

Introduction

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What makes photography photography is not its capacity to present what it photographs, but its character as a force of interruption. —Eduardo Cadava, Words of Light

It must be significant that when, in his “Little History of Photography,” Walter Benjamin defines *aura* as “the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it might be” (518), he is looking at the photograph of a woman, soon to be a mother. In the picture of the photographer, Karl Dauthendey, father of the poet, she is identified only as “his fiancée.” It is Benjamin who sees her as the mother she will become after the engagement photograph of Dauthendey, “that woman whom he found one day, shortly after the birth of her sixth child, lying in the bedroom of his Moscow house with her veins slashed.” In the photograph, Benjamin adds, “she can be seen with him. He seems to be holding her, but her gaze passes him by, absorbed in an ominous distance” (510). Susan Sontag has described Benjamin’s own photographic portraits in similar terms, noting that his gaze invariably misses the camera and seems to float off to a lower corner of the photograph (109). And, following Sontag, a number of critics attribute evidentiary status to these Benjamin portraits where, reading the life from the work, the photograph is interpreted as portending his suicide, thus as depicting his melancholy temperament, “a brooding, gloomy Benjamin, born under the sign of Saturn, whose languid prose and language of gestures—that is, downward gaze, chin leaning on a clenched fist—seem to quote from an ancient pictorial archive of mourning and melancholia” (Hanssen 170-71). It seems to me, however, that in Benjamin’s way of looking at the portrait of Dauthendey’s fiancée, the distance of *aura* is just what precludes attempts to read the photograph as a document of this sort, belonging to what Mieke Bal in this special issue of *Mosaic* calls “the dis-course of the face.” Encountering such auratic distance in the gaze that passes him as

well as Dauthendey by, Benjamin, the beholder, “feels an irresistible urge to search” the photograph for what he calls “the inconspicuous spot” where “in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it” (510). In looking at the woman in the engagement photograph, Benjamin, like the angel of history, is turned toward the past, searching for the spot, the peripheral detail, through which surface homogeneity opens to the space of an other. “For it is another nature that speaks to the camera,” he writes, suggesting that to view the portrait of Dauthendey’s fiancée is to listen, as well as to look.

In *Camera Lucida*, a book that informs as many essays in this *Mosaic* issue as does Benjamin’s “Little History,” the “inconspicuous spot” is the *punctum*. Jacques Derrida explains in “The Deaths of Roland Barthes” that the word *punctum* “translates, in *Camera Lucida*, one meaning of the word ‘detail’: a point of singularity that punctures the surface of the reproduction—and even the production—of analogies, likenesses, and codes” (39). As does the detail, the fragment or “minute signifier” (38) for Benjamin, the *punctum*, for Barthes, *interrupts* the supposed coherence and referentiality of the (portrait) photograph. And, like the “tiny spark” that, Benjamin says, “sears the subject” to open one to the space of an other (510), the *punctum* “pierces, strikes me, wounds me, bruises me,” so as to arrive at its essential definition, “that it addresses itself to me. The absolute singularity of the other addresses itself to me” (Derrida 39). Through these two texts, then, “Little History” and *Camera Lucida*, and through the interruptive force that inheres for them in the *punctum*—the fragment, the spot, the point of singularity—I might make my way to the tenor or tempo that I think characterizes this special issue on The Photograph.¹ I take this tempo to be given by a suspensive structure that, to borrow Derrida’s words, “rends the fabric of the same, the networks or ruses of economy” and that, for all its silence, “addresses itself to me,” albeit obliquely, that is “without being directed towards me, without being present to me” (39), not any more than is the haunting gaze of Dauthendey’s fiancée. Derrida’s work attests to the way this structure defines and divides every *trait*; as much for writing as for photo-graphing, the *punctum* “suspends the referent and leaves it to be desired,” so much so that “one must be able to speak of a *punctum* in all signs” (61). I would add, nonetheless, that what punctuates the following pages might both surprise and destabilize you.

It is a matter of time, of tempo, this force of interruption that David Farrell Krell calls shutter speed: in a camera, so fast that it really does sear the subject, “mutilates the body and humiliates the soul;” so fast that it anticipates or accompanies the sudden removal of death. For Krell, “‘The Photograph’ is a congenial site for many ideas

¹ As I am reading *Camera Lucida* through “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” my way is made, of course, with the help of Derrida. This note is added at the proof stage, three days after his death. We dedicate this special issue to him, in gratitude for his life and work.

that have been occupying me of late,” all of which, in their five “apparently quite disparate spheres of inquiry”—spheres that move in a dazzling way through Aristotle, Augustine, Heidegger, Jacob Bernays and Hölderlin—relate shutter speed to time and to tragedy as *ecstatic*. Shutter speed, Krell suggests, is akin to “Heidegger’s account in *Being and Time* of the temporalizing of time as ‘ecstatic,’ that is, as a kind of seizing, removing, transporting, and enrapturing of our existence”; time as ecstatic, “not in the sense that we constantly experience joyous rapture, but in the sense that human existence, as long as it lasts, ‘stands out’ and is ‘displaced,’ ‘cast,’ or ‘projected,’ *thrown* through time.” Tragedy, too, “the tragic shudder and its attendant shattering and re-establishment of equanimity, its attendant *pleasure*,” is a matter of the ecstatic, where “the suffering members of a very small number of Greek families initiate us into the far-flung tragic universe—which is our only universe, the universe of what one might call the *tragic absolute*. There is nothing else out there to shoot.”

In his discussion of Hölderlin, his fifth and final sphere, Krell turns to “that famous invisible photograph of Roland Barthes’s mother as a five-year-old girl, the Winter Garden photograph,” the photograph that Derrida in “The Deaths of Roland Barthes” calls the “invisible *punctum*” of *Camera Lucida* (43). And it is as *punctum*, interruption, and seizure, that Krell in conclusion calls up this photograph of a woman-not-yet-a-mother, a woman whose gaze we cannot meet. Freud “cites the death of the *father* as the most disruptive event in a man’s psychic life,” but for Barthes and Derrida, Krell explains, death of the mother is more shattering still; “the *mother’s* life and death circumscribe her son’s or daughters’s life even more dramatically.” There are differences of course, but it is striking that Mieke Bal also concludes her essay on photographic portraiture as *light writing* by turning to the photograph of a woman-not-yet-a-mother, her mother in this case, shown as a girl with her nanny. In this photograph, it is the *punctum*, force of interruption, that interests Bal, with the “physical rift between the toddler and her nanny [as] not just a representation of the indelible mark of severance that still today opposes two worlds,” but also as an “expression of the impossibility of portraiture.” Insofar as the *punctum* opens one to the space of an other, it makes for what Krell calls a “confusion in and of the photograph.” This, “both a filial and a temporal confusion, is not temporary, and in a universe of contingency it is not contingent.” Yet, Bal’s essay suggests, the confusion is elided just where it should be most evident: in photographic portraiture, the genre that, she says, is in acute need of contemporary critical reflection. Whereas the “discourse of the face” mobilizes portraiture in the service of Western individualism, its documentary realism and its identity politics, Bal asks how analysis of the portrait, at this *post-traumatic* moment, might break the circle-of-return to the subject of individualism. Again, for Bal, this rupture has to do with a gaze we cannot meet, with the photograph of a woman who does not quite look us in the face.

The tempo of this *Mosaic* issue is given in Bal's "Light Writing" by the Proustian "split second of pure dependency"—a split that severs, wounds (*pierces, sears*) the viewer of the portrait photograph—and that tempo is reinscribed in several of the following essays in which photographic portraiture emerges as a central concern. Margot Leigh Butler, examining links between portraiture-as-documentation and identity politics, offers a critique and contextualization of Lincoln Clarke's *Heroines: Photographs*, a celebrated book of photographic portraits of female heroin addicts, "Women missing names, missing words, missing women on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside." Foregrounding the interdisciplinarity of her approach, Butler examines the photographed women of *Heroines* as overburdened cultural "figures" and at the same time, as "figures of implicatedness" through which power relations, including those at work in documentary photography, might be exposed and analyzed. In Richard Crownshaw's essay, difficult questions pertaining to the photograph's indexicality and status as document are explored through a reading of W.G. Sebald's use of photography in *Austerlitz*. A pressing issue for Crownshaw in this essay, as he reads through *Austerlitz* to a critique of theory and practice of "postmemory," is "the potential for adoption to turn into appropriation," so that archiving the traumatic experiences of others becomes a colonization of victims' memories. If, in Crownshaw's reading, *Austerlitz* resists this colonizing impulse, it is through a complex appeal to the photograph's potential for disruption of the archive and of the gaze of the archivist. In Caroline Blinder's essay, the documentary project is again opened to question, and this by way of examining the canonization by Lincoln Kirstein and William Carlos Williams of Walker Evans as a visionary artist of the vernacular and as representative of the best in American documentary photography. Blinder argues that in responding to the publication of *American Photographs*, the catalogue for the 1938 Evans exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Kirstein and Williams "constructed a vision of American documentary photography as a native and transcendental art." In the process, they heralded photography as promising "an active living way to articulate the importance of the vernacular as intrinsic to the modernist project." Kirstein and Williams "used an Emersonian rhetoric to connect the everyday, the vernacular, with a spiritualized and transcendent idea of vision," Blinder maintains. In Eugénie Shinkle's essay, in sharp contrast to this, the vernacular, everyday, image under discussion is empty of anima. Shinkle examines approaches to banality as an aesthetic category inclusive of a range of contemporary photography, also as a peculiarly postmodern mode of looking. Banality, in Shinkle's reading, is about loss, exhaustion, debilitation, frustration, boredom, even spiritual destitution, but it "can also be understood as a form of resistance to the institutionalization of photographic vision" and as having its own "transformational power."

Does banality show up in Fred Wah's personal photographs, an entire roll shot in a southeastern British Columbia forest by his brother with a borrowed camera for Fred's book *Tree*, that needs a black and white cover?

this is a hard language to work out
 the images keep interrupting the talking
 trees keep being pictures of themselves
 my words keep meaning pictures
 of words meaning tree
 and its not easy
 to find myself in the picture

To turn your eyes, *and ears*, to Wah's ramble in "Is A Door A Word?" is, quite simply, to suffer the dislocation, the "Isadora effect," of the tempo of this issue. Here, the *hyphen* is the *punctum*, "a tool in the resistance to closure," that brings together poetry and photography so as to sustain "the dynamics of 'betweenness.'" Not an aesthetics of banality, we might say, but of hybridity, an engagement of word and picture that is, in Mieke Bal's terms, "beyond," post- or meta- the word/image opposition. "Actually," Wah writes, "it's neither. Picture or Word. But the space between them. A poetics, then, of the hyphen between image and text, the 'actually' not a 'finally' but a between, a hybridity." A poetics of the hyphen that understands being as "being in-between," always at least a "twoness," and that sustains the hyphen "by layers of reference, a whole life, including, in his case, a fingerprinted racialized life," Wah's bio-text moves, in its final pages, to Telchak Puerto and to a collaboration between Mexican and Canadian photographers and writers that took place there just two weeks after hurricane Isadora had devastated the region. There, hanging around with photographers, Wah took photographs, many of blown-away doors, and, turned toward the past, he searched the photographed ruins for a word.

Since, in Wah's photo-text, it always takes two to make anything move, the hyphen includes ME TOO (ME-TWO), the photographer as part of the photograph, a shadow always there. Such inclusion of the photographer within the photograph is a highly political act, a point that emerges from Petra Dreiser's exploration of the photograph as archive in John Edgar Wideman's *Two Cities*. In Dreiser's reading of Wideman, the photographic archive both houses images of race that belong to the dominant culture and engenders a counter-memory. For Dreiser, the force of the latter owes at least in part to what Barthes calls the *punctum*, the small, unintended detail that is powerful enough to disrupt from within and that imbues every photograph, and every archive, with both "suggestive absences and lurking presences." In the essay by Jeanne Perreault and Patricia Levin, disruption inheres in the working *process* of

Montréal artist Nicole Jolicoeur, a process “that struggles to break the camera’s literal hold on its subject.” Perreault and Levin examine Jolicoeur’s use of famous nineteenth-century archival material, arguing that her playful reconstruction of found images of women, a project that culminates in a series of self-portraits, raises serious aesthetic and ethical questions about viewing, referentiality, and (female) identity. In Janice Hart’s study of Penelope Lively’s novel, *The Photograph*, questions of the referent and of photography’s referentiality are again at issue. For Hart, Lively’s novel poses the problem of the “truth value” of photography, while at the same time probing the photography-fiction relation, and not the least, while demonstrating “a pronounced ability on the part of a writer to think photographically.” In Hart’s reading of Lively, moreover, the very definition of the photograph is as “portal” or “process” that “enables movement in either direction, in or out of the image,” back and forth across the word-image frame. Helen Robertson, too, locates disruption in photographic process. Structuring her essay “like a filmstrip that moves from one image to the next” in order to foreground process as part of the photograph and as bound up with viewing and referentiality, Robertson examines Thomas Ruff’s series of photographs of Mies van der Rohe’s buildings as “a self-reflexive display of the photographic process” and as works that “incorporate the act of viewing and making an image within their structure. This means that when the viewer looks at the work, his or her own activity is already part of the structure of the image.” At the opening of the essay by Elizabeth Musgrave and Douglas Neale, “process” involves juxtaposition of text (“an evocative 200 word paean to the verandah”), paintings (a suite of six paintings of “the verandah as a cliché of Australian-ness”), and a photograph (“of an Australian settler’s cottage in a semi-ruinous state”), all of which are drawn together to preface a discussion of the photography-architecture relation, a discussion that, as it develops, in part through speculation on the *punctum*, “implicates the photograph in processes of invention in relation to memory.”

Between 1880 and 1910, the German-born Australian photographer John William Lindt produced a series of photographs documenting his garden and residence known as The Hermitage in the Yarra Ranges north of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia. Lindt supplemented this photographic series with two written records, one which he wrote himself, and one which he co-authored with another photographer, his “fellow bushwalker,” Nicholas John Caire. In their essay, Catherine De Lorenzo and Deborah van der Plaats argue that “the intersection of art, poetry, gardening, and photography at The Hermitage can be attributed to Lindt’s understanding of *Cosmos*, a five-volume study of the physical universe written between 1846 and 1862 by the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt,” a work that few scholars have recog-

nized as influential for late-nineteenth-century Australian landscape photography. Art, poetry, gardening, photography: *hybridity* is a word that De Lorenzo and van der Plaat use. For M. Kathryn Shields, studying Ralph Eugene Meatyard's *Ambrose Bierce* and *Lucybell Crater* photographs, hybridity brings inseparably together the real and the imaginary, rendering the photograph, post- the word/image opposition, as itself a fictive, literary, and narrative work; and the mask becomes the hyphen that joins the "concurrently impossible and undeniably true." Meatyard's *Ambrose Bierce* and *Lucybell Crater* pictures "create fiction through the realistic medium of the camera, using the mask to mark the site where the traditional boundaries between these genres are transcended. Meatyard's masks foreground and almost parody the notion of making the familiar strange. The literary quality of his work engages the intuitive realm by emphasizing the ambiguity and malleability of identity."

With this *Mosaic* special issue on the photograph, then, we may want to ask, following Krell, what is left of Cartesian "stability," of the "clear and distinct" as standards of identity. What Dan Russek, in his essay on the decisive role played by photography in the evolution of Julio Cortázar's work, calls an "aesthetic of heightened awareness," might well suggest the issue's tenor. Setting out to assess the importance of journalism and travel writing for Cortázar's evolution, Russek argues that the use of journalism in Cortázar "goes beyond the exploitation of a literary motif or a principle of textual organization. Some of the hallmarks of modern journalism such as brevity, fragmentation, simultaneity, and mosaic-like design" are actually parallel to Cortázar's aesthetic. Which reminds me of the opening, "Filling Station," entry to Benjamin's "One-Way Street," where it is avowed that "true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework; this is, rather, the habitual expression of its sterility. Significant literary effectiveness can come into being only in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms" (444). Here is an issue searching in myriad ways for the inconspicuous, for the point of singularity.

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