his parents' struggle to assert something else. Sultan chooses to determine and construct the 'entire identity' of his parents but effects something else entirely. In seeking intimacy or interaction, he arrives at himself – ultimately distance. He is an example of an author who doesn't disappear – he *appears* as the subject.

Both series spotlight two crucial aspects of the photographic portrait: the position and relation of photographer to 'subject' and the grand photographic project of revealing the 'true identity' behind appearance. They question the power and specialness of the photographer as author and expose its fragility. They suggest alternative positions for the subject in relation to the viewer and alternative notions of 'reality' than one that relies on resemblance. It begs the question: if we were to explore *mere* appearance, rather than seeking essence, what might we find? Kristeva describes two models for organising fictive signification based on two 'dialogical categories';<sup>78</sup> the first between subject and addressee (reader), which determines the nature of genre; and the second between subject-photographer and subject-depicted, which determines the *manner* of enunciating (constructing) the photographic statement. The use of respective pronouns, if translated into the context of photographic portrayal, better explains the particular metaphoric activity: the use of 'he/she', the impersonal pronoun, introduces a degree of anonymity and negation in depiction (Delahaye). The use of 'I' in narration increasingly and figuratively inserts the author alongside the subject as with Evans and Goldin and, at its extreme, literally embeds narration in the characters depicted. Nikki S.Lee's *Projects* [fig.4] depict her after having infiltrated an identifiable community, adopted an appropriate persona and 'having become' one with her subjects. She thus incorporates the cultural codes of each group. An author's projection can sometimes take an inverted form, where in some instances it is difficult to discriminate one story from another; Sultan's narration is disrupted not only by his father's dialogue but by the images themselves that answer back. Where the staging is openly displayed and impersonal, the collusion between author and addressee is shared and the

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<sup>75</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'It is the Object that Thinks Us', p.150

<sup>76</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'For Illusion is not the Opposition of Reality', p.133

<sup>77</sup> Phillips, 'Photo-Logos: Photography and Deconstruction', p.165

<sup>78</sup> 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' in *Desire in Language* describes and analyses the work of Mikhail Bakhtin p.86



fiction is tangible, if not visible and evident. The addressee is then privy to the quotation, irony or commentary, as with Jeff Wall who often makes art historical references such as to Manet or Hokusai.<sup>79</sup> In complete contrast to this is the careful and self-conscious standoff strategy whereby the 'subject' is given strict mechanical parameters<sup>80</sup> that strip the event of expression or removes contact altogether (von Zwehl, Yokomizo).

## CONCLUSIONS

Part One establishes the portrait as an *event*, rather than moment and as a manifestation of exchange dependent on *process*, rather than any system that implies or desires immutability. I identify positions for photographer, subject and reader that facilitate alternatives to objectification or the didactic and definitive and Kristeva's dialogical matrix as providing a frame that incorporates process, participation or forms of disappearance. The degree of complicity and participation in the relationship between the protagonists is established as determining, implicitly or explicitly, dialogic modes of exchange. The range of perspectives described in this section are located in relation to the material example of practice and demonstrate a developing correlation between verbal and visual ideas.

In the light of Derrida's discontinuous self-division and Sartre's affective sense, one can see that portrayal encompasses the notion that the manner of rhetoric must necessarily describe our attitude to the world, which in consequence suggests that qualities in the photograph are inserted by us in feeling and response, rather than by the photographer. Kristeva forefronts qualities that are only evident in intonation and not in the literal substance or 'thing', which confirms dimensions besides indexical reference. Baudrillard hints at the immanence inhabiting the material of the photograph, rather than a transcendence imposed by our pretensions. Levinas's metaphor 'face' introduces the notion of a conceptual space reliant on senses other than vision and Derrida's performative reading engenders a conceptual framework of qualities, which Sartre's 'order of qualities' begins to articulate as a form of concept-idea-feeling-quality. Thus each inserts a conceptual element that is both material and abstract, both graspable and ineffable and suggests the possibility of an alternative imperative to that of 'resemblance'.

Disruption of the portrait genre identifies a need for other modes of describing photographs of people. I have stated that the mode of 'intention', the inclusion or removal of particularity, the nature of interaction and the level of commentary are determining factors in understanding photographs differently, but the concomitant transformation of the particular into the dimension of 'something more' as symbol is difficult to avoid. A recurrent theme is that of the conflict between

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<sup>79</sup> Jeff Wall, born Canada 1946. Lives and works in Vancouver. In 2001. In 1977 he began making backlit Cibachrome transparencies and since 1991 has used digital technology. His photographs are typically staged like a scene in a film and are therefore operate like fiction.

<sup>80</sup> See for example Bettina von Zwehl's elaborate procedures where subjects wear uniform apparel and are told to hold their breath.



this urge to find universal meaning beyond the self (to reduce alterity by making it knowable) and the compulsion towards inexplicable areas that invite a more dangerous encounter, suggesting a practice that is not reliant on words, not ruled by logic or literal translation and which does not fixedly determine meaning by naming but courts territories of the unknown. Levinas acknowledges the value of *not* knowing and the possibility and opportunity of the mystery residing in the particular without universal meaning. Part Two aims to identify how such unknowable qualities might be formed and manifested and how ‘meaningful’ images are constructed in an arena that entertains uncomfortable and uncertain content, determined by the mobility and multiplicity of those involved in the process. I pursue the possibility of generating ‘ideas’, of presenting ‘something more’ without neutralising or idealising and the possibility of exploring photographs in a way that retains the particular event or process, as an alternative to transcendence.



## PART TWO: CONSTRUCTIONS OF RESONANCE

### Introduction

In Part Two, I examine ideas that contribute to an explanation for non-definitive meaning; those elements that remain ineffable in an image. Common to a number of theoretical fields concerning visual signification, is an area, which appears to remain in parenthesis. It is referred to as being certain in its existence, but undefined in structure. It concerns the aspect of potency in visual imagery that is not transparent to meaning. Its location is (bracketed off), to the side or insignificantly placed, not universally understood and not consistent. It occupies an area that precisely makes visual meaning not a language in the manner of a linguistic system, because it is ungraspable, elusive and too 'replete.'<sup>1</sup> Its existence provokes an array of terminology unique to particular ideological frames. In this discussion it is named variously as *pure meaning* (Barthes), *sans* (Derrida); its place is *punctum* (Barthes), *parergon*, (Derrida), *interstices* (Levinas); its function is *catalyser*, metonym, metaphor; its motivation is *semiotic* (Kristeva). Each term contributes a means to describe the ineffable and to indicate the whereabouts of a reverberating potency that is critical but evades definition.

I examine the manner in which photographs construct a discourse by means of their visual dynamics. I review the respective mechanisms of meaning and the indescribable and the role of each in the contemporary portrait, not with the aim to define or contain in a categorical structure but to recognise and expose. Attempting to grasp elusive ideas about ineffability, I aim to examine the intrinsic dynamic in the photograph that is neither a support for narrative interpretation nor explained by being 'transcendent' and give emphasis to immanent property instead. Narrative could be said to be the anti-thesis of the ineffable as it orders and sequences the anarchy of detail. I look at alternatives to this understanding, to procedures that are more discursive than decisive and ask how does the image articulate the implicit?

'CONTEXTS' establishes a rationale for my use of the key term 'resonance', which signifies aspects of quality that defy definitions such as beauty and suggests the possibility of the photograph being more akin to a rhythm than a thing. Poststructuralism has had a profound effect on the interpretations of meaning and in this regard, I contextualise this examination of the photograph (not specifically portrait) as being influenced by Derrida's procedures of deconstruction. I discuss the significance of *differance* as the dynamic that decentres both the reading and the making of images that encourages dispersal, process and dialogue and which denies narrative and definition in images. 'THE FUNCTION OF DETAIL', specifically explores

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<sup>1</sup> For useful distinctions between representation and language or the complexities in visual depiction see Goodman, Nelson, *The Languages of Art*, Indianapolis: New York: Kansa City: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc. p.41 and p.230



the dynamics of the *parergon*, the subjective dimensions of *punctum* and the workings of metonym that inhabit them. I argue for the essential role of detail in contributing the element that defies definition, that can elevate the image to something more than narrative. In 'THE MECHANICS OF METAPHOR', I correlate *differance* with theories of metaphor and proceed to look at how metonymic procedure opens up the possibility further to metaphor in allegorical systems within the image, in 'conceptual schema'.



## Chapter One: CONTEXTS

### *RESONANCE SANS SENSE*

Before looking at the operations of meaning in the photograph, I consider the naming of elements that cannot be quantified, that problematise the relationship between sense and meaning. One such habitual name is 'beauty', which I translate generally to indicate at least a property of potency: a quality that is carried in the 'thing' (photograph), but cannot be named as present, because it cannot be separated from the whole in order to be articulated. As a quality of experience it may yet retain a purpose or validation for artwork, but is clearly an outmoded term in the context of contemporary art photography, which commonly incorporates ideas of absurdity, fiction and irony as its foundation. Its use in relation to the non-definitive qualities of image that I am examining, confronts the need for a more suitable term with which to measure description. Derrida's disturbance of Kant's notion of 'beauty', and particularly the implications of 'sans', introduces the role of concept over appearance and suggests alternative possibilities for an understanding of how elusive qualities operate.

In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida follows texts by Kant and Heidegger to question firstly, what determines our notion of art and aesthetics, and secondly, what elements within a work determine its quality, what elements can be judged as fulfilling aesthetic criteria (what is 'beautiful'?) He troubles terms in order to disentangle them from the ideologies that forge them and to undermine the preoccupation with 'presence' and 'beauty' in aesthetic discourse. The term 'beauty' confronts a number of assumptions and mis-directions in the discussion of meaning for the contemporary context. Attempts to locate any elusive quality require criteria to establish its limits, and by definition are doomed to tautology and contradiction. For example Kant's criteria are fundamentally problematic as they do not entirely define the quality that is being described and Kant himself indicates a number of contradictions to his own premise.<sup>1</sup> It seems that the limits of his criteria demand another dimension to the quality he describes; they are too logical, too restrictive and too loaded with subsequent connotations allied to pleasure and 'pleasing'. Derrida's essay 'Parergon'<sup>2</sup> exposes contradictions permeating the boundaries of 'beauty', and a language that struggles to explain visual conditions, properties, qualities and meaning that are non-verbal, that are intrinsically non-linear and which resist structures determined by language. Derrida identifies an area of essential non-logic, which does not conform to the requirements of definition,

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790), trans. James Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952: 'To discern what is beautiful, It is a judgement, not a cognitive judgement, nor one pertaining to knowledge, but of imagination. Therefore not logical – it is an aesthetic judgement which means the determining ground cannot be other than subjective', p.41. And having set the boundaries of what determines beauty he concedes: 'The real meaning is that they (tones, colours) make this form more clearly, definitely, and completely intuitable, and beside stimulate the representation by their charm, as they excite and sustain the attention directed to the object itself.' p.68, § 226

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, Jacques, 'Parergon' in *The Truth in Painting* (1978), trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp.37-82



but do depend on the principle of *parergonic* logic, which is contradictory. This is a quality that pervades rather than situates itself.

Neither does the term 'sublime' suffice as it requires a significance of magnitude or veneration, which does not fit the kind of quality to be found in a detail, and does not satisfy the manner of quality that I am seeking to describe. 'Sublime' is that which is un-representable<sup>3</sup> but that we can imagine; neither noumenal and outside of our experience, nor phenomenal and in the world as it appears to us. Accession of the unarticulated quality to the height of the sublime omits whole areas of possibility. If sublimity is a *state* that is ineffable, it cannot be depicted. This differentiates itself from what I am concerned with – aspects of something that *is* depicted and yet is ineffable (in the sense of indescribable). A photograph such as Evans's *Allie Mae Burroughs* (1936) might qualify as an example where 'the expression of which all possible words are unsuitable'.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it is necessary to distinguish between those photographs that display unspeakable objects / things / events, and photographs that either *amplify* these qualities in the thing, or *construct* such qualities. However, a photograph of a person presents a conflation of this difference, in the 'subject' *and* in the photograph *of* the subject, and elusive qualities in the person become elusive qualities in the image. In simple terms, the ineffable can be described as meaning that operates in an arena that is not confined to speech. A more suitable term then might be 'indescribable', which allows for the possibility of speaking of an ineffable state whilst incorporating an acceptance of incompleteness and not necessarily 'truthful' states. A configuration of ineffable as states or things (actual or possible) that cannot be linguistically expressed, 'about the nature of which nothing literal can be said',<sup>5</sup> moves toward the boundaries of the literal/figural as a key concern.

Indescribable qualities *are* visually representable, can be experienced but are difficult to grasp and describe completely or adequately. The indescribable resides *in* the image and is immanent rather than transcendent in the sense of above and beyond experience and the mundane world. Thus 'transcendence' is a problematic term, which whilst it is used to distinguish work that surpasses the object depicted and is often applied to Evans's work for example, it becomes a generalised and meaningless term that encompasses all manner of meaning from the everyday to the metaphysical. In order to chase the indefinable quality that is *not* bound by logic or limitation, I need another term that retains potency but encompasses divergent non-logical forms that can sustain boundless simultaneity of meaning in a photograph. It will need to be essentially self-referential and not dependent on the achievement of finality, but to admit qualities of disturbance and mobility. Using Derrida's examination in 'The Sans of the Pure Cut',<sup>6</sup> I shall firstly outline elements of property,

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<sup>3</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 119. The notion of the 'sublime' is extensively discussed in Wassenberg, Martin, *Tracing the Sublime, Transcendental Subjectivity from Burke to Lyotard*, 2000 (unpublished, accessed Hallward Library, University of Nottingham)

<sup>4</sup> Kennick, W.E. in *E of Philosophy*, p.181

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, 'The Sans of the Pure Cut' in *The Truth in Painting*, pp.83-118



which, if the references to 'beauty' were removed, appears to indicate an opaque quality that is not transparent to meaning and that approaches the ineffable.

It is the *without* that counts for beauty; neither the finality nor the end, neither the lacking goal nor the lack of goal but the edging in the *sans* of the pure cut.<sup>7</sup>

Derrida amplifies aspects of Kant's descriptions that are tantalisingly close to an opaque quality; terminology that emphasises lack rather than possession, such as 'non-knowledge', 'without end' and 'vague beauty'. Kant's 'adherent beauty' refers to universal qualities that are generally recognised, whereas 'free' or 'vague' beauty is singular and depends on wayward and indeterminate qualities that emerge from perhaps an 'insignificant detail', and approaches that 'errant' but potent quality that I am talking about. Derrida agitates this and Kant's third moment<sup>8</sup> that significantly relies on figurative expression to clarify the difficulty of naming its properties and which determines 'beautiful' as work that has finality but does not represent a purpose. He acquires, as metaphor for the beautiful, the wild tulip 'in which the *without-end* or the *without-concept* of finality is revealed' and everything about it 'seems finalised...seems to be organised with a view to an end'.<sup>9</sup> Derrida spotlights those spaces (the *sans*, the 'without' concept, the without purpose) that lie in-between the more easily definable bits, words that reference a fundamental state of indeterminacy attached to the concept of beauty, to be found in what is *not* described, what is *lacking*. Derrida's 'logic' proceeds to explain that if the wild tulip can only be beautiful *without* a purpose, but appears to strive towards one, it is the *without* and the *lack*, which are essential to the property of 'beauty'. 'Beauty' depends on the 'absolute interruption' of this end and, if this 'cut' and interruption were not absolute, 'if it could be prolonged, completed, supplemented, there would be no beauty'. *Sans* is not a lack in a negative sense therefore, as it is a *required* property of what is termed 'beautiful'.<sup>10</sup>

Rational ideas (like that of beauty) require common accord and some sort of ideal that can conform to objective judgement. The '*sans* of the pure cut' interrupts the process of idealisation and differentiates pure property, the simple condition from the ideal. The *sans* is that wayward un-pin-downable element that adds something, or takes definition away and the ability to define it away. We end up with a set of essential oppositions: either the ideal of the imagination *or* pure property, either adherent and comprehensible *or* 'vague', either with end *or* without end, either sense *or sans* sense *or* nonsense. The opposition between what is held to be beautiful in the ideal concept and what is held as beautiful in the *particular*. 'Beauty' presupposes a 'particular end' *as if* ideal, *as if* purposeful. Everything seems *as if* perfect, *as if* organised and natural but is 'cut off' before

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 89. Derrida's use of word *sans* accesses sense (intelligent), sense (phenomenal), non-sense, sense *sans* sense (without reference).

<sup>8</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, pp.61-80

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.85 refers to the reference by Kant - 'a tulip is regarded as beautiful, because we meet with a certain finality in its perception, which in our estimate of it, is not referred to any end whatever.' (Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p.80)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87



achieving totality.’<sup>11</sup> ‘The essential thing’ is edgy hesitant and ambivalent, its nearness to purpose is on the edge of purpose, as it strains towards it. Derrida’s ‘logic’, of potency in lack and purposelessness, leads us toward an interesting, provocative conclusion, that artworks, by not applying themselves ‘to signify, show or represent’<sup>12</sup> may be the only ‘freely wandering beauties’. A *non*-oppositional effect emphasises the divide between logic and non-logic, qualities of purposelessness and non-knowledge threaten the conceptual schema of ‘beauty’ and yet share some of the properties. Derrida is attracted to the negativity or what opposes that urge to complete and the fluidity of a quality existing in what is *not* there – the *without*. Derrida’s never ending allusion to the phenomenon of non-opposition, overflow, addition, supplement is equivalent to that which cannot be described adequately. The lack is the inexplicable and *without* naming it, essentially he is describing the ineffable quality that *affects* us.

In terms of the photograph the ‘without end’ (purpose) is pertinent to the accidental property of the photograph, which incorporates whatever the camera is ‘pointed’<sup>13</sup> toward, indiscriminately; the ‘without end’ (termination) is pertinent to its ‘naturally’ endless connotation; the ‘lack’ is pertinent to the propensity of the photograph to refer to what is absent; the ‘sense without reference’ is pertinent to the contradictory fact that the photograph is tied to the referent, despite attempts to divorce it and ‘without’ points to a direction in contemporary photography to leave out and deny content or authorship. These characteristics confirm the peculiar property of the photograph, rather than striving to contain it. *Sans*, the property of *without*, switches emphasis from what is there and can be described to what is not there and provides a context for the formulation of an aesthetic (not of beauty), which becomes important to aspects of contemporary art photography and will be further discussed in Section Three. Three key distinctions of the ineffable recur; the hiatus between showing and telling, presenting and describing (*Sonja’s* ambivalence); the gap between content (what is there) and the form of the content – how *Allie Mae Burroughs* is inscrutable; the concepts associated with ineffable that straddle borders as with metaphor, *sans* and as will be seen *figure*.

To insist on the musicality of every image is to see in an image its detachment from an object... as though a sensation free from all conception.<sup>14</sup>

Levinas articulates a sensation of meaning that does not require a criterion of location. His perspective on the ‘image of sound’<sup>15</sup> suggests a means of finding suitable terminology. Levinas’s ‘rhythm’ accesses senses other than sight and removes experience from one that depends on language and sight to one that suggests a dimension of reverberation and tone reminiscent of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 89

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.97

<sup>13</sup> Derrida’s rhetoric exploits, for example the word ‘pointure’ to explore what ‘point’ is habitually sought, what is ‘point-less’ in the search for meaning and what is ‘point-less’ in the image.

<sup>14</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, ‘Reality and its Shadow’, in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (1948), trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983, p.5

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 5



Kristeva's *semiotic*: 'Sound is the quality most detached from an object. Its relation with the substance from which it emanates is not inscribed in its quality. It resounds impersonally. Even its timbre, a trace of its belonging to an object, is submerged in its quality, and does not retain the structure of a relation'.<sup>16</sup>

'Rhythm' refers to the 'sensible and the imaginary' and does not constrain or contain inherent criteria.<sup>17</sup> It emphasises instead affect and response over 'what is' intrinsic in the work. It suggests that 'poetic order affects us'<sup>18</sup>, imposes itself on us and by our passive submission to it, forces us to participate. It conjoins the 'I-actor' (who is active) with the 'I-spectator' (who is passive), so that the subject becomes 'a part of the spectacle'. Sensation, a 'function of rhythm', is a 'category independent from substance', not a residue of perception but an alternative means of perception. Levinas's 'sounding' destroys the possibility of our apprehending a 'thing' or a 'subject' and thus destroys the question – 'what is this about?' It suggests another dimension of meaning that is more active, concerned with how and what is happening, more of a *process*. The dilemma is how to 'tell' of this kind of meaning, what methods to employ that come anywhere near articulating it. Roquentin's experience<sup>19</sup> highlights the realisation that words do not define what actually occurred at all. They are not the equivalent of, and can only be another version or distortion of, experience. Levinas's imposition of the world of objects on us, making us participants, together with the photographic property of simultaneity and absence and an apprehension more akin to sound rather than sight, contributes to an entirely different plane of reference. *What happens* is not the same as *what is*. *What is*, is not the same as *what it is 'about'*. The notion of rhythm, sound and reception in passive participation is far removed from the intentional determination to 'grasp' an object, a thing, a *what-is*. This is the arena that asks: what is a sensation rather than what is a 'thing'. The participation of the viewer-subject effects 'a reversal of power into participation,' an involvement of a 'sphere situated outside of the conscious and unconscious', one of 'rhythm and dreams'. The image 'as a rhythm' and belonging to another dimension of interaction with reality, is a 'disincarnation of reality' that disallows the possibility of us (as subjects who 'normally' dominate objects) 'capturing' reality. The condition of rhythm heralds an alternative to the hierarchy of subject/object, reminiscent of Baudrillard's 'disappearance' and proposes an *interaction* with reality other than through seeing as verification, and subject defining a 'thing'.

I am approaching a dynamic of potency that I can name, which can encompass the contradiction of lack and possession and indicate without defining, allow movement and meaning without linearity. Immanent property can only indicate that which is qualitative and add to the import of an image; it

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>17</sup> See for example discussion of the 'boundaries between entrenched domains of knowledge' in Davies, Martin L. & Marsha Meskimmon (eds.) *Breaking the Disciplines, Reconceptions in Knowledge, Art and Culture*. London, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2003

<sup>18</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.4

<sup>19</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea* (1938). Hamondsworth: Penguin, 1965, pp.182-187



cannot be pinned down because it reverberates.<sup>20</sup> Resonance is a term that allows objects in the image to have simultaneous meaning, to speak to each other, to be active, mobile and not static. Resonance does not imply resolution or end (termination). Elements can be non-teleological – *sans* – without-end (purpose). The properties of resonance encompass the contra-linguistic and amplify the non-formal, non-sequential, the importance of tonal and rhythmic qualities that are symptomatic of simultaneity and sonority. Resonance allows meaning across oppositions and is not transparent to meaning but is opaque and signifies potency and possibility rather than certainty. It is a term that encourages disturbance and mobility without the necessity of logical meaning, without the sense of literal translation. Resonance confirms what is *without* narrative within un-purposeful properties in the photograph. In the examinations of detail and metaphor that follow, I shall establish a foundation for ‘resonance’ in the photograph as potent and opaque, which can be more practically explicable in terms of metaphoric function for example. Firstly I discuss Derrida’s premise of *differance*, which provides a poststructural frame for many of the qualities articulated here as ‘resonance’.

#### *DIFFERANCE AND THE PHOTOGRAPH*

*Differance* ‘is not a being-present, however excellent, unique, principal or transcendent one makes it. It commands nothing, rules over nothing, and nowhere does it exercise any authority. It is not marked by a capital letter. Not only is there no realm of differance, but differance is even the subversion of every realm. This is obviously what makes it threatening and necessarily dreaded by everything in us that desires a realm, the past or future presence of a realm’<sup>21</sup>

Applications of linguistic theory have contributed to the task of reading photographs and have helped to establish the premise of looking at images as another form of reading. Derrida’s writing is important because in the process of scrutinising other’s theories about language (Husserl, Saussure), he questions the appropriateness and nature of the analysis of language itself. In reaction to structuralism, he reveals language as not being transparent to meaning and his exposure of texts are a persuasive argument against reliance on logical forms of analysis. The irony here for photography is that earnest attempts, evident in applications of structural analysis,<sup>22</sup> to find some respectable base for reading images, to elevate interpretation from vague speculation to validation founded on conforming criteria, echoes nineteenth century attempts to validate photographic practice itself by emulating principles of painting and dissipates the very qualities of photography that contribute to its particular process of meaning. Derrida’s essential legacy is that of questioning assumptions at every level of meaning construction. Its relevance in this search to understand non-definitive meaning and resonant quality in photographs, centres around his preoccupation with the

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<sup>20</sup> Definition in Chambers English Dictionary, ‘Resounding; sonority; sympathetic vibration.’

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), trans. David B. Allison, Evanston: North Western University Press, 1973, p.153

<sup>22</sup> For example Umberto Eco ‘Critique of the Image’ in Burgin, Victor, (ed.) *Thinking Photography*. London: Macmillan, 1982



disturbance of what is considered the norm and as I seek to explore those facets of meaning that appear to defy structures of analysis, his procedure of looking at aspects of interstices is pertinent. Firstly as my exploration seeks what is there in a photograph *besides* what is depicted, Derrida's focus on absence and supplementation provides a starting point for its scrutiny. Secondly his use of language exploits what is absent in definition, what is inferred, what is intuited and forms the basis of the dynamic of *differance*<sup>23</sup> that manifests expression visibly and requires an alternative approach to linear and linguistic translation. I concentrate on concerns of expression and rhetoric and the implications for photographic practice, rather than the mechanics of 'signification', explored extensively elsewhere.

In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida challenges assumptions about the relation between logic and rhetoric in the foundation of language. In the context of the medieval framework of grammar, logic and rhetoric,<sup>24</sup> grammar can be understood as the mechanics of communication, logic as what lends it understanding as logical, absurd or contradictory and rhetoric as the mode of expression, the appropriateness to its context, the tropes and style used and the particular relationship of language to the world as expressed. This usefully gives us a comparative frame within which to look at the disturbance of sense addressed by Derrida. Applied to photographs, grammar equates with formal aspects such as depth of field,<sup>25</sup> logic with the photograph's indexicality and rhetoric with the more elusive aspects. Thus when looking at photographs we *logically* start with subject matter and ask: What is it? But as with Levinas's 'sounding', Derrida attacks the tradition rooted in the restricted scope of logic and switches emphasis toward the manner and placement of expression. This upturn is of the utmost importance in the context of reading and using images, as it focuses on what is absent or concealed by assumptions, and suggests alternatives to an aesthetic that perpetuates 'subject matter'. Applying this principle to photography generates such questions as: What is implicit or *besides* the subject depicted? What is not visible? What is provoked? How is meaning constructed around the object? How can we escape fixation on what it is? How can a photograph contradict its indexical and naming properties? How can a photograph break its own rules?

Derrida's central idea of *differance* references Pierce's 'pure rhetoric' (how one sign readily leads to another), which introduces an inclination toward meaning being dependent on interpretation rather than initial conception. Derrida amplifies this by rejecting idealised abstractions of meaning from the everyday experience of things and from their context. His provocative, often misinterpreted, statement 'there never was any "perception"',<sup>26</sup> in simple terms, rejects the understanding of perception as a notion of pure and immediate, unmediated awareness and

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<sup>23</sup> 'Derrida's 'definition' of *differance* in *Speech and Phenomena*, pp.129-130

<sup>24</sup> Suggested by Newton Garver in Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. ix-x

<sup>25</sup> Durand, Regis, 'How to See (Photographically)'. In Petro, Patrice (ed.) *Fugitive Images: from photography to video*.

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Durand tantalisingly suggests 'the essential dynamism of photographs lies in their impulsive character' but disappointingly locates it in devices such as sequencing, superimposition, depth of field, double exposure.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p.103



acknowledges experience as reliant on all kinds of context. Without the certainty of pure perception and interaction ('presence') or the existence of a pure essential meaning independent of the signifier, meaning must rely on context and interpretation. Context, a key element of 'deconstruction', re-positions 'presence' as not possible (or even desirable). Derrida extends Saussure's 'play of difference'<sup>27</sup> that encourages 'the condition of possibility', to become a *process* of meaning and the development of a 'conceptual system': 'every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts'.<sup>28</sup> *Differance* introduces a profound uncertainty concerning definition and in consequence 'fact', 'consciousness'<sup>29</sup> 'truth', 'reality' also, and refuses the presupposed question that prefaces philosophical thinking: *what is?*

The structure of supplementation and the possibility of the existence of objects in their absence 'gives birth to meaning'. This principle provides a key to confusions inherent in photographic meaning. As language substitutes a word for an object, we depend on reference to an object as sufficient to indicate meaning. The absence of the object does not 'prevent a text from "meaning" something' and meaning tolerates 'the total absence of the subject or object of a statement'.<sup>30</sup> Language depends on the oppositional nature of difference<sup>31</sup> in order to distinguish one concept or thing from another, linked, maybe similar, but each different. It presupposes antithesis in any declaration. But as we yearn for certainty in sameness, primacy or unity, common sense has dictated that things, when represented and denoted as x, are the same when in fact a representation cannot be the same. A basic premise of communicating about existent objects depends on our ability to 'imagine' the existence of something that is not there and both our understanding and communication *assumes* absence. The notion of supplementation emphasises the function of addition, inherent in that substitution process and adds another level of meaning to the sense of that object. There is an expectation of meaning 'accompanying' an object that indicates a further dimension to meaning, existing outside the representation of the object (whether it be absent or present) so that language is full of expressions that lack an object but which are full of meaning (by connotation) or that are present in implied likeness (metaphor). The process of substitution then introduces elements of sense that are not straightforward and are potentially disruptive.<sup>32</sup>

Images, like words, operate as substitutes for objects. It is not necessary to 'see' an object to understand its existence, as the object can be supplemented by a word (or a photograph). But in a photograph, every referred object is inescapably contingent and can be 'seen', which confuses the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 140 - 'Saussure had only to remind us that the play of difference was the functional condition, the condition of possibility of every sign.'

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 133

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 139

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 93

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 140: 'the other as different'

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 88 - 'What is supplementary is in reality difference, the operation of differing which at one and the same time both fissures and retards presence, submitting it simultaneously to primordial divisions and delay.'



fact of its absence and any 'intelligible sense' held in connotation. Despite photographs lacking the level of regularity and sameness required by a 'system of denotation',<sup>33</sup> this principle of substitution exists in our reading of photographic images as a literal statement of the thing depicted, and is evident in the belief of photographs as transparent. In speaking of an image of someone, we commonly speak of *that person*, as if they were there, *not* the image.<sup>34</sup> With regard to portrayal, what operates here is the emotional space triggered as response to both the image, as reference to that person, and to the person depicted (Sartre's *affectivity*). With the powerful propensity of a photographic image through metaphor and metonym to reference what is absent in the image as well as what is present, one can see how concepts and meaning can *depend* on oppositional relations to what is there within the image. Photographic texts can play with this riddle of absence. And whilst we have come to suspect the existence of 'truths' on one level, perversely in an image, the reference to what is 'outside' (what is not factual or physically referenced), is possibly what gives it its dynamic.

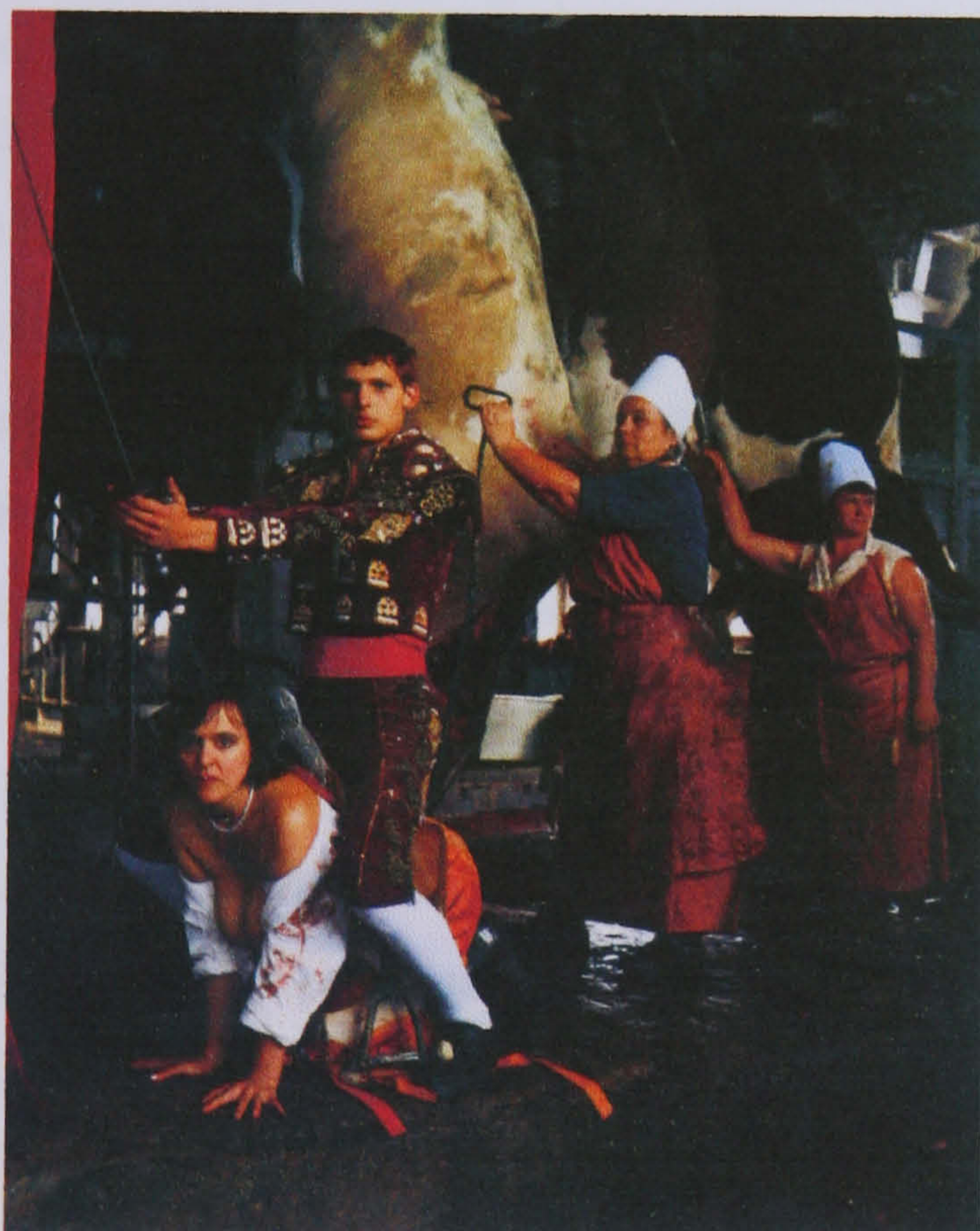


Fig. 41 Arsen Savadov, *Bloody Merry series*, 1998

In a photograph, the logic of sign determining meaning can be seen to be visually evident, as 'reality'. Superficially, here is a picture of A – simple. On another level, it can be seen that there is all manner of complexity that separates 'meaning' from 'reality' or what is signified. This is the illogic of photographic depiction. The process of supplementation in a photograph is disturbed by the essential difference between object and photograph and conflicts with the premise of the photograph as being 'truthful'. If we look at the style, the tropes and the relation to context, the indexical referencing will be simultaneously disrupted by the manner of expression, in the selection and framing of the image, in the context in which it is shown, in the position of those contained in

<sup>33</sup> Goodman, *The Languages of Art*, pp. 26-30

<sup>34</sup> Garver in *Speech and Phenomenon*, p. xxiii notes Derrida echoing Wittgenstein's 'seeing' and 'seeing as' [*Philosophical Investigations* Part II, ¶ 11] and Goodman's 'representation as' similarly.



the image and so on. If we look at the 'rhetorical structures' of contemporary photographic portrayal, it becomes ever more complicated as these expressive structures are deliberately manipulated and confused by the photographer. The significance for photographic images, of a switch of emphasis from logic to expression, can be seen in the false, artificial or declamatory expression used by those photographers that exploit style and mannerism, particularly prevalent in Eastern Europe; Arsen Savadov's work<sup>35</sup> implicitly incorporates history in theatrical and absurd tableaux depicting a collapsed Soviet ideology that speaks simultaneously of tragedy and humour. The *Bloody Merry* series [fig.41] relates the incongruity of the 1917 revolution and the interior of a slaughterhouse. A rhetorical perspective confirms the truism that 'all is not what it seems' and refutes 'the camera never lies'. We have learnt to look for paradox, irony, omission, trope and allusion. Removal of logic allows absurdity, nonsense and banality.

If it obeys certain rules, an expression may be (contradictory, false, absurd according to a certain kind of absurdity) without becoming nonsense. It may have no possible object for empirical reasons (a golden mountain) or *a priori* reasons (a square circle) without ceasing to have intelligible sense – the absence of an object is hence not the absence of meaning.<sup>36</sup>

Derrida alerts us to a number of assumptions in the project of finding transparency of meaning, which may lend understanding to what we take for granted in reading images. In 'The Supplement of Origin', he exposes Husserl's struggle to stay with his own phenomenological principles whilst accounting for exceptions to them, the validity of which he does not question.<sup>37</sup> Derrida thus reveals contradictions (essentially the breaking of 'rules') resulting from the constraints of a logic that cannot see outside itself, and sheds some light on similar constraints in the many contradictions of photographic aesthetics. Significantly for photography, the principle of 'supplementation' in linguistic theory (which assumes that one form both represents and adds to another in the operation of signification) is exposed as fundamentally contradictory in its dependence on absence. The basis of contradiction in such images as *Bloody Merry* derives from this same operation. Derrida highlights a number of distinctions in Husserl's text that are typically representative of Western metaphysics; distinctions between *indication* (where one thing stands for another and can be communicated or verified) and *expression*, which is meaningful (where meaning intention animates a signifier). Distinctions between empirical sense (that refers directly to that which exists), intelligible sense (that may not exist but is not nonsense) and nonsense (that does not conform to grammatical sense), persist. These are essentially distinctions between elements of expression and elements of sense,<sup>38</sup> where sense here is understood as logical in relation to objects, on the basis of

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<sup>35</sup> Arsen Savadov, born 1962 Ukraine, lives and works in Kiev. Another project refers to the Donbass Coal Mines where Savadov depicts coal miners in tutus, bringing the incongruous together; romance, high culture and industrialisation.

<sup>36</sup> Husserl cited in Derrida, 'The Supplement of Origin', *Speech and Phenomena*, p.91

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon*, p.127

<sup>38</sup> 'Sense' is confused in translation and it is significant to note that Derrida's use of 'meaning' ("sens" and "vouloir-dire") incorporates the French sense that literally means 'will to say' and which includes the understanding of purpose, intention in its foundation. See Derrida, Jacques. *Positions* (1972). trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. p. 14.



'truth' being objectivity. The maintenance of such distinctions helps us to organise and clarify complexity. Their disruption, giving us no certain criteria to distinguish 'an effective language from a fictitious language',<sup>39</sup> disturbs what is understood as reality, representation or imaginary and lead to different reconfigurations, hegemonies or fictions, such as visualised in *Bloody Merry*.

Husserl's attempt to separate description (indication) from expression, reveals its own contradiction and introduces the ambivalence of meaning, its tenuous connection to things and the precarious property of 'fullness' that is difficult to account for or explain. Derrida points out Husserl's contradictory statements regarding the limitations of objective expressions, for example: 'try to describe any subjective experience in unambiguous objectively fixed fashion; such an attempt is always plainly vain.'<sup>40</sup> And yet this is what is ideally striven for within the rules of truth and 'presence'. He points out that such an obvious inconsistency explains the absence of 'presence', which, because it is so ingrained and taken for granted as an 'ideal', is not 'seen' or understood as being absent. His exposure of the misalliance between meaning and indication, between meaning and absence, explained through examples of grammar, is at the root of his refutation of 'presence'. The logic of grammar in formal analysis is therefore limited, as it does not explain meaning in its fullness; does not explain the potency of *Allie Mae Burroughs* for example. The existence of modes of sense that do not point to existing objects, which are equivalent to impossible imaginings, such as 'square circle' or 'golden mountain', indicates the dimension of meaning that is not bound by factual reference. If meaning can exist outside literal reference, the distinction between expression and indication becomes shaky,<sup>41</sup> visibly apparent in literal depiction that also operates figuratively (*Bloody Merry*). The role of supplementation in the photograph, complicated by the confusion of absence and the misleading distinction between purely communicative (informative) language and expressive language, between indicative 'sense' and 'meaning'<sup>42</sup>, perpetuates the enigmatic whereabouts of potency. The conditions for resonant quality exist in absence and supplementation and encourage a meaning and aesthetic that is outside 'presence' and that *enjoys* its absence. In photographs there are elements that supplement the 'grammar', that make the image more than the sum of its constituent parts and which cannot be quantified. Such elements introduce the possibility of 'empty' meaning and 'full' meaning. The level of effective sense (Barthes's *studium*), as opposed to meaning which is not indicative, but perhaps more 'full', more potent, but too complex or subtle to be determined. This is the pivotal difference between 'sense' that can be defined and can answer the question "what is?" and 'sense' that cannot.<sup>43</sup> Derrida's recognition of rhetoric disrupts the common separation of what an expression means from *how* it is applied for the

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<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p.56

<sup>40</sup> Husserl, *Formal & Transcendental Logic, First Investigation*, p.321-322 cited in Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p.100

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p.99 - 'All of which amounts to recognising an initial limitation of sense to knowledge, of logos to objectivity, of language to reason', and since knowledge is revealed as unattainable, this 'presence' is unstable.'

<sup>42</sup> Garver explains terms used by Frege and Husserl that distinguish 'sense' as timeless and context free from 'reference' as time dependent, contextually variant. In *Speech and Phenomena*, p. xv

<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 55



purposes of aesthetic analysis and suggests that the two domains cannot be separated, giving emphasis to *how* rather than *what*.

The significance of Derrida's premise of *differance* depends on the visibility of the written word. There are two elements in verbal meaning that are not definitive and which Derrida forefronts and uses. Firstly, the performativity held in utterance (akin to Kristeva's *semiotic*) and secondly, the very visibility of the written form which shows us differences that we cannot 'see' in any other way; differences apparent in writing that cannot be heard in speech. He refers to the space between speech and writing where writing is visible and speech is not. Speech says other things that writing cannot - intonation, stress, implication, emotion. Writing can do things speech cannot - make visual connections - aesthetic connections. The consequent play of meaning resulting from its visibility as opposed to a different sort of performativity - of intonation, rhythm and speech in expression - is its visual equivalent. The written word plays on the grammatic difference of noun (object), adjective (as indicating property) and verb (as indicating action). It brings these different senses together - neither active nor passive, and both. The visibility of the different spelling of *differance* removes it beyond its sound and allows it to refer to the complexity of all its constituent meanings. It simultaneously places it *between* activity and passivity, and in using more than one sense or tense (like resonance is different from resonating), it demonstrates the potency of 'dissemination'.<sup>44</sup> Thus it undermines two basic principles of writing - the logical sequencing down the page of one point following another and the logical definitivity of either/or. For example, he uses the metaphor of weaving /interlacing to explain his word *differance*, as an 'assemblage' that allows 'different lines of sense' to interweave and separate again. Derrida creates a situation in writing, which will extend meaning rather than constrain it and as we saw in *Droit de Regards*, his theoretical position is inseparable from expression. Meaning is implicit within the delivery<sup>45</sup> and an extension of the structure of the text; a strategy *sans* finality. His play of words exploits and *performs* the element of meaning that does not relate exactly to the representation of an object or any *thing*; it is a procedure that parallels a similar rhetoric that operates elusive elements in photographs.

Much of the impact of *differance* is in the disruption of oppositional hierarchies. Whilst Derrida sees a series of oppositions as a sort of inevitability,<sup>46</sup> *differance* questions the oppositional symmetry of, for example, 'sensible/intelligible, intuition/signification, nature/culture',<sup>47</sup> presence/absence, inside/outside and works to undermine the 'representation of a presence' in what

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<sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Positions* p. 45 Dissemination is distinguished by its refusal to be 'led back to a present of simple origin', whilst polysemia represents a progress dependent on a linearity 'that is always anxious to anchor itself' and 'is organized within the implicit horizon of a unitary meaning.'

<sup>45</sup> Derrida's manner of writing could be said to equate with Barthes's definition of rhetoric as the 'signifying aspect of ideology', Roland Barthes, *Image: Music: Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977, p.49

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p.148. Much of Derrida's writing is allied to that which is contrary to itself, inconsistent, as it uncovers the paradoxical nature implicit in the assumptions of thinking. For example, Johnson points out in her introduction to *Dissemination* (p.x) that Derrida's account for the error of truth is forced to use the tools derived from the notion of truth.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Positions*, p.9



seem to be ‘natural’ oppositions. The logic of supplement promotes the co-existence of addition and substitution, or, for example, poison and remedy (*Pharmakon*).<sup>48</sup> No one meaning is privileged over another and a text (image) offers signification in a number of directions simultaneously, which puts identification in question; ‘A and B’ are no longer opposed nor even equivalent.<sup>49</sup> This co-existence deconstructs the ‘either/or’ logic of contradiction or non-contradiction. ‘An [image] signifies in more than one way and to varying degrees of explicitness’<sup>50</sup> and suggests divergent elements that are not oppositional but are simultaneous and heterogeneous. Meaning can be seen to oscillate across possibilities that are seemingly at odds. What we might have understood as contradiction (denial of what is affirmed, assertion to the contrary), is not, and is but another expression of difference. Meaning is constituted by ‘the very distances and differences it seeks to overcome. To mean, in other words, is automatically *not* to be. As soon as there is meaning, there is difference’.<sup>51</sup> One cannot simply overturn an opposition as it ‘can only dig up something that is really nothing, a gap, an interval, a trace.’<sup>52</sup> *Differance* embodies apparently digressive directions – temporally and spatially, such as the photograph’s stance of both presence and absence, which, in referring to what is not there, is its own difference from itself.<sup>53</sup>

Any subsequent use of the term ‘contradiction’ carries with it the insistence on asking: Is there an assertion not compatible with the explicit meaning? Is there an invisible or repressed assertion? Where I am tempted to refer to contradiction, I acknowledge difference and deferment that inhabit everything that seems to be present and certain.<sup>54</sup> Parenthesis and ellipsis,<sup>55</sup> rather than contradiction, permit the necessity of something existing side by side with something that is apparently at odds, incongruent, inconsistent or absurdly associated. Both functions interrupt purpose, introduce a disturbance, are discontinuous and destabilise. Something can be this *and* this (*and* this *and* this) at variance, dissenting, but not opposite, not incompatible, not negating, not disagreeing.

The principles demonstrated in the written neologism *differance* are pertinent for visual texts in the way that we understand an idea and indicate pivotal points for this thesis: that necessitate a reflection on meaning in the visibility of a text (word or image) itself; that promote the non-oppositional nature of visual meaning in the possibility of multi-faceted and simultaneous meaning;

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<sup>48</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Dissemination* (1972), trans. Barbara Johnson, University of Chicago Press: 1981, pp.100 ‘when a word inscribes itself as the citation of another sense of the same word, when the textual center-stage of the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and make legible that which in the same word signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, *poison*... There is no contradiction between this proposition (poison) and the preceding one (remedy).’

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, Barbara, ‘Introduction’, *Dissemination*, p. xiii

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xv

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.ix

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.x

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiii : ‘[A and B]... are their own differences from themselves’.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.ix

<sup>55</sup> Chambers dictionary: Parenthesis suggests the use of something inserted in something ‘which is already complete without it’: a digression, an interval, space or interlude. Ellipsis is ‘a figure of syntax by which something is left out and implicated’: it is obscure or circumlocutory.



that suggest the conceptual system of meaning in the visual propensity to make connecting references, to find allusion, metaphor and temporality. Changes in such assumptions allow those functions of meaning (of absence, supplement and insignificance), to work implicitly and simultaneously (rhetorically), to agitate and make uncertain and to operate more centrally. This gesture of visual meaning is a significant shift in emphasis. Its conjunction of meaning and expression shifts our manner of understanding from a translation of text governed by the logical progression of verbal language, toward a conceptual framework that can grasp the scope of an 'idea' visually, as with *Bloody Merry*. Applying Derrida's dynamic of *differance* to the visual photographic context, threatens a number of the 'rules' of certainty found in aspirations to 'presence' in (modernist) photography, such as expectations of the depiction of 'reality', of authenticity, of the transparency and universality of meaning. It challenges the boundaries of the definitive, the authority of, what Allan Sekula calls, the 'cult of the self-sufficient image'<sup>56</sup> that expects 'unqualified objectivity'<sup>57</sup> or expressions of transcendence. Many of the ideas that I later explore in relation to the photograph can be seen to emerge from conditions associated with *differance*. Conditions such as the conflation of the literal and figural and the difference between effective, empty and full meaning. For example Nan Goldin's description of subjective experience by the 'objective' means of photography provides an implosive instance of 'objectivity' conflated by its rhetorical expression. *Differance*, as it conflates difference (the spatial) and deferral (the temporal), is principally a decentring dynamic, which denies the logic of diegesis and definition and encourages dialogue and dispersal.

Derrida reminds us that a logical conception of the world is not necessarily 'common sense'. Logical truths and trust in certainty are dependent on the notion of an entity, entire unto itself, and separated from time and thought in its constitution, a thing that has an essential nature that does not change. The disturbance of which touches on a number of questions for the photographic image. It is worth noting here that the status of the photograph, with regards to its 'representation of reality', remains at a point of conflicting interpretations. On one level it is popularly considered as a mirror of the world, a transparent mediation of 'reality'.<sup>58</sup> On a post-structural level, and in contradiction, this is seen to be misguided and contrary to the fictional properties of the photograph. In this context we have come to accept the premise of 'presence' as a series of received ideas that affect metaphor, difference and expression, as suspect. Having accepted the notion that signs, reference and meaning, sense and expression cannot be kept separate, contemporary understanding is that meaning and the relation of signs to the world is dependent on time and context. Contemporary photographs can be seen as texts that undermine themselves, that contain contradictions, gaps and

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<sup>56</sup> Sekula, Allan, *Performance Under Working Conditions*. Hatje Cantz, 2003, p. 246

<sup>57</sup> 'This is an absolute unqualified objectivity. Unlike the other arts, which are really anti-photographic, this objectivity is the very essence of photography, its contribution and at the same time its limitation.' Paul Strand, 'Photography' (1917). In Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.) *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980, pp. 141-142

<sup>58</sup> For example Paul Strand: 'This is an absolute unqualified objectivity.' in Trachtenberg, pp.141-142



disruptions and provide examples of how, rather than reflecting a transparent reality or authenticity, photographs can construct reality as opaque. The discontinuous space of the photograph is both continuous in its interminable reference and discontinuous in its destabilising incompleteness. In attacking the tradition of logic, Derrida invites and appears to celebrate logical absurdities in texts as a necessary consequence of their disturbance.

That Derrida's 'logic' can now be seen as in itself a 'common sense', suggests the need for further examination of the possibilities and direction in the use of photographs to express ideas. The procedure of *differance*, which may now seem 'natural', encourages approaches to meaning that lie outside literal reference, forces challenges to the prime distinction of form and subject (matter), which persists, but is somehow now inadequate when reading photographs. And its reliance on the wider scope of metaphorical and conceptual frameworks, rather than ones that are required to be more definitive, more suitably accommodates the possibilities of the photograph. In Chapters Two and Three I describe those functions in particular that contribute to the power of the image and that challenge the distinction between 'form' and meaning and how these principles are conjoined in an image. I ask how might *differance* work as a dynamic that dislocates the photograph's property of empirical reference,<sup>59</sup> disrupt the function of naming, indicating and objectifying and establish a more dangerous place in between non-sense and 'grammatical sense'? How might the discourse of photographic practice proceed to break its own rules?

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<sup>59</sup> By this I mean the way that the photograph points to an object, rather than the Peircean *index*, which indicates causal affect. Charles Sanders Peirce's term *icon* is more accurate as referring to an object due to its resemblance, but is problematic because of its connotations. His term *symbol* is a sign that is recognised due to cultural convention and habitual use.



## Chapter Two: THE DYNAMICS OF DETAIL

### *DYNAMICS OF PARERGON*

But this frame is problematical. I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper, and that Kant calls *parergon*, for example the frame. Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin, Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit. And its surface between the two limits.<sup>1</sup>

Following *The Critique of Judgement*<sup>2</sup> Derrida adopts the term *parergon* ('frame', 'edge') as a metaphor for an addendum (and supplement) to Kant's theory and explores the assumptions made at the start of any aesthetic 'judgement', and the characteristics of visual supplement, which contribute to the potency of the work. He challenges the persuasive reasoning of Kant's 'disinterested pleasure' in aesthetic appraisal, 'letting us think that everything comes from the object, which pleases'<sup>3</sup> rather than from ourselves as viewers.<sup>4</sup> The text 'Parergon' is fundamentally important for problematising aesthetic analysis rather than for an exploration of the function of the *parergon*, which his examination invites. The text is responsible for an adjustment in approaches to art history, such as that of Mieke Bal whose emphasis has moved from a 'disinterested' analysis to a focus on *who* is looking and *how* they are looking, necessitating reference to historical, social and subjective contexts.<sup>5</sup> It initiates many questions, such as what is central and what is peripheral to a work, but leaves the application of alternative criteria in 'judgement' to others. In general, the procedure of *differance*, as a dynamic, encourages dispersal and is responsible for a decentred, more digressive approach to reading images. *Parergon* is pertinent in that its properties describe aspects of the photograph, which come close to the indescribable and that quality I have identified as 'resonance'. *Parergon* provides a term for the detail in the image, which may only *apparently* be insignificant and is the major dynamic of detail. After outlining a context for some of the most pertinent points raised by Derrida's examination of the properties of *parergon*, I will return to worry, in the manner indicated in the above quote, the more specific function of *parergon* in photographs.

*Parergon* indicates what has been dismissed hitherto as peripheral and marginal and not as important in determining the aesthetic quality of a work. Derrida agitates the literal meaning of

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, 'Parergon' in *The Truth in Painting*, p.63

<sup>2</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Judgement*, §14, p.68. This summary also uses Craig Owens's translation of 'Parergon', *October* 9, Summer 1979

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.47

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45

<sup>5</sup> Bal, Mieke, *Looking In. The Art of Viewing*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001, e.g. 'What kind of act of viewing is at stake?' p. 60. Bal presents a clear argument of the influence of Derrida in this regard in 'Dispersing the Image: Vermeer Story' p.67: 'Derrida's concept of dissemination is a powerful tool for breaking open the monolithic discourse of origins that appears to be the stronghold of the discipline' (art history).



*parergon*. It is ‘neither plus nor minus, neither outside nor inside, accident nor essence.’<sup>6</sup> It is what is extra, in addition to, beside, beyond (*para*) the work (*ergon*), but is not incidental. It assumes those qualities which are ‘supernatural’ (as in not ‘common sense’) or transcendent, or at least not explicable, and which are exterior to pure reason. The *parergon* is not integral to the representation or the empirical ‘sense’ of the object but belongs to it extrinsically ‘as a surplus, an addition, an adjunct, a supplement’. The notion of supplement incorporates a number of principles, which are ‘naturally’ in opposition: absence and presence, lack and ‘fullness’, sufficiency and insufficiency, inside and outside, the disturbance of which creates the dynamic of *parergon*.



Fig. 42 Annelies Strba, *Sonja with a Glass*, 1991

The conflict inherent in opposition is central to the logic of *parergon*, which is principally one of contradiction. *Parergon*, in itself, references that which is an intrinsic component and yet is in addition and detachable. It suggests that placement *either* involves integrity *or* detachment and externality. Kant, referencing what is at the edge or is ‘merely’ ornamentation (drape/column/frame),<sup>7</sup> assumes that there is a more centred, essential part to the image that is ‘beautiful’ without *parerga*, which are superfluous to the ‘essence’. Derrida asks: ‘Where does *parergon* begin and end? Would any garment be a *parergon*? A *parergon*, the necklace she wears around her neck?’<sup>8</sup> His extension to what a *parergon* might be, indicates adjuncts to the body in particular, and in *Droits de Regards* he suggests ‘two sorts of significant “details”, two types of

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *Positions*, p.43

<sup>7</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Judgement*, § 4, p.68

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.57 (and Owens translation, p. 22) Bal’s essay ‘Dispersing the Image’ p.84 references this section in introducing the term ‘textual navel’ and echoes Barthes’ necklace as *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*, p.53



fetishistic genres',<sup>9</sup> two types of metonymy, those connected with the body and those not. Derrida's quote above facetiously emphasises the literal aspect of the metaphor 'frame' and the principles of beginning and end, inside and outside and thereby aesthetic judgement, which assumes that we can distinguish between what is extrinsic and what is intrinsic in an image. Derrida's procedure questions the hierarchies of what is essential and what is peripheral, what matters in an image, and has the effect of readjusting the logic of *parergon* in terms of its function. It is now not as simple as 'this essential' or this 'mere ornament'.<sup>10</sup>

It is not because [parerga] are more detached but on the contrary because they are more difficult to detach and above all because without them, without their quasi-detachment, the lack on the inside of the work would appear ...or would not appear. What constitutes them as parerga is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the ergon. And this lack would be constitutive of the very unity of the ergon. Without this lack, the ergon would have no need of parergon, The ergon's lack is the lack of a parergon.<sup>11</sup>

By this logic the *parergon* is the element that gives a work a unity and a resonance, and without this supplement, the work would be mechanical, powerless, meaningless. It is 'riveted' to the internal dynamic of the work, injects its 'internal structural link' and animates it.<sup>12</sup> It is a logic of contradiction. The logic of supplement requires a lack or an absence in the work, in the first place in order for it to be supplemented.<sup>13</sup> One logically then asks 'what is it that is lacking?' But if we remember the 'structure of supplementation' that is the foundation of language and the procedure of substituting an object with a reference to it (a word in linguistics, an image in thought), then we can see that its absence may not be a lack in itself, but a procedure of communication. It may be that it is the unique element of supplement that communicates with us, that gives the work its potency. Derrida troubles Kant's original constitution of *parerga*, shakes the whereabouts of what is integral and what is detachable, and for whom and illuminates contradictions held in judgement of where that elusive quality is and where it is not and how it comes to be there or not. Derrida thus uses the term *parergon* to explore aspects besides the obvious physical embellishments that augment the story or object. Aspects which impact on meaning, but which are supplementary to the 'essence' or the focus of the image (photograph); supplementaries to the text, perhaps concepts underlying the text; subtle attachments that are insignificant and yet function as connotation: 'the indeterminate "black holes"...an indeterminate, indifferent or aleatory basis for meaning, as

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Right of Inspection [Droit de Regards]* with Marie-Francois Plissart, trans. David Wills, *Art & Text* 32, 1989, p.34

<sup>10</sup> Derrida's discussion of the form of *parergon* in *Truth in Painting* (1978) is followed through in *Droits de Regards* (1985).

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.59

<sup>12</sup> Giles, K.W., 'The Expectation of Narrative in the Photograph'. Ph.D., Kent, 47-10542

<sup>13</sup> Derrida talks of the addition and the supplement in 'The Supplement of Origin' in *Speech and Phenomena* (1967)



insignificant as the discourse you might imagine in the place of the punctuation mark'.<sup>14</sup> Both *sans* and *parergon* confirm the positive necessity for lack and absence.

In pursuing the whereabouts of *parerga* in the image *Sonja with Glass* [fig.42],<sup>15</sup> I resume an examination of the function of *parerga*, suggested by Derrida's text, and highlight what is concomitant with the insistence on *differance*. In asking questions, I expect no answers but confirmation of contra-positional elements of dynamic in the image, that produce the elusive quality that I have termed 'resonance'. 'Where does the *parergon* begin and end?'<sup>16</sup> How might the features of *parerga* help to identify the origination of resonant meaning in a photograph? What determines whether a *parergon* contributes to or subtracts from the work as a whole, its 'beauty' or resonance? Such questions refer to criteria on three levels. Firstly, applying the oppositional dynamics of *parerga*, those of absence/presence, lack/fullness, inside/outside, sufficiency/insufficiency; secondly Kant's 'moments'<sup>17</sup> of 'disinterest', universality, purposelessness and necessity; thirdly the consideration of formal/definitive aspects over non-formal/non-logical features. Barthes's earlier structural thought provides a model for levels of significance<sup>18</sup> in an image, from informational, symbolic through to 'something else' and in some respects helps to distinguish aspects that are 'merely' indicative from aspects that impart quality, and content that is intrinsic or extrinsic can be described in these terms. I shall not reiterate such analysis here<sup>19</sup> but shall return instead to Kant's premise for aesthetic quality ; what is central and intrinsic and what is extrinsic and superfluous. According to Kant, aesthetic judgement is neither evaluative judgement in terms of the object's function nor the subjective 'interest' of the viewer, but should instead restrict itself to 'intrinsic' factors.<sup>20</sup> So what is precisely intrinsic in *Sonja with a Glass*?<sup>21</sup>

*Intrinsic* is defined as inward, genuine, inherent, essential, belonging to the point at issue, and *Extrinsic* as external, not essential, not contained or belonging to the body.<sup>22</sup> How does what is intrinsic, conform to the formal aspects of the image? Do formal aspects like the composition of the image help in clarifying what is an intrinsic quality? In this image the formal aspects do not tell us much at all, are underplayed and hardly seem to be what is important. The colour is commonplace and does not seduce in the sense that Kant suggests might be a distraction. The image does not assault me with sensation. Can I dismiss these aspects as missing the point entirely? The image appears to be deliberately unconsidered, approaching the accidental. So it appears that the

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<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Right of Inspection* p.40

<sup>15</sup> Annelies Strba, *Shades of Time*, 1991

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 57

<sup>17</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Judgement*, pp.41-85

<sup>18</sup> Barthes, Roland, 'The Third Meaning' (1970). In *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press, 1977, pp.52-68

<sup>19</sup> See Shawcross, N, *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Translation in Perspective*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997, and Burgin and Eco

<sup>20</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Judgement*, pp. 43-44

<sup>21</sup> Annelies Strba, *Shades of Time*, 1991, p.119

<sup>22</sup> Chamber's English Dictionary



dominant *non-form* is important here and, with the dismissal of ‘formal’ considerations, the image conflates form and meaning. This then becomes the ‘formal aspect’ – the integrity of accident and the assimilation of *de*-formalising. What about the dirty grainy effect that imbues the whole image? Is that intrinsic too? If it was taken away the room may be bright and clear and clinical and I may see Sonja as efficient and alert. What would be a contemporary equivalent to a distracting feature of subjective ‘interest’ in this image? Perhaps only my very subjective response to the person I imagine Sonja to be; such a performer, so composed, yet so unpretentious in the banality of her situation. With the absence of Kantian formal aspects, ‘free of interested pleasure’, not dependent on ‘empirical inclination’ (experience?), how can the image ‘appeal universally’, as it so blatantly courts the attributes of the non-formal and of non-art?

Following the above logic, if I consider the non-formal features to be intrinsic and contributing to the quality of the image, what does distract and function as *parergon*, as ornament? What is detachable? The function of parergonality is found in details, such as Sonja’s earring, literally an item of adornment. Does it remain as mere ornament and ‘harm the beauty of the work’.<sup>23</sup> And if it contributes, must it make extensive or indeterminate reference outside itself? Is it sufficient to be recognised as an adornment that touches her body? Or is it that it adds poignancy in its glitzy contrast with the drab kitchen? Or is it, because it provokes metonymies, which accord with specific associations of ‘knowledge’: a whole discourse concomitant with Barthes’s necklace,<sup>24</sup> the extensive culture of *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* and a history of Vermeer appraisal, not least Bal’s<sup>25</sup> in this respect. If a detail is to contribute something besides its reference, and if it is not to be merely adornment, then *must* it acquire metonymic or metaphoric attributes? How grand must an obvious association be for it to be universal and how universal before it is tired? Can I distinguish the detail that seems superfluous from that which is necessary and ‘sufficient’ and how does it contribute to resonance? How sufficient does a meaning have to be for it to contribute and how ornamental before it detracts? What is just sufficient? How small and insignificant does it have to be to remain insignificant - the number of knobs on the cooker? When is it sufficient enough to be small but significant - her earring? When is it significant only in my private reverie - her blouse? Perhaps the confusion on the table is necessary only in as much as the objects (books and cartons) indicate reading and eating. And if this confusion was not there at all, her position would reside in a more considered formality; her elbow resting on a clear and uncluttered corner of the table in the right hand corner of the image. How superfluous is the large but insignificant coffee pot on the left? If it were removed, Sonja’s head would become the apex of the image. Superfluous items appear only to affect the formality of the image and perhaps cannot be escaped, but it appears that resonance for me lies elsewhere.

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<sup>23</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Judgement*, p.68

<sup>24</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography* (1980), trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1993, p.53

<sup>25</sup> Bal, ‘Dispersing the Image: Vermeer Story’ in *Looking In*, in which Bal discusses the role of light as a ‘typical parergon’ in the painting *Woman holding a Balance*.



If a *parergon* is not necessary, how is it unnecessary and to what? To the comprehension of the image, the 'sense' of the image – i.e. its reference to what is there, its mimetic value? If that is so, and I can say that I recognise that as being a glass of water, then marks on the glass of water or what I can see through the glass become superfluous. But clearly the potency of the object does not stop at the recognition of it for what it is as object, but at the status or quality of that object – i.e. as a marked, scratched glass. What is extrinsic to the glass of water? – its reference to what is outside the image, to what I associate with it? Or is it what is peripheral to the content – to its being a glass of water, for example the size of the glass? What part of the glass of water is *necessary*? Which is more resonant – the glass, the transparency of the glass, the dinginess of the glass or the water *in* the glass? If I were to substitute details for details in the image, it would doubtless make a difference, for example if it were milk in the glass. What element in this image is intrinsic to the particular effect (physical event) but extrinsic to the meaning held in the effect? Is this meaning more potent because of personal association (*punctum*) or more potent because of a bald, unmediated content? If it is the potency, then the personal association, which contributes to that may be entirely unnecessary.

What is larger and significant and too central to be *parergon* – the glass of water? If I consider Sonja's stare to be the focus of the image, then what is the glass of water? Is the glass of water *parergon* or another focus of the image? Is it the inseparability of these two features in terms of dominant focus that contributes to the meaning of the image overall? Or is the central feature the dynamic of her gesture? What is indicated in the image is inextricable from the meaning of the gesture: Sonja is about to pick the glass up *or* she has just placed the glass down on the surface beside her. Her right arm works as if independently and separately from the intensity of her look, which is serious and concentrated. The normal activity of the arm contrasts with the event, which is isolated and special. She sits in a very relaxed way, sat sideways on a kitchen chair, her left forearm relaxed and resting on the table, her hand dropping down over the edge. Her right hand hovers, holds, looms over the glass. It is this possibility of directionless movement and uncertainty that is the focus and essentially intrinsic; a 'form of kinetics'<sup>26</sup> of *possibility* that works metonymically and resides in imminent possibility.

Kant's certainty requires either-or definitions, which the photograph does not concede, but which displays instead the simultaneity of meaning that presents a work 'without end' (without purpose or without termination). The dynamic of *parergon* works against logical structures and requires the readjustment of oppositions. It emphasises and animates the simultaneity of detail that encourage reverberation and mobility, *without* teleological progression. It accesses parts of the image that

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<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Right of Inspection* p.40



disturb the certainty of the established hierarchies of finality and definition, parts that reverberate instead, but do not find resolution. It contributes to resonance by acknowledging the ambivalence of its residence (both outside and inside) and the significance of the incidental, the marginal and the peripheral, contradicting the search for ultimate meaning. *Parergon* confirms also, the inappropriateness of the linear model, which originates in a linguistic resolution and the unsuitability of the narrative implication, so often imposed on interpretations of the photograph. And yet there remains a compulsion to construct narrative. Firstly, via metonym and fiction, driven by desire, and secondly, via logic, toward narrative.

Burgin describes the photograph as ‘purposive movement with causes and intentions’ and accepts the compulsion to invent and insert narrative, despite the photograph not being a ‘linear form’ but one that ‘like a chord, vibrates simultaneously.’ Whereas Laura Mulvey makes a brief but interesting assertion that invites a move to ‘breakdown the *inside* of narrativity’,<sup>27</sup> to find new structures that play against the normal constraints of narrative pattern. David Phillips interprets *parergon* as ‘the constitutive role of textual anchorage and of determining contexts and pictorial conventions.’<sup>28</sup> I see the role of *parergon* as one of boundless possibility, as does Bal, but toward a possibility of narrative. She speaks of *parergon* as the element that activates narrative in an image, that makes something happen: ‘something is happening, the still scene begins to move’ and ‘the surface is no longer still but tells a story’.<sup>29</sup> This stillness of moment (the has-been), ‘captured’, ‘frozen’ in a photograph is the antithesis of narrative. In their anxiety to make ‘something happen’, theories of narrative in the photograph tend to deny its properties of *differance*, its perverse propensity to show, despite its stillness, independent moments and details, simultaneously. With the purpose of narrative comes interpretation that is constrained by the weight of decision, the enormity of the either/or, the ‘this or that’, ‘this way or that way’. This is the assumed necessity of directional implication in the interpretation of event that it must go forward or go back. Yet it doesn’t have to be that way and the image can do both and simultaneously; it *is* fiction but a simultaneous fiction. A photograph offers the opportunity to sustain the simultaneity of different interpretations; of ...and...and...and. Hitherto emphasis has rested on the stillness of the frozen time element. With its contra-oppositional dynamic, *parergon* provides a means to shift the emphasis toward the *possibility* invited by simultaneous and contradictory elements within the photograph and its resonant purposelessness, which is not inclined to resolve itself in a structure, such as narrative.

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<sup>27</sup> Victor Burgin and Laura Mulvey speaking at the Photoforum conference, *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Image*, Kent Institute of Art & Design, Canterbury, 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> May, 2004

<sup>28</sup> Phillips, David, ‘Photo-Logos: Photography and Deconstruction’, in *The Subjects of Art History*. Cheetham, Holly and Moxey, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.167

<sup>29</sup> Bal, *Looking In*, p.77



## DIMENSIONS OF PUNCTUM

It is an addition (supplement): it is what I add to the photograph and what is none the less already there.<sup>30</sup>

*Parergon*, the supplementary element that can contribute resonant meaning, has another dimension, that of a subjective punctuation, Barthes's *punctum*. His 'sensitive point' is to be found in chance elements of detail and is provoked by incongruity, irony, repulsion that invoke a sense of place or 'a kind of tenderness'. Fundamentally, *punctum* can be an entirely personal recognition, coming from a wholly singular experience of an incidental detail, apparently insignificant, 'which addresses me', that speaks directly to me, confronts me. *Punctum* is the point (centre) of significance that plays with the point (place) in the image that can become the point (purpose) of the image it inhabits.<sup>31</sup> As it implies (or promises) purpose in its name, it contradicts itself in its teleological pointlessness. Its characteristics are unlocatable and not part of the image that is coded or explicable. Its 'incapacity to name is a symptom of disturbance'<sup>32</sup> in the image and its unqualifiable properties indicate how it interrupts the empirical sense of the image. The *punctum*'s dynamic is its latent subjective potentiality,<sup>33</sup> its dissimulation and its positional absence. Most importantly, it shares with *parergon* its marginal reference and its metonymic expansion. And like *parergon* it is a sort of power that is not dependent on the narrative progression of time and place, does not contribute to the logic of making stories and works in another dimension to linearity. What drives this fascination with the potency resident in the surprisingly incidental, is a 'metonymic force'.<sup>34</sup> What is called the *punctum* illuminates the 'scandalous' metonymic power of detail more acutely than *parergon*. It is the 'force' and the dynamic of the *punctum* that moves the 'original' figure of Sonja to something other than merely reference to her and which becomes Sonja's dynamic.

It is 'the place of the irreplaceable singularity and the unique referential, the *punctum* irradiates and, what is most surprising, lends itself to metonymy. As soon as it allows itself to be drawn into a system of substitutions, it can invade everything, objects as well as affects. This singularity which is nowhere in the field (of codes of meaning) mobilizes everything everywhere; it pluralizes itself.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 55. He gives examples of *punctum* in incongruity (bad teeth, dirty nails), irony (nuns walking behind soldiers), repulsion (Warhol's hands) p.43

<sup>31</sup> Derrida disturbs the word *point* in 'Restitutions'.

<sup>32</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 51

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, Jacques, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes', in H.J. Silverman, (ed.) *Philosophy and Non-philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 288: 'The value of intensity (*dynamis*, force, latency) which I am now in the process of tracking down, leads to a new contrapuntal equation, to a new metonymy of metonymy itself, to the substitutive virtue of *punctum*'.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.290: 'The metonymic force divides the referential line, suspends the referent and leaves it to be desired, while still maintaining the reference'.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 285



In *The Deaths of Roland Barthes*<sup>36</sup>, Derrida fondly explores the dimension of *punctum*, as he amplifies concerns expressed in 'Parergon'. Derrida sees the logic of *punctum* as confirming the impossibility of 'presence' and emphasises its elusiveness, its dependence on absence and its metonymic power, only briefly referred to by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. Derrida uses the analogy of music in his attempt to describe the peculiar cadence of the *punctum*. 'The *punctum* gives rhythm to the *studium*, that is, 'scans it' and resembles 'forms of counterpoint and polyphony and fugue'.<sup>37</sup> His resort to this analogy indicates a dimension that is not lucid but resonant and which 'no longer speaks of light or photography or anything to be seen' and which invokes other senses instead, other than sight. One cannot identify it precisely and say 'look at this!' It cannot be pointed to as a substance or 'thing' and just as *differance* is elusive, resonant and indeterminate, so is the *punctum*. Just as the meaning of the word *differance* defies its own property of utterance and relies on the visual dimension to provoke the full possibility of its meaning, so *punctum* denies its own visibility and relies on 'something else'. Because where is it exactly? It is unlocatable and inhabits the dimension of rhythm and tone, the language of sensation and dimensions of the *semiotic*, rather than aesthetic 'disinterest'.



Fig. 43 Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Heads #10*, 2001

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.264. A detail that 'punctures the surface of the reproduction... of analogies, likenesses and codes. It pierces, strikes me, wounds me, bruises me, and, first of all, seems to look only at me; it is the Referent which, through its own image, I can no longer suspend, while its 'presence' forever escapes me, having already receded into the past.'

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.269: 'It is supplementary and musical' originates with Barthes use of the word 'scan' in *Camera Lucida*, p.26



Derrida labours the distinction between the terms referent (what he calls that ‘vast and vague category’) and reference, the confusion of which contributes to the notion of transparency.<sup>38</sup> The photographic referent (e.g. Sonja’s earring) unavoidably ‘adheres to itself’<sup>39</sup> but ‘doesn’t relate to a present or to a real but, in a different way, to the other’,<sup>40</sup> its absence. Like Barthes, Derrida speaks of the relevance of this absence as deriving from the ‘having-been-there’ of a unique occurrence, rather than from the significance of the object alone. ‘In the photograph, the referent is noticeably absent, suspendable, vanished into the unique past time of its event, but the reference to this referent, let us say the intentional movement [in the phenomenological sense] of reference, also implies irreducibly the having-been of a unique and invariable referent’.<sup>41</sup> So it is that absence recurs again. In ‘*DIFFERENCE AND THE PHOTOGRAPH*’, I iterated that the object referred to in a photograph was allied to the linguistic function of supplement together with its dependence on the absence of what is referred to. And that connotation, (Barthes’ ‘imposition of second meaning’<sup>42</sup>), which is found in the reference, resides in the supplement. What is depicted in the image is the referent. The referent, the earring as it was, resides in the photograph and what it refers to, the earring, exist independently. The photograph *refers* to the earring that is absent in reality and not there in front of us now. The reference in a photograph, to the referent underlines the absence of the object depicted (the earring). The *punctum* ‘suspends the referent (the earring), not the reference’<sup>43</sup> to it and inserts a further dimension to the reality of the earring, which is the reality of subjective thought, provoked by the image of it. ‘However lightning-like it may be, the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power that accesses another sort of reality is often metonymic’<sup>44</sup> and ‘metonymy is no mistake or falsehood; it doesn’t speak untruths’.<sup>45</sup> If the metonymic power exists, if it occurs, it possesses a sort of truth, not in its reality but in the fact that Sonja’s earring is pertinent in the poignant contrasts it refers to. Contrasts that are absent, but which we grasp conceptually. It is this point in the definition that is important here; the ‘reality’ of the image is the metonymic content, rather than what one can imagine about the specific time and place depicted in the image. The photographic reference is ‘haunted’ by the referent, which follows the image in its absence and reverberates. The metonymic reference inhabits the object’s absence and it is the uniqueness of its having-been-there that lends it its poignancy. The *punctum* has double resonance; it amplifies the possibility of metonymy with its reference to this unique occurrence and as a result, accesses a special sort of absence.

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<sup>38</sup> See Walton, and Friday, Part One, p.20

<sup>39</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 5-6

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, ‘The Deaths of Roland Barthes’, p.275

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 281 - my parenthesis. David Phillips itemises Derrida’s concern with the ‘Referent’ in ‘Photo-Logos, Photography and Deconstruction’ in *The Subjects and Objects of Art History*, note 60, p.176

<sup>42</sup> Barthes, ‘The Photographic Message’ in *Image, Music, Text*, p. 20

<sup>43</sup> Derrida, ‘The Deaths of Roland Barthes’, p.275

<sup>44</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 45

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, ‘The Deaths of Roland Barthes’, p. 293



What is it in the portrait that operates in this way? In my description of A, I have deliberately eliminated all references outside her head and hands. My attempt to describe A cannot strictly carry the dimension of *punctum* which, as Barthes defines it, arrives by accident, not artistry, and is unlikely to be a result of the photographer's intention. But, in seeking what defines A as A, as I know her to be, I rely entirely on that personal address to me and her expression and gesture in the constitution of the dialogue between us.<sup>46</sup> If it is not *punctum*, then I have found a kind of 'sensitive point'. Whereas, with images of strangers, the 'pointed' emotional hook is more likely to reside in the surrounding paraphernalia or in the subject's features. In this respect, what I am looking for in images generally, is the element that awakens my response, my very subjective interest, that alerts *me*, perhaps only *me*.



Fig. 44 Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Auden and Emma* 1989.<sup>47</sup>

*The dog looks at me, is alert and keen and makes me smile. The central subjects are occupied elsewhere. The light catches the toes on Auden's feet and the way the feet rest on the stool is interestingly precarious. The door handle is 'interesting' more in the manner of 'disinterest', intelligible interest, concerned with shape, placement and is wholly explicable.*

<sup>46</sup> See *Affective Reaction*, Part Two

<sup>47</sup> In *Philip-Lorca diCorcia*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995. Philip-Lorca diCorcia, born 1953 Hartford, Connecticut. Following this earlier series of friends and family in the 1970s (and featuring his brother Mario), other series include in 1980s of hustlers in Santa Monica using more limited staging and in the 1990s, *Streetwork* and *Heads* are both taken remotely. *A Storybook Life* records incidentals over a period 20 years from 1978.



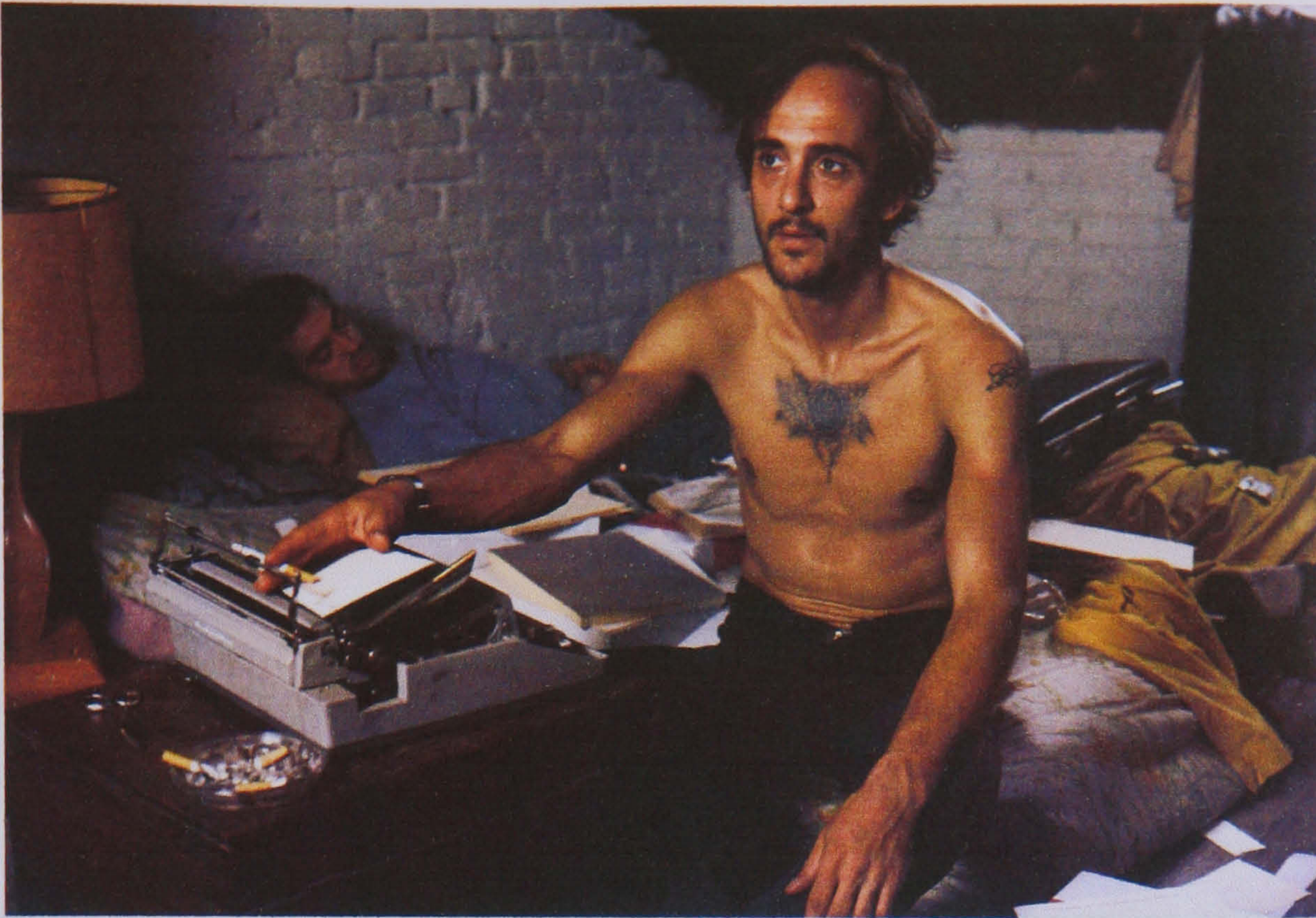


Fig.45 Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Bruce and Ronnie* 1982.

*Tattooed, amidst the disarray of what looks like spartan living, he appears tough and scrawny. There is an inkling of 'tenderness' in the creases, tiny folds of his lean stomach. He is soft and flesh after all. Is then what induces this kind of response, some element that reveals vulnerability? But his hands too are important to my response – his right arm outstretched, his hand holding a cigarette appears to be adjusting the typewriter. It is a hand with purpose, an imminent gesture (as with Sonja's in the kitchen), that which points from the future, on the verge of taking place and from which emanates the possibility of either /or, as it indicates backwards or forwards. His left hand rests in the foreground of the image on his knee passively. There is an indicative contrast of gestures, but the potency lies in the possibility of neither one thing nor another.*

There is no sentiment to be had in diCorcia's images; the subjects are not pitiable and the scenes awaken no nostalgia. These are carefully staged, with the intention of keeping interpretation open and not prescriptive in any way. What lets me in, are little suggestions of incongruity and paradox. Like Ruff's portraits, devoid of expression or context, diCorcia's later series *Heads*<sup>48</sup> isolates the head and the power of the image relies more on facial expression, gesture and the effect of monumentality rather than in details of context. In portraits such as these, the 'piercing' described by Barthes is not obvious; in #8 her open mouth and the eyebrow ring reveals vulnerability, in #10 [fig. 43] it is perhaps the incongruity of the serious inward reflection with the apparel of youth and in #02 the signs of preoccupation; bottle of water, tickets and her attention caught, the light illuminating her pockmarked face.

Metonym, metaphor, allegory are frequently referred to under the umbrella of metaphor. Whether we stick to a classic interpretation of metaphor, that of substitution of one signifier for another, or

<sup>48</sup> Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Heads*, New York: Pace Wildenstein, 2001



whether it is extended to include a metonymic process, that of a part implying the whole, these processes function in our thinking as a move to ideation. Metonymy is a more poetic shortcut, where ‘the name of one thing is put for that of another related to it, the effect for the cause etc.’ (the earring as the move to womanhood, the water for thirst) and synecdoche, literally one part for another or a whole, or the whole for a part, (a book for a library or reading). ‘A sort of hallucinating metonymy’<sup>49</sup> is the function that animates the absolute stillness and instantaneity of the photograph and that beguiles us into ‘seeing’ it as more.

### CATALYSER CONTRA-NARRATIVE

Taking a sideways step from the properties of detail in a photograph, I shall look at an example of how *interpretations* of its effect might differ. Barthes’s early structural analysis<sup>50</sup> of the role of detail in literary narrative is significant for its introduction of the notion of the constituent elements of meaning as being lateral (non-literal) as well as vertical (necessary for narrative progression). In the context of the photograph, it reminds us of the simple fact that content is presented obviously and simultaneously in a photograph, but that the impact of that fact is not so certain. The term ‘function’ has already been assumed as useful in discussing meaning in photographs. In this text, Barthes uses it to determine the elements of content that indicate where a story might come from, or go to, and which set the boundaries of context and implication. In this respect, all details in an image have a function in that they all contribute to a context. There are those details that have particular import, which make reference symbolically (in the Peircean sense) in that elements have more cultural significance, and there are those, which are more idiosyncratic and have the potential for poignancy, nostalgia, memory, association. ‘Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness: everything has a meaning or nothing has’<sup>51</sup> and when it is in the context of an artistic statement, Barthes contends that ‘no unit ever goes wasted’, which he later explores in *The Reality Effect*.<sup>52</sup> Thus the smallest element can contribute to the bigger picture by implying action, place, character or the qualitative value of the scene. This differentiation can be easily transported to the context of photographs and has been discussed with regard to the dynamics of *parergon* and *punctum*. It may seem a truism to state that all details in a photograph contribute to the meaning, so that the fact that Sonja’s glass is a glass of water, and not a glass of milk, makes a difference. But the assumptions that follow this fact vary and are interesting.

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<sup>49</sup> Derrida, ‘The Deaths of Roland Barthes’, p. 282

<sup>50</sup> Barthes, Roland, ‘Structural Analysis of Narratives’. In *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press, 1977. Originally published in French in *Communications* 8, 1966

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89

<sup>52</sup> Barthes, Roland, ‘The Reality Effect’ in Tzvetan Todorov (ed.) *French Literary Theory Today*, trans. R. Carter, Cambridge University Press, 1982



What Barthes calls 'distributional' elements, function as the suggestion of anticipated use, in much the way that we saw the implicit *possibility* and the ambivalent action of the glass of water being picked up or being put down, and 'integrational' elements, which are more diffuse, psychological or atmospheric, for example the paucity of the scene being indicated by a mark on the wall or imbuing a 'homeliness', a certain 'value', a set of priorities to home-life. In terms of literature, differentiation between verbal and adjectival functions support these distinctions, which I shall translate as eventful and qualitative in the context of the photograph. And further to that, Barthes aligns 'metonymic relata' as possessing the verbal function and 'metaphoric relata' as having the function of 'being'. It may be that we could distinguish between these distinctions in a photograph; between images more ridden with 'distributional' elements (eventful), relating to doing and narrative than 'integrational' (qualitative). But it is more likely that objects in the image relate to both functions, so that the glass of water is metonymic in the anticipation of it being picked up and the water being drunk, and metaphoric in the enormous implications of the concept 'water', the implications of the glass being transparent and half full (or empty) and the implications of the hand *nearly* touching the glass. The visibility of *differance* presents active and passive elements simultaneously.

In a photograph, unlike language, it is not only difficult to structurally determine the whereabouts of specific meanings, but also the qualitative elements, those that describe, cannot be separated from the event and content. The quality is both inseparable from the object depicted, and inseparable from the special absence of the metonym. The photographic property of absence thus brings together the dynamic of *parergon*, the special absence of the metonym and, as with *differance*, meaning and expression. As we saw with the density of implication of referent and reference, it is difficult to distinguish pure, functional notional reference in an image from that which indicates something else. The image of the glass refers to a glass (as we have seen - the root of transparency) *and* indicates other things, so that there are layers of reference. Removal of the cooker would place Sonja somewhere else, not in a kitchen. Replacement of the glass for a cup would alter the tone and the possibility in metonym, not the central content, which is Sonja. We can thus verbally describe the possibility of two similar images, similarly as 'Sonja is sitting in the kitchen with her arm outstretched, touching a glass of water' or 'Sonja is sitting in the kitchen with her arm outstretched, touching a cup of water'. It would appear to make little difference verbally until we behold that implication visually. Objects, which inform in a photograph are always also 'implicit signifieds' and in this respect it would be difficult to argue that anything was totally insignificant.

In speaking of literary narrative, Barthes indicates details, that act as 'cardinal functions', which help to conclude a story in terms of action (which might equate with what we might term key



points in an image), and details as ‘catalysers’, which contribute to the tone rather than the action, ‘but their functionality is attenuated, unilateral, parasitic’.<sup>53</sup> One could see these details, as Giles<sup>54</sup> does, as being consequential in establishing a narrative interpretation or, as I do, as being key in producing the opposite effect, of disrupting the narrative and in consequence contributing to the potency of the image, just *because they do not* determine anything in particular. *Catalysers* are inconsequential (literally) in that they are not causal in a way that produces an effective action, but may be more *affective*, via tone and quality. ‘Cardinal functions’ accomplish a ‘telescoping of logic and temporality’, ‘the risky moments of narrative’, the will she, won’t she, the uncanny moment, decisive points that anticipate important action. It is this anticipatory ‘distributional’ function that is central to what has been valued as indicative of the ‘photographic eye’ or even ‘decisive moment’, which anticipates action or feeling, coupled with moments of action. ‘Integrational’ elements may not contribute to ‘the economy of the message’<sup>55</sup>, but instead provide tension to what Barthes calls the ‘discursive function’ and which ‘accelerates, delays... and sometimes even leads astray’ (delays, defers as with *differance*). And in a photograph, there is no requisite conclusion, all elements could be ‘dilatatory’, all could be seen as central. So that the prime function of detail in an image is discursive and rhetorical, that expression and meaning are apprehended simultaneously with action or content, as opposed to a narrative interpretation, which encourages a conclusive direction.

The expectation of a photograph as a text that constructs meaning is not one that necessarily equates ‘text’ with ‘meaning’ or ‘meaning’ with ‘narrative’, as Giles suggests. Because we are *able* to fabricate a narrative from an image, does not define that facility as a determinate norm. In response to Barthes’s *The Reality Effect*, Bal suggests that details that deny definition, ‘ultimate’, indivisible details, may ‘make a connotation of realism shift to a place of denotation because there is no denotative meaning available’ and so contribute to a construction of meaning as something ‘real’. There are thus aspects of any one detail that contributes to the assurance of what is real and there are aspects that cannot be accounted for. Barthes explanation is cryptic but I interpret him as saying that it is the *genre* that represents the ‘real’, the *category* that acts on behalf of the ‘real’ and ‘not its various contents’, which is being signified; in other words, ‘the very absence of the signified...becomes the true signifier of realism’.<sup>56</sup> This asserts the significance of absence again over the certainty of the detail’s contribution. It says that we cannot ‘see’ the photographic content for the ‘reality’ we ‘see’ (understand) as being depicted by it. Giles contends that it is the useless details that make the photograph ‘real’ for us and that it is through them that we can construct a story. He leaps from looking to articulating and draws a parallel between the articulation of an image and the verbal articulation of a fictional character in a novel and so describes the norm of our

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<sup>53</sup> Barthes, ‘Structural Analysis of Narratives’, p. 94

<sup>54</sup> Giles, ‘The Expectation of Narrative in the Photograph’, p.110

<sup>55</sup> Barthes, ‘Structural Analysis of Narratives’, p.95

<sup>56</sup> Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, p.16



'reading' photographs as a necessary translation into words, as a literal 'reading' of the text. His parallel is dependent on a translation of literary terminology, such as 'content', which assumes the same literal significance in a photograph, so that 'content' in a photograph is translated as those features that support 'narrative', as they would do in literature, rather than signifying a different constitution entirely; of being 'integrational' features that are particular to the *differance* of the photograph. I suggest that 'catalysers', so far as they exist, contribute equally to the photographic tone overall and that, rather than constructing the narrative (Giles), or becoming indicative of a 'realism' and in consequence further denotation (Bal<sup>57</sup>), they animate the overall quality of resonant meaning. It may be possible then to sidestep the interpretative position, which assumes literary functions literally and look at alternative and more pertinent, figurative possibilities.

### PURE MEANING



Fig.47 Richard Avedon, *William Casby*, 1963

So far, two different types of significance have consistently emerged, which I shall refer to as *effective* and *affective* meanings. As we saw in '*CATALYSER CONTRA-NARRATIVE*', detail may be seen as consequential, as effective in helping to establish the active content, or, as *not* contributing to causal effect, but important in terms of tone and quality and being *affective*. The non-causality of the catalyser enters an arena of ambivalent and more elusive meaning, which I would describe as non-definitive or non-effective meaning, but which can achieve *affect* in some way. I equate this 'affective meaning' with Barthes's term 'pure meaning'. This notion unites a number of issues discussed previously, in the contexts of *Parergon* (of what is extrinsic) and *Differance* (of what is absent) and its clarification correlates constructive models of elusive meaning found in detail. A clearer apprehension of what constitutes *pure meaning* approaches a

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<sup>57</sup> Bal, 'Dispersing the Image' in *Looking In*, p. 74. Comment derived from Barthes's essay 'The Reality Effect.'



definition of what is resonant and ineffable quality in photographs and introduces discussion of photographs that question the condition of meaning.

In his writing about 'meaning', Barthes repeatedly assigns importance to the role of the insignificant in achieving an indefinable and elusive photographic quality, which he variously described as 'obtuse meaning',<sup>58</sup> 'pure meaning' and 'punctum'. His brief explanation of 'pure meaning'<sup>59</sup> importantly distinguishes between the degree of meaning and effect and explains the contradiction that an image must 'go beyond the nominal subject to be great'. He states that, as every photograph refers to the specific, in order to generate general meaning and thereby 'signify' in a universal way, it has to assume a mask – a definitive, mythic image that will sustain, such as Avedon's portrait of William Casby, which he refers to as 'the essence of slavery is here laid bare' and where 'the mask is the meaning'. Society wants meaning, but translated ('less acute') as opposed to 'absolutely pure'. It mistrusts pure, raw meaning, without a mask, which is more dangerous. His reflection here points to the degree of balance between being explicit enough to be readable generally, and discreet enough not to disturb too much, enough 'to disturb' and not so discreet as to be ineffective. Photography then is most effective 'not when it frightens or repels but



Figs. 46, 48-51 Boris Mikhailov, *Case History series*, 1999

<sup>58</sup> Barthes, Roland, 'The Third Meaning', *Image, Music, Text*, pp.52-68

<sup>59</sup> See Barthes's brief logic of 'pure meaning' in *Camera Lucida* p. 34-38 and his discussion of the incidental yet insignificant object or 'punctum' p.45-59. Parallels can be drawn between Barthes's *pure meaning* and his reference to the *mask* and Baudrillard's allusion to the *mask* as being a more fruitful presentation in itself than trying to get behind it, in 'For Illusion is...' Baudrillard also uses the term *literal* in a similar sense to Barthes as having more integrity, being more powerful, in 'It is the Object that Thinks Us', *Photographies*. Barthes uses *literal* in the sense of bald rawness or *pure meaning*.



when it is pensive, when it thinks'. How general or specific an image must be to be meaningful or meaning-less and how meaning and potency is constituted is clearly confusing. Barthes's discussion is difficult, perhaps because he relies on the distinctions between political and aesthetic, between generality and particularity, and implicitly, between public and private, whereas contemporary uses of photography do not always retain these distinctions. Barthes indicates that a translated photographic image, an image already explained by the author, misses the essential and raw import of what is photographed. He suggests that the 'invented' image leaves the viewer no room for response or interpretation because the image is already loaded with obvious meaning.<sup>60</sup> Any expectation of some special quality in a photograph is closely allied to an expectation of the author translating experience, via commentary or metaphor into some universal meaning. If, to achieve this quality of 'universally true', photographs must signify more generally, must lose particularity, then according to Barthes, they must lose their very particular idiosyncratic and perhaps hidden history and ultimately their potential power as images. The specificity of context and the visually insignificant is vital to images if they are to retain an inexplicable rawness, and not be clothed in symbolism or mythic representation.<sup>61</sup> The implication here is that universal narrative (meaning that is trans-historical and trans-cultural) might eventually become *insignificant* i.e. generality leads to insignificance. Significance must therefore require particularity. If nothing is left for the viewer



<sup>60</sup> See quotation cited by Nancy Shawcross as her translation of 'Photo-chocs', a commentary by Barthes on an exhibition in Shawcross, *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Translation in Perspective*, pp.3-4

<sup>61</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Great Family of Man' (1957). In *Mythologies*, London: Vintage, 1983, pp.100-102





to contribute, Barthes's indefinable quality cannot exist and the image is ultimately meaningless. Interpretation, of Strba's images for example, is left with the viewer and is reinvented with each viewer's own reference. Boris Mikhailov's brutal images are situated between pictures being too confrontational and being illegible. Are these an example of what Barthes called literal, pure meaning; too raw to be effective? They present brutality in a theatrical way, a deliberately posed way that is obviously not a 'realistic' presentation in the sense of a likeness that is 'true', 'sincere' and 'revealing' in the humanist tradition. What is impressive about these alarming images is the way they cut through the search for a definitive statement that might express 'dignity' and eventually sentimentality. They disrupt sympathetic perception; they are so awful. Their exposure repels us; they distort and subvert that temptation to prettify, sanitise, and exalt, in a way that alienates us from his subjects, rather than creating the illusion of bringing them nearer, in shared humanity. This illusion of nearness in the photographer's packaging of different worlds is something Levinas avoids in his acceptance of alterity. Mikhailov avoids mythic representation in presenting unrefined versions of experience from a position of immersion in a very particular place and history. Margarita Tupitsyn says of Mikhailov's work that 'being part of it' makes the 'intrinsic meaning' unavoidable.<sup>62</sup> Involvement 'from below' rather than 'from above' explains and gives his work its precipitous position - on the edge of decency and documentary. The abandonment of analysis or comment of the Russian situation is the comment. Mikhailov himself talks about 'being' rather than seeking a marked event ('the more we can exclude (event) from representation,

<sup>62</sup> Tupitsyn, Margarite, 'Photography as a Remedy for Stammering' in *Boris Mikhailov, Unfinished Dissertation*, Zurich: Scalo, 1998, p.219



the closer we can approach the most important thing – being<sup>63</sup>) advocating ‘being’ or ‘the real’ as unremarkable and non-eventful. ‘Unvarnished “representation” of “reality”, a naked account of “what is” (or was), thus looks like a resistance to meaning, a resistance, which confirms the great mythical opposition between the true-to-life (the living) and the intelligible<sup>64</sup> – pure description. Thus Mikhailov’s work offends on two counts; the particular rawness of subject matter and the disconcerting place of ‘reality’.

Perversely, photography cannot help but elevate the subject, into an object of display, elevate the insignificant into the ‘significant’, and traditionally it has been the purposeful photographer’s obligation to do so, to transcend what is commonplace. Baudrillard shares with Barthes a horror of over-construction and both encourage ‘the possibility of pure event that can no longer be manipulated, interpreted or deciphered by any historical subjectivity’<sup>65</sup>; they are looking instead for something ‘without culture’<sup>66</sup> something ‘more radical’. Baudrillard warns that ‘when the image is buried beneath commentary...walled up in aesthetic celebration, it is finished’, becomes ‘aesthetic stupefaction’.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, they both suggest that photographs with ‘artistic’ intention lose their potency and both move towards an unresolved poetic that defies logic and which is reminiscent of the consequence of Derrida’s *sans*, rather than eventful resolution. As we shall see in Part Three, it is this defiance of logic, the elusive quality, the concept of raw apprehension approaching non-meaning, which is being simultaneously pursued and obscured, repeatedly, in contemporary practice – Barthes’s ‘absolutely pure’, Baudrillard’s ‘figure of nothingness, absence and unreality’.<sup>68</sup>

Persistent divisions between indication and expression, ‘distributional’ and ‘integrational’ elements, intended/authorial and received/subjective meanings all suggest a consistent and essential difference that distinguishes *effective* from *affective*, so that the degree of effective meaning is derived from the level of indication, the level of successful communication of intended meaning or the level of ‘distributional’ elements contributing to clear, ‘meaningful’ causal signs. Signs, which reflect cause and effect are the result of their being informational or authorial. Similarly metaphorical references can be seen as outspoken and effective or more obscure and ineffective. There comes a point however when an image can become too clear (cliche) and lifeless and thereby becomes ineffective and without potency. ‘Living’ metaphors need to disturb continuously to be

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<sup>63</sup> Boris Mikhailov quoted in *Unfinished Dissertation*, p.219

<sup>64</sup> Barthes, *The Reality Effect*, p.14

<sup>65</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, ‘Forget Baudrillard’, interview with Sylvere Lotringer, 1984–85, in Mike Gane (ed.) *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p.100

<sup>66</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 7 and see Baudrillard’s ‘allergy to culture’ in Gane, *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, p. 24

<sup>67</sup> Baudrillard, ‘Aesthetic Illusion and Virtual Reality’ in Zurbrugg, Nicholas (ed.) *Jean Baudrillard: Art & Artefact*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, p.22

<sup>68</sup> Baudrillard, ‘For Illusion isn’t the Opposite of Reality...’ in Wiebel, Peter, ed., *Photographies 1985-1998 Within the Horizon of the Object, Objects in this Mirror are Closer than they Appear*, Hatje-Cantz Publishers, 1999, p.139. Baudrillard’s definition of *punctum*.



meaningful. Indicative statements are the equivalent to rational function, to the 'symbolic',<sup>69</sup> and 'expression' equivalent to Kristeva's semiotic function, which disturbs and is driven by the pre-symbolic. Effective meaning is not ambivalent and leans towards definition. Efficacy is dependent on the comprehension of the image, the 'sense' of the image - i.e. its reference to what is there, its mimetic value. In fact it may have nothing to do with potency. Affective meaning can be ambivalent and indeterminate. The definition of *pure meaning* clarifies the difference between meaning with purpose, which is effective, and meaning, which is potent but either purposeless or ineffective. Avedon's portraits of the *Mid West* [fig.11]<sup>70</sup> are definitive and startlingly clear and 'effective'. Evans Polaroid portraits on the other hand are non-definitive, have no clear apparent view and make no statement, yet possess resonance. Thus if we separate Effectiveness from Potency and assert that one does not derive from the other, we establish a place prior to this persistent assumption of cause and effect, regarding 'good' and powerful images. Images can be effective and potent (Avedon), and can be ineffective and potent (Evans).

As we saw in *The Reality Effect*, if one takes 'insignificant notation' in photographs to contribute to the mood and character of the whole effect, it would be difficult to determine which detail contributes to which aspect of character. The possibility of 'pure' indication or pure description is an interesting one in relation to photographs. In photographs, the function of 'descriptive passages' are interpreted as indicative of something 'real' and whilst one could describe any photograph as being 'descriptive only', the indicative content will always suggest otherwise, caught as it is in the inevitable cycle of cause and effect. And so Barthes distinguishes descriptive detail that is 'irrelevant' to the narrative structure, 'attached to no functional sequence, nor to any signified characteristics, atmosphere or information'. He suggests such description as interwoven with the 'imperatives of realism' - so that 'referential constraints' are interwoven with 'aesthetic constraints'.<sup>71</sup> Works of 'pure description', which doggedly resist ulterior meaning, such as Ruff's attenuated portraits, only contribute evidence of something taking place and are barely 'evidence of 'what-was-there''.<sup>72</sup> They reflect aspects of Baudrillard's 'disappearing subject'. They are both non-expressive and expressionless, having effected a subversion of direct expression. (The extreme deliberateness of von Zwehl and Lundin contrive its total rejection.) Ruff plays out Baudrillard's impossible realm of reality in photographic practice, of no representation and no meaning. His authenticity lies with the primacy of the image and his determination not to succumb to the illusion of being able to represent, which he implicitly holds as a weakness. He appropriates and combines two forms; the formal portrait and the passport photograph and presents the person as a reductive abstraction rather than a reference, a 'kind of second reality', which is a 'thing' rather than a

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<sup>69</sup> See p.120, note 59

<sup>70</sup> *Richard Avedon, In The American West, 1979-1984*, exhibition catalogue, Centre for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 2001

<sup>71</sup> Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', p.14

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15



person. But rather than a concern with the 'thingness' of the object depicted, Ruff is concerned with the 'thingness' of the photograph and its surface quality. The physical presence of the subject in the photograph approaches a subject that refers only to itself. He arrives at a sort of simplicity; his own brand of purity which avoids the dilemma of both subjectivity and confrontation.

Clarification of *pure meaning* exposes what are assumed to be the necessary conditions for 'meaningful' images, such as the equivalence of universal meaning with the degree of meaningfulness (Kant's second 'moment' again), and the equivalence of meaning with authorial intention. Assumptions regarding what is necessary for 'meaningful images' rely on such expectations, and preface subsequent judgements of quality. Derrida's disturbance<sup>73</sup> between determinant judgement (where the general comes first and determines the particular) and reflective judgement (which begins with the particular and must retrace the way to the general) provides a way to encompass works such as Mikhailov's and has motivated new readings in art history<sup>74</sup> that require a more interactive process of engagement than a reliance on didactic information.

As we saw in '*DIFFERENCE AND THE PHOTOGRAPH*', the perpetuation of distinctions helps to organise complexity and to dispel uncertainty. Any disruption to this established order will contribute toward a different hegemony, an assertion of the figural over the literal. Oppositional assumptions originate in implications of words such as 'purpose', 'insignificant' and 'meaning' and lead to a dependence on unquestioned premises, which maintain the existing hegemony. A premise, which equates 'meaning' with narrative relies on the primary placement of authorship, to determine what is meaningful and typifies a common assumption concerning the relationship between description, authorial intention and meaning, and parallels the still dominant distinction between indication and expression. Giles's interpretation<sup>75</sup> distinguishes between meaning with intention or purpose, and meaning which is only 'descriptive' and not expressive of any purpose. The naming of photographs with no apparent purpose as 'only descriptions' implies that a very 'straight' 'descriptive' depiction may not have meaning beyond being a sign for a certain type of a thing, e.g. 'an unclothed man'. 'Purpose' is distinguished still further by 'purpose' that is communicated and 'purpose' that is unknown. In this scenario, anonymous 'purpose' is problematic. Giles's statement 'only purposeful signs are meaningful' assumes the priority of intended purpose and reflects a common point of view. Without purpose, signs are deemed to be worthless and meaningless (worth is assumed to be attached to communicated 'meaning' and vice versa), and in turn, are dependent on the premise of authorship that does not include the possibility of a correspondingly active role of the reader. Thus all the power is given to the author / narrator / photographer and none to a subjective reading. This premise is positionally at odds with the 'logic of contradiction', the

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida, 'Parergon', *The Truth in Painting*, p.51 (Owens, p.16)

<sup>74</sup> See for example Bal, Holly, Moxey, Jones

<sup>75</sup> Giles, 'The Expectation of Narrative', p.109



‘without’ function (and Kant’s third ‘moment’) or the possibility that meaning can arise in a senseless, purposeless way, as with Barthes’s description of useless detail, *punctum* or *air* and Derrida’s *parergon* and *sans*. The position and clarity of ‘purpose’ is central to the condition of ‘meaning’ and its status of quality. For an image to be powerful in the sense of *pure meaning*, I suggest it requires a position that side steps originating distinctions and is at the edge of significance, purpose and effectiveness.

Just as expression is not added like a “stratum” to the presence of a pre-expressive sense, so, in the same way, the inside of expression does not accidentally happen to be affected by the outside of indication. Their overturning is primordial; it is not a contingent association that could be undone...If indication is not added to expression, which is not added to sense, we can nonetheless speak in regard to them, of a primordial “supplement”: their *addition* comes to *make up* for a deficiency, it comes to compensate for a primordial nonself-presence.<sup>76</sup>

*Pure Meaning* returns to the issue of what is seen as being ‘real’, where expectations reside persistently in truth, verisimilitude and ‘realism’, where the implicit and particular nature of ‘purpose’ is obscurely embedded and established by the current norm of ‘reality’. But Barthes’s speculation reminds us that any description is relevant only in the terms verified by the particular ‘rules of the discourse genre’,<sup>77</sup> so that in some genres, verisimilitude is vital and, in others, aesthetic attenuation. Genres have different functions; some with more ‘effective’ functions than aesthetic (in the sense of exciting and meaningful) and some with different desires other than realism as truth or verisimilitude. It might seem an obvious statement to make that ‘meaning’ cannot be separated from the context in which it is read. But what happens in discussing photographs, is that the ‘discourse genre’, the particular norm of reality in any particular context, can be forgotten;<sup>78</sup> for example, ‘documentary’ photographs with effective purpose cannot be cited in contrast to ‘art photographs’ without inviting confusion.<sup>79</sup> Genres are less distinct or explicit in contemporary practice and confused functions can dictate different meanings and thus ‘judgement’ can be meaningless or ineffective. The notion of realism need not be constrained by verifiable ‘truth’ and can be descriptive in a different way, in the manner of ‘dream’ or ‘poetic’ logic as Kristeva describes<sup>80</sup> or, as in pre-modernity, when ‘plausibility was not referential, but overtly discursive’.<sup>81</sup> There remains an expectation of ‘realism’, which is not a law but a habit. It is possible that meaning can be attached more directly as symbolic with aspects of description that are not essential to the message, that embellish and are integrated with the ‘imperatives of realism’<sup>82</sup> (the illusion of realism), where the aesthetic is embedded in its effect.

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<sup>76</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 86.

<sup>77</sup> Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, p.13

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>79</sup> As sometimes is the case – see Kippen, Gillian, ‘The Critical Language of Photography’, Ph.D. University of Manchester, 1997

<sup>80</sup> See Julia Kristeva’s discussion of Bakhtin’s dialogism in ‘Word, Dialogue, Novel’ in *Desire in Language*, p.70

<sup>81</sup> Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, p.13

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 14



*Pure meaning* also returns us to the distinctions between indication and expression, between ‘reality and representation’, the ‘veridical and the imaginary’<sup>83</sup> and between presence and repetition. Derrida’s refutation of ‘presence’ emerges from Husserl’s failure to explain the part of expression that exceeds the indicative and the consequent misalliance between meaning and indication, and indicates instead the alliance between meaning and absence, explained through examples of grammar. At the root of an explanation for *pure meaning* are those elements that exceed explanation and the indicative. Derrida exposes ‘pure logical grammar’ (the formal in photographic terms) as therefore limited, as it does not explain meaning. He derives ‘form’ from ‘sense’, which is restricted to what we know, to what we can anticipate. There is always that which supplements the ‘grammar’, that which makes up the image, a gestalt that is more than the sum of its constituent parts and cannot be quantified. *Pure meaning* is that latent area of possibility, not defined, which can overturn established assumptions of concept and norms of genre. What is ‘non-presence’ allows and confirms the possibility of meaning that approaches unacceptability or meaninglessness in terms of the norm, and the possibility of abstraction or non-meaning in terms of the indexical photograph and to which I return in Part Three.

The range of mechanisms discussed confirm the difference between what is reference and what is image; the distinction between efficacy and potency clarifies a point of departure for resonance from that of communication and indicates a meaning derived from other than what is referenced. The role of supplementation explains the central importance of absence, which invites metonym, the imagination and allegory. Having located positions of instability that present meaning as an area of possibility, the next chapter considers *how* this instability refers outside the photograph itself, explores the mechanics of what is absent, the possibilities of metaphor and ultimately the interdependence of meaning and expression validated by *differance*. What is crucial is the manner in which photographs can be discursive, reflect ideas, demonstrate attitudes, without translation into words. The photograph necessitates a comprehension derived from its immediate impact independently from verbal translation. Barthes’s ‘rules of discursive genre’ could suggest a significant leap from the literal to a discourse that operates visually.

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<sup>83</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p.50



## Chapter Three: THE MECHANICS OF METAPHOR

### MARIO'S FRIDGE<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores the conceptual domain that constructs visual meaning by firstly describing an image that provokes thought, but possibly not by means of a personal sensitive point (*punctum*).<sup>2</sup> It highlights the conflict between our compulsion to define the subject ('thing') and our inclination to conceptual speculation. In 'CHASING THE NON THING', I explore aspects of the metaphoric process that give more direct access to the meaning in photographs and which continues to contradict narrative interpretation.



Fig.52 Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Mario*, 1978

*'From the dark opening of' the cluttered insides of the fridge, light shines forth.<sup>3</sup> Within the shelves of the door, jars sit next to wine next to beer, pasta piles on cheese. In the fridge, 'vibrates the silent call of' food and nourishment, the prospect of cooking and care. 'This equipment is pervaded by' the promise of provision, of white goods, utility and domesticity. It promises more; more comfort, nurture, sustenance and certainty. Mario is still. He stands as if chilled by the preservative powers of the fridge. He stares fixedly within, at what I cannot see. He is expectant; he is submissive before its power, its electric energy, its light. When he shuts*

<sup>1</sup> Mario's Fridge refers to 'Mario. 1978' in Christine Liotta, (ed.) *Philip-Lorca diCorcia*, Museum of Modern Art, 1995

<sup>2</sup> See Bal 's discussion of meaning, other than by the 'rules imposed by language' (p. 74). Bal, Mieke, 'Dispersing the Image'. In *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*, pp.65-91

<sup>3</sup> The phrases in quotes in these two paragraphs are from Martin Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935) in Cazeaux, Clive (ed.), *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, London: Routledge, 2000, p.87. The rest is my speculation derived from this text.



*the door, the light will go and whilst it is open, he absorbs its strength. The manner of placement in the fridge door is the one visible trace of human uncertainty in a room of clean lines and decisive surfaces. It is night. Six black windows, two obscured by the fridge door, tell me it is dark outside, but warm; the bottom window is open to the night air. It is dark outside, but light inside the fridge. It is as if Mario feeds off the light, the source of sustenance. There is light at the bottom of the fridge; in the midst of darkness there is light; the silver lighting.*

*The illuminated space is surrounded by edges, framing the interior and the light that emanates from it.<sup>4</sup> Within the frame of the picture, at least six successive vertical edges echo the frame of the fridge door. 'On the edge of the void, we follow the line...we follow them on the edge, the edges, the multiple edge which detaches the being-product from ...its subjective scope'.<sup>5</sup> It is a simple frame, an edge around the interior of the fridge 'depicted in absentia'. The interior is seen only by Mario, who can see the top, the bottom, the underneath of successive shelves, the layers of shelves, one upon another, the provisions placed and piled, ordered, or disordered, within. The content of the fridge ordered, by Mario or another, a testament to taste, priority and housekeeping. 'Into this subjective scope, cut off from' my knowledge, will come the one who fills and empties the space, successively replenishing and using its content; the fridge, an ever full cave of sustenance. This is 'the usefulness of the useful, the presumed essence of the product', but useless to Mario, now frozen and detached from reaching into the fridge and taking out what he wants, what he needs, what he desires. What nourishment does he seek? And is it there for him to take? Is he forlorn because what he expected is not there or is he not focused on the content, but on the light - of the future or of the past? Is it the future that he sees, as if in full cine-colour, illuminated and moving before him? The fridge, full of light, promises much; food, nourishment, time travel, the mystery of the universe. The opening of the door is absolute. My position, my view cuts me off from the view inside the fridge; cuts me off from the meaning that is within. 'Not a more or less of stricture but a determined (structured) form of stricture: of the outside and the inside, the underneath and the top. The logic of detachment as cut leads to opposition, it is a logic or even a dialectic of opposition... It has the effect of sublating difference. And thus of suturing. The logic of detachment as stricture is entirely other. Deferring: it never sutures.'<sup>6</sup> The fridge defers, it is neither accessible nor inaccessible, it is open now and will close soon, it is neither full nor empty, neither sustaining nor unsustaining, neither giving nor taking.*

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<sup>4</sup> Recalls Indiana's description of the fridge as an 'abyss' in Indiana, Gary talking about Mario in 'The Nights of a Dreamer', *ArtForum*, January, 1993

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, 'Restitutions' in *The Truth in Painting*, p. 339

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340



*'Here you are picking up on what was started in 'The Sans of the Pure Cut' concerning artificial and "defunct" products" an implement without its handle<sup>8</sup>, a fridge without provision, dislocated from its function, cut off from its purpose ('vague beauty'). A near beautiful 'white good', having a hole, a cavity, a cave. The light ('unconcealedness'), revealing truth. 'The truth of the useful, in other words the being-product of the product...appears in the instance' of opening the fridge door. 'This movement of truth passes via the possibility of fetishisation, but ends up...only confirming the very thing it seems to efface' The 'truth' of the product 'fridge' is not a fridge; it is a cave, a nourishing light, the end and the beginning of the world, the rebirth of Mario.*

The passage above describing *Mario* is linear only out of necessity; it is a linear, verbal approximation of a non-linear conceptual speculation. Contained within the sequential structure of words and sentences, it attempts to relate the simultaneous event of looking.. The meaning here is the conceptual frame which encompasses the focus of Mario in the image and Mario's focus on the fridge interior; Mario's look and the light. But this is not narrative. In order to interpret metaphor, it is necessary to resist the linear, the consequential and the narrative. What I say in words in attempting to describe what I see in an image, images do by default when not troubled with words, when not forced into some defining logic or 'pointed' argument. Images open up possibility. It is easy then to conceive of abstract ideas with the depicted object as metaphor; to look at objects and photographs and allude to abstract concepts. Metaphor is a process that enables defamiliarisation with the object ('thing') depicted. This is thought derived from visual reverie – the void of the space, the intertwining laces<sup>9</sup>, the back and forth of association. Words close down, explain and clarify.

'The thingness of a thing is particularly difficult to express and only seldom expressible'<sup>10</sup>  
 When looking at images, we generally start with the subject matter and ask what is it? And then what does it mean? *'MARIO'S FRIDGE'* demonstrates the malleability of any subject depicted; the 'thing' that is much more than the 'thing', as we construct meaning around it. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger's concern is that a work (of art) should disclose the 'truth' of a 'thing', in its 'unconcealedness'. His speculation is grounded in 'presence,' and a concern to locate the essential nature of a 'thing', as determined by the manner in which it is made ('pure'-thing, 'equipment'-thing, 'work'-thing). He tries to bypass the prevailing thought about that 'thing', the 'thing-concept, that 'obstruct(s) the way toward the thingly character of a thing', which 'constitutes its artistic nature', the 'thingly element'. He tries to see the 'thing' as it is.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 346

<sup>8</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p.80

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, 'Restitutions' in *The Truth in Painting*, p.299

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art* in Cazeaux, p.86

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, 'Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment. The pair of peasant shoes, is in truth', in Cazeaux.



Derrida's concern in contrast is to chase the manner of meaning rather than 'truth' and the essential 'thing'. In *Restitutions*,<sup>12</sup> Derrida 'discloses' the contradictions in Heidegger's definition of significance of Van Gogh's painting of shoes and his attempt to explicate a 'thing' that is a work of art. Derrida's discussion of whether the 'work of art' is a thing or something else, questions the distinction between matter and form and points to the fixation with 'subject' (in the sense of subject-matter). In looking for 'truth', discussion focuses on *what* it is, where it has come from, *what* it represents. This fixation is revealed in the naming of things, fixing things, confirming things and relies on 'semio-linguistics' dominated by 'the matter-form couple', where form correlates with the rational, matter with the irrational. As Heidegger's speculation demonstrates, a very simple image allows an array of 'subject' to emerge. It is a 'thing' that manifests 'allegory and symbol' which 'provide the conceptual frame'. For example, in describing the nature of the 'thing', he reveals that his intention is to transcend the representation as he speaks of what is *not* there, what is held metonymically in the shoes and yet is absent: 'From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth.'<sup>13</sup> Here Heidegger projects onto a 'mere thing' with subjectivity or accesses what Derrida calls 'its subjective scope',<sup>14</sup> the subject who is absent but inferred by an object present.

It is the persistence in describing the 'subject' in a photograph, the what of the 'thing', that contributes again to us seeing photographs as transparent to the world, that blinds us so that we perhaps do not *see* the metaphoric meaning that accompanies the photographed reference to that object (the fridge, the earring, the glass of water) and our mediated perception of it. Derrida's use of the metaphor of lacing and shoelaces to expound the movement from inside to outside and back – of the picture and the 'thing' itself, demonstrates how easily, when talking about a picture, we confuse – the subject as being there – as if it were a 'thing' in front of us. 'It seems to be situated between the thing and the work of art...When the "product" is the subject of a "work", when the thing-as-product (shoes) is the "subject" presented or represented by a thing-as-work'.<sup>15</sup> Our presumption tends to look for what a 'thing' *has* to give it quality, on substance rather than lack. 'Restitutions' extends the premise of *differance* by insisting on moving away from the subject-matter, the 'what is'. Derrida speaks of the struggle to find a language that describes visual conditions adequately, that is non-linear and which takes place between what is the content of the work and some particular element within it. He invents new logics of 'detachment' as *cut*<sup>16</sup> and as contradiction. The contradictory logic of supplement (as we have seen with *parergon*), sits uncomfortably with the tradition of 'thingness'.

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p. 88

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, 'Restitutions' in *The Truth in Painting*, pp.255-382

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art* in Cazeaux, p.87

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, 'Restitutions' in *The Truth in Painting*, p. 339

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.297

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340



The dominating concern 'thingness' is doubly pertinent for C20 photography. 'Modernist' photography has assumed this prevailing aesthetic in a particularly acute manner; that a photograph should not only show a 'thing' in a simple and 'straight' way but should reveal some 'truth' about that 'thing'. As an example, Ware observes of Walker Evans that rather than seeking 'to recreate reality from metaphors',<sup>17</sup> he looks to 'reveal the metaphors that were already there in reality' in the object. This revelation of 'thingness' is the origin of a particularly photographic aesthetic concerned to 'transcend the everyday'. It has forefronted the essential element of an object beyond its resemblance and yet, simultaneously and in contradiction, insists on the very 'straight' depiction (likeness) of that same object. The paradox for the photograph in revealing 'something else' is that its photographic property must also inevitably reference 'things'. This 'thingness' and absence indicates a central concern for directions in photography emerging in the late C20. Part Three articulates strategies evident in photographic practice that demonstrates the ambivalence regarding thingness and its absence. Firstly I will articulate an emphasis as metaphoric procedure as a way to circumnavigate the inclusion of concept with that of absence.

### *CHASING THE NON-THING*

The term 'concept' is problematic as it is commonly allied to language and words, whereas here the context of 'reading' a photograph is determined by *visual* apprehension that accesses 'concepts' via *visual* figuration. A word attempts to identify a meaning or thing, whereas a photograph circumscribes meaning and things. A photograph refers to what things look like, but 'naming' objects that we recognise is not how we respond to a photograph; this is a more complex process of seeing, thinking and collating. The sort of thinking that a photograph provokes is one that expands thought rather than defines or confines, and the ambiguity of the term 'concept' is useful because it suggests networks of meaning and thinking besides (or before) something is named. When I refer to a 'concept', I am assuming that its reliance on visual play encompasses a dimension besides one that it is determined linguistically. I emphasise the distinction between Derrida's 'intrinsic multiplicity' of thought and its verbal articulation. How one articulates thought is determined by the language one uses. For example, Levinson<sup>18</sup> states that if a language lacks the word "if" then one can only express a conditional by saying in effect 'perhaps A, perhaps B', which might mean a host of other things, including perhaps A, perhaps B. And it suggests the interesting possibility of 'iffing' an image: seeing perhaps this and perhaps that.

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<sup>17</sup> Ware, Robert, 'Walker Evans, Impersonality and Metaphor'. *History of Photography*, vol.17, no.2, Summer 1993, pp.147-151

<sup>18</sup> Levinson, Stephen C., 'From Outer to Inner Space: linguistic categories and non-linguistic thinking'. In Nuyts, Jan (ed.) *Language and Conceptualisation*. Cambridge University Press, 1997



In the field of cognitive linguistics, the precise nature of conceptualisation and the extent to which it is shaped by linguistic representation is unclear. Nuyts outlines an interdisciplinary debate, which acknowledges both ‘linguistic’ and ‘conceptual’ knowledge and explores how their relationship may be organised.<sup>19</sup> There are various theories and explanations about what goes on in our heads – about how language is processed, how abstract concepts are conceived and how conceptual knowledge is organised, but because the operation of the mind only appears to us in our behaviour – indirectly, it is difficult to find evidence for any particular view. Views range from the formation of concepts being dependent on language (thinking is linguistic) to the other extreme that separates language and thought<sup>20</sup> and sees absurdity in the ‘idea that thought is the same as language’.<sup>21</sup>

Intervening theories vary according to how the nature of the relationship between language and concept is drawn; some recognise non-linguistic representation and some recognise ‘semantic form’ as conflated with ‘conceptual structure’. All these theories describe models of categorisation. Seen as a form of categorization, a ‘concept’ is a way of establishing a type of entity, condition or event by ordering its features or properties, which can be seen to be at odds with Derrida’s critique of the existence of essential meaning and things. However in apprehending images we assimilate, condense and shift elements without necessarily naming them; it is a more fluid assemblage of ‘multiplicity’. Rather than aligning ‘concept’ with essential substance,<sup>22</sup> what is important here is its capacity to conflate several elements (its holding-function), and the configuring *process* of accumulating qualities, as yet un-named, and which I call ‘conceptual’.

[Metaphor] speaks obliquely, exploits lateral connotations, insinuates things without really saying them, suggests ideas without making them explicit.<sup>23</sup>

In an attempt to understand how photographs ‘speak obliquely’ without being explicit, I explore the possibilities of the metaphoric process as a model that exemplifies the conflation of unrelated, incongruous elements. In so far as the term ‘metaphor’ is applied to the analysis of images, many of the properties described in literary analysis can be applied to imagery and are already familiar, such as ‘substitution’. But despite *differance*, which has gone some way to disperse ‘centre’ and ‘presence’, and to involve the reader, and thus subjectivity, in interpretations of the image, there remains a compulsion to make ‘sense’, to validate by using procedures also borrowed from literary analysis, which affirm more purposeful intentions, such as narrative. Rather than assuming that because images may share similar properties of analysis with literature, they necessarily share a similar purpose or consequence, I shall identify those properties that confirm visual rather than verbal processes and effects. I shall assert properties of meaning construction that relinquish the

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<sup>19</sup> Nuyts, Jan and Eric Pederson (eds.) *Language and Conceptualisation*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.1

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4

<sup>21</sup> Levinson refers for example to (Miller 1982: 66-6) and (Pinker 1994: 57). In Nuyts and Pederson, p.14

<sup>22</sup> Prasada discusses Aristotle’s question ‘What is it?’ Sandeep Prasada ‘Name of Things and Stuff: An Aristotelian Perspective’. In Jackendoo, Ray, Paul Bloom and Karen Wynn, *Language, Logic and Concepts*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002

<sup>23</sup> Bennington, Geoffrey, *Jacques Derrida*. London; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p.119. Bennington describes metaphor as having a primary place in Derrida’s writing.



urge to pull elements together and look instead at processes that move against narrative. Derrida's distinction is useful here, between *polysemic* meanings, which can be gathered together and totalised (as in narrative), and *disseminated* meanings, which remain fragmented, multiple and dispersed.<sup>24</sup> As such it is not the distinction between visual or verbal nature of texts that make sense or non-sense but the manner of display. As an alternative, I want to amplify what proceeds from the metonymic procedure, in the primary moves of contiguity, substitution and analogy in the process of making visual meaning. After describing what metaphor does and how it works, I shall relate three perspectives on the function of metaphor that support a simultaneous reading, a *perquisition* of the photograph and, which add a dimension that is particularly pertinent to the understanding of meaning in photographs and to this argument: Black's consideration of potency and 'interaction'<sup>25</sup>; Lakoff's 'conceptual schema'<sup>26</sup>; Paul Ricoeur's alliance with the metaphysical and the psychological.<sup>27</sup> Whilst they speak of the principles of linguistic metaphor, in each case many of the terms, properties and processes discussed can constructively be applied to the reading of photographs. I shall emphasise the operation of 'conceptual knowledge', rather than that of language, as the function that assembles concepts, which is most pertinent to apprehending photographs and where the meaning process in photographs occurs.

Simply put, metaphor is another process of substitution, where the meaning shifts from one domain to another, where it speaks of (sees) one thing in terms of another.<sup>28</sup> Different theories have emphasised different aspects of the properties of metaphor; 'comparison theory' defines metaphor as a form of ellipsis, comparing things rather than substituting; 'controversion theory' emphasises some kind of logical contradiction between terms, where meaning, via connotation, is shifted from the centre to the margins and where the 'twist of meaning is forced by inherent tension or oppositions, within the metaphor itself'.<sup>29</sup> Metaphoric procedure originates from contiguity and resemblance and proceeds inevitably from resemblance to substitution and supplementation (as we have seen in *Differance*). Procedures of connection are related to the basic brain functions that process thought and language and assemble concepts.<sup>30</sup> Absent terms are brought to the present through connection, selection and substitution and are part of the same operation.

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<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *Postions*, pp.61-2

<sup>25</sup> Black, Max, 'More about Metaphor'. In Ortony, Andrew, (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 1993

<sup>26</sup> Lakoff, George, 'The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor' in *Metaphor and Thought*

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978

<sup>28</sup> From Aristotle, Poetics 21.1457b. 6-7.cited in Karsten Harries, 'Metaphor and Transcendence'. *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1978, vol 5, no.1, p. 74

<sup>29</sup> Beardsley, M.C., 'Metaphor' in Edwards, Paul (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Crowell, Collier and Macmillan, 1967, p106

<sup>30</sup> The conditions *Dysphasia* and *aphasia* demonstrate how brain function operates when the links between thought and language are disrupted. Patients following a stroke with *aphasia* often make words up or display *semantic paraphrasia*, which is the substitution of a semantically related but incorrect word. The condition demonstrates the capacity of the brain to assemble concepts.



Metaphor is divided into two parts; the primary subject or the literal frame ('tenor', 'referent') and the metaphoric secondary subject, the figurative concept, ('vehicle'<sup>31</sup>, 'relatum'). Max Black emphasises the 'interaction' of these two domains. Thus importantly for the reading of photographs, a metaphorical process works both ways; tenor and vehicle can affect each other, reverberate back and forth between the two and is a more profound process than a mere comparison. Already there are significant parallels for meaning in photographs, discussed as the properties of *parergon*; substitution> supplementation; comparison> resemblance; opposition> contradiction> absurdity; interaction> dialogue; tension> resonance.

I shall call metaphorical utterances that support a high degree of implicative elaboration resonant. Resonance and emphasis are a matter of degree. They are not independent: Highly emphatic metaphors tend to be highly resonant, while the unemphatic occurrence of a markedly resonant metaphor is apt to produce a dissonance, sustained by irony or some similarly distancing operation.<sup>32</sup>

Black's 'interaction' view describes the metaphoric process as a system, an 'implicative complex' of relationships, where the metaphor 'vehicle' projects associative implications on the topic (subject depicted) and the reader selects and contributes properties to both primary and secondary subjects. Interestingly, he also employs the term 'resonance' to describe the degree of implicative elaboration and thereby the potency of the metaphor and the more complex the association the stronger the resonance. This is a marked difference in criteria from other theories, which suggest that it is the distance between domains connecting the literal and the figural that makes for strong metaphor. Thus Mario's fridge is implicatively complex and not just a 'thing', as is the glass of water. The glass of water can be as simple as the association of bread and water, or as vague and indefinite as the metaphysical attributes of life giving sustenance. The fridge can be associated with the function of the kitchen and cooking or it can access the abyss and the unknown. This allowance of complexity is most apposite in visual metaphor where grammatical structure does not dictate primary and secondary positions as it does in language. It becomes a system of reverberating ideas rather than 'things'. Strong visual resonance may be dependent both on the degree of multiplicity in implication and in the degree of interaction between all parties. The assertions, which may be numerous, are indeterminate. But in a photographic image, the literal object to which attributes are asserted becomes more fixed than with literary metaphor. Tension may be created between a conception of the real world as the photograph refers to it and my conception of the world as I might imagine it. A resonant metaphor may be as near our 'image' of the real world or as far away from that 'image' without being implausible. A visual metaphor, to be resonant, cannot be too obvious, but perhaps it can be as implausible as it likes.

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<sup>31</sup> Ortony, Andrew, 'Introduction' in *Metaphor and Thought*, explaining I.R. Richard's terms – tenor and vehicle, Miller – referent, relatum, p.3

<sup>32</sup> Black, 'More About Metaphor', p.26 – metaphoric resonance recalls 'psychological resonance' (Kozloff.)



I need now to step aside from metaphor to look at our understanding of where the reverberation of meaning takes place. An instinctual prejudice exists that separates perception from thinking. This distinction is longstanding and then only superseded by the supremacy of vision above all the other senses.<sup>33</sup> Theories concerning the nature and function of metaphor in language and thought have shifted around the problem of 'thinking' and 'looking' and concentrate on the structure of language. Rudolf Arnheim uses the broad term *apperception*, to encompass more than the mere physical implication of 'perception' and extends the meaning of the term 'cognitive' to include perception, association and context. He asserts that 'thinking' forms part of perception and vice versa; they are not separate functions and include: 'such operations as active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison as well as combining, separating, putting in context'.<sup>34</sup> Following his thesis further: thoughts and images are interchangeable, from the early acquisition of sensory elements to the processing of more abstract 'theoretical' ideas. Arnheim asserts that 'visual thinking is indivisible' and assumes the purity of a kind of seeing that cannot be translated linguistically. A person looking at an image is supposed to reach beyond the image directly, connect with experience from memory and organise a lifetime into a 'system of visual concepts'. The 'mental grasp' encompasses fragmentation, totality, difference and subtle distinction, and the physical object itself is different and stands alone; its own reality is isolated from anyone's 'mental grasp' of it. Apperception assumes integrity in the apprehension, a type of clarity. Thought is often spoken of as continuous, perhaps not logical but understandable and clear and in relating thought we speak as if we had one thought at a time. But as Derrida explains, the nature of thought is chaotic, multi-faceted, simultaneous and disordered.

A method of analysis in the construction of metaphor proposes that in reading a text we use 'memory images' to gather information from the passage and make sense of it.<sup>35</sup> This process neither insists on anything purely visual nor relies on translation from the visual to verbal language. The process is first *constructive*, setting a context for understanding and then *selective*, becoming more abstract in understanding concepts. We then use 'semantic models', a set of alternative possibilities in which all the information can apply to the text. This is open and can allow for change; it is fluid. A 'semantic model' contains different representations which may be incompatible even contradictory. They allow an idea to hold an image and at the same time allow that model to change and fluctuate - so that ideas can contain, for example, the possibility of a situation with 'snow' and 'not snow' simultaneously. If we apply this theory to the looking at photographs, it opens up the recurrent opposition of absence / presence in a logical way, so that

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<sup>33</sup> See Jay, Martin *Downcast Eyes, the Denigration of Vision, Twentieth Century French Thought*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1993

<sup>34</sup> Arnheim, Rudolph, *Visual Thinking*. London: Faber, 1970, p.13

<sup>35</sup> Miller, George A., 'Images and Modes, Similes and Metaphors', in *Metaphor & Thought*



when we see an image of an empty room, we also understand that room could be full in numerous possible ways. We can understand that there is no one there, but that there *could* be people there and the very fact that there *could* be people there, adds more meaning to the fact that there is not. A fridge may be seen as that *particular* fridge and ideationally as what a fridge does as a piece of 'equipment'; the abstract model holds all the possible things contained in that fridge. In looking at Mario's fridge, I formulate a 'textual concept' of what I am looking at. It also points to the similarity between photographs and metaphor in that they both can sustain numerous meanings. This understanding of difference within the concept of a thing is seen as positive: 'incompleteness of the mental image is not simply a matter of fragmentation or insufficient apprehension but a positive quality, which distinguishes the mental grasp of an object from the physical nature of that object itself.'<sup>36</sup> Resemblances invite us to use the knowledge we have; to search for possibilities which are similar but not the same; we look within the context for 'plausible grounds' for a particular thing / event in a particular given context. We need to recognise and then we need to interpret. To understand metaphors we need to recognise, reconstruct, interpret. So when looking, we apply our existing knowledge of the objects involved, what the objects conventionally mean and then adjust according to the context. In novel juxtapositions or confrontations, such as an obscure photograph, our feelings in relation to the new relationship may have to adjust to accommodate an unfamiliar concept. We have to appreciate both the similarity to previous instances and notably the differences. It is the differences that redefine our response. And each of us does this differently.

The generalisations governing poetic metaphorical expression are not in language, but in thought: they are general mappings across conceptual domains and apply to much of everyday language – everyday thought. In short the locus of metaphor is not in a language at all, but in the way we conceptualise one mental domain in terms of another. The general theory of metaphor is given by characterising such cross-domain mappings. And in the process, everyday abstract concepts like time, states, changes, causation and purpose also turn out to be metaphorical.<sup>37</sup>

In the interdisciplinary discussions of the function of metaphor, acknowledgement that the metaphoric instinct pervades thought (not just language) is important with regard to the recognition of 'conceptual knowledge' as a primal process shared by both visual and verbal meaning. Lakoff's 'contemporary theory' returns us to something like Arnheim's apperception but also explains and incorporates the ordering of context and culture. Lakoff's theory of metaphor questions the traditional literal/figurative distinction and presents a challenge to assumptions by some theorists who prioritise literal meaning;<sup>38</sup> he proposes that what we call 'metaphor' is embodied in our

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<sup>36</sup> Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, p.107

<sup>37</sup> Lakoff, 'The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor' in *Metaphor and Thought*, p. 203

<sup>38</sup> Lakoff, p.148



thinking and is the main mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts.<sup>39</sup> I do not adopt this theory as any sort of structural law, but as another means to see a relationship between feeling, thought and concept, one which does not prioritise the role of language. Lyotard speaks of the violence of language, the nature of which insists on oppositional structures: 'it is divisive because it externalises the sensible opposite itself, as an object, and it is divided because it interiorises the figural in what is articulated.' He proclaims that language forms 'the problem of knowledge' and 'forces us to desire the true as...the fulfilled signification', which forces the object, in its constitution by language to be lost.<sup>40</sup> It is this desire to find synthesis that swallows up resonance whereas the 'figural' 'is a process that negotiates figures and language' and 'explains the capacity of the event to remain outside the grasp of structures, and yet to work within them.'<sup>41</sup>

Despite Lakoff's conclusion of underlying universal principles, which is at odds with deconstruction, his constructivist view of the process of cognition<sup>42</sup> suggests that as soon as we talk about abstractions and emotions, rather than what is concrete and physical, 'metaphorical understanding is the norm'. Linguistic metaphor depends on the breaking of the rules of sense and on the three basic functions of substitution, comparison and interaction. Lakoff's contemporary theory marks a main point in my argument against the containment of meaning in narrative interpretation. It is revelatory in its assertion of figurative expression being a prime necessity in the constitution of linguistic meaning and in the contention that metaphors are understood 'effortlessly because experience is conceptualised' besides (if not before) language. Lakoff makes the switch from analysing metaphor in order to understand how it uses language, toward seeing how language is influenced by metaphoric thought. Language, which can only relate an approximation of the metaphoric movement in a photograph, rather than explain it, is relegated to a secondary role. Whether conceptualization is pre-linguistic, as Lakoff implies, or whether it is parallel to language, it can be conceived as not necessarily articulated by language. It is a theory that, like disseminated meaning, defers linguistic categorisation.

Perversely, a contentious theory concerning the workings of metaphor in a linguistic context, releases the understanding of visual metaphor from the subordination to linguistic structures. Lakoff relates that what is called 'metaphor' in language is a mechanism that 'allows us to understand a relatively abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete, or at least more highly structured subject matter'<sup>43</sup> and contains a 'conceptual system' of meaning, where understanding comes prior to translation into language. 'Conceptual systems' map

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.203. Lakoff's premise is that conceptual habits frame our way of thinking and extends this to promote radical and political reconceptualisation. He also suggests that there are underlying universal principles embodied in metaphor - the 'event structure' metaphor being one such universal. This notion of universal principles is at odds with deconstruction which seeks to undermine universal principles.

<sup>40</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois, 'Taking the Side of the Figural' from *Discours, figure* (1971). In Crome, Keith and James Williams (eds.) *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*. Edinburgh University Press, 2006, p. 38

<sup>41</sup> Crome and Williams, 'Introduction'. In *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, p.15

<sup>42</sup> Ortony, *Metaphor and Thought*, p.13

<sup>43</sup> Lakoff, *Metaphor and Thought*, p.245



knowledge, experience and meaning and work below the level of consciousness and incorporate psychological associations. Thus what we call metaphor is 'the main mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts' and is 'fundamentally conceptual, not linguistic in nature' and the locus of metaphor is in our conceptualising 'one mental domain in terms of another' - 'mapping across conceptual domains'.<sup>44</sup> The notion of 'conceptual schema' provides a different terminology, which accommodates the inexplicable before the interference and contribution of language.

What Lakoff calls 'event structure' pervades much of our speech (as does Reddy's 'conduit metaphor'). So that we, for example, describe difficulties in terms of blockages; features of terrain; burdens; counter-forces; lack of an energy source. 'Event structure' metaphor 'shows that the most common abstract concepts – time, state, change, causation, action, purpose and means are conceptualised via metaphor. Since such concepts inhabit our language unconsciously, the fact that they are conceptualised metaphorically shows that metaphor is central to ordinary abstract thought.'<sup>45</sup> What he calls generic-level schema explains a tendency of interpretation to personify and to make analogy so that many metaphors seem to fit a single pattern and form large generic metaphors :

Events (like death) are understood in terms of actions by some agent (reaping). It is that agent that is personified. We thus hypothesised a very general metaphor, EVENTS ARE ACTIONS, which combines with other, independently existing metaphors for life and death. Consider for example the DEATH IS DEPARTURE metaphor. Departure is an event. If we understand this event as an action on the part of some causal agent – someone who brings about, or helps, to bring about, departure – then we can account for figures like drivers, coachmen and so forth.<sup>46</sup>

Returning to the context of photographs, this as a principle can be seen to happen with the fridge. Thus the fridge is personified: the fridge emits light and is enriched by it; the fridge is a source of energy and will provide; the fridge, as container, is full and provides; the fridge will sustain Mario in some way; the fridge is intelligent and speaks; the fridge is an oracle. If we open the door we may find the answer. Mario confronts the question of life > LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The meaning encompasses both particularity and meta-metaphor. It accesses large 'generic metaphors' such as 'the meaning of life', 'the mystery that is me, Who am I? What am I?' 'the uncertainty of humanity', 'mortality' and 'life after death'. Thus the universe, life and death are accessible in the light in the fridge. It is a figurative concept, a space of meaning (a 'conceptual schema').

The process of analogy is more familiar but approaches the same process of conceptual connection. The fridge is *like* a time machine, an abyss. As analogy, we arrive at interpretation via a number of conceptual leaps – light > emitting > utterance > speech – light is *like* speech – *like* knowledge – *like*

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p 203

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 222

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 232



oracle. Notably these leaps may be different and various and we understand them simultaneously. Lakoff finds that there is a pattern to the kinds of things that occur in schemata that relate to the abstract concepts of causal structure, temporal structure, shape of event and purpose structure. The relation of the specific to the general is significant, as is the relation between a specific knowledge structure and its generic-level structure; the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor. It is an extremely common mechanism for comprehending the general in terms of the specific.<sup>47</sup> The generic schema maps against the specific instance of the image. One force > light, equates with another force > speech > knowledge > persuasion. A physical force equates with a psychological force. The point of this, in terms of reading a photograph, is that many such generic schema occur simultaneously. We cannot help but generate connections easily. They do *not* occur in sequence and whilst they may connect, one schema does not necessarily follow another; they are not diachronic. They need not make narrative, but they do generate other images.

Paul Ricoeur's writing is important in asserting the more elusive elements of metaphoric function and in contributing emphasis on the 'transference of feelings' that accompanies conceptual connection: 'In symbolising one situation by means of another, metaphor "infuses" feelings attached to the symbolising situation into the heart of the situation that is symbolised'.<sup>48</sup> Thus feelings and (resonance) can be carried in an object via some sort of conceptual interaction, which 'extends the power of double meaning from the cognitive realm to the affective'. Ricoeur amplifies the boundary between semantic theory and the psychological theories of imagination and feeling<sup>49</sup> and sees metaphor as providing a 'common frontier' between 'a logical moment and a sensible moment',<sup>50</sup> between the verbal and the non-verbal; the meeting point of meaning and sensibility.<sup>51</sup> He seeks an alternative to distinctions 'held to be self evident between denotation and connotation', 'between cognitive and emotive values of discourse', between 'discovery and creating', 'finding and projecting', 'inside and outside'. In addition, he raises the question of the metaphysical and of immanence and transcendence: 'The relation of analogy begins its migration towards the transcendental sphere when it is charged with expressing the identity of principles and elements that cut through the diversity of genera',<sup>52</sup> belonging to different domains. When this is transported to the context of the visual, we mistake the inability to translate or describe verbally, as that, which cannot be seen or understood conceptually. Our expectation is to explain, using language, images which may be indescribable in quality, which are not transcendent in the sense of beyond our understanding, but do deny verbal articulation. Ricoeur's distinction between transcendent analogy and immanent metaphor or poetic resemblance suggests that the metaphoric move, rather than

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.235

<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *The Rule of Metaphor: multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, trans. Czerny, Robert, Kathleen McLaughlin, John Costello, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p.190

<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, 'The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling'. *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn, 1978, vol.5, no.1, pp.143-159

<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p.208

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 305

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 271



being transcendent, can completely pervade an image and present ‘an experience that is completely immanent to it’.<sup>53</sup> The important difference is that an image is not required to make *verbal* meaning – an obvious difference, but perhaps one that is overlooked when interpreting visual work. The photograph, because it is non-verbal, can more easily express at a fluid, conceptual level that can resonate, if it is allowed to, interminably.

Ricoeur stresses the tension at the intersection between literal and metaphoric interpretations (between the mundanity of life in the kitchen and the transcendence of life after death). Metaphoric interaction begins when an expression exceeds the capacity of language to express it and which can be explained by a reference to ‘primordial truths’, metaphysical transcendence or by imagination, ‘the vivifying principle’. Ricoeur rejects both extreme semantic analysis, which dismisses ontological explanations of poetic expression and a highly spiritual ‘meta-poetics’, and forefronts the imaginative force of conceptual thought as an alternative. He proposes the recognition of expression that allows a ‘pre-objective world’<sup>54</sup> and identifies the place of power that animates thought as existing in the ‘paradox of copula’; the contradiction of ‘is / is not’ that metaphor necessarily inhabits. A contradictory statement that simultaneously indicates both a resemblance (is), and the incongruity of its absurdity and ‘unreality’ (is not), requires a concept of ‘truth’ other than that of ‘truth-verification’.<sup>55</sup> Thus Ricoeur’s analysis brings together Black’s ‘interaction’ and Lakoff’s ‘conceptual system’, in bridging the structural and the emotional, the pre-linguistic and the rational, the imagination and the metaphysical in a ‘poetic reality’. His analysis is one that would support the origin of metaphor as pre-linguistic and suggests an alternative to seeing value only in definitive facts, things, places and more in terms of ‘seeing things as actions’, process and event.<sup>56</sup> Thus ‘what does it mean?’ becomes ‘what is happening?’ His discussion suggests the power to represent a ‘polysemy of being’ in a ‘state of activity’<sup>57</sup> and introduces the notion of the metaphor as a ‘condition of possibility’.<sup>58</sup>

The underlying assumption in much of the discussion of metaphoric function appears to have been that literal statements are true and metaphorical assertions are not. Lakoff, Black and Ricoeur suggest that the ‘truth’ of metaphoric implication or ‘how things are’<sup>59</sup>, is where ‘truth’ is not allied to fact necessarily, but to meaning and validity. Once the notion of ‘truth’ comes into play, the agenda is bound to approach something more metaphysical. Lakoff contends that mental constructs are in themselves metaphoric and whether one follows the argument that conceptual

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.271

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.306

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.305

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.308

<sup>57</sup> Ricoeur cites Aristotle p. 307

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 287

<sup>59</sup> Black, *Metaphor and Thought*, p. 38



metaphors define an outlook on truth and reality, and thus are metaphysical, they non-the-less readjust the hierarchy of the metaphoric function of constructive thought in relation to language.

The distinction between literal and non-literal discourse...rests on the relation between what is said and what is meant. In literal utterances this relation is one of consonance: the implied meanings are consistent with the sentence meaning though they may range far afield from the actual statement. In non-literal utterances the relation is one of dissonance.<sup>60</sup>

The 'is/is not' of Ricoeur's 'poetic reality', *sans* and *parergon* confirm the positive necessity for lack and absence. The *sans* confronts the peculiar condition of the photograph, which simultaneously presents the opposition of truth and falsehood, as it invites both literal (due to its visual reference to things) and a figurative resonance (due to the power of metonymy) and the expectation of pictures as possibly fictional. In the contemporary context, we may now always expect fiction. Instead of constructing an interpretation that conforms to conditions in the actual world, we may suspend this reference to a certain extent, or construct one that conforms to the image, look for what it says about the world or 'project ourselves into a metaphoric world'<sup>61</sup> where anything is believable. The concept of the non-literal in photography is always difficult because we *see* the literal reference. The very literalness of Strba's images for example, imply a multitude of meanings other than the literal. Conceptual associations such as 'Sonja likes to drink water > water is life-giving > she is thirsty > she is needy' occur whilst the content remains ultimately banal. In literal images the author means what is there and in addition promises 'something else'. Non-literal photographs (Savadov) relate directly to authorial intention, and their appearance may be intentionally at odds with an aspect of meaning, as they may deliberately not mean what they say, and may be ironic or critical. Metaphor and irony have the common structure based on an opposition to the factual level: 'what the speaker says is intentionally at odds with the way the speaker knows the world to be.' What the photograph says may be different from what it depicts literally, but it is the relationship between what is presented and what is believed and meant that divides metaphor from irony. With irony the relation between what is said and what is meant is one of opposition. Metaphor can show something in a new light and irony comments, but can be deeply embedded. Strba's *Shades of Time* is metaphoric but not ironic. Andreas Gursky's 'world' is both metaphoric and ironic.

Derrida confirms the link between metaphor and metaphysics: 'Only man imitates properly, takes pleasure in imitating. The power of truth, as the unveiling of nature (*physis*) by mimesis, congenitally belongs to the physics of man...Such is the natural origin of poetry, and such is the

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<sup>60</sup> Winner, Ellen and Howard Gardner, 'Metaphor and Irony', *Metaphor and Thought*, p.425

<sup>61</sup> Levin, Samuel R., 'Language, Concepts and Worlds', *Metaphor and Thought*, p.127



natural origin of metaphor.’<sup>62</sup> Mimesis is never without a property of similarity, resemblance, either one of physicality or of function. Metaphor depends on resemblance in some way and works from the premise of exchange, which requires some shared similarity, for it to work. A photograph is mimesis. A photograph *is* metaphor or at least metonym. A photograph of a glass refers to the concept ‘glass’ and in this respect is the equivalent to the word ‘glass’ and is its metonymic visual equivalent, but it does not require further words to provoke metaphoric association. Additional contextual knowledge may be needed for personal and particular significance (*punctum*) and ideological<sup>63</sup> or historical knowledge may be required for certain meanings. However, in an image one cannot absolutely identify where meaning sits. So one might say there are metaphoric images where one can share possible meanings and others where the significance is pertinent on a personal level, where secret knowledge supplements meaning. The photograph essentially is self-contained in the sense that, like *parergon*, visual metaphor is not detachable, is indispensable to the meaning and its absolute inseparability from the object depicted.

There are two consequences relevant to photography. As with the supplement, one is the dependence on what is absent to generate meaning and, as a result, the nearness of the play of metaphor to the ‘transcendental sphere’ and the ineffable. The other is the level of deep embeddedness of metaphor within any ideological system (e.g. photographic practice). Derrida’s example of the generic metaphor ‘sun’, in its embodiment of the metaphysics of light and dark, exemplifies both of these. He discusses the heliotropic metaphor in the language of philosophy, as ‘the very opposition of appearing and disappearing, the entire lexicon of *aletheia*... of day and night, of the visible and the invisible, of present and absent – all this possible only under the sun’,<sup>64</sup> as illustrating meaning that is both sensory and that is exceeded by improper knowledge, and meaning that is non-sensory. In terms of effect, the metaphoric process, and as we have seen, the photograph itself, makes manifest metaphysical oppositional expressions such as absence, sense and nonsense. It is a means of approaching what is ungraspable<sup>65</sup> and intangible. In this regard, Derrida notes the characteristic assumptions of access to opposite effect, via the properties within metaphor, of loss, of the unattainable, the ineffable and in that loss lies the promise of more than is given.<sup>66</sup>

What is emerging is a premise that asserts the notion of conceptual schema as a figurative space, which provides a fluid framework for the set of concepts provoked by the photograph, the ineffable and resonance. Indeed resonance may depend on the fundamental generic degree of the conceptual

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<sup>62</sup> Derrida, Jacques, ‘The Ellipsis of the Sun: Enigmatic, Incomprehensible, Ungraspable’. In *Margins of Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, 1982. First published in French 1972. In the book as a whole he works with reference to the writings of Hegel, Heidegger, Aristotle and Nietzsche. p.237

<sup>63</sup> As in Michael Craig-Martin’s *An Oak Tree*, 1973.

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, ‘The Ellipsis of the Sun’, p.251

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.244

<sup>66</sup> Jeffrey, Ian, ‘Fragment and Totality in Photography’. *History of Photography*, Volume 16, No. 4, Winter, 1992, pp. 351-357: comments on Derrida’s refusal to collate fragments.



transference from one domain to another, the degree of ‘implicative elaboration’ or the degree of reference it encompasses. At the very least, resonance does not derive from that which contains and organises factually, sequentially or historically and so denies an interpretation leaning toward narrative. The ‘metaphotographic’<sup>67</sup> acknowledges psychology and emotive factors and the role of concept as pre-linguistic and central to the dynamics of meaning and possibility. Ricoeur’s ‘poetic reality’ of metaphoric ‘interaction’ makes ‘sense’ of self-contradiction, simultaneity and non-sense of the need for narrative. It suggests instead moves from the diachronic (historic development) and diegetic (narration of facts) toward the dialogic of exchange and process, a stage before definition or resolution. It suggests moves to support abstract meaning and the logic of absurdity via contradictory and simultaneous meaning – the antithesis of narrative.

Bal’s image analysis incorporates both Derrida’s dissemination and Kristeva’s dialogism, inserts context, history and ‘localized contingent speech’,<sup>68</sup> emphasises reciprocity between the viewer and the picture resituated within the viewer’s space, and importantly points to the conflation of narrator and author that exists in visual critique. Bal’s readings start with the margins of detail rather than general overview and go some way to affirm the non-logical aspects of ‘polysemia’ and to demonstrate a reading that uses visual and discursive elements.<sup>69</sup> However, Bal’s reference to ‘pure visuality’<sup>70</sup> perpetuates an interpretation of meaning as implicitly verbal and assumes that, in its stillness, the image cannot speak sufficiently without the literal animation of narrative. Whereas Ware’s position<sup>71</sup> states that photography’s visuality, without verbal assistance, can close ‘the gap between the actual image and the mental image we form from it’. Thus a photograph makes connections more quickly from the object to our own interpretative mechanisms and set of conceptual frameworks – moves quickly to metaphoric relations. And Derrida’s procedure of *perquisition* accesses strategies for thinking within the text against logic, playing with subjectivity, irony, ‘reality’ and arrives at a process that is contra-linguistic. Dialogism is a different sort of ‘narration’ (*not* narrative) that transgresses rules, structurally and socially. It relies on another logic,<sup>72</sup> of ‘distance and relationship’ between different elements within the structure that indicate ‘a becoming’ as opposed to ‘continuity and substance’ and ‘thing’. It is a ‘logic of analogy and nonexclusive opposition’ as opposed to one of causality and diachronic linearity. It is a ‘logic’ of the ‘transfinite’ rather than the *definite*. Grammatical functions serve to facilitate an understanding of opposing concepts again, the assertion of process and spatialisation (verbal) rather than containment and object (noun). It returns us to the strategy of *differance*, that of temporal deferment and *process* together with spatial difference, without finitude.

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<sup>67</sup> Derrida, *Right of Inspection*. p.73

<sup>68</sup> Kristeva, ‘How Does One Speak To Literature’, *Desire in Language*, p.115

<sup>69</sup> Bal, *Looking In*, p. 78: ‘Dissemination has now even affected the classic distinction between the visual and the discursive.’

<sup>70</sup> Bal, *Looking In*, p.69

<sup>71</sup> Ware, Robert, ‘Walker Evans, Impersonality and Metaphor’, *History of Photography*, Vol.17, No.2, Summer 1993, p.199

<sup>72</sup> Kristeva, ‘Word, Dialogue and Novel’, *Desire in Language*, p.71



There are then alternative dynamics to those that more ‘naturally’ construct narrative. Photographic potency resides in the possibility of metonymy and the imaginary as opposed to elements of meaning confirming *effective* expression or causal effect; this happens and then this happens etc. Photographs are still and their potency resides in simultaneity. In a desire to find reasons, logic carries us away in readings that establish causal narrative interpretation at the expense of Barthes’ ‘discursive function’, which encourages delay, reflection and interaction. If instead we were to look at photographs in the way of dreams rather than ‘reality’ defined by the informational and authorial, a photograph need have no requisite conclusion or consequence and all elements could be ‘dilatatory’.<sup>73</sup> Barthes proposes a realism not restricted to verifiable truth, that asserts functions that work simultaneously with the urge to make stories and prior to the urge to explain or impose chronology and supposition. It is these possibilities that I pursue in Part Three.

### CONCLUSIONS

In Part Two I establish the conceptual space of the photograph and locate aspects of poststructural thinking in specific examples of photographic practice, such as the delicate balance of meaning provoked in the simplest of images (*Sonja*). I assert the conceptual dimension to photographs over that of mimesis and the dominance of ‘thing’, and offer alternative readings to those of narrative and transcendence. If there is a parallel with linguistic terms, it is seen to be that of ‘fiction’ in the broadest sense. I collate writings that explain the ineffable in images and draw parallels between the different terminologies. The assertion of process established in relationships and individuation identified in Part One, is echoed here in systems of meaning reliant on a pre-linguistic process that incorporates other senses than the visual. For example, Kristeva’s emphasis of intonation over literal substance is confirmed by Derrida’s questioning of ‘thingness of thing’ and his assertion of ‘hallucinatory metonym’. Levinas’s compulsion toward more dangerous territory is seconded by Barthes’s *pure meaning* and Ricoeur’s ‘pre-objective’ reality. Sartre’s ‘order of qualities’, Kristeva’s semiotic dynamic and Levinas’s conceptual space of ‘face’ are paralleled by metaphoric mechanisms and the rhetorical manner of emergent meaning in Lakoff’s ‘conceptual schema’.

Importantly *differance* demonstrates a conceptual and fluid system that can encompass a range of ideas, and which provokes fundamental shifts in their apprehension. *Differance* indicates a dimension of meaning that is non-literal, equates with what generates meaning but cannot be described, and thus with the ineffable. The role of particular and insignificant detail is highlighted as an essential dynamic, without which the work is mechanical. It is seen as a powerful element of Derrida’s dissemination and an alternative to the totalising compulsion to find ‘universal’ meaning. Thus I forefront the non-literal aspects of meaning, which exploit ‘integrational’ effect and begin to identify different conceptions of ‘realism’ besides the reference to objects. I emphasise the

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<sup>73</sup> Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, pp.12-13



rhetorical manner of meaning that emerges through process and the implications of the photograph that access realities of subjective thought and of conceptual association.

I establish the key term 'resonance' and provide a context for quality without beauty, which begins to articulate an aesthetic that can accommodate purposelessness, happenstance and contradiction. I establish a premise of instability that promotes illogic, non-knowledge and absence as key properties, substantiated from a number of perspectives and the metaphoric process. I assert as positive the reverberation of nascent possibility in the photographic properties of non-oppositional simultaneous process and incompleteness, which inject figural dimensions to reference that cannot equate with anything that can be verified. The distinction between potency and efficacy clarifies much of the confusion surrounding the affect of images and realigns the assumption of cause and effect. Derrida's questioning of certainty, the decentring of meaning and of authorship, the suspension of equations of 'content' with story or meaning with 'purpose', Ricoeur's realignment of meaning and truth are some of the many disturbances that impact on conceptions of 'portrait'. Part Three demonstrates contemporary depictions of people relying on strategies that accommodate these conditions.



## PART THREE: CONTEMPORARY POSITIONS

### Introduction

In a lecture presenting his essay 'Restitutions'<sup>1</sup> concerning Heidegger's examination of Van Gogh's shoes, Derrida emphasises the voice that interrupts more formal discourse in a manner that recalls the 'intrinsic multiplicity' of voices related in Part One. In this instance an hysterical and exasperated woman figure (another voice of Derrida) insistently interrupts 'What pair?' 'Who said they were a pair of shoes?' He thus questions the dependence firstly on our insistence on 'subject matter' or of what the image is 'about' and proceeds to explore alternatives, (as in *perquisition*). Part Three pursues alternatives to an aesthetic that perpetuates 'subject matter'. Having established the fundamental premise of *differance* as asserting a figural understanding, and assigning a contemporary relevance to rhetorical expression, Part Three examines what this 'expression' might be and positions theory in relation to a developing aesthetic that demonstrates poststructural thinking. Continuing to evidence the dynamics identified in previous chapters, Part Three serves to collate concepts of the encounter and process with authorship, systems of meaning with changing notions of 'reality' and principles motivating aesthetics. I consider changes in aesthetic consciousness affected by attitudes to a world influenced by poststructural processes.

Firstly I use Levinas's provocations to consider the role of absence in the process of meaning and to initiate consideration of how practice is located in relation to 'reality' or Baudrillard's 'irreality'. Secondly with reference to Kristeva's principle of *negativity* as one explanation of motivation, I consider the more obscure and uncomfortable aspects of aesthetics that accommodate instability, incompleteness, the centrality of absence and which unite visceral response with conceptual configuration.

Looking at the contemporary 'portrait', I consider directions in aesthetics that counter comfortable expectations and discuss how practice widens the parameters of discourse. I focus in particular on the strategies adopted by photographers that highlight features, such as the ordinary and the banal, which reoccur throughout the thesis and which articulate a pattern of concern. Concerns for example that demonstrate the distrust of allusions to 'truth' 'essence' 'certainty' and which are shown to focus and motivate photographic strategies. I appraise contemporary practice in the light of Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'postmodern', Jeff Wall's 'photoconceptualism' and reviews of postmodern practice, and situate directions in portrayal in relation to a wider aesthetic context. Finally I consider the equations of aesthetics with visuality and realism with the literal, I re-assert the conceptual and figural dimensions and indicate alternative directions for portrayal. I consider

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Rosalind Krauss, 'Poststructuralism and the "Paraliterary"', *October*, No.13, Summer 1980 and reproduced in Krauss, R., *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 1985



how the 'ineffable' might be reconfigured in the light of poststructuralism and contemporary practice.



## Chapter One: ABSENCE AND SHADOW

### *ABSENCE OF THING*

Can one speak of a disengagement on the hither side of an interruption of time by a movement going on the hither side of time, in its 'interstices'? To go beyond is to communicate with ideas, to understand. Does not the function of art lie in not understanding? Does not obscurity provide it with its very element...foreign to dialectics and the life of ideas? Will we then say that the artist knows and expresses the very obscurity of the real? But that leads to much more general question...in what does the non-truth of being consist? Is it always to be defined by comparison with truth, as what is left over after understanding? Does not the commerce with the obscure, as a totally independent ontological event, describe categories irreducible to those of cognition? We should like to show this event in art. Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of the shadow...art does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation, which moves in just the opposite direction.<sup>2</sup>

Levinas's brief passage *Reality and its Shadow*,<sup>3</sup> provides an interesting link between art, the ineffable and the semiotic and serves to collate a number of themes in relation to writings discussed earlier. His use of terminology, such as *interstices*, *ineffable*, *rhythm*, *within*, the *real*, resounds uncannily with a series of conceptual associations central to this thesis such as the interruptive process, the in between, resonance, participatory constructions of meaning, non-effective meaning and affectivity. He underlines two premises: firstly, conceptions of reading photographs that disrupt the author/viewer divide, echoing Kristeva, and secondly the interrelation of meaning with reality, anticipating the consequences of its dislocation. This passage introduces the main points for discussion in Part Three: conceptions of reality and photographic practice, conceptual domains of the photograph and the intersection of the ineffable and *differance*.

Levinas's use of the term 'interstices' to encompass the disturbance of the norm, anticipates Derrida's discussion in 'Parergon'. Together, the two texts demonstrate the arbitrariness of oppositional paradigms whereby Levinas's terms *within* and *in-between* parallel Derrida's terms *outside* and *inside*, which are literally in opposition, but which figuratively describe the same uncomfortable, liminal position of uncertainty and the ineffable. Recalling for example Sartre's 'affective sense' and assuming Derrida's assertion of 'lack', Levinas's logic confirms an alternative apprehension of photographs that relies on the sensible and imaginary rather than knowledge and an explanation for meaning firmly situated in conceptual domains besides the reference. Levinas's simplistic statements of the obvious such as perceived elements are not the object but like its 'old

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<sup>2</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, 'Reality and its Shadow', in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (1948), trans. Alphonso Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983, p.3

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1



garments', and 'a represented object, by the simple fact of becoming an image, is converted into a non-object',<sup>4</sup> recognise the string of assumptions so easily subsumed within the logic of referent = absent object = meaning. He underlines two fundamental properties of the photograph central to my argument; firstly, the importance of absence and the consequent *active* process of involvement in understanding, and secondly, his notion of 'rhythm' (or resonance) that differentiates meaning, not as a 'some-thing', but as a manner of meaning that is 'detached from an object', the emphasis being on affect rather than what it *is*.

The condition of 'non-object', initiated by the principle of substitution of image for absent object, in turn affects a fundamental, perceptual shift from direct engagement with things, to what Levinas calls 'sensations'. The resemblance of a photograph (like the object itself) imposes itself on us; invites a process of action and interaction, association and reverberation. But because visual meaning (unlike a symbol or word), does not stop with the reference to concept alone and continues to reverberate<sup>5</sup> beyond resemblance to the object referred to, the process becomes a kind of doubling of reality which separates us and creates a fissure, a 'meanwhile'. He thus establishes resonant meaning as residing, not in transcendence, but in our reading – in our own reality.

His metaphoric use of 'shadow' indicates 'resemblance' as belonging to, but not grasping the original and as neutralising the object it represents, placing it alongside the object as its shadow. This logic of resemblance as shadow, as opaque, is allied to the notion of large generic models of metaphor, as with 'life is a journey'. In this scenario, a different conception of resemblance, unlike that of 'realism', converses with 'reality', this time as an allegory, as 'an ambiguous commerce with reality in which reality does not refer to itself but to its reflection, its shadow'.<sup>6</sup> He asks in what sense is the imaginary world more unreal than the empirical one? Where and what is the 'sensation' of the image and how is it different from the perception of the original object? Rather than 'reality' being represented by resemblance, Levinas asserts that the image accompanies 'reality', giving direct access to the imaginary without the need for intervention of words. This places a representation of 'reality' alongside itself, rather than as 'reality' behind appearance. In disturbing the duality of appearance and reality, he disturbs also the conception of 'being and essence' and creates a 'fissure' between them. Thus Levinas, instead of finding the place of real meaning in transcendence, places it firmly on this side of the object, beside me and not in the repository of 'beyond', but in my reality as viewer, as I move towards it. So that a photograph, as Levinas implies, cannot and need not transcend 'reality' or seek universal significance, as modernist photography has assumed. This reverberation of resemblance is another model of Sartre's affectivity where the imaginary, association and projection become a reality that incorporates the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.5

<sup>5</sup> Ware, Robert, 'Walker Evans, Impersonality and Metaphor', *History of Photography*, Vol.17, No.2, Summer 1993, pp.147-151

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p. 6 and see Levinas 'becoming' in Part Two



'paradox of rhythm and dreams' with interpretation, so that the subject becomes part of the same world, 'is exterior to itself, but with an exteriority which is not that of the body'<sup>7</sup>, but of the imagination. So that in this, another version of the dialogical matrix, the photographer, the subject and the viewer all participate in the photographic event.

Levinas 'non-object' echoes Derrida's refutation of the fixation of 'thing', denying Heidegger's 'thingness' and preferring the move toward absence/lack. His metaphor 'shadow' is a reflection, both in the sense of its mirror image, and in the sense of association or contemplation. It functions in a similar way to Derrida's written neologism *differance*, to keep meaning moving, re-sounding reality, rather than reproducing it, negating the sequential logic of one point following another, and in its place asserting a procedure between activity and passivity. More traditionally 'reality' is most dependable and comfortable when confirming a diachronic progression through time and when locating cause and effect. The principles found in both Levinas's and Derrida's theses shift the manner of understanding from sequence and chronology toward a conceptual framework and indicates an alternative grasp of 'reality', of the world of ideas rather than 'things'. The importance of the simple fact of simultaneity and absence of 'real' object, inherent in photographic property, necessitates an equality of oppositional presentation and the power of 'polysemia'.

*Reality and its Shadow* introduces the idea of art's function to obscure and succumb to the figural rather than to clarify. Levinas's speculation about 'artistic expression' connects a number of the aspects addressed in Part Two and indicates much of what I argue in this section as conceptually ungraspable. Fundamentally it is his implicit interest in the possibilities dormant in *not* understanding artworks; what is non-literal; a kind of non-aesthetic, which lies both at the heart of this text and my thesis. He asks what is real? Where is the meaning? Is there 'eternal' significance? If we put aside Levinas's assertion that artists 'know and express the very obscurity of the real', what he says about its position interprets intuitively a good deal of later debate concerning the 'real'. He disturbs assumptions that concern what is 'true' and 'real' and states a paradoxical position whereby 'art' interrupts 'reality' and moves against established aesthetics. The function of 'art' is not to communicate, not to be understood, not to create, but to obscure and present a non-truth; something that disengages or disturbs the approach to an answer, which is nearer to what is 'real'. It does not have to reveal, expose or enlighten or to aspire to 'truth' or 'realism' and can embrace instead those elements that are not understood. This is a very different sort of 'reality', to that of the empirical world, one in its shadow that moves away from definition, where the literal succumbs to the figural.

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<sup>7</sup> Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.4



## BAUDRILLARD'S 'IRREAL' WORLD AND THE PHOTOGRAPH

The assumption that 'the aesthetic potential of photography resides in the revelation of the real'<sup>8</sup> determines subsequent critique and practice and Levinas identifies the problem of aesthetics as depending on what is meant by the use of the word 'real' and the confusion between 'reality' and 'realism', paralleling Goodman's distinction between representation and resemblance and Barthes's in *Reality Effect*. His use of the word 'real' appears to refer to what is either imagination or before language (more akin to Lacan's *real* that resists the *symbolic*). His condition of 'non-object' underlines the fundamental significance and effect on our engagement with the 'real world' as being detached, and anticipates many of the ideas embraced by, for example, Vilem Flusser's 'dislocated world'.<sup>9</sup> His description of image, non-object and reality heralds Baudrillard's questioning of subject over object in 'disappearance' in the way he intimates the possibility of detaching a photographic image from its object, of breaking down the mind/body divide, where the clear division of 'I' (mind) becomes part of the world (body) in spectatorship, beginning to 'disappear'. As we saw in 'SUBJECTS LAST ADVENTURE', Baudrillard suggests that by displacing the photographer as subject, photography can have a dimension of the 'real' that escapes the complication of 'representation' and thus can get nearer to producing no meaning at all.

Ironically our understanding of the world, mediated by photographs, reflects a consciousness that has assimilated the inauthenticity of 'reality'. Baudrillard's discussion of representation and simulacra, expounds the suggestion of re-seeing as a consequence of the photograph and concludes that we can no longer distinguish between real and imaginary, original and copy, surface and depth and that reality is constructed by the image, in a 'panic stricken production of the real'.<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard speaks of an order of hyperreality, which disrupts the world of simple meaningful communication and abolishes discourse focused on 'the play of real and appearance.'<sup>11</sup> 'Hyperreality' and 'aesthetic illusion'<sup>12</sup> reposition photographs as equivocal documents rather than a reflection of reality. He assumes that the real is lost (is its own 'shadow') and identifies a series of conditions that increasingly remove us from the original interaction with the object (Levinas's 'meanwhile'). His notion of 'successive phases of the image' identifies the first, as the reflection of a basic reality, the second, as masking and perverting a basic reality, the third, as masking the absence of a basic reality and the fourth, as 'bearing no relation to any reality at all'.<sup>13</sup> The tradition of modernist photography could be said to equate with Baudrillard's first phase, of reflection, with

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<sup>8</sup> Bazin, Andre, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' (1967). In Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.), *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980

<sup>9</sup> Flusser, Vilem, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983). London: Reaktion Books, 2000. p.17

<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, New York: Semiotext [e], 1983, p.13

<sup>11</sup> Gane citing *Simulations* p.123 in Gane. Mike, *Baudrillard's Bestiary, Baudrillard and Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 99

<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'Objects, Images and the Possibilities of Aesthetic Illusion'. In Zurbrugg, Nicholas (ed.) *Art & Artefact*, London: Sage Publications, 1997, pp.7-18

<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p.11



the additional requirement that a 'good photograph' must reveal a more meaningful 'real' behind appearance, transcending the real.

Do photographs ever capture any reality? Between reality and its image, exchange is impossible. There is at best a figurative correlation. 'Pure' reality, if it exists remains a question without an answer.<sup>14</sup>

In his writing on photography specifically, Baudrillard proposes an un-definition of what is 'real'.<sup>15</sup> He describes photography as 'irreal', empty, a kind of untruth, an absence, a toppling over into the un-real. This term 'irreal' embodies many of the conditions in which photographic practice participates, described in this thesis. It encompasses the instability of reality and certainty, questions our attitude to the 'subject', challenges what seems 'obvious' and natural' and promotes a fundamental shift in consciousness. Baudrillard sees banality<sup>16</sup> as the inevitable consequence of our belief and reliance on representation and verisimilitude, where the photograph, aware of its own deceit, and self-conscious in its fabrication, absorbs the consequences of cause and effect and creates an 'implosion of meaning.' Echoing Levinas as he does so often, his critique of our acceptance of the 'referent' as 'real' in its absence, where we are expected 'to glide in a kind of frictionless space from the perceptual to the conceptual,'<sup>17</sup> parallels description of the photographic contradiction that leaves us believing in what is not there. His argument comes to rest in his reference to Barthes's *punctum*: 'that figure of nothingness, absence and unreality which stands opposed to the "studium", the whole context of meaning and references. It is the nothingness at the heart of the image which lends it its magic and its power and which is most driven out by significations.'<sup>18</sup>

Again like Levinas, instead of 'treating' the world and others as 'objects', he focuses on 'exhuming' the alterity, amplifying the difference that makes it 'other', exactly that which alienates us. Baudrillard's discussion fundamentally concerns what he calls the 'symbolic process' as a radical alternative to the concept of sign and signification. Baudrillard is concerned that 'no adequate analysis of systems of representation can, simply, refer to the 'real' world (the referent) as if this was unproblematic...What tends to happen is that in each phase of representation a former dominant conception of the 'real' is taken as a reference model of 'current' reality, always already out of date.'<sup>19</sup> His notion of 'the symbolic is neither a concept, nor an instance or category, nor a

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<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'Poetic Transference of Situation' in *L'Autre*, London: Phaidon, 1999, unpaginated

<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'The Art of Disappearance' in *Art & Artefact*, pp. 28-31

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, 'For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality...' in Wiebel, Peter (ed.) *Photographies 1985-1998 Within the Horizon of the Object, Objects in this Mirror are Closer than they Appear*, Hatje-Cantz Publishers, 1999, p.140

<sup>17</sup> Baudrillard, 'For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign' (1972). St Louis: Telos, 1981, cited in Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary*, p.3

<sup>18</sup> Baudrillard, 'For Illusion isn't the Opposite of Reality...', p. 139

<sup>19</sup> Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary*, p.95



'structure', but an act of exchange and a social relation which puts an end to the real, which resolves the real, and in the same stroke the opposition between the real and the imaginary'<sup>20</sup>

The function of absence in photographic texts confirms dependence on reference to the absent object by unavoidably 'seeing' photographs as transparent. In attacking the easy shifting between reality and sign as if they were the same and the assumption that things are logically related to one another, photographic practice is able to disturb and threaten a number of the 'rules' of certainty, which photographic properties confirm. Given that photography confirms 'seeing' as being intrinsic to our understanding of reality, it is its own contradiction in that it must always, by its very nature, reflect appearance. Its counterpart the 'real' behind appearance is central to the irony of the photograph and meaning, and the equivocal role of photographs is key in the evolution of aesthetic strategy. With this propensity to reference what is absent as well as what is present, photographic texts can play with this riddle of absence. What is directly referenced is deferred, displaced and repositioned as possibly irrelevant or meaningless, echoing Barthes's distinction between meaninglessly effective and ineffectively meaningful.

### THE EXTRA-ORDINARY



Fig. 53 Nick Waplington, *from Indecisive Memento*, 1998

In the current climate of self-conscious cultural awareness, an aesthetic has arisen, which assumes methods that divert interaction and expression in hiding, or even averting the eyes whilst taking the photograph (Baudrillard's 'disappearance'). Distrust of authorship and authenticity generates anxiety and ambivalence and encourages an abdication of authorial responsibility, an undercurrent of denial, an implicit trait of avoidance, resulting in an aesthetic of 'without', as a subtle parallel to Derrida's *sans*. No underlying truth or essence, no ultimate description, no definitive image, no 'moment', is seen to be celebrated in such documents as Nick Waplington's *Indecisive Memento*,<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard, *L'Exchange Symbolic et la Mort*, Paris: Gallimard cited in Gane, *Baudrillard's Bestiary*, p.2

<sup>21</sup> Waplington, Nick, *Indecisive Memento*, London: Booth Clibborn Editions, 1998



which exploits the use of series and displays an imperative to avoid direction and definition – typical characteristics of Derridean texts interrupting and subverting traditional forms with interference and obscuration. Liberated from an expectation of representation, denotation is paradoxically used in a way that is a form of abstraction, a kind of non-representation developed through the play of avoidance. A common feature of much contemporary practice is one that makes no comment or any point at all and presents deliberate images of the very ordinary and very familiar. Here I discuss this effect in the work of Strba and Lundin, this time with regard to the particular and irrelevant and Beat Streuli and Philip-Lorca di Corcia via the anonymity of the street and the use of happenstance. As instances of the denial of anything special, these images exploit non-eventful depiction.



Fig. 54 Ulf Lundin, *Pictures of a Family series*, 1996

Both Lundin's *Pictures of a Family*, spying on a family,<sup>22</sup> and Strba's *Shades of Time* give us visions of family life in parenthesis, Lundin's via avoidance and Strba's via intimacy. We associate photographs of family with event and interaction and thus of relationships, but Lundin's images document the non-event; they highlight relationships by showing us the *lack* of interaction. They focus on remnants, what is normally left over and discarded, because the main subjects are obscured or blurred. They look sideways at a life, indicating what is incidental and ordinary, what is *not* said and what remains undefined. They are fragmentary in two respects, as they constitute pauses in the process of a distinct set of continuous lives *and* as partial glimpses of a whole. They are reposeful and yet there is usually something going on. The activity is steady and unremitting. They present us with physical obstruction and distancing devices: a lamp post vertically dissects the woman; the man appears to walk through a wall; a board shuts off his facial features; we see his body and head but not his eyes and mouth; something in the foreground slices diagonally across the top right hand corner of the image, obscuring his head. But a number of them together display a

<sup>22</sup> The *Pictures of a Family* series, 1996 records a family over the period of a year. Lundin makes a contract with an old school friend that allows him to photograph them at any time as long as they do not know he is there.



rhythm, a gentleness and the methodical logic of day-to-day activity, which forms an emergence of the life of an individual. Lundin deliberately obscures 'reality' and provides us with a suspension of vision and judgement or involvement. He places our response at a remove, creating a situation where the vision is oblique, indirect and impeded.

As Strba's *Shades of Time* assumes such an easy appropriation of the snapshot as valid portrayal, one might say 'but what is the point or how are they significant?' Their distinctive qualities reside in the fact that they are *not* in themselves special; they highlight the non-speciality of domestic life and of relationships. Because they are so familiar, so ordinary they are recognisable and because these images do not isolate, determine one story alone or make any point whatever, they can perhaps reflect a more 'normal' presentation of others. They are a simultaneous, collective telling of the *eventless-ness* of domestic life. The subjects are not elevated beyond the appearance of what is there; they are ordinariness in the extreme. But unlike the family album, Strba's subjects tend not to smile, are indeed often expressionless with studied seriousness and quiet concentration, not presented in the manner that normally displays 'happy' moments. Strba presents a digressive sequence that does not conform to the logic of time or centrality; there is no sequential logic explaining behaviour, location or stories. The emphasis is on descriptive aspects of Sonja rather than someone in a narrative. And Sonja, is diffused by the countless depictions of her through the years amidst the insistent inclusion of incidental detail and disarray, of bedding, cats, pots and pans, clothing. Strba's strategy of no authorial comment results in images that are reduced in obvious meaning whilst full of reference to the reality of the situation. The kitchen table presents neither aesthetic formality nor any obvious significance and any import of meaning is dependent on the viewer, as it is not shared explicitly and remains a secret between the photographer and subject. Such dialogic imagery is dependent on singular context, which approaches a sort of meaninglessness. The very incidental shots display successive focus of figure and ground as we spotlight every object in the image in turn, as each is of equal significance. The significance or 'universality' of these images resides exactly in specific detail and ordinariness. They don't offer us any answers; they are not a substitute for experience and are bereft of a directed expression, dilemma or passion. If there is purpose, it is for the *a-special* moment, the retention of particularity, without irony or cute reference. Metaphoric reference is minimal or indistinguishable.

Lundin and Strba both assume the validity of photographic series confirming its significance as a method of 'realism', replacing the more definitive dualism of essential being and appearance with emphasis on a process where there is no ultimate end; where all one can find is a series of manifestations; where beings change and will present themselves differently at different times. By giving us the ordinary and refusing the *extra-ordinary* (literally outside the norm), their work gives us back what is potentially our own experience and undermines the presumption that the



photographer has something to say or must search for resolution and significance through a shared, greater meaning. These are more discursive, more overtly inter-subjective, unrehearsed, uncontrolled methods that lead us away from the presumption of 'presence' to a more open field.



Fig.55 Beat Streuli, *New York*, 2000

In contrast Streuli and Di Corcia *exploit* the blandness and arbitrariness of the crowd and present the ordinary as extra-ordinary in the sense of an excess. Both series depend on automation and chance in some way. Streuli<sup>23</sup> uses the preset determination of the long distance lens and diCorcia<sup>24</sup>, with the use of a tripwire, involves the unwitting participation of those photographed. Both photographers present a highly edited selection from the great number of pictures taken and both appear to relinquish any attempt to elevate the implication of meaning beyond the very ordinary appearance of what is there. They too do not search, frame or construct by any direct intervention with the 'subject'. This is ordinariness taken to an extreme; the ultimate in glorification of the ordinary; 'elevations of the banal',<sup>25</sup> or sanctification by the spotlight in Di Corcia's case. Streuli presents us with what we may encounter everyday in every city, what we already know. His work has been variously described as 'boring',<sup>26</sup> as 'marvellous',<sup>27</sup> as not expressive and with 'no existential note, no pain, no criticism, nor judgement'.<sup>28</sup> Streuli's approach is an extreme version of 'straight' photography, or in his terms more 'democratic'. His translation of a '*feeling of reality*',<sup>29</sup> as opposed to the more usual direct translation, acknowledges implicitly the impossible project of depicting reality, while recognising our desire to be given the illusion of it.

Di Corcia *dramatises* the banality of what we know, in his presentations of latent drama in the street. We don't have to have a 'special eye' or an expressive vision to see (understand) what he

<sup>23</sup> For example, *Portraits 98-00, La belle estate*, Torino: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 2000

<sup>24</sup> For example *Streetwork* series (1993-1997) and *Heads* series (2001)

<sup>25</sup> Pfab, Rupert, 'Photographs of Modern Life'. In *City*, Hatje-Cantz, 1999, pp. 23-29

<sup>26</sup> Imhof, Dora, Review in *Kunstforum International*, no. 148, December 1999

<sup>27</sup> Williams, Gilda, *Art Monthly*, no 210, October 1997

<sup>28</sup> Valtorta, Roberta, 'The Crowd as Body, The Silent Photography of Beat Streuli'. In *Beat Streuli, Portraits 98-00*, Torino: GAM - Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 2000, pp.25-31

<sup>29</sup> Pace, Alessandra, Interview with Beat Streuli, in *Beat Streuli, Portraits 98-00*, pp.115-119



wants us to see is there and in that respect his intention follows the tradition of inviting us to look more acutely via the photograph. However he uses his 'vision' self consciously and strategically, careful to remove vestiges of interpretation. 'The pictures are "non events" both because I see that as interesting and because I want to remove photography's biggest attraction – the offering of a second hand experience'.<sup>30</sup> The selection is both particularly bland and grandiose in contradiction. diCorcia's images in particular have become solid and separated from the background and appear unreal,<sup>31</sup> as cold isolations, which turn-to-object each highlighted individual. Perversely, the effect is of a super-reality, ultra-aliveness, whilst perpetually frozen. They spotlight individuals in the act of *doing*, rather than waiting or being reposeful, that suggests it is the act of *process* which sustains our interest. They are literally dramatic and have turned the ordinary into a theatre.



Fig.56 Philip-Lorca  
diCorcia, *Naples*, 1995

Streuli's and di Corcia's work remains ambiguous. They make no comment, do not 'document', do not engage with any moral concern or intention, do not actively 'search for real faces'<sup>32</sup> and neither do they present a taxonomical archive and yet ostensibly they present epic fables of the ordinary. These do not have that humanist intention pointing to the universality of Man, of *explaining*, of showing how we belong, nor do they easily access meaning in the way more introspective studies do, such as Delahaye's *Subway* and Evans's *Metro* series. It is hard to utilise these images as metaphors for our own states of being, as confirmation of our own existence, as they seem too bland for this. In consequence, they are not doing what 'photographic vision' is supposed to do; they do not fulfil the desire for a new photographic vision. They are not violating ordinary vision but violating what is thought to be 'photographic vision' and as such have invited responses for their amateurishness and indifference to photographic history ('but this is not photography!'<sup>33</sup>) The images are superficially unmediated and relinquish an overtly expressive use of the medium. The

<sup>30</sup> Di Corcia, Philip Lorca, *Streetwork 1993-97*. Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1998

<sup>31</sup> See for example *Naples 1995*, *Tokyo 1994*, *Naples 1996*

<sup>32</sup> Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, Penguin, 1979, p. 104

<sup>33</sup> von Amelnunxen, Hubertus, 'Beat Christoph Streuli (II)'. *European Photography* 57, Spring/Summer 1995, pp.55-58



work is 'stripped', 'reduced' and 'in a sense free of the excesses of language'<sup>34</sup> or photographic heritage. Described as the work of 'flaneurs',<sup>35</sup> the term is implicitly critical for the lack of search and for its aimless purpose. But in avoiding the chase, there is still serious effort here; carefully prepared strategies that avoid interpretation and intent on achieving something by any means other than confrontation or posing.



Figs.57-58 Beat Streuli,  
*New York*, 2000

It is the nature of all these images to present no more than what is there, little scope to render the subjects as anything beyond themselves, whether it be 'mortality, vulnerability, mutability'.<sup>36</sup> They undermine the search for presence, significance or profundity through metaphoric reference. But despite the eschewal of the 'captured' moment, despite a kind of metaphoric minimalism, as Derrida demonstrates, the 'metaphotographic event'<sup>37</sup> is impossible to avoid; what went before; what comes after; what is imagined; metaphor; metonym is held in each of these ordinary eventless moments. In reading these images, even the most simple statement such as 'her right hand hovers over the glass' leads us elsewhere, to what has gone before, to our imagination, penetrating 'the abyss of these metonymies'.<sup>38</sup> The viewer is thus assigned a speaking role that can speculate and position, where 'there is reversibility, irreversibility, diachrony and simultaneity'.<sup>39</sup> Sonja's glass of water, whilst not significant in itself, even irrelevant, is integral to the import of the image as a whole, which would be meaningless without it. We compulsively project meaning and elements of such projection will thereby imply 'essential features' that can be metaphorically applied to aspects of existence. There is plentiful discourse prompted by the work of Streuli and diCorcia, which confirms that this is the case. Bonami describes diCorcia's photographs as a vast 'family album' that records the despair and disappointment of failure, as having the grandiose purpose of

<sup>34</sup> Valtorta, 'The Crowd as Body', p.25 and recalls Sartre's 'stripped' *Being and Nothingness*, p. xxxviii

<sup>35</sup> Dister, Alain, in *L'Oeil* (Lausanne Switzerland) no 498, July/Aug '98, pp. 54-57

<sup>36</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p.14

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Right of Inspection*. [*Droit de Regards*, 1985]. Trans. David Wills, *Art & Text* 32, 1989, p.73

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42



displaying American culture.’<sup>40</sup> Danto, discussing Streuli’s *Oxford Street*,<sup>41</sup> sees the work’s subject as the ‘modality of being human in the world’s cities’ whilst Streuli’s themes of ‘transitoriness and process’ interrupt the flux and confront us with ourselves.<sup>42</sup>



So despite these contradictions, what is it in these images that I implicitly appreciate? They are minimally constructed, push the lack of significant content to the limit and are refreshing in that the metaphoric use *is* minimal. The ‘subjects’ are not necessarily the focus. The incidental is allowed to reveal meaning without authorial assistance and if there is anything to be revealed, then it will be I who determines it. Presentation is simple, without reference to conditions such as ‘vulnerability’. They invite meaning without effort, are open, less determined and avoid cliché, due to lack of commentary, for a short time at least. For everything ‘becomes cliché’ eventually, even this new *unnew* vision – as a device for making special something that is not special. Being suspicious of attempts to express or to insist on passion, what I appreciate about this work is that it *allows* room for reflection. This too can be seen to be another take on ‘disappearing as a subject’, of disrupting the pose, allowing the subject to be and not forcing them to become something else – a hero, a role, an expectation, a pleasure. These photographs remind us that we know that photographs are not real and that we are not obliged to reveal the world as beautiful. On the edge of purpose and aimlessness, of objectification and control, communication and meaninglessness, the work confirms Baudrillard’s project disturbing the control of the subject and Barthes’s precipitous ‘*pure meaning*’.

At the end of 20th century, this approach seems an obvious reaction to what has gone before; the concerns of expression and the moral obligation to reveal through the ‘art’ of photography.<sup>43</sup> They

<sup>40</sup> Bonami, Francesco, ‘Clean Clusters in a Shopping Mall’. *Flash Art*, no 183, Summer 1985, pp.105-106

<sup>41</sup> Danto, Arthur C., ‘Beat Streuli’s Gesamtkunstwerk’. *Parkett* 54, 1998/99, pp.126-127

<sup>42</sup> Ammann, Jean-Christophe, ‘Beat Christoph Streuli (1)’. *European Photography*, Spring 1995, pp.51-52

<sup>43</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p.30



question their position as 'good photographs', subverting, as they do, what this is expected to mean. But are they doing something different or are they merely 'wrenching things from their context (to see them in a fresh way)', confirming what has long been held as photography's 'commitment to pure seeing'? If there is a difference, it is that they do not *overtly* offer us an alternative view or any kind of subjective view. If these images are too ordinary to offer us any substitute for experience, what effect does this very ordinariness have on us? Can extreme banality and ordinariness be a metaphor for consciousness? Do they escape the ambition of transcendence evident in the likes of Steiglitz's *Equivalents* or do they land straight back in there? For how long, can this 'ordinary', this new 'straightness' avoid metaphor, nostalgia and triteness? Can we stay content with this ordinariness?

### APPEARANCE AND EXISTENTIAL INDIFFERENCE



Fig.59 Philip-Lorca diCorcia,  
*New York*, 1993

In perception there is always the construction of a figure on a ground. No one object, no group of objects is especially designed to be organized as specifically ground or figure; all depends on the direction of my attention...Each element of the setting, a person, a table, a chair attempts to isolate itself, to lift itself upon the ground... I am witness to the successive disappearance of all the objects which I look at – in particular the face, which detain me for an instant.<sup>44</sup>

Streuli's *City* and diCorcia's *Streetwork* series confront the phenomenon of our looking at and relating to others, present the opportunity to stare at our leisure<sup>45</sup> and to indulge in a way that is normally forbidden; they encourage our fascination and voyeuristic nature. The effect, however, produces an indifference or separation, at least between the viewer and the 'scene'. It questions the extent to which we can be interested beyond a conceptual appreciation of the cleverness of the construction; the extent to which we can care or become involved. We *are* fascinated, but they invoke the contradiction of compelling us to look, whilst remaining indifferent, as neither comment

<sup>44</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), trans. Hazel Barnes, London: Routledge, 2000 edition, pp. 9-10

<sup>45</sup> Wylie, Charles, 'Streets of Paradox'. *Art on Paper*, v3, no. 4, Mar/April, 99, pp.43-45



nor expression is put before us. They invite reverie and speculation concerning a global condition, but not in terms of individual psychology; these images have entered a dreamlike world where no one has a face. The protagonists are visually held outside and beyond the natural world, within the photograph, where they highlight an active world, as all the subjects depicted are in the process of movement and doing and proceeding. As instances of inter-subjective activity, these images illustrate both the 'world of objects', acted upon by the photographer, and the world of conscious and active subjects, 'doing'. They are both. They are devoid of emotive relation, visually stunning, yet giving us no point of emotional contact. To make sense of them, we are compelled to objectify these other 'someones'.<sup>46</sup> They give us a world that is opaque, a world that has so much hidden from us, namely the psychological life of the protagonists. In literally spotlighting them, diCorcia illuminates them *and* obscures them. They are distant and removed from us, and leave us with no experience beyond marvelling at this other world, which happens to be identical with our own. They present, as far as is possible, 'pure appearance',<sup>47</sup> in the sense that they exist for us only to the degree that they appear, *indicating* a lateral depth of meaning, but not giving us sufficient information to gain insight into what that might be. They present our *own* experience, of the street, and of our direct relation to the world and its appearance.

We can equally well reject the dualism of appearance and essence. The appearance does not hide the essence, it reveals it; it is the essence. The essence of an existent ...is the succession of appearances.<sup>48</sup>

However, expecting the duality of appearance and essence, we are used to looking for the hidden reality assumed in the pursuit of 'good' or more traditional photographic portraiture; the word 'appearance' suggests the existence of something, which is *not* appearance, always something as well, behind the surface, so it carries with it an inherent negativity. In these photographs, 'others' are revealed to us 'in a succession of glimpses, shadings, profiles', not 'exhausted by... appearances, which are infinite' They present us with no 'beyond' to speak of, no clues but invite us to look at a series of appearance. Sartre relinquishes the idea of appearance hiding some thing else and states that there is no hidden interior or thing beyond the exterior to be found (no 'presence'), that appearances are equal and none are privileged as more meaningful.<sup>49</sup> Appearance is all, subverting the desire to reveal the true nature behind the mask. Thus Baudrillard, echoing Sartre, proposes that we should seek the mask (the appearance) rather than anything else; but both projects, whether seeking what lies beneath the mask or denying its existence, acknowledge the duality of mask and something else. And a number of contemporary photographers work from this premise of the 'appearance is all', present superficiality, banality, ordinariness and, as with

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<sup>46</sup> Derrida uses this term for 'others' in Amy Ziering Kofman and Kirby Dick's film, *Derrida*, 2002

<sup>47</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.17. Sartre's notion of essence is not timeless and substantial and anticipates Derrida - essence is ever changing and idiosyncratic and constructed by the individual: 'the objective will never come out of the subjective' p. xxxvii

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiii - 'the infinite in the infinite'.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xx -xxii: 'There is no longer an exterior for the existent if one means by that a superficial covering which hides from sight the true nature of the object' and 'appearances ...are all equal, they all refer to other appearances, and none of them is privileged.'



diCorcia and Streuli, are not seeking other inward beings. Infinite series replaces dualism and suggests another trait of current work as the acknowledgement of a *process* where there is no ultimate or end, where all one can find is a series of manifestations, where things change and will present themselves differently.<sup>50</sup> Here there is no more than appearance *and* there will always be *more* than can be presented.

Streuli's and diCorcia's work explains, in a simple way, the notion of *semantic models*; alternative possibilities in understanding concepts and images. In their presentation of appearance only, they refer us to the possibility of *other* appearances, of what is *not* there. Sartre's notion of stripping 'all human projections of meaning'<sup>51</sup> from experience (epitomised by Roquentin's encounter with the tree root<sup>52</sup>) suggests the possibility of a situation where 'the veil is torn away... words have vanished and with them the meaning of things.'<sup>53</sup> Here lies the possibility of seeing something entirely without projection, structure or meaning that leaves us with images, which make it difficult to project our own meaning, and yet we are compelled to try. Explanation and meaning depends on what is *not* there *and* the subjective impression of the viewer, and the foundation of our subjectivity lies in the 'infinite totality of the series of appearances'<sup>54</sup> that conjures up what is absent and projects towards the 'realm of possibilities'.<sup>55</sup> What is *absent*, can be anticipated in imagination and is as much *present* as what is referenced in the image. In the sense that an object/image is context-dependent for its definition, and that we can only understand it in relation to everything else, all that it is *not*, and all that it *could* be, is there in the image also. Thus confronting the image can be seen as an act of consciousness, rather than of a 'thing'; confronting this realm of possibilities is more a *process* of meaning. These photographs, with the lack of any relation between 'subject' and 'object', are impenetrable. The lack of 'contact' makes it difficult to penetrate their opacity, but despite the lack of emotional projection, they engage the intellect in projecting meaning and allusion. Clearly they show that there is no literal, positive characteristic of *being* (or representation) possible. *Being* is 'beyond' activity and passivity, temporality and change, possibility and necessity. These images present the contradiction of apparent translucency of appearance, the opaqueness of subjects and consequent emptiness.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. xxii

<sup>51</sup> Hammond, M. and J. Howarth., R. Keat, *Understanding Phenomenology*, Blackwell 1991, p.114

<sup>52</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, 'Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology', trans Joseph P. Fell, *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, 1,2, May 1970, pp 4-5: 'the tree escapes me and repulses me, and I can no more lose myself in the tree than it can dissolve itself in me. I'm beyond it; it's beyond me.' and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938), Hamondsworth: Penguin, 1965, pp.185

<sup>53</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, p170

<sup>54</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. xxxvi

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 224

<sup>56</sup> See Sartre's distinction between the translucence of consciousness and the opacity of objects as they appear to us in *Being and Nothingness* p. xxxiii: I cannot 'reduce this table to a synthesis of subjective impressions' and pertinently here 'we discover ourselves on the road, in the city, in the midst of the crowd, thing among thing, men among men.'



It is true that things give themselves in profile; that is, simply by appearances. It is true that each appearance refers to other appearances. .... It is futile... to attempt to found the reality of the object on the subjective plenitude of impressions.<sup>57</sup>

Sartre, in questioning what is subjective and what is absent, describes the impenetrable complication of consciousnesses reflecting on other consciousnesses and might be describing these very photographs. It is as if Streuli and diCorcia were set the task to produce photographs, 'stripped' of meaning,<sup>58</sup> of all conceptualisation, all differentiation, all features or characteristics and thereby betray 'their solidity, density, their 'full positivity'.<sup>59</sup> These images are indicative of current themes in contemporary photography as they present, in their ordinariness, an ontology of boredom and indifference. They give us simple appearances that ultimately obscure our view. However, photographs that in different ways circumvent intentional search, looking sideways, outside the frame, via anonymity, banality and intimacy, arrive ultimately at the same place, in an affirmation of 'the real' displaced as 'irreal'. In avoiding the extraordinary and the transcendent, we achieve a provocative banal and photographs, 'apparently created in an artificial manner... reveal the natural'.<sup>60</sup> Coming full circle, in avoiding one kind of objectivity (or subjectivity), there is immersion in another.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. xxxvii

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 112

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. xx -xxii

<sup>60</sup> Sviblova, Olga, 'Sergey Chilikov'. *Imago*, vol. 14, Summer 2002, p.25. Chilikov calls his method 'provocation'.



## Chapter Two: AESTHETIC FRAMES

Just as such non-eventful photographic texts present expressions of an aesthetic without authorial interpretation, so they parallel a number of theories that encourage a move from comfortable totality toward meaninglessness. As Levinas's *shadow* works against transcendence, Baudrillard's *irreality* establishes a place of excess, where the 'impenetrable enigma' resides, and Barthes's phenomenon of *pure meaning* straddles the borders of non-meaning, the consequence of which might be images that are too dangerous; too bald or abject, too banal, too extra-ordinary to be acceptable as meaningful. Kristeva's assertion of the *semiotic* explains an un-nameable force, where *pure meaning* approaches the 'boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable, abject'. Pursuing this compulsion toward the boundaries of aesthetic, I look firstly in this chapter at Kristeva's notion of *negativity* as one theory that offers explanation for what is unspeakable and lies at the edges of meaninglessness. Secondly I establish connections between the emergence of aesthetic change, its confirmation in photographic practices, before examining where ineffable domains meet conceptual portrayal. As this thesis chases what is ineffable, I am particularly interested in explanations for the compulsion that moves practice away from conformity and understanding and that 'resides in the passage between (the) desire to signify the asymbolized and the asymbolizable.'<sup>1</sup> Kristeva introduces the possibility of the unspeakable (ineffable) and nonsensical into poetic meaning, which establishes these elements as a 'normal' consequence of psychology and structure and as a verifiable challenge to any established norm. The foundations of the signifying process is reorganised and controlled by social and psychic constraints that surface as disturbance of this order, 'as poetry', the 'part of meaning that cannot be accounted for – that part that doesn't mean: nonsense, tones, rhythms.'<sup>2</sup> Kristeva's explanation for the compulsion toward poetic meaning could be said to equate with Ricoeur's, which grounds 'poetic reality' in the imaginative realm of conceptual thought.

Kristeva's application of the theoretical to creative texts contributes to a shift in the perspective of what is important to practice, and to a trans-disciplinary base from which to *commence* practice. An important consequence of her work is the introduction of a very material and 'sensible' dimension to interpretation, which distances us from metaphysical notions of transcendence and moves toward an emphasis on affect and response instead. Kristeva's approach is one that asserts *process* rather than product as being central, and indicates a theory of signification where meanings in verbal and visual texts (photographs) are equivalent.

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<sup>1</sup> Kristeva, Julia, 'How Does One Speak To Literature' (1971) in *Desire in Language*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p.118

<sup>2</sup> Lechte, John, *Julia Kristeva*. London: Routledge, 1990, p. 91



## CONTRA-AESTHETICS

*Powers of Horror*<sup>3</sup> explores the region of the *abject* as one that might perversely reveal, and simultaneously push, the limits of aesthetic convention. The abject, lying at the edge of what is repressed, holds the secret of what attracts *me*, of what will be meaningful for *me* or what repels *me*. As such it is fragile, unclear and not fixed and originates in those aspects of my psyche that are sublimated, either personally or socially or both. Straddling categories of 'Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality', it skirts around what is not acceptable, what is taboo. Confronting the *abject*, returns us to the dangerous arena of encounter with someone else, with what I desire, but cannot know, where my identity can be overwhelmed and 'the distinction between subject and object removed'.<sup>4</sup> The possibility of 'abreaction', and the contradiction of, on the one hand being attracted, and on the other being repelled, touches the root of my desire and approaches a realisation of loss, of all that has formed me. Tantalised by a photograph, 'the object of want'<sup>5</sup> taunts, seduces, 'beseeches and pulverises the subject'.<sup>6</sup> (For Barthes, it is the absence of his mother, within his memory. For myself it is the total absence of my mother, without memory.) When looking at photographs, when confronting the mess of my thinking and the multitude of associations, the *abject* provides both an entrance and an exit, simultaneously toward and away from what I repress, a within and a without. What I reject allows me to approach a meaning for myself and allows me to avoid what I cannot 'face'. And where these are articulated, they find a symbolic existence, perhaps an epic or mythic one.

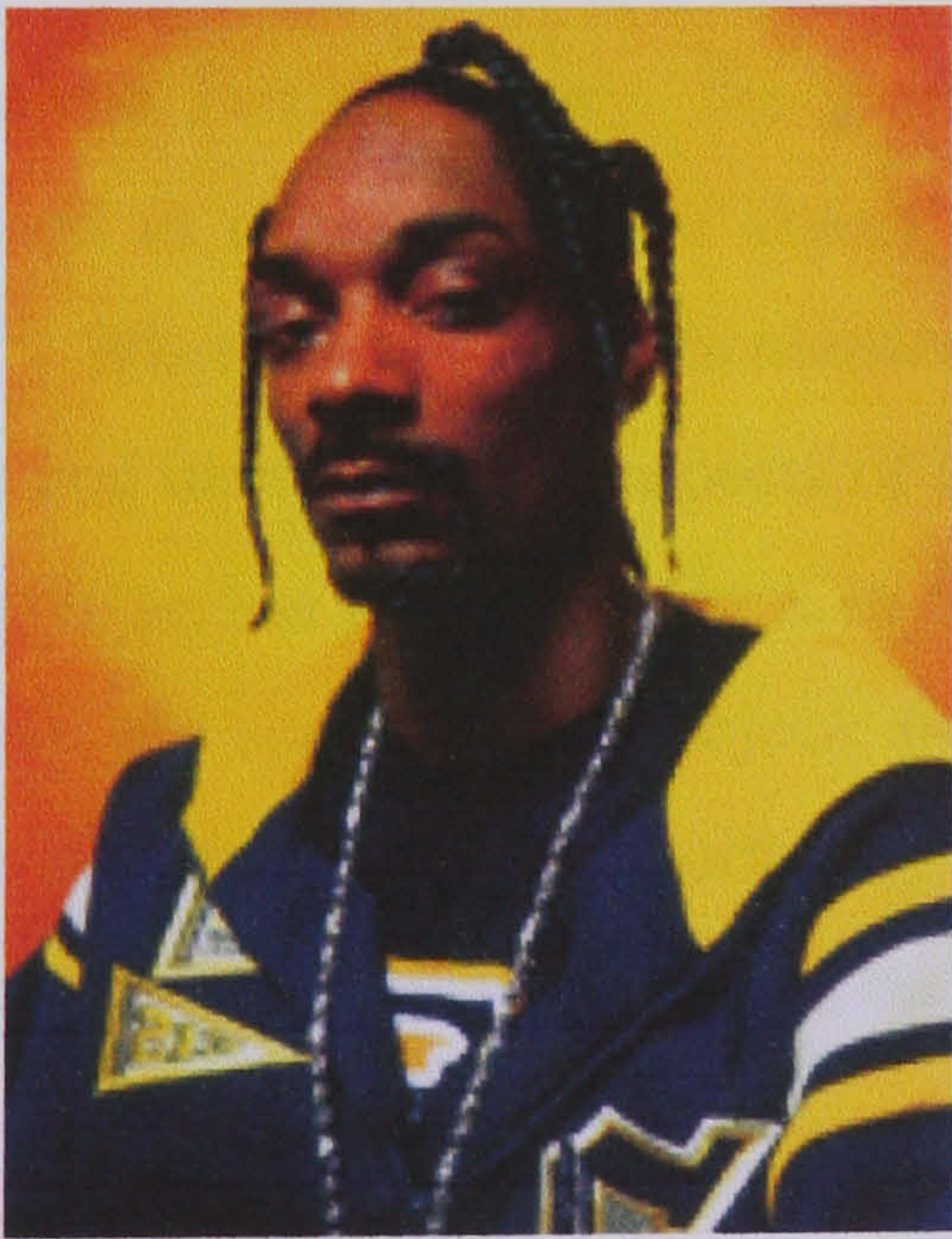


Fig.60 Andres Serrano, *Snoop Dog* from the series *America*, 2004

In looking at artistic practice, Kristeva identifies the territory of the *abject* as that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules' and which, through content and style, approaches 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'<sup>7</sup> In a photographic context, we similarly might cite the breaking of

<sup>3</sup> See quote in *Part Two* citing Kristeva, Julia, 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection' (1980), trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982. Reproduced in Cazeaux, Clive, ed., *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000, pp.542-552

<sup>4</sup> Kristeva in Cazeaux, p.500

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.544

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.544

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.544





Fig. 61 Martin Kollar, Slovakia, 2001

a number of taboos: of indignity, exposure and exploitation (Mikhailov's *Case History*) or of the grotesque (Cindy Sherman's *Sex Pictures* 1992-4 significantly left out of the retrospective show at the Serpentine, 2003<sup>8</sup>) or of death and sanctity (Andres Serrano's series <sup>9</sup>) or of sex (Robert Mapplethorpe before him) or of what is clumsy, obscene, pretty, sentimental or indulgent...whatever is unacceptable at any one time. But a common aesthetic, such as the current sensationalism and sensuousness typified by Serrano's Baroque use of colour and subject [fig. 60],<sup>10</sup> can eventually anaesthetize what is dangerous, can make safe and sanctify: 'The various means of purifying the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis *par excellence* called ...the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters...by the same token purifies.'<sup>11</sup> It could be said that it is the 'abyss of incompatibilities, rejections and abjections'<sup>12</sup> that invents forms of convention such as artistic practice, that enable us to confront what is uncomfortable. In so doing, a process of aestheticisation assimilates and generates material that might at first be challenging before becoming common currency, for example the *extra*-ordinary, the grand-normal and the super-banal.<sup>13</sup> [fig.61] 'Desire, thus normalised in order to escape abject concupiscence sinks into a banality that is sadness and silence.'<sup>14</sup> Where Sartre and phenomenologists use philosophy to sanctify and release them from the base and uncomfortable aspects of being human, Kristeva confronts them and accepts them as inescapable and as a positive force. In *Powers of Horror*, she aligns the 'artistic' with the perverse and where she speaks of the abject, she could as well be speaking of aesthetic evolution: 'The *abject* is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them.'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cindy Sherman, born 1954 New Jersey, has been instrumental in normalising the use of photography in art practice. Significantly in the series pertinent to Kristeva's discussion, *Disasters* and *Fairy Tale* 1985-89 and *Sex Pictures* 1992-4, she does not use herself as model.

<sup>9</sup> Andres Serrano, born 1950, lives and works in New York. Raised a strict Catholic and from a mixed race background, much of his work challenges all manner of cultural taboos. In this context significant images and series are *Piss Christ* 1987, *Blood and Semen* 1990, the *Morgue* series 1992, *A History of Sex* 1997. His work principally takes the form of portraits – *Nomads* 1990, *Native American Portraits* and *America* 2004

<sup>10</sup> Bal discusses implications of Serrano's work in Bal, Mieke, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1999, pp.45-75. This description could also be given to works by Arsen Savadov.

<sup>11</sup> Kristeva in Cazeaux, p. 552 'Through that experience... "subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse and start again - inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject'.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 555

<sup>13</sup> Martin Kollar, born 1971, Zilina, Slovakia 'I travel through Slovakia and imagine it as a miraculous and exotic country'. *Imago* 13, Winter 2002

<sup>14</sup> Kristeva in Cazeaux, p.560

<sup>15</sup> 'Perverse or artistic' in Kristeva in Cazeaux, p.551



A number of Kristeva's texts bring to mind equivalent expressions in photographic practice. Her description of the characteristics of carnivalesque as rebellious, 'anti-rationalist' and challenging established order, 'parodies and relativises itself, repudiating its role in representation', is 'both representative and anti-representative'<sup>16</sup> and is recognisable in contemporary moves in art practice of displaced realities or more spectacular dimensions. *Tales of Love*, reminds us of images that portray the more dangerous aspects of relationship, rather than images that idealise, beautify and clarify as with more classic portrait tradition [see Avedon fig.11]. Images which, in describing someone that one desires or loves, suggest photographic pursuits on the edge of capability, 'painful or ecstatic states where the object slips away'<sup>17</sup> (Evans, Goldin) or are ugly and uncomfortable (Mikhailov) or do not translate insignificance (Strba). It is recognisable as paralleling descriptions of the dual roles assumed by both Evans and Strba and their respective 'subjects', where participants and texts collide, contradict and reconstruct each other, where each 'participant is both actor and spectator...loses [their] sense of individuality...and splits into a subject of the spectator and an object of the game...the subject is reduced to a nothingness, while the structure of the author emerges as anonymity that creates and sees itself created as self and other, as man and mask.'<sup>18</sup> As we have seen, intimacy, intrusion, anonymity are possible strategies for muddling the borders in the photographic encounter.<sup>19</sup> Kristeva's emphasis introduces the possibility that images might offer a kind of equivalence to feeling, not the metaphysics of Steiglitz, and not so definitive as that evoked by words, but more equivocal, visceral and uncertain.

'Negativity is the liquifying and dissolving agent that does not destroy but rather reactivates', that affirms and 'links/unleashes the "real" and the conceptual' the objective and the subjective.<sup>20</sup> The notion of rejection,<sup>21</sup> deriving from Freud's 'expulsion', establishes an outside that is never definitely separate from, but which disturbs the unity of the subject. It explains the psychological origins of the dynamics of meaning such as *parergon*, *cataylser* and *punctum*, which are neither intrinsic nor extrinsic, neither significant nor insignificant. Within the signifying process, rejection provokes reaction and renewal, motivates metaphor and is the basis of a 'metonymic desire',<sup>22</sup> as opposed to the repetition of established norms. As one of the "ultimate" mechanisms of psychic functioning,<sup>23</sup> rejection is the negative force that reactivates practice, 're-constitutes real objects, "creates" new ones, reinvents the real, and re-symbolizes it'.<sup>24</sup> Kristeva describes *negativity* as the process that mediates drives such as rejection, and 'pure abstractions' such as 'being and

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<sup>16</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel'. In *Desire in Language*, p.79

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, Julia, 'Throes of Love: The Field of Metaphor'. In *Tales of Love*, (1983), trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, p.267

<sup>18</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', p.78. In a similar split, Levinas asserts that the 'poetic order' forces the participating reader as both 'I-actor' and 'I-spectator'.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, 'Throes of Love: The Field of Metaphor', p. 268

<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p.109

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp.147-148

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.178

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.160

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.155



nothingness'. It is the 'movement of heterogeneous matter' emphasising the *performance* in meaning construction<sup>25</sup> that challenges logical negation, which merely replaces something with its opposite rather than fundamentally changing it.<sup>26</sup> The function of *negativity* challenges true/false and logical/non-logical oppositions, and 'recasts' dualities like universal and particular, indeterminate and determinate, quality and quantity, negation and affirmation,<sup>27</sup> replacing them with the trajectory of "primary process" (displacements, condensations)' instead.<sup>28</sup> *Negativity* is the principle that motivates change in the dynamics of significance, that mobilises what is static, that contradicts, that moves between abstraction and the material, objectivity and subjectivity and that determines what is resonant in an image as increasingly uncertain and a-logical. It is a difficult concept but somehow central for my purpose of finding the logic of resistance and ambivalence over acceptance, and the relation of an 'ineffable mobility' to its determination.<sup>29</sup> In the photographic context it disturbs the normative rules of aesthetic and can be seen in the unremarkable or the awful as 'good' in portrayals disregarding 'objective vision', or in images that dismantle photographic assumptions of control and objectivity, now established as a genre disturbing conventional subject /object relations and sitting on the edge of taste.

A conception of art that 'pluralises, pulverises, musicates' truths, is very different from one that represents established progressive ideology. It is not a separating or uplifting process but brings us back to the corporeal rather than the transcendent (a kind of 'transubstantiation') something altogether more dangerous. Kristeva affirms all that is a-logical and a-knowledgeable and suggests an alternative to unity – in non-meaning and chance. Her thesis anticipates much of the oblique sentiment evident in photographic depictions of avoidance or that encompass boredom as a result of the superfluity of meaning and the consequence of excess.

Kristeva's address to the forces that motivate, confirms the derivation of meaning in what is absent, displaced or disguised and, with regard to the photograph, to what is shown or not shown. Fundamentally what drives us is the motivation to retrieve what we have lost, hence the recurrence and importance of *absence* throughout the process of meaning. In psychoanalytic terms, every object of desire is a substitution for the real object, as the 'real' itself cannot be signified, only the desire for it in its absence. What gives us the 'affirmative moment' and ensures its maintenance, is not the object produced but the *process* of its production. Whilst desire perpetuates absence, it provokes contradictions and keeps us interested. This is the contradiction that defeated Sultan in his desire for the 'identity of substance' in the portrayal of his parents; when sought it becomes elusive

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<sup>25</sup> See for example essays by Amelia Jones and Karen Lang in Jones, A. and Stephenson A. (eds) *Art History/ Art Criticism: Performing Meaning Performing the Body, Performing the Text*. London & New York, Routledge, 1999

<sup>26</sup> Kristeva's *negativity* derives from her close reading of Hegel cited throughout 'Negativity: Rejection' in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in which she argues the connection between Hegel's 'repulsion' and 'negativity' and Freud's 'rejection'.

<sup>27</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p.109

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.125

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.109: *Negativity* 'figures as the indissoluble relation between an 'ineffable' mobility and its 'particular determination'.



and results in substituting fictions. Thus desire seeps through a text via what is referred to and what is absent and is resolved via fetish, universal appeal or fiction. Learning that we are separate, that we cannot become an 'other', we are left with desire as a consequence of this lack and strive to achieve a commonality with the cause of this lack – others - the contradictory base from which signification begins. The idea of the fetishistic object<sup>30</sup> derives from this place of lack, which the photograph can serve to amplify, particularly in images of people (Barthes's mother in the Winter Garden or my 'self-transcendence' constructed in my depiction of A). This psychological contradiction, of seeking fulfilment in the source of lack, signals a fundamental parallel in representation, where meaning that does not speak to the individual can be meaningless and meaning that appeals universally can be empty.<sup>31</sup> Emptiness comes down to the lack of individual fullness where meaning is normalised, standardised, made common to all (the contradiction of *pure meaning* again). Dijkstra's desire to describe both the universal and the individual significantly reveals the in-between place of contradiction and irony: 'I discovered that if you want to give a general impression, you should be very specific,'<sup>32</sup> and illustrates the myth of the individual originating in psychoanalysis and confirmed in Western constructs of existentialism and modernism.

### AESTHETIC HISTORIOGRAPHIES

The forces explained by psychoanalysis confirm, from another perspective, the basis of conceptual transference from one domain to another (in metaphor), on the level of primal function *and* the level of expression. It explains our compulsion to react and confront on the one hand, and cling to stability and the familiar on the other. Kristeva explains mobility as *fact* and the mechanisms, which counter stasis and 'thing' as change and resonance. Kristeva's positive *negativity* and Derrida's *sans* are both moves that confront lack and take a different direction that move away from fetish and universality. The consequence for the photographer is the exploration of areas that encompass desire for representation *and* an understanding that it cannot be satisfied via resemblance alone and may only satisfy in unexpected ways. Visual personifications of these states return to an overt even ostentatious use of metaphor as can be seen in the stripped down portrayal of the Face (Ruff) or Jeff Wall's pictoramas.

Many of the attributes identified above as goal-less and as disregarding the dominant modernist aesthetic to find completion or to define or mythologize, are articulated in different terminology as

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<sup>30</sup> Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. *Screen*, Vol.16, no.3, 1975 establishes this idea, which Burgin explains in 'The Absence of Presence' in *The End of Art Theory*, pp.42-44: 'The fetish is pure presence... its function being precisely to deny absence to fill the 'lack' in being'. And Burgin again explores fetish in 'Newton's Gravity' in Squiers, Carol, (ed) *The Critical Image :essays on contemporary photography*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991

<sup>31</sup> Oliver, Kelly, 'The Crisis of Meaning' (1998). In Lechte, John and Mary Zoumazi (eds.) *The Kristeva Critical Reader*. Edinburgh University Press, 2003, p. 51: 'To be full is to be content; to be empty is to be hungry for something else.'

<sup>32</sup> Rineke Dijkstra in interview with David Brittain, *Creative Camera*, April/May, 1999. In contrast to this would be a generalising conception such as *The Family of Man*, Edward Steichen's photography exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955.



'postmodern photography'. 'Postmodernism', in Jean-Francois Lyotard's terms is defined as a consistently dislocated relation to the world,<sup>33</sup> as a recurring state, of attitudinal adjustment that precedes assimilation, where 'beliefs are shattered' and where other realities are invented. Following this reasoning, successive reactions to experience test the rules of existing aesthetic practice, provoking successive conceptions of the real, in a series of 'anti-aesthetics'<sup>34</sup> currently located in conceptual shifts of understanding with regard to positions of authenticity, authorship and meaning. Whilst this condition of 'postmodernism' is currently being questioned as 'fading into the background',<sup>35</sup> there appears to be confirmation, in photographic practice at least, of Lyotard's assertion that the project of modernity, as the pursuit of universality or 'some grand narrative',<sup>36</sup> has been relinquished. Photographic discussion echoes Lyotard's suggestion that a postmodern aesthetic 'denies itself the solace of good forms' or searches for presentations that can 'impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable'.<sup>37</sup> I have suggested more pervasive effects than mere 'postmodern' quotation, where for example photographers circumvent the impossible task of making definitive photographic statements by assuming methods that avoid expression and 'meaning'. Procedures of deconstruction and an obligatory awareness of the conditions of power and positioning have long since been assimilated in the careful avoidance of directorial authoring. A changing (anti) aesthetic, no longer reliant on universal certainties, is malleable rather than 'fixed or permanent'<sup>38</sup> and moves towards forms of local specific knowledge that can be seen in choices of subject matter as diverse as Strba's and Allan Sekula's. A quiet but substantial reformation is manifested in the way that photographers use strategies to dismantle hierarchies. It begins to suggest that a more appropriate term might be 'poststructural photography'.

Steve Edwards<sup>39</sup> reviews the influences of poststructuralism on photography and its central identification of the 'transcendental signified' as an illusion. He gives a clear and critical description of postmodern conditions of the 'reality effect' and of its assumptions from a position that accepts the themes of postmodern having 'attained the status of 'radical' common sense'. His position concludes that postmodern theory is no improvement on what went before '*in extremis*' as authorial, aestheticised genius. What he calls 'hermetic brilliance' has become the new form of totalisation, rather than confronting or exploring the effect on practice of this understanding. He presents too the problematic of the neat critique of modernism, which restricts itself to Greenberg and Schwarkowski and asks what of the other modernist histories? If 'postmodernism' and

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<sup>33</sup> Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984

<sup>34</sup> Foster, Hal (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*. Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983

<sup>35</sup> Bate, David, 'After Thought'. *Source*, 40, 2004, pp.30-33 He asks is it 'another 'ism'', fading into the background'. He also asks: 'Is an end to the discussion of postmodernism the end of ideology?' and suggests the current era of 'neo-realism'. Jurgen Habermas prefers to label reaction as 'anti-modernism'; see 'Modernity – an Incomplete Project' in Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*.

<sup>36</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiii

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81

<sup>38</sup> Moxey, K., 'The History of Art after the Death of the "Death of the Subject" 1999. In [ ] *Visible Culture*, [http://www.rochester.edu.in\\_visible\\_culture/issue1/moxey/moxey/html](http://www.rochester.edu.in_visible_culture/issue1/moxey/moxey/html), [accessed 1/2/2003]

<sup>39</sup> Edwards, Steve, 'The Snapshooters of History: Passages in the Postmodern Argument'. *TEN 8, International Photography Magazine*, UK, no. 32, 1989, pp.2-21



associated theories teach us anything it should teach us not to be 'totalised' by any theory and to see it in the context of its own history. How does post-modernism challenge any further or differently?

Gerard Mermoz's appraisal<sup>40</sup> suggests that metaphor pervades art history just as it does philosophy<sup>41</sup> and that what is at issue is the process in which truth-values are embedded in a critical framework, so that the 'telling' of a history can mute the practice and render it irreversible. He describes the arena as a 'metaphorical auditorium' that re-creates meanings in the image of the presiding ideology. In such a way a particular body of work will come to signify a typical example of a 'trend', and become inscribed as permanent (e.g. Walker Evans of modernism, Sherrie Levine of 'postmodernism'). Conceptions of certain heroes can confirm 'teleology' and gather validations, desires as 'an anchor, or focus of historical significance'. Rosalind Krauss describes the construction of artistic value based on the biography of one such hero<sup>42</sup> as a regrettable trait of art history, and Evans provides an example of another, more subtle evolution of heroic aesthetic, articulated in his own writing on 'quality'.<sup>43</sup> Evans's work, assumed as exemplary of photographic modernism (typified by *Allie Mae Burroughs*), is contradicted with his Polaroid portraits, which could be described as more characteristically 'postmodern'. Like Derrida's procedure of *differance*, historiographies such as those of Evans, suggest that where we can see certainty, we should look for evidence of counter-argument. Currently, for example, there is an anxiety to reappraise what has been previously dismissed in aesthetics – i.e. beauty.<sup>44</sup>

Since the writing of these reviews (1989), at the time of a very typical use of 'postmodern parody', the impact of digital technologies has forced a relinquishing of the preciousness of photography's ontological nature to confirm what matters. It is now visual reference that accesses meaning, which the range of practices and uses of photography in fine art practice has opened up, incorporating its own tautology and reinventing criteria of beauty and form. Rather than being fearful of its new consciousness, photography has embraced 'ideological fiction' as its own domain. Rather than 'truth', it assumes a more abstract functioning, fiction and an embodiment of desire itself in the ready presentation of whatever one wants. Twenty years later, I see more deep-seated adjustments to the conceptual framework of photographic practice than a literal translation of deferment for example. It may be possible now to survey some aspects of practice for what they tell us about ideology in the light of subsequent softening of reaction, as evident of an implicit awareness or consciousness.

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<sup>40</sup> Mermoz, Gerard, 'Rhetoric and Episteme: Writing about "Art" in the Wake of Post-structuralism'. *Art History*, vol. 12. no. 4, December 1989, pp.497-509

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, Jacques, 'White Mythology'. In *Margins of Philosophy* (1972). University of Chicago Press, 1982

<sup>42</sup> Krauss, Rosalind, 'In the Name of Picasso'. In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. London: MIT Press, 1985

<sup>43</sup> Evans, Walker, 'Categories of Quality' (1969). In *Walker Evans Archive*, 1994.250.54 (18), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

<sup>44</sup> Meyer, James and Toni Ross, 'Aesthetic/Anti-Aesthetic: An Introduction'. *Art Journal*, Summer 2004, pp.20-23



The conversation between Peggy Phelan and Irit Rogoff<sup>45</sup> displays a determined critical disavowal that avoids definitive positions, putting themselves in an in-between disassociated position in order to allow 'something else to emerge'. Applying this precarious model of enquiry of 'without' to photographic practice brings us back to the necessary tactic of a participatory exchange both in terms of the relationship between *operator* and *spectrum* and in terms of critique. Much photography anxiously disavows any position in an attempt to allow 'something to emerge'. What Rogoff refers to as 'participatory' exchange, shifts the position from which one views an exchange. Rogoff and Phelan's anxiety to 'unthink ourselves away from...certainty' parallels the methodologies adopted by photographers who avoid the definitive and who anticipate all the angles of framework and possible certainty. This can take a literal form in avoiding technical control by embracing 'amateurish things'<sup>46</sup> and the 'non-moment',<sup>47</sup> or in using sometimes perverse strategies that are ambivalent and non-determinate, or adopt a deliberately crude form of realism. The goal ultimately appears to be the same, but rather than critically challenging one version of truth, they propose starting from a position of what we don't know – a participatory methodology that does not exclude.

Two more recent essays articulate different attitudes to what is considered aesthetic and the significance of meaning. On the one hand Nick Zangwill<sup>48</sup> brackets off those examples of work found to be problematic (Duchamp's and Warhol's, referred to as 'aberrant works') and disallows an engagement with more contemporary developments. On the other, Roger Seamon<sup>49</sup> identifies the association of 'visual' with what is aesthetic as being a fundamentally misleading premise. Zangwill's essay provokes a number of tantalising questions regarding the notions of *aesthetic* and *non-aesthetic*. Firstly, the notion of anti-aesthetic or negative-aesthetic as being bland or ugly. His use of the term 'negative aesthetic function' for what lacks an aesthetic function invites enquiry of the difference between this and a position of neutrality, if that were possible, or between that and ugliness. We could then formulate two different anti-aesthetics; one of ugliness and one of neutrality. Secondly, the dependence of so called anti-aesthetic works, or Lyotard's 'postmodern condition', on our prior knowledge of and involvement with existing established aesthetic properties requires the definition of the aesthetic state that we are avoiding and must be therefore 'second-order works', thereby establishing originality as the prime criteria. Thirdly he reminds us of the difference between having no aesthetic purpose at all and having a non-aesthetic purpose, which requires the properties of the original aesthetic to remain the same. Fourthly he discriminates

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<sup>45</sup> Phelan, Peggy and Irit Rogoff, 'WITHOUT' A Conversation'. *Art Journal*, Fall 2001, vol.60, no.3, pp.34-41

<sup>46</sup> Graham, Paul, 'I Blame Elvis' an interview with Jennifer Winters. In *End of an Age*, Berlin: Scalo, 1999

<sup>47</sup> Waplington, Nick, *Indecisive Memento*, London: Booth Clibborn Editions, 1998

<sup>48</sup> Zangwill, Nick, 'Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 60:2, Spring, 2002, pp.111-118

<sup>49</sup> Seamon, Roger, 'The Conceptual Dimension in Art and the Modern Theory of Artistic Value'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59:2, Spring, 2001, pp.139-151



between meaning (narrative point) and ‘aesthetic point’ and works that may have one or the other or both and that meaning can only have aesthetic significance if it is confined to narrative as Zangwill assumes. However he does supply the clue to resolving this aesthetic impasse, whilst not allowing it as valid, as residing in his own dilemma as those ‘purely conceptual works....that I have overlooked that make no attempt to have an aesthetically interesting visual or aural aspect’<sup>50</sup>.

Assuming a more contemporary scene, which has assimilated the notion of the readymade, it is evident that much current discussion on aesthetics depends on visual association. On the other hand, if one equates *aesthetic* with perceptual, ‘sensible’ over visual qualities, then it makes definition and analysis, in my terms, a lot simpler. It simplifies too an understanding of works which attempt to access more than the perceptual; a more conceptual dimension. It is helpful to remember Levinas’s ‘sense’ as rhythm and as a more participative access to ‘poetic order’. Seamon clarifies the whole notion of contemporary aesthetics by simply adding the conceptual to the three more assimilated criteria – of mimetic, formal and expressive. He points out that the conceptual has always been there, carried by the visual – in allegory. What confronts us now is the possibility of fore-fronting the conceptual over the visual. The major conceptual framework of vision is a large generic metaphor that is difficult to shake off. Speech is ridden with references that allude to the image; it is fundamental to our descriptions of our thinking and helps give form to it. Photography confirms and embodies this metaphor for understanding (I see what you mean), which in turn is embedded in our conception of reality and aesthetic. What persists is the comfort of the visual providing definition.

Discourse arising from the awareness of our assumed dependence on visibility<sup>51</sup> and the consequent assumptions that result from that has led to a profound disturbance of the complacent contentment that is provided by ‘seeing is believing’. But it takes more than awareness to shake belief and W.J.T. Mitchell doubts the degree to which the nature of visibility and our relation to it has changed. Mitchell traces the developments in art history deriving from ‘turns’ in philosophy and discusses the legacy of various analyses. His ‘pictorial turn’ refers to a reaction to a self-conscious awareness of the problems arising from ‘spectatorship’ and ‘reading’ that grapples with the complexities between visibility and discourse. On the one hand everything to do with looking and on the other everything to do with reading. What might change more easily is the way that we articulate ourselves, the way we explain the problematic. The biggest adjustment is an acceptance that we ‘are constituted by both language and imaging’<sup>52</sup> rather than either/or. However, as language has dominated discourse (over the visual), visibility has dominated in terms of providing a metaphor and reference for explanation. Mitchell refers to a critical ‘postmodern iconology’ that

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<sup>50</sup> Zangwill, 2002, p.114

<sup>51</sup> Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*. Berkely; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1994

<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, W.J.T., *Picture Theory*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.24



supersedes language as being dominant, because it suppresses language and 'sutures image and text'; he suggests that each now 'supplements the other'. This would alleviate the contradiction between work that either forefronts visuality and sensation over conceptual resonance, or forefronts the conceptual at the expense of visual potency. In 'CONCEPTUAL DOMAINS' I consider examples where the conceptual might be assimilated with potency.



## Chapter Three: CONCEPTUAL DOMAINS

### 'NEITHER WORD NOR CONCEPT'<sup>1</sup>

Before returning to situate the photographic portrait in relation to contemporary directions in practice, I want to clarify here the conceptual space of the photograph and ideas, in relation to *differance* and the ineffable, to correlate these terms with those of Derrida and Lyotard. Being concerned with ideas that are not confined by 'naming', I have identified the 'conceptual system' of metaphor and 'resonance' as terms that approach a sense that switch the emphasis to 'capacities'<sup>2</sup> and more active 'production', rather than one that indicates something more definitive. I consider here the 'ineffable' as residing in the conceptual domain of the photograph. I go further and equate the conceptual domain and different modes of the ineffable with *differance*.<sup>3</sup>

Discussion of the ineffable and the photograph is framed within the complex arena of concept, meaning and description and reliant on distinctions between object and concept, between describing and naming and between the photograph 'naming' an object and intending a concept.<sup>4</sup> The principle of 'naming' can be seen to problematise a discussion that is concerned to assert the figural over the literal, and possibility over definition. The implications of 'is', being instrumental in the linguistic procedure of 'naming', encapsulates the defining process that separates it from what it 'is not', which is indeterminable. Looking for examples of 'concept' beyond the correlation with a word and its meaning, Frege's logical notation is useful in its adjusting the emphasis of designation. Using the nominal expression 'Dobbin is a horse', he suggests that 'is a horse' works not as a reference or a name, but as a *description* that is applied to what is being described – Dobbin. Thus 'is a horse' signifies the concept of being a horse rather than signifying 'horse' as an object. When we describe, we 'have' a concept that remains vague until it is articulated, when it begins to find form and move towards definition. As soon as it is articulated it becomes a nominated subject, where before that 'concept' was unformed and formless, not a subject, not anything. Frege distinguishes between *reference* (the entity Dobbin) and *sense* designated by the expression that describes it. His logic extends the idea of a single nominated element to that of a set of properties or attributes rather than one. This equation of a predicate as a concept, approaches what happens when looking at a photograph. The relevance of Frege's distinction between object and concept provokes a question so obvious that we do not ask it when looking at a photograph,

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, Jacques, 'Differance' (1968). In *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982, p.7

<sup>2</sup> Honderich, Ted, (ed.) *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.389: 'concept' is defined as 'cluster of capacities'.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, , *Margins of Philosophy*, p.26 'Differance has no name in our language. But we 'already know' that if it is unnameable, it is not provisionally so, not because our language has not yet found or received this *name*, or because we have to seek it in another language, outside the finite system of our own. It is rather because there is no *name* for it at all... not even the name of *differance*, which is not the name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions.'

<sup>4</sup> Frege, Gottlob, 'On Concept and Object' in Geach, P.T. and Max Black (eds.) *Translations From the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952, p.54 cited in Glendinning, Simon (ed.) *Arguing with Derrida*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, p.62: 'By a kind of necessity of language, my expression, taken literally, sometimes miss my thought; I mention an object, when what I intend is a concept. I fully realise that in such cases I was relying upon a reader who would be ready to meet me halfway.'



which encourages the procedure of defining meaning in terms of what *is* photographed. Can we differentiate between the objects referred to and the concepts apperceived in consequence? The answer might appear equally obvious – we cannot. But what is not so obvious is that the concepts are lost behind the very obviousness of the objects.

I think that the distinction between the effable and the ineffable is best drawn as a distinction between states of knowledge. And an ineffable state of knowledge is one that cannot be expressed by means of a truth. It doesn't have content; if you like it doesn't share content with any truth – where that truth is for these purposes, is just a declarative statement...I don't define the ineffable in terms of the impossibility of stating this or that truth.<sup>5</sup>

As Moore explains it, Frege's semantic conundrum is fundamentally addressing the distinction between thought and reality, which situates the ineffable in terms of the failure or impossibility of reconciling language and reality. Moore points to Derrida's *differance* as a version of ineffability,<sup>6</sup> or as I see it, as a possible way of coming to terms with the ineffable. In the sense that the ineffable operates 'in a field larger than speech', the visibility of *differance* offers an alternative to the urgency for linguistic equivalences and identifies two conditions for the ineffable – temporal and spatial. The notion of the ineffable as indeterminacy lends a temporal nuance without limitation, as different versions proceed indefinitely, avoiding precise definition. The ineffable as 'un-nameable' is different, is spatial in terms of questioning *where* it is, *what* it is exactly.

One could simply say that it is the limits of language that define what is and what is not ineffable, but this understates the procedure. Moore's statement quoted above suggests that the ineffable is *not* the inadequacy of description, but the absence of anything to express or describe. Moore equates the ineffable with an absence of content and opens up the question of equivalence between ineffability and a certain sort of knowledge, between knowledge and expression of that knowledge, between experience and knowledge, between 'truth' and declaration. It is the relationship between experience and understanding, and between understanding and language that creates the ineffable. Certainly what this discussion confronts repeatedly is the discrepancy between verbal description and what is conceived as possible visual meaning, which is not identifiable in a specific location. Moore's definition of ineffable – is *not* the impossibility of stating this or that truth. He is talking about 'ineffable knowledge' – that does not equate with truth statements – where the equation of truth is inappropriate as a definition – as there's no 'truth' to be stated. He equates 'ineffable knowledge' as being characterised by 'knowing how' rather than 'knowing that'.

*Why should there not be a playful use of [image] in what might have been thought of as 'unsuitable' contexts, perhaps involving contradictions, perhaps involving nonsense, whose*

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<sup>5</sup> Moore, A.W., in *Arguing with Derrida*, p.78

<sup>6</sup> Moore, *Arguing with Derrida*, p.76



*effect, given the meanings [concepts] of the objects in play is, if only a matter of brute psychological fact, that those who encounter these uses, have insights that are in some perfectly orthodox sense, ineffable?*<sup>7</sup>

As I move toward a version of conceptual practice, this possibility of a ‘different state of knowledge’ as a particular ‘conceptual space’ makes sense. When I ‘translate’ Moore as above, what’s interesting in switching the context to photographs, is that the play of ‘words’ becomes the play of ‘objects’ and one cannot easily use the word ‘meaning’ applied to objects. An object has a concept – not a meaning. Thus to talk of a photograph as having meaning, when it clearly displays ‘objects’ is inappropriate. What could be more appropriate and effective than ‘what does this photograph mean?’ would be to ask “what concepts does the photograph provoke?” And if we do not use the word ‘meaning’, we can remove the equation of meaning=truth. We thus remove the necessity of description validated by the affirmation of truths. This would liberate the photograph from its historical and phenomenological link to ‘truth’. It also releases it from finding ‘meaning’ justified by linguistic expansion or routes such as narrative.

Moore considers Derrida and Wittgenstein as both being concerned with the impossibility of reconciling ‘the unity of thought with the unity of reality.’<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein’s thesis on description and discourse presents a series of provocative statements that question our understanding of the nature and certainty of declaration, description, proposition and our *use* of language, which is interwoven with tautology and contradiction. Statements such as ‘what can be shown, cannot be said’<sup>9</sup> point toward the obvious (taken for granted) difference between the event and the *description* of event. The distinction between content (what is there) and the form of the content (how it is shown) goes some way to explaining the limits of description and that one version (its form and presentation), is not the whole substance of a fact or possibility communicated at any one time. This division depends on the assumed binary opposition of form and content and what is explored here is the possibility of their non-opposition, in alternatives conceived as *differance* or *figure* that incorporate content in the form of its expression. Wittgenstein provokes possibilities that conflate description, understanding and meaning, as they are, as he suggests, irreconcilable and the question of veracity irrelevant. ‘What a picture represents it represents independently of its truth or falsity, by means of its pictorial form’. And apprehensions of ‘pictures’ can bypass or not recognise the ‘pictorial form’ that determines them (in a portrait-form for example). Thus, as Wittgenstein points out ‘a picture represents a possible situation in logical space’<sup>10</sup> and will accommodate itself to the particular context in which it is presented. It thus represents its own sense; it asserts a kind of fiction as it can

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<sup>7</sup> My ‘translation’ of Moore, *Arguing with Derrida*, p. 67: ‘Why should there not be a playful use of language... whose effect, given the meanings of the words in play...’

<sup>8</sup> Moore, *Arguing with Derrida*, p.61

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London and New York: Routledge, 1974, 4.1212, p.31

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.202, p.12



only ever be a 'model of reality'.<sup>11</sup> The additional dimension of belief (of truth and falsehood) attached to meaning is a complication, particularly pertinent (or ironic) for the photograph that carries the weight of 'truth' and 'reality'. As Derrida questions assumptions, so Wittgenstein questions predetermination – the logical sequence and inevitability of rules, the obviousness of what he calls '*super-order*'.<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein's 'family resemblance' suggests a pool of features /capacities (meanings) from which a group of words/concepts can borrow.<sup>13</sup> Following this procedure, and liberated from supposed access to 'truth', meaning can work in a way that allows a 'condition of possibilities' ('semantic models') that surround an image – that is if we can resist the desire to fix meaning. Seen like this meaning can be fluid and evolving.

The ineffable is not the inadequacy suggested by 'indescribable' but is a conceptual space and a 'different state of knowledge'. And a photograph operates in this space within its own terms of rhetorical dynamics (*perquisition*) that work in advance of what may be articulated in words. In this sense it is pre-linguistic and can anticipate ideas expressed verbally. It anticipates not by naming in a way that defines signification, but in conveying the concept, in the manner of 'is a horse', which maintains with its indeterminacy more capacities, more possibilities. It is a different way of understanding meaning (what is provoked). Liberated from the need for a supposed universal property or access to 'truth' behind appearance, photographs work in a way that allows a number of possibilities to inhabit it. Visualisation of a concept, because it uses appearance to trigger recognition, assumes by default the notion of 'likeness' and the degree of 'truthfulness' understood in the likeness. But as we make connections between properties and qualities, concepts, in the sense that they are capacities, are only required to accumulate likenesses, not resolve them.

### *TOWARD THE FIGURAL AND FICTION*

The figural itself is unrepresentable. Only the trace of its action appears, and the function of the artwork is to reveal its effects.<sup>14</sup>

Lyotard's *figurality* emphasises a condition of non-thingness that identifies it as a force rather than a thing, as a dynamic that interrupts the move toward coherence or completion, extends the logic that makes sense of Wittgenstein's assertions of 'picture'. It straddles also the borders of the 'knowable and communication'.<sup>15</sup> Lyotard describes the figural as 'the visible (figure/ground), the rhetorical (figural/literal), work, the Unconscious, the event' and the 'process of representation by concepts'.<sup>16</sup> Lyotard's figural engages both conceptual and psychological domains, as does

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 2.12, p.9: 'A picture is a model of reality' and 'What a picture represents is its sense', 2.221, p.12

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001, pp.96-97

<sup>13</sup> Magee, Bryan, *Confessions of a Philosopher*, London: Phoenix, 1998, pp.146-148

<sup>14</sup> Bogue, Ronald, *Deleuze on Music, Painting and the Arts*, New York and London: Routledge, 2003, p.115

<sup>15</sup> Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 564

<sup>16</sup> Readings, Bill, *Introducing Lyotard: Art & Politics*, London & New York: Routledge, 1991, p.xxxi – p.3



Kristeva's semiotic. 'Figural space' approaches the world of Lakoff's conceptual domains – an interim realm of mutable meaning, never to be determined, ineffable and resonating. This is a space without regularity, which is ungraspable spatially and temporally unlocatable, and not confined to past, present or future, dispenses with the photographic 'moment'. It is the 'unspeakable other' that works within and against discourse, that is 'radically incommensurable with that of discursive meaning' and that resists the aim to order. Like Derrida's *undecidable*, the 'unspeakable other' asserts difference *over* opposition, not in a reversal of oppositional hierarchy but as equivalence. Thus 'irrational' does not displace 'rational'. The term *figural* potentially suits my purposes as it describes a space that is resistant to signification and recognises a 'sense' about an object that cannot be communicated so 'that an object always in some sense remains 'other' to any discourse'.<sup>17</sup> Lyotard's *figural* secures a place that touches Derrida's disseminated meaning and *differance*, Kristeva's *semiotic* space and Ricoeur's poetic process in metaphor, and establishes the advent of fiction. It is an expression that 'breaks down the 'opposition between textual and figurative representational space'<sup>18</sup> and encompasses the potential of contemporary media processes and displays<sup>19</sup> that amplify the limitations of linguistic signification.



Fig. 62 Jeff Wall, *Insomnia*, 1994

J.F. Lyotard's , *Dicours Figure* (1971) is not in English translation. My references are from Readings, Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or Philosophy After the New Media*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001, who provide discussion of its contents with their own translations.

<sup>17</sup> Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, p.4

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

<sup>19</sup> For example the exhibition *Making Things Public*, ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2005



The aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination with which... such a multiplicity of partial representations are bound up, that no expression indicating a definite concept can be found for it.<sup>20</sup>

Processes of representation by concept and imagination return discussion to Kant, who articulates the key relationships between understanding and imagining, between what is demonstrable and what is not, between what is explicable and what is not. He speaks of concepts as elements that form an understanding of something in an objective sense (rational) so that a 'concept of understanding' is demonstrable and as such is seen as total and graspable and explicable. He then distinguishes 'ideas from concepts of understanding' and describes an 'aesthetic idea' as 'that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever i.e. *concept* being adequate to it, and which language, consequently can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible.'<sup>21</sup> An 'aesthetic idea'<sup>22</sup> is an intuition (of the imagination) and is subjective. Rational ideas are objective, some of which may be demonstrable by some measure, and some not and are indemonstrable concepts of reason. Concepts such as magnitude and cause may be verified empirically with an example, whereas an aesthetic idea is inexplicable (not able to be explained). A concept of understanding is demonstrable and immanent. A rational idea that cannot be verified is transcendent. In these terms we have the difference between an aesthetic idea that follows the subjective principle and cannot be explained and rational ideas that cannot be demonstrated by example, but which are rationally explicable following objective principles. So we might have an idea, so conceived that we cannot imagine it and not demonstrate it. And we might not *understand* an aesthetic conception, might not be able to grasp completely the manner in which our imagination apprehends what is presented, which is inexplicable – this is ineffable. As Kant defines it, the ineffable resides in the relationship between imagination and understanding – the possibility for imagination or idea to *exceed* understanding.

As described in Part Two, the notion of beauty is inappropriate in contemporary practice, but before he assigns categories of beauty, Kant's analysis presents a succinct description of a concept of imagination that expresses the possibility of ineffable attributes and is nearer to what I term conceptual space. Kant's distinction between 'rational concepts (intellectual ideas)<sup>23</sup> that give some semblance of an objective reality' suggests the order of photography known as 'straight', whilst 'representations of the imagination' termed as *ideas*, which can be fabricated and speculative begin to identify the order of fiction, exemplified as we shall see in the work of Jeff Wall. This

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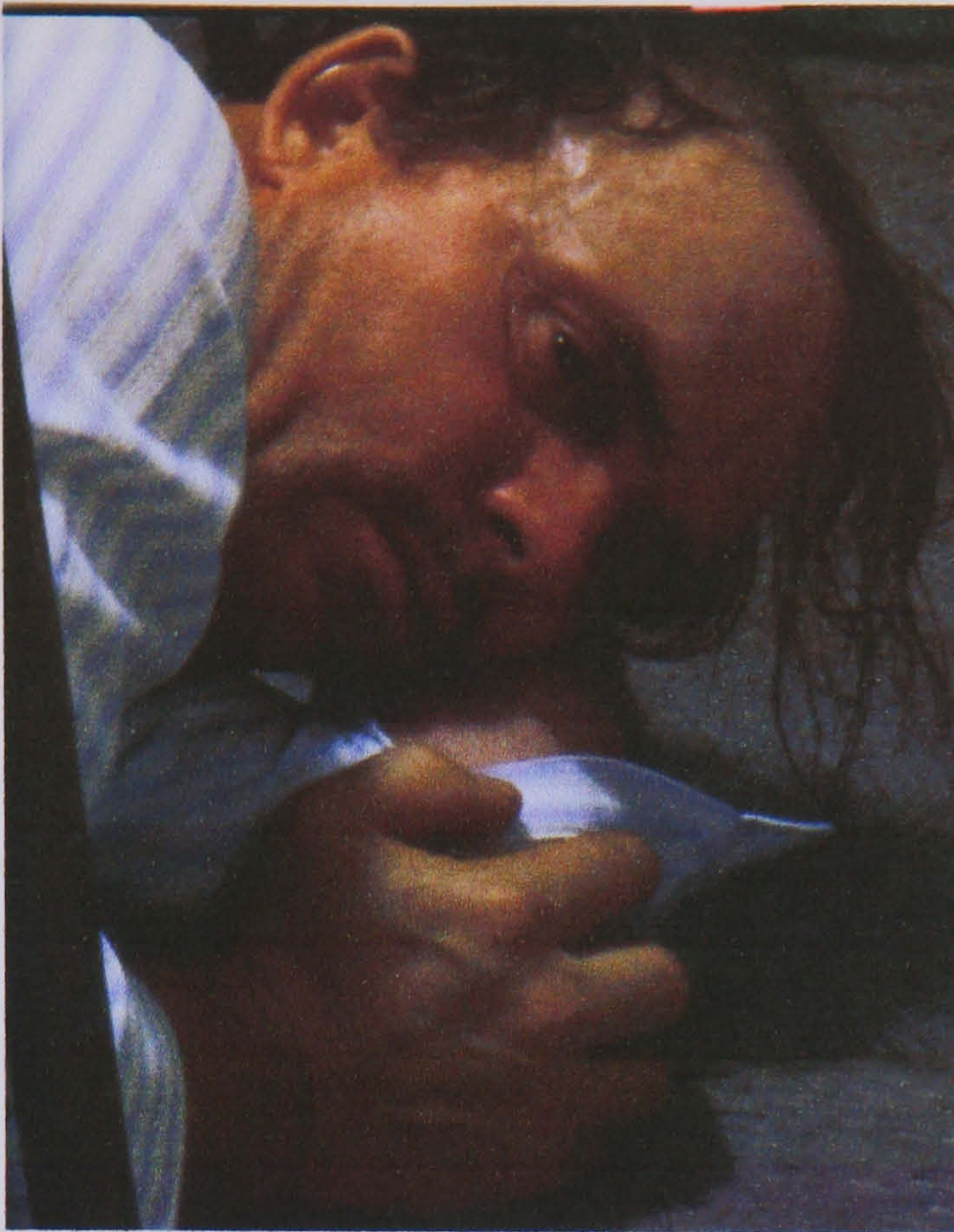
<sup>20</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790), trans. James Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952, pp.179, 212, where definite is equivalent to *determinate*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, §49, p.175

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, §57, Remark 1, pp.209-213

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, §49, p.176





distinction separates 'rational concepts' from 'aesthetic ideas', which are indeterminate and ineffable and which are determined from within the photograph and from the experience of the viewer / reader,<sup>24</sup> who induces 'such a wealth of thought as would never admit of comprehension in a definite concept...(that) exceeds what can be laid hold of in that representation or clearly expressed.'<sup>25</sup> Somewhere here is the distinction between photographs that are expected to access transcendent (rational) ideas and photographs that retain 'immanent resonance' (Ricouer) and which are ineffable and not necessarily rational.

A string of oxymorons provides a continuous texture of contradictions, an aporia by which language deletes itself as quickly as it sets itself down; it is a useful device for alluding to the ineffable, which is more likely to be found in erasures and other sorts of verbal limbos than in precise settled description.<sup>26</sup>

'*CHASING THE NON-THING*' established metaphor as straddling boundaries between conceptual domains, linguistic barriers, naming categories. It is Western linguistics that contains knowledge in arbitrarily assigned characters that represent sounds, rather than in pictograms for example that contain a cluster of concepts within one image. 'An ineffability then, may be imagined indifferently, as a hieroglyph...an instantaneous autotelic...that will suffer dilution and corruption if translated, compelled to channel itself into some consecutive time-bound language'.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately I am asserting explanations for meaning other than a resort to transcendence or the sublime and a consideration of the ineffable in relation to the photograph as *autotelic* (its own justification, its

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp.176-7

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.177

<sup>26</sup> Kelly, Michael (ed) *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.495

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.494



own self contained ‘manifestation of knowledge’, that ‘will suffer dilution if translated’), as immanent, and *aporetic* for its propensity to invoke doubt and undermine itself. As *differance* permits digression and interrupts purpose, the term *aporia* (unpassable path, impasse, not knowing where to go) introduces doubt and incorporates plausible possibilities that are inconsistent or cannot be solved or concluded. Derrida refers to *aporia* to indicate the undecidability of what cannot be reduced to binary opposition. ‘The nonpassage, the impasse or *aporia*, stems from the fact that there is no limit. There is...no longer a border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable and indeterminate.’<sup>28</sup> *Aporia* refers to the co-existence of contrary elements, side by side, in the same way that ‘semantic models’ refer to our capacity to conceive them. Derrida’s expansion on *aporias* acknowledges ‘the margins, the levels, or the marks of individuality and the interminable list of all the so-called undecidable quasi-concepts that are so many *aporetic* places or dislocations’<sup>29</sup> As ‘*aporetic* dislocations’<sup>30</sup> photographs ‘[put] to test a passage’,<sup>31</sup> provoke both a sensual and conceptual response, a fusion of image and concept. Ruff’s portraits are simple, direct and self-contained and yet complex, divergent and ambiguous; thus they can be seen as both autotelically and *aporetically* unnerving in their knowing ‘straightness’. My interest in the photographic lies with its very self-contained properties, its capability for generating metaphoric association *without* the need to access the attributes of other media or for physical effects that conform to ‘artistic’ hierarchical ideals – i.e. painterly effects. I want to disassociate the power of the photographic ineffable from any such necessity. If the ineffable is to be found in ‘erasures and limbos’ rather than ‘precise settled description’, it will be found in the photographic propensity for a kind of oxymoronic description precisely within its own ‘settled description’. An image already simply presents multiplicity, as one object and another object and another, not constrained or compromised by each other’s presence.

The procedure of *differance* identifies the dynamic of conceptual reverberation, whereas Lyotard’s figural and Deleuze’s adoption of the term can be confused by their application to specific instances of artistic practice, just as Kant’s apprehension of ‘aesthetic idea’ makes sense before its application to notions of beauty. It is for this reason that whilst Deleuze’s reference to immanent difference and ‘concepts’ as a point of indeterminacy touch my concerns, I have chosen not to include his writing in this exploration beyond mention. In addition his privileging of sensation, which centres the visceral impact of painting bypasses the photographic impact of metaphoricity and forefronts instead the metamorphic. My concern with the power of photographs is for how they work *through* their indexical reference, not through photographic effects that emulate painterly effect as in mirroring, blurring, deformation, distortion. Like Krauss’s applause of surrealist

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<sup>28</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Aporias.*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, p.20

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17



photography for such effects, Deleuze's focus on painterly deformation (as with Bacon's faces<sup>32</sup>) does not address my question and diverts attention away from the indexical to properties of materiality that photographs do not share. And it is this division of materiality from sensation in Deleuze's conception that is problematic. Somewhere in the distinction between art's 'becoming' as the 'possibility' and philosophy's 'plane of immanence'<sup>33</sup> is a dynamic that recognises a created universe of what is possible – as an aesthetic category. But just as this universe of possibility points out the limitations of normality and legitimise art's project to extend this beyond pictures – more conceptually and appears to approach a 'conceptual schema', it digresses. Deleuze's distinctions between different kinds of thinking move away from the conceptual field and when addressing painting specifically it begins to explain 'possibles' as possible worlds – as 'pictures'. This is not the same as reverberation, resonance or immanent quality and suggests instead that art's possible worlds are not virtual in the same sense that 'philosophy's 'plane of immanence' is, that art is a virtual that requires subdivisions of 'technical plane' (of materiality) and 'aesthetic plane' (of sensation). Lyotard and Deleuze in including examples of 'art' are mostly concerned with painting, such as distortion (Deleuze on Bacon) or abstraction (Lyotard on Pollock) and whilst commentaries on them refer briefly to Levine for example,<sup>34</sup> in the context of Lyotard's conception of the postmodern, there is little inclusion of photographic practice and reinforce a privileging of painting as 'art'. In addition these works take little account of the history of Conceptual art for example, which is in itself a profound omission for discussion of photographic practice.

### *DISPATIALITIES*

Before reviewing indications of practice amplifying poststructural writing, I want to consider first instances of discussion that exemplify the photograph's pivotal reliance on absence and presentness that come close to a recognition of the photographic power of conceptual resonance and which identify the crucial departure for my argument as figurality. The debate that exists between two attitudinal poles relating to photographic indexicality, is typified by Clement Greenberg's statement condemning the photograph's inability to transcend its position as 'literal and anecdotal'<sup>35</sup> that identifies the attitude that persists of the photograph being bound to the object rather than to ideas. It also typifies the assumption that to be meaningful, an image must transcend itself. Szarkowski on the other hand, as an advocate of photographic transcendence, ironically indicates a central point for postmodern disturbance as fictionality, and 'asserts that the fragmentation created by cropping

<sup>32</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, *Francis Bacon, The Logic of Sensation* (1981), trans. Daniel W. Smith, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, *Negotiations*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p.148 cited in Bogue, p.174

<sup>34</sup> Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, p.74

<sup>35</sup> Greenberg, Clement, 'The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of exhibition of Edward Weston'. In O'Brien, John, *Collated Essays and Criticism Vol.2*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.60 cited in Soutter, Lucy, 'The Photographic Idea: Reconsidering Conceptual Photography'. *AfterImage*, vol. 26, no. 5, March/April, 1999, p.9: It is probably for this reason that it proves so 'difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as document' and 'obligations of the medium' is bound to be 'literal and anecdotal'.



photographs allows an image to function as a symbol rather than a story because it is cut off from spatial & temporal continuity'.<sup>36</sup> And it is the degree of literal or figural translation of this disturbance, which I differentiate here.

Krauss's conception of temporal/spatial discontinuity articulates a version of *differance* that does not translate figurally and remains literal. In 1976 she describes the photographic image as 'the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it'.<sup>37</sup> In discussing the influence of poststructuralism on artistic practice with reference to examples of displacement in Surrealist photography, she consistently interprets photographic distortions of time and space as being physical – 'fuzzy, distorted, discoloured.'<sup>38</sup> Krauss emphasises that 'the sign, as a function of absence rather than presence, is a coupling of signifier and immaterial concept in relation to which there may be no referent at all'.<sup>39</sup> The principle of montage (a physical escape from the literal) was considered to advance the possibilities of 'realism' because of its capacity to connect, in a-temporal sequences, discrete bits of the world.<sup>40</sup> Krauss's discussion of Surrealist photography introduces the possibility of discursivity and dispersal of 'moment' but similarly focuses on form and physical reference to what is absent, which relies on methods of doubling, mirroring, cropping, cutting, framing, prioritising 'anti-realist' effect over indexical function and denying the photograph's property of conceptual power, its simultaneity. The photographic image, thus 'spaced' is 'deprived of one of the most powerful of photography's many illusions' that 'destroys the fateful linkage of vision with pure synchronous presence and introduces the interruption of discursivity'. But while it 'banishes the unitary condition of the moment'<sup>41</sup> it refuses photography's temporal figurality. John Roberts points out that Andre Breton's original attack on representation and transparency of meaning and the subsequent Surrealist photograph, intends a more direct access to 'the production of signification' using the photograph's 'indexical function',<sup>42</sup> and that more relevant to later developments in photography, is Surrealism's engagement with realism as a social intervention rather than a critique of 'all things naturalistic'. What is pertinent here, is that unlike the physical dis-spatiality in Krauss's example, elements in a picture draw us away from what is pictorially there and can refer allegorically to the implication of what *was* there, as with Martha Rosler's *Bowery*.

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<sup>36</sup> Soutter, pp.8-10

<sup>37</sup> Krauss, 'Rosalind, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America' (Part One). *October* 3, 1976, p.203

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.203

<sup>39</sup> Krauss, Rosalind, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism'. In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985, p. 107

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, John, *The Art Of Interruption, Realism, Photography and the Everyday*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, p. 102





Fig.63 John Baldessari, *Somewhere Between Almost Right and Not Quite Right (With Orange)*, 2004

Similarly, in a consideration of women's contemporary photography with regard to Levinas's 'face', Robin Durie<sup>43</sup> cites as examples of 'non violent, non objectifying representation', portraits that rely on a sort of visual obliteration in blurring and physical effects. Photographers such as Deborah Klomp present a literal 'veneer' to 'cover the nudity of the face' with closed eyes, make-up or obscuration, rather than tackling the question in a directly photographic way. Durie thus translates Levinas's nudity of the face literally, by advocating the presentation of a physical mask to protect the face from an objectifying gaze and reduces Levinas's 'face' to plastic materiality, to the physical effect of the photograph rather than the significance of the encounter itself, or the expressivity of the face. Durie's description confirms the existentialist view as closing the photographer's subjectivity from the viewer as 'structural indeterminacy' as 'irrecoverable absence in the work' and epitomises a distrust of certainty displayed in the disturbance of authorial control evident in physical dispersal of focus – in blur.<sup>44</sup> More recently John Baldessari, via montage and removal of much of what is there, continues methods of physical disturbance that deny photographic reference and that become a formal ambiguity.<sup>45</sup>

### *DIFFERENCE AND THE PORTRAIT*

I want now to pursue aspects of critiques that identify a 'deconstructive' move as a more conceptual development in practice.<sup>46</sup> I am interested in how the photographic can work more figurally, how it can set up 'discourse in place of presence, a discourse founded on a buried origin, a discourse fuelled by that absence',<sup>47</sup> without resorting to physical strategies such as doubling, blurring etc. My argument seeks to reassert the conceptual shift that enlivened photographic practice in the 1980s and to emphasise the contribution that practice makes not only to changes in

<sup>43</sup> Durie, Robin, *Face to Face, Directions in Contemporary Women's Portraiture*. London: Scarlet Press, 1998

<sup>44</sup> Smith, Lindsay (1992) in Kember, Sarah, *Virtual Anxiety :Photography, New Technologies and Subjectivity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, p.26

<sup>45</sup> John Baldessari, *Intersection series, 2001-2, Somewhere Between Almost Right and Not Quite Right (With Orange)*, 2004

<sup>46</sup> Owens, Craig, 'Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism'. *October 12*, 1980

<sup>47</sup> Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', p. 107



aesthetic consciousness but to conceptual configuration more generally. Demonstrating the photograph to be fiction (as Levine does) questions what there is left to say about representation, what remains of 'presence', how that can be exploited, and to what extent the photograph can dispense with mimesis and escape dependence on what-was-there. Suzi Gablik, describing a practice that reflects a condition of non-determinacy and of 'anything goes', resists acceptance of the loss of totality beneath appearance and meaning that offers no resolution. She asks 'do we know what the necessary ingredients might be for making a transition between the old existential meaningfulness and new images of value', as something that 'reconnects with its visionary function of healing and social interaction?'<sup>48</sup> In contradiction to its intention perhaps, this question identifies for me a possibility that removes the 'visionary' role, and focuses on art as a means of discussing social interaction instead, and which has no fear of fictive means to traverse our existential alienation or to explore social and aesthetic realms.

The dynamic of *differance* is largely concerned with the contradictions concomitant with absence and supplementation, which we 'understand' as necessary in verbal texts but struggle with in relation to visual texts. Martha Rosler's series of photographs *Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-5) marks a point that challenges the assumed necessity in photographic representation of depicting the 'thing' (as 'picture'). It contains references to the structures and relations of event and situation without any visual representation of its 'subject' (those people inhabiting the area of Manhattan) whose lives are affected by such structures. Rosler deliberately constructs this reference as 'unauthored, collective, historical, vernacular and nuanced,'<sup>49</sup> by leaving out indexical depiction of the central 'subject matter' and focusing on the 'theme' instead. Rosler's project parallels a structural critique of 'presence', by absenting what is central literally, but which results in a profoundly more figural use of indexicality. More contemporary examples of similar positions begin to effect the same denial but through reference to the 'subjects' themselves. Thus the effect of absence is disguised. Ruff's 'portraits' belie detachment from the subject matter in their apparent 'straightness' that conflate expression in a way that confuses distinctions between the literal and the non-literal and express more abstract qualities that are not expressed by the face itself. Combining traditional constraints with contemporary psychological strategies they construct 'ideas' of a contradictory character as self-contained conceptions that undermine themselves and which invoke doubt.

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<sup>48</sup> Gablik, Suzi, 'Postmodernism and the Question of Meaning'. *Art Criticism*, Vol.3, No.3, 1987, p.70

<sup>49</sup> Rosler, Martha, Interview with Benjamin Buchloh in Catherine de Zegher (ed.) *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*. Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; London: MIT Press, 1998



The two reigning myths of photography – the one that claims that photographs are ‘true’ and the one that claims they are not – are shown to be grounded in the same praxis.<sup>50</sup>

Indications of profound conceptual digression can be seen in aspects of photographic practice that explore the possibilities of dismantling its dependence on the defining indexical nature of the photograph and its alliance with ‘reality’; works for example by Jeff Wall and projects by Allan Sekula<sup>51</sup> and Alfredo Jarr<sup>52</sup> operate more conceptually, toy with strategies that conflate and disrupt assumed restrictions in translating ‘reality’ and stretch self-imposed limits of ‘transparent’ photographic reference. In Jarr’s anxiety to assert significance in the face of tragedy, he uses structural devices that present events obliquely, using what is absent or not said; he focuses on



Fig. 64 Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996

<sup>50</sup> Wall, Jeff, “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art” (1995). In Fogle, Douglas (ed.) *The Last Picture Show, Artists using Photography*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 2003, p.37

<sup>51</sup> Allan Sekula, born 1951 Pennsylvania, lives and works in Los Angeles. Has been photographing and writing since the early 1970s. *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning* (1975) and *Photography Against the Grain* (1984) still challenge preconceptions of documentary and realism.

<sup>52</sup> Alfredo Jaar, born Chile 1956, lives and works in New York. Generally his work is challenging and concerned with political change. *Lament of the Images* presented 3 photo-based installations 1994-98 as a result of his recording the testimonies of those surviving the genocide in Rwanda.



constituent details that do not contribute to the event but build a reality by recording the peripheries and rely on imagination, association and memory; he focuses on one individual history rather than that of thousands. [fig.64] His rhetorical approach forces us to interact with the images and acknowledge their performance as fiction. Sekula investigates possibilities of realism that avoid the 'cult of the self-sufficient image' in extended projects ( *Fish Story* 1990-93, *Black Tide*) that address a number of tangential events simultaneously.<sup>53</sup> They weave a network of cause, consequence and coincidence – of tangential events that are trans-historical. These parallel threads of content work across a number of evolving 'chapters' and 'plots', for example one on cargo and industrial capital, another on pollution and include incidentally specific individuals such as David Brown telephoning home [fig.65].



Fig.65 Allan Sekula, *David Brown telephones his wife*, from *Fish Story*, 1993

Wall relates the story of what he terms 'photoconceptualism's quintessential "anti-object" that broke the spell of modernist photography's bid for transcendence'.<sup>54</sup> Bracketed off from 'aesthetic evolution', it introduced reportage as parody and the possibility of literal performance, both of which have proved to contribute to the development of a profound discourse within the portrait specifically that plays with the pose as performance as double inflection evident in Dijkstra, or as implosion in Strba. The central role of parodic document in acts of positive denial in Lundin or Streuli owes a debt to Nauman's self conscious acting out (*Self Portrait as Fountain*, 1966-67), an example that legitimates photographic processes to effect an idea as a record, as an event. What happens now is that the photograph subsumes both the aesthetic, the anti-aesthetic that legitimises it and the idea that is proper to meaningful art, so that photography no longer has to legitimise itself through purity true to its productive process.

<sup>53</sup> Sekula, Allan, *Performance Under Working Conditions*. Hatje-Cantz, 2003, p.246

<sup>54</sup> Wall, 'Marks of Indifference' in Fogle, pp. 32-35



Douglas Huebler<sup>55</sup> inserts the possibility of ‘emptying subject matter’<sup>56</sup> in photographing ideas where resemblance is not what is at issue. Huebler’s pieces mark a step away from representation, toward independence from mimesis, toward a synthetic photographic practice. *Variable Piece 1A, The Netherlands 1973* depicts eight people photographed immediately following their being told ‘you have a beautiful face’ or ‘you have a very special face’ or ‘you have a remarkable face’. The preconception of the piece determines a reaction in the subjects. The contradictory use of indexical properties ‘is the necessary centre of these works’ that assert the project itself (the concept) as the essential creative element, rather than its visuality. The photograph becomes a presentation of photographs of things rather than a ‘representation of absent things’. Conceptual art is a tradition that is assumed now in the artificiality determined by deliberate interventions with the photographer, seen frequently in contemporary strategies that determine the programme such as von Zwehl’s theatrical control, Dijkstra’s double inflection, Lundin’s disappearance. The need for ‘good’ portraiture is excluded by the creative programme. And reportage bequeaths reportage without event, narrative or commentary and highlights photography’s depictive qualities as something that can be interfered with, allowing photography to underwrite appropriation and fiction as central conditions of poststructural art. Contemporary photography inherits ‘the experimentation with the “anaesthetic” and “the loss of the visual” in ‘photoconceptualism’.<sup>57</sup> Further to this, amateurism, long since validated by Warhol, and Ruscha’s reductivism, denies representation of its theme and is seen as ‘an economy mirrored in the structure’<sup>58</sup> as are Ruff’s portraits. Where Rosler removes the subject and speaks of them, Ruff removes the subject by depicting them and speaking of other things than what is depicted. Sensuousness is replaced with discourse. Instead of replacing the picture with a text literally, we get pictorialism celebrated by Wall as text. ‘Dragging its heavy burden of depiction...Conceptualism...cannot provide the experience of the negation of experience’ but ‘revolutionalised our concept of the Picture’.<sup>59</sup>

Modernism ‘took as a given that it was in the connative richness and density...the intension – of the aesthetic sign that it lay claim to being art at all’.<sup>60</sup> And it is this that photography was anxious to aspire to via such as Evans’s ‘lyrical documentary’ – ‘documentary (what photographs are good at) touched with expression’ (the artist’s mark). The history of C20 photographs invited metaphoric interpretations that lead toward romance, narrative or sentimentality and more latterly self-reference. Sekula’s suspicion of the photograph to symbolise ideologies such as Steiglitz’s *The Steerage* ‘that transcend the perceptual’, derives from the photograph’s capacity for metonymic power. ‘Steiglitz’s reductivist compulsion is so extreme...that he denies the iconic level of the

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<sup>55</sup> Huebler, Douglas, *Variable Piece no. 101*, West Germany, March 1973, of Berndt Becher

<sup>56</sup> Wall, ‘Marks of Indifference’, p.38

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.40

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.43

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 44

<sup>60</sup> Krauss, ‘In the Name of Picasso’ in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p.27



image and makes his claim for meaning at the level of abstraction.’<sup>61</sup> His logic proceeds to equate Kant’s aesthetic idea with idealism as a kind of indulgence that distinguishes itself from a Lewis Hine photograph, which ‘in its original context is an explicit political utterance.’ What Sekula despises here is the removal of specificity that transforms meaning into generality and myth, a ‘devolution into mystic trivia’ or ‘abstract ‘fetish’’. Thirty years later, photography has shown that one can have metaphor, aesthetic and authorial dispersal in portrayals that represent individuality, specific locality and difference (Jaar). And ultimately Sekula’s work demonstrates the use of photographs to express ideologies and ideas as far removed from idealised metaphor as may be possible.

Craig Owens reveals the dependence of the image upon interpretation whilst also ‘dispersing, disseminating the ‘natural’ content of things’; in this way allegory levers open the apparent continuity of time, nature and history providing an open space for a materialist/ postmodern reinterpretation and eventual transfiguration.<sup>62</sup> Owens’s discussion of the ‘deconstructive impulse’<sup>63</sup> promotes the use of image to problematise reference and exploit the ‘gap’ between the signifier and what is signified and importantly marks a recognition of the allegorical potential in photography.<sup>64</sup> In 1980, he indicates that it is to be found in properties of impermanence, site specificity and strategies of accumulation, hybridisation and discursivity. These are more fundamental than merely stylistic effects and different from notions of allegory as necessarily romantic, mythical or fantastical. Owen’s postmodern art is characterised as allegorical because it stresses ruins and spaces, fragmented images from art history mass media and ‘in its impulse to upset stylistic norms, to disassemble modernist form, to redefine conceptual categories, to undo usual stereotypes’<sup>65</sup> and connects postmodern fragmentation to notions of poststructural decentring, which inserts the ‘emotion of language into the aesthetic field’.<sup>66</sup> His recovery of allegory from prejudices of history reveals a conceptual framework that has been confused if anything by semiotics and the desire to establish structure in the understanding of artwork (another aspiration to ‘truth’). The allegorical impulse as a ‘consequence of a self conscious preoccupation with reading,’ exemplifies deconstruction as it works against contemporary myths and the ‘symbolic totalising impulse’ ‘to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence’.<sup>67</sup> With reference to Derrida’s fundamental premise of *differance* and to addition and supplement, he likens the dynamic to a ‘conceptual force’<sup>68</sup> that can inhabit the photograph.

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<sup>61</sup> Sekula, Allan, ‘On the Invention of Photographic Meaning’ (1975). In Victor Burgin (ed.) *Thinking Photography*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1982, p.100

<sup>62</sup> Muir, Peter, ‘Signs of a beginning: *October* and the *Pictures* exhibition’

<sup>63</sup> Owens, ‘Allegorical Impulse Part II’, p. 79

<sup>64</sup> Owens, ‘Allegorical Impulse Part I’, pp. 56-7

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.56

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58



Depiction is an act of construction; it brings the referent into being...depictions are generic because...there...is always something...ghostly... This quality is a sort of resonance, or shimmering feeling.<sup>69</sup>

*Differance* suggests a disturbance that stops asking 'what is', interrupts the causal move toward narrative, points to the paradox indicated by photographic reference that is removed from the materiality to which it refers. Uses of photography to express concept alone challenge the photograph as a fact, challenge where the 'subject' is, play a game with mimesis and assert idea, content and context as central, not the 'picture'. Wall's fictional yet 'realist' constructions<sup>70</sup> remind us that we *assume* a necessary relationship of 'adequacy' that depends on mimesis, which implies that the referent has precedence over the depiction and proceeds to contradict this relationship. His engagement with fiction releases the constraint of dependence on depiction of the referent. Wall's conceptual pictorialism presents the antithesis of attempts to find 'essence' via photography's literal access to the revelation of the real. Instead he reconfigures 'according to my feelings and my literacy', no longer as documentary (objective) touched with expression (subjective) and no longer subjectivity at a distance – masked, hidden or un-stated. He uses themes, ideas and the picture, confronts photographic literalness and presents conceptual assimilation in his use of 'realist' fictional depictions. Rather than Krauss's intervention of effect, Wall resumes Breton's purpose of social interruption and incorporates Kristeva's psychological space into the photograph. He incorporates poststructural effect without resorting to abstraction or visual ambiguity, gestural



Fig. 66 Jeff Wall, *Adrian Walker*, 1992

<sup>69</sup> Wall, Jeff, in dialogue with Arielle Pelenc, in *Jeff Wall*, London: Phaidon, 1996, p.14

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14



vagueness or fragment and accesses meaning, so that dis-spatiality is figurative not literal, conceptual rather than physical. Like Ruff's conflation, Wall's 'literal' image works like a double negative that is more 'figural' than literal imagery, which 'transcends' its own literalness.

The fact of it being or not being a 'portrait' of a specific real person, may be secondary in the structure. The title, because it names him, makes it appear that he is such a specific, real person. But it's easily possible that Adrian Walker is simply a fictional name that I decided to make up to create a certain illusion, like 'Emma Bovary'. Even though that's not true and there is such a person, and that is him, I don't think there is necessarily any resonance of that in the structure of the work, generically speaking. The nature of the picture gives no guarantee that that identification matters at all. So, like a lot of pictures, it is a bit of a hybrid. Portraiture seems to be a social relationship, sustained by empirical and historical evidence, corroborating the identity of someone who appears in a particular picture; it doesn't seem to be a pictorial relationship or a pictorial phenomenon, as such.<sup>71</sup>

I arrive at a correlation between the acceptance of fiction with the revival of allegory, the dynamic of *differance* that liberates the image from naming mimetically, the arrival of fiction that incorporates the photographer's subjectivities and the psychological. Wall and Sekula both shift the founding premises of photographic portrayal in fundamental ways. Wall, by introducing fiction, Sekula with the specificity of local context. Both use allegory; Wall via pictorial realism and Sekula via a 'critical realism'.<sup>72</sup> Both are forms of non-transcendent portrayal. Wall questions the assumed goal of 'truth' as being necessary and suggests that fiction may be just as important. His 'portrait' of Adrian Walker is one such example, which demonstrates an indifference to the verity of subjects. Speaking of this particular work, he questions the relevance of awareness, non awareness or the objectification of the subject as necessarily defining a portrait. He refers to Michael Fried's distinction between 'absorptive mode' and 'theatrical mode' of where absorptive pictures of people portray 'being' in their worlds rather than acting it out. 'Both of course are modes of performance. I think Adrian Walker is absorptive'. The 'naming' is defined by the operation of the title that states his occupation and 'Drawing from a specimen' operates in the manner of Frege's 'is a horse' in identifying a conceptual domain of activity in which *Adrian Walker* participates. Activity identifies 'less by their personal, empirical, historical, social identity and more by their generic identities controlled by the type of picture they're in.'<sup>73</sup> The absorption evident in *Adrian Walker* is indifference to an objectification, caught in the event of being photographed. 'Adrian Walker' is both nominal and participatory.

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<sup>71</sup> Wall, Jeff, 'Restoration, Interview with Martin Scwander (1994), in *Jeff Wall*, London: Phaidon, 1996, pp.127-8

<sup>72</sup> *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: around Allan Sekula's Photography*, Symposium, Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography and Visual Studies, Leuven, Belgium, September 2005

<sup>73</sup> Wall, *Jeff Wall*, p.128



The reference to *Emma Bovary* suggests a conception of portrayal that incorporates different vistas, different self contained chapters, which can be read independently, a-chronologically and only become narrative if following a diegetic pattern. In the contemporary tradition of dialogue, *Adrian Walker* is a chapter in the fiction that is the reality of Adrian Walker. In effect, unless the person is known to us personally, whether it is fact or fiction is only relevant to its resonance if one believes in the essential character or possibility of 'truth to reality' in 'straight' depiction. 'The fact that someone really is what they appear to be in a picture is not a picture matter.'<sup>74</sup> Once someone is a portrait, they are in a picture and performative, either performing another or themselves.

Kaela Economou gestures as she describes to incredulous anarchist-sniffing reporters a beating at the hands of the Seattle police. Lubov Khouyakova poses in a cramped studio amidst her paintings depicting the industrial landscape and war time graves of the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, standing incongruously on an infant's chair. Michel Boireau stretches for the hundredth-thousandth time to grab the controls for an overhead gantry. There is no need for fiction here, for actors or models for staging. Nor is there any need for an overtly archival (that is, serial) association of the three portraits, such as one might find in August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit*. The links between these photos may well pass through others that I am not describing, but there is also a sense in which all three persons – for all their differences – inhabit a shared existential domain, outside the parameters of successful manoeuvring in a "globalized" life world: the activist who rebels against the future, the painter who sticks to a realist idiom and to regional motifs, the manual worker who sticks to the same job for more than twenty years.<sup>75</sup>

The portrait of Lubov Khoudyakhova, the Russian painter (fig. 70), functions as if she were a character in a novel; she is both herself and her *role* in *TITANIC's Wake*, along with the characters of Bill Gates, Frank Ghery and Wilmslow Homer. Sekula's projects suggest the 'epic sweep and resonance of a historic novel, without in any way trying to be a historic novel and without departing from the pictorial possibilities of careful documentary photography'.<sup>76</sup> The projects demonstrate Lakoff's 'generic is specific' structure and maintains difference in specificity as one element within a global schema, that presents the general in terms of the specific rather than 'generalising'. The fact of Sekula's 'documentary', defined in the context of 'art', in itself transforms the possibilities of documentary and demonstrates it as artistic fiction. His novelistic approach acknowledges the fictional elements within work whilst being concerned with the realities of global economies and relationships. 'There are two general conditions for working in this way: a person or a place must be compellingly portrayed in visual terms and plausible if unexpected essayistic threads must bind one picture to others.' Here are realistic portrayals presented in the midst of tangential and

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.128

<sup>75</sup> Sekula, Allan, *TITANIC's wake*, Liege: SNEL, 2003, pp. 107-8

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.107





*Portrait of Kaela Economou, beaten  
by the Seattle police,  
2 December, 1999*



*Portrait of Michel Boireau,  
Biemont Factory, Tours*



*Portrait of Guillaume Blanc with  
oysters, Sache*

*Figs. 67-69 Allan Sekula, from TITANIC's wake, 1998-2000*



specifically contextual content contained by the metaphor 'wake' – of the sea and of its reverberation, more 'real' than any searching beneath masks can achieve. Here is a presentation that does not transcend its content and sits knowledge *besides* knowledge and yet is more 'essential' in portraying what we cannot name or describe. Here is a release from the portrait that defines and reveals what is hidden. These pictorial possibilities of critical realism, along with those of Wall's fictional pictorial realism, example the borderlines of genres and the diversity of conceptual domains encompassed by contemporary photography.

Projects such as Allan Sekula's *TITANIC'S wake* use simultaneous reference in different ways; visual projects that use the concept of parallel discourse, but which deny linearity; works that present simultaneous 'stories' and which feed off each other but without privilege; translations of experience that avoid transcendence, teleology or any notion of superior position and which adopt participatory strategies of equivalence instead. These are modes of realism that encompass fiction, allegory and critique, which no longer have to justify artistic validity or objective reality and which move on from the veracity of the snapshot typified in Goldin or Strba, The mirroring of everyday reality in an evermore 'natural' realism is one subversion of the modernist transcendence of the everyday that still depends on a belief that there can be a pure perception, unconditioned by time and space. As such it fails ultimately to undermine presence. Participative practice such as Evans's Polaroids and Goldin's work break down the author-subject divide and ultimately describe themselves. Whereas Sekula's novelistic realism, using subject matter as merely a vehicle for an idea, returns to the function of allegorical painting, when the substance was *idea* rather than objects (which give effect to the idea). 'Any interest I had in artifice and constructed dialogue was part of a search for a certain "realism": a realism not of appearances or social facts but of everyday experience in and against the grip of advanced capitalism. This realism sought to brush traditional realism against the grain.' <sup>77</sup> We are reminded here of other conceptions of 'realism' in Barthes's alternative unconstrained by verifiable truth, Moore's interpretation of content as absence and Kristeva's 'poetic logic'.

Wall, Ruff and Sekula insert the conceptual back into 'realism', <sup>78</sup> confronting modernist taboos of pictorialism or social documentary and refuse the ideal of spontaneity, refuse the poetic of Cartier Bresson's moment of 'just one thing', <sup>79</sup> refuse the dogmatic ontology of Andre Bazin's 'real',

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<sup>77</sup> Sekula, Allan, *Photography Against the Grain, Essays and Photo-works*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 1984, p.x

<sup>78</sup> Wall, *Jeff Wall*, p.13

<sup>79</sup> Cartier-Bresson, Henri, An excerpt from 'The Decisive Moment' (1952) in Vicki Goldberg, *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*. 'Sometimes you have a feeling that here are all the makings of a picture except for *just one thing* that seems to be missing. But what one thing?'



refuses the instinct of Evans's 'real thing'<sup>80</sup> or Strand's 'unqualified objectivity',<sup>81</sup> challenge Heidegger's 'thingness of thing' and move toward images that reflect the conflation of temporal deferral and spatial difference, and construct a conceptual fiction.



Fig. 70 Allan Sekula,  
*Lubov Khoudyahova in her  
studio, TITANIC's wake,*  
1998-2000

<sup>80</sup> Evans, Walker, manuscript notes on 3 x 5" index cards, notes for lyric documentary on cards – 'the real thing always has PURITY, CERTAIN SEVERITY, RIGOR, SIMPLICITY, DIRECTNESS, CLARITY, IS WITHOUT ARTISTIC PRETENSION, HARD + FIRM AS BASE, in Walker Evans Archive, 1994.250.54, Yale photography notes (11) 25

<sup>81</sup> Strand, Paul, 'Photography' (1917) in Trachtenberg, pp. 141-142



## CONCLUSIONS: THE POSTSTRUCTURAL PORTRAIT

The trajectory between Evans's *Allie Mae Burroughs* and Thomas Ruff's portraits parallels poststructural themes, the journey through Conceptual art and postmodern practices and determines the differences between a concern for transcendence and a knowing indifference inhabiting 'straight' depiction. Evans, as a recurrent theme, can be seen as a 'bridge' between ideational realism – documentary infused with sensibility (1936) and an extreme form of subjective realism (1974), which breaks the taboos of distance and objectivity. Evans represents both a break with the modernist ideal of distance by inserting himself as the 'subject' in the image of others, and a contradiction to an increasingly aware authorship in an extreme form of authorial indulgence. His subject matter is not the subject–depicted, but instinct and emotional distance itself – a representation of the limitlessness of not knowing others or ineffability itself.

This thesis offers an understanding of poststructural ideas from the perspective of visual practice, by relating directions of concern that confirm alternatives to modernist pretensions such as synthesising meaning and definition. Testing the hypothesis that photographic practice functions as discourse, I present a series of examples that articulate characteristics such as indeterminacy. Whilst contemporary practice confirms many of Lyotard's predictions for the 'postmodern condition', I assert that the impact of such thinking on practice is underestimated, and more fundamental than the narrower, re-iterated aspects usually associated with postmodernism. I demonstrate that profound shifts in our assumptions and understanding are visualised in practice, more aptly named here as poststructural. As a phenomenon, poststructural photography borrows the appearance of photographic traditions, but is oblique, attenuated and contradictory. One is confronted with a series of contrasting traits; a pervasive display of uncertainty and an assertive re-generation of traditional genres; a refusal of narrative and an active engagement with narrative; a realism that is 'natural' and raw, and a realism that is conceptually complex. Further to interpreting photographic representation as demonstrating a reflection of the contemporary condition, I claim that photographic practice, as a form of discourse, visualises implicitly held values, displays its own interventions and not only parallels, but via rhetorical viewing, participates in a way that extends verbal debate. In questioning the easy shifting between photograph and referent, poststructural photography explores the possibilities of dismantling the denotative power of the photograph and its alliance with 'reality'. It incorporates alternative conceptions of what is 'real', in the sense that it is forced to constantly discuss with itself – truth, reality, temporal deferral, spatial difference. It toys with strategies that conflate and disrupt assumed restrictions and moves toward a conceptual form, not in the sense of documenting an idea as it did in the 1970s, but by using its reference to objects to conceptualise.



I identify the need to adjust the frame in which the portrait can be read and propose a conceptual framework to explain meaning. By problematising the equations of art and aesthetics with visuality, and of 'realism' with the literal, I assert conceptual interpretations over literary systems like narrative, immanent property over aspirations to 'transcendence' or 'essence' and nominate *differance* as a principle dynamic. I pursue the equivalence of the visual and verbal and establish alternative ways to articulate photographs by forefronting conceptual domains that assert a photographic discourse without recourse to verbal translation or narrative. I example theories that emphasise meaning *besides* 'subject matter' and 'object'; in Kristeva's *semiotic*, Levinas's *shadow*, Derrida's *sans*, all of which validate the move toward figural interpretation. By examining non-literal configurations of the image, I adopt a notion of photographic properties as capacities, which incorporate psychological, contextual and cultural associations and establish a framework with which to focus on what is provoked by the photograph subjectively, poetically and politically rather than on what is referenced. I propose a psycho-sensible dimension explained by Levinas's 'face', which introduces a conceptual space that unites the encounter, the photograph and our response to both, which is seconded by Lakoff's theory of conceptual schema. Acknowledgement that the metaphoric instinct pervades thought (not just language) is important with regard to the recognition of conceptual reverberation as a process, prior to translation into language, which allows us to understand thematic projects with a complexity of reference and implication.

I adopt Derrida's procedure of *differance* as a poststructural equivalent for the ineffable, which embodies an approach to thinking, encompassing many of the ideas discussed and which traverses those regions of meaning that are elusive and indeterminate. Notions such as the ineffable and transcendence, as persistent constituents of 'art', change in the light of philosophical alignment and are accordingly manifested and re-interpreted differently. Explanations of the ineffable from different perspectives collated here, indicate a move toward opacity, immanence, dissemination, non-representation, non-narrativity. A poststructural reluctance to explain via metaphysical origins, is echoed in practice that insists on, for example, a stubborn ordinariness that resists transcendence. I assert the relentless uncertainty of ineffability as a constant provocation, and *differance* as an explanation for the ineffable, as an alternative procedure to the paradox of searching for 'absolute representations'.

The conceptual space validated in Part Two liberates the portrait from its function to define or its obligation to present 'psychological focus'. Part One identifies 'essential' descriptions as subjective and rephrases the questions provoked by Baudrillard and Ruff as 'how does the portrait say something about relationship, or me as photographer or reader?' Levinas, like Sartre, establishes a reality for the meaning of photographs, not in transcendence but in our reading of them – our own reality and Derrida indicates the possibility of interpretation as psychological fiction, which mirrors



the photographer's consciousness. Echoing Levinas's insistence on alterity, Kristeva's on process, together with poststructural adjustments to authorship, three positions of practice become apparent that deny 'essential' depiction and problematise objectification. These are participative dialogic portrayals that conflate the positions of author-subject and speak of themselves (Evans and Goldin); disengaged selfconscious authorship apparent in strategies that fabricate interventions to destabilise or avoid interaction and/or meaning (von Zwehl, Yokomizo); critical realism that does not attempt to transcend its content or privilege or totalise and subverts allegorically in presentations that situate knowledge *beside* knowledge, event beside event (Sekula).

Finding pretensions to locate 'essence' to be beside the point and that if there is 'psychological focus' it is dependent on the nature of the exchange, I confirm Ruff's statement ('they're not depictions, they're just images) as appropriate. I reconfigure the portrait as a form of fictional description that presents a logical space for possibilities, rather than authenticity. Baudrillard's photographic project is seen to amplify this from the point of view of the photographer and Derrida's *perquisition* from that of the reader. As the procedure of dissemination does not endeavour to synthesise, contemporary practice likewise reverses the role of motif that generalises, and where more universal meaning might develop, it emerges from the specific (e.g. Sekula's Lubov Khouyakova and Dijkstra's bathers). This notion of portrait as a conceptual fiction avoids intentional depiction of 'essence' and escapes transcendence. I conclude that a parallel with the broad notion of 'fiction', which can take a variety of forms, suggests a direction that includes more dangerous territories that challenge the established aesthetic (e.g. Sekula's ideology or Evans's poetic aberration).

Procedures of encounter build a conception of a world made visible in the rhetoric of visual practice, in recurrent strategies that reflect extremes in the 'subjective scope' of the photographer and in the self-conscious address to authorship. A 'dialogic' perspective articulates a breakdown of the fixed oppositions of author/reader/subject and inserts interventions and structures that force alternatives to didactic narration following more familiar linear structures. The assumption of objectification (Sontag) is found to reside in more generalised meaning than in the specific and local, and the dialogic indicates a route through the conundrum of a meaningless generalisation via meaningful particularity. The protagonists in portrait fabrication are revealed as discontinuous and mobile and thus not static or consistent. Similarly the important element of the encounter is found to be process and exchange, largely responsible for the breakdown and realignment of genres whereby the 'portrait', having lost its limitations as a genre, becomes a convenient term for a more complex 'depiction of people'. Following discussion of metaphor, it becomes clear that the portrait functions as a generic metaphor for a 'mirror to consciousness' on two levels. Ironically it proves to be a more accurate alternative to a 'mirror to the world' and more extensive than is first



apparent. It emerges firstly with the interaction with others (Sartre), self-reflexive accounts of thinking (Derrida) and being in process (Kristeva). Following demonstrations of practice paralleling poststructural thinking, it can be seen at another level as an aesthetic consciousness that pervades photographic discourse and as a 'reflection' that provides visible clarification of how we apprehend the world.

Examining the same themes (e.g. absence, uncertainty and subject) from both psychological and analytical perspectives, I demonstrate that the portrait has been adjusted in the light of both. I find that both arenas provide verification of the motivating principle of absence, both validate the move from a literal toward a more figural place, and both contribute to an aesthetic evolution that accommodates dominant cultural ideas. Derrida, Levinas and Kristeva in turn articulate liminal positioning in readings that forefront the sensible and the imaginary over knowledge and object. Ricoeur stresses the tension at the intersection between literal and metaphoric interpretations that suggests an alternative to seeing value only in definitive facts, things, places (single images) and more in terms of 'seeing things as actions', process and event and the *relationship* between things. He emphasises the boundary between semantic and psychological theories of imagination and feeling, and endorses the portrait as a 'condition of possibility' and meaning as immanent resonance. Thus 'what does it mean?' and 'what is it?' becomes 'what is happening?' By 'explaining' the figural in terms of what we as viewers do when looking, rather than what or how the piece is made, I position the ineffable as a conceptual domain of latent possibility and potency.

The 'meaningful' portrait is found not to be dependent on causality or efficacy and is reconstituted outside resemblance. Levinas's acceptance of alterity, when courted rather than modified, invites an ever changing contra-aesthetic that accommodates the discontinuous subject and encourages the simultaneity and divergent multiplicity that photographs must always display. Kristeva's emphasis on the visceral is echoed by Levinas's 'hearing' the visual, suggesting a response other than visual sensation. Derrida emphasises aspects of art that are not dependent on resembling 'reality', Levinas repositions resemblance as being alongside the depicted-subject, and representation shifts away from mimesis to conceptions of 'realism' no longer constrained by verifiable 'truth', toward less referential and more discursive models, as allegory. Extensive demonstration of extrinsic meaning for example in integrational effect and *parerga*, exposes absence and concept as the central factors of the poststructural portrait rather than resemblance or visuality. In exploring the discourse that occurs besides the reference to subject matter, what becomes apparent is that the photograph could usefully relinquish the obligation to demonstrate 'meaning' and be seen as a means of provocation instead.



Derrida's logic of supplement, which disturbs, dislocates, interrupts and omits, indicates a procedure for exploring the image that encourages countless eventualities. I see the processes of deconstruction, metaphoric conflation and photographic provocation as linked by their obstructing the path to definitive meaning. *Aporia*, which 'concerns the impossible',<sup>82</sup> invoking doubt, inserting what appears to be no way forward, blocking our way and separating us from resolution, recalls the validation by psychoanalytic practice that there is no essential meaning to be found and that all that is found is meaningful, useful.<sup>83</sup> As alternatives to 'essential' depiction, I assert the autotelic and aporetic properties of the photograph and promote 'portraits' that incorporate the figural and a poststructural aesthetic that accommodates process and simultaneity, immanence and resonance. I correlate the revival of allegory, the dynamic of *differance* and the prevalence of fiction that incorporates subjectivity and the particularity of local context. I propose a conceptual aesthetic and a view that celebrates aspects of poststructuralism that is rooted in what the photograph provokes rather than what it depicts.

This thesis contributes examination of three aspects in the consideration of contemporary art practice: the poststructural, the figural and the ineffable. Using the photographic portrait as an example, I provide a discussion of a developing aesthetic updated in terms of the poststructuralist theoretical context. I have focused on photographic aspects relating to the nature of content and construction of meaning but recognise the potential for consideration of additional issues, for example, the tensions caused by scale, presentation and context. My response has been principally with the cognitive and not the materiality of visceral impact; differentiations such as the photographs' colour, size or illumination do not feature here. I have examined rather what sort of knowledge a photograph provides: how meaning can be maintained as fluid rather than concrete; how the visual operation articulates without recourse to structured schema; how it speaks multiplicatively without implying oppositional structures and negative implications.

I have identified figural space as being a direction from which to explore possibilities for *perquisition* of the contemporary photograph. Further consideration of encountering the 'figural' may establish a different vocabulary from one which implies a dependence on verbal articulation to validate how a photograph 'speaks'; what a photograph provokes exceeds any description or any one 'reading'. Importantly, Lyotard forefronts the visual rather than the linguistic and adjusts phenomenological dependence on perception to encompass the unconscious. The term 'figural space', used comfortably in the context of architecture or virtual design, encompasses habitation of a space, involvement within and through a space, in such a way that absence features as strongly as objects. If we incorporate this level of engagement with Kristeva's 'psychic space', we may more readily encounter the photograph as figural and more allied to events and absence than 'things'.

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<sup>82</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p.13

<sup>83</sup> See p. 72



In terms of a response to photographs, I have focused on the affective notion of the ineffable. The 'ineffable', as a notion rooted in metaphysics, has been a useful focus for what has long been explained as what is beyond us. I have repositioned what is provoked by our not knowing, by lack and by absence, with a more contemporary equivalent for the ineffable in *differance*. The ineffable is now embodied in poststructural disturbance, in theories that describe excess, difference and deferral: terminology more suited to the era in which it exists.



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