

Another Aperture: Craft towards an Alternative Photography

by Abri de Swardt

“So I resolved to start my inquiry with no more than a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed *for me*. Nothing to do with a corpus: only some bodies. In this (after all) conventional debate between science and subjectivity, I had arrived at this curious notion: why mightn’t there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer *universalis*)? – Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*ⁱ

Imagining or imaging a world without photography has become virtually impossible. The camera’s eye has become metonymic for ours; in fact, the aperture is paramount to the pupil: it has annexed all forms of the visual, seeing closer, further, penetrating through, capturing more and in more detail. Zooming in, the lens has become the decisive window, an anthropological looking glass, both apparatus and evidence, picturing the societies that have spawned and embraced it. Photographic nomenclature is now vernacular; we see photographically; we seek the photogenic. This insatiable pursuit of the moment in time, picture perfect and print-ready, has become universalised, hegemonic. Lending magnitude, especially in the capacities of domestic photography¹, to an experience, an experience only made real as far as it is visualised, as far as it is manifested in an image through the camera, “miniaturize[d]”, it transforms, according to Susan Sontag, “history into spectacle”ⁱⁱ. Subsequently, in order to “consume the raw materials of our tomorrow’s memories”, to purchase “this past-in-the-future, this nostalgia-in-prospect” as Annette Kuhn delineatesⁱⁱⁱ, we smile like we mean it to fit into the (existing) frame, a process where singularity solely encompasses a choice between

1

À A term inclusive of all photographs, either snapshots or studio portraits, which visualise the domestic sphere of friends and family.

matte or gloss. This catalogue essay examines, in relation to photographic practices, a selection of Pierre Fouché's work that exists *for me*, probing the snapshot towards an unmediated, honest relationship to subjectivity.

A packaged subtraction from reality, the social photograph frames significance, documenting, validating and sanctifying. Entirely ordinary, it is as binding as it is banal, its immediacy satisfactory for its small audience with the amateur at its helm. Often ascribed as the public² interface of the private, it is ideal, as Barthes notes, "to utter interiority without yielding intimacy"^{iv}, an objective Fouché emulates. An event within itself, Fouché identifies its accessibility and sentimentality as incremental in its power to move us, a capacity rendered universal by the infinite repository of existing photographs we mimic and maintain in front of the lens, as Christoph Doswald relates: "[t]he images are inside us, and we are the images"^v. Readily shifting from warm reminiscences to a condoned voyeurism into the lives of others, the use of the social photograph within the realm of art becomes suffocated in a surplus of meaning to the point of inconsequential oblivion. Unanchored, bereft of a caption that voices context, the photograph is rendered mute – it does "not explain; [it] acknowledge[s]", relaying a message "both transparent and mysterious" as Sontag asserts citing Diane Arbus: "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know"^{vi}. Reaching into the frame, beyond the flat photographic plane, is unfeasible, as Richard Avedon concurs,

The point is that you can't get at the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface."^{vii}

Fouché traverses this epistemological dilemma in signification by engaging directly with the surface interface of the

photograph, translating its molecular façade into something altogether other.

Abandoning reiterations of the ordinary, he deconstructs the image in a process analogous to the tech-gnosis of digital photography where “much will occur after the shutter is released” as Fred Ritchin elaborates: the “photograph becomes the initial research, an image draft, as vulnerable to modification as it has always been to recontextualisation.”^{viii} Via a systematic process of breakdown, in imaging software like Photoshop, of the source image into its constituent pixels, the building blocks of the digitized photograph, Fouché reduces the image into a map of squares, a manageable mosaic that functions as a blueprint. This transcription of the hypertext of the photograph, as abstracted data to be played with, entails a sublimation of passion into a rigid analytic, as is seen in *The Distance Between Us II* (2004), a photograph of his previous partner André embracing him, mathematically reassembled through 6000 dice. Coherent from afar the work becomes abstracted upon closer inspection, its rigorous but economic internal logic laid bare: comprised of twenty tones of red dice, the nuances deriving from inconsistencies in manufacturing, as well as the six tones possible from the six different sides of the dice (the lightest being that of six, and the darkest that of one), the poetic matter is here the meaning. Reading as a pixelated jpeg, the dice connote chance: from the leisure of childhood board games, to striking it lucky in love, it all comes down to a gamble, and therefore a risk – the jeopardy of displaying homosexual affection publically, of losing your heart, is met by the throw of the dice. Valiant and vulnerable, if not requisitely fatalistic, it is the chances one must take. The possibilities imbued in how the dice lands, as well as in the propensity of the digital image for manipulation and simulation, become apt metaphors for an understanding of sexuality as socially constructed, standing opposite to an essentialist viewpoint embodied by analogue photography. Chemical, it is more often than not an end unto itself.

Looking down upon the work, and therefore at André and Pierre, who in turn peer upwards, the viewer's gaze activates a hierarchy of subject/object, where the power lies in the hands of the viewer-subject to reify the art-object. Through this relationship social perceptions regarding sexuality and the imposition of gendered structures are called into being, where the hetero-normative hegemony places demands on desire and identify through constraints on the homosexual body in its performance of masculinity, in particular by dousing it in fear and shame, alienating as it distances. This collective discrepancy in agency is magnified by the physical expanse between spectator and art. Consequently physical interactions affirming sexual difference are relegated to the private sphere, that of the anonymous interior of the work. Here occurs a celebration of a queer politic in spite of the viewer, but also for them, a jubilation poignant as far as it is ostensibly uncalled for by one of the parties, who, perhaps still hesitant to wear his heart on his sleeve appears (rather pleasantly) surprised by the sudden squeeze from his beloved. An icon of stolen caresses and failed relationships, it is also a self-portrait conveying the uncanny mirroring through the photographic self-image, as annotated by Barthes: "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image"^{ix}. Stepping outside the body, doubling, the self becomes *other*, through the camera's lens the subject "feels he is becoming an object", undergoing a "micro-version of death"^x, the decisive distancing.

Intimations of bereavement also permeate the stifling prerogatives of the family album, an archive that records in order to corroborate. Its photographic traces warrant a familial history that is the source of self-knowledge of heredity, and the perpetuation of a unifying myth of togetherness. Edifying, this performance of happiness spawns an unsustainable sensibility that estranges as far as it endeavours to assimilate. It is this reiterated representation of family, smiling, that codifies and naturalises the hetero-normative, functioning as an

institutionalised, pedagogical instrument, what Paul Ricoeur deems the “monument hiding behind the document”, that is a “witness in spite of [itself]”^{xi}. Put to another use, violently decontextualized from the archive into a freer interpretive structure, this domestic ideology of authentication becomes destitute. Adrift in a new context of display its latent dissidence is palpable in Fouché’s *The Distance Between Us III* (2005-2006), an alteration of a photograph depicting two men at the shore into a nine-point tapestry. By virtue of the *studium*, which Barthes declares that “very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste”^{xii} which one engages with “culturally”^{xiii}, present within the print, it is clear that this is as an archived image. Discoloured, with outmoded haircuts and beachwear donned by the men, this snap is a lucky find from Fouché’s family album. Shot by his mother when his parents were on honeymoon, the fortuitous erotic quality of the image resonates with Barthes notion of that which “will disturb the *studium*” – the *punctum* – “that accident which prides me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”^{xiv} Here the *punctum* is the touch of the right-hand man leaning with his arm on the shoulder of Fouché’s father, the other man. Although not contextualised by the image itself, this information is an incision into the photo, an accidental wound disclosing a “power of expansion”, that fantastically “transcends [the photograph] as medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself”^{xv}, a “subtle beyond”^{xvi} – the outside of the image.

A labour of love, the tapestry, carefully and intensively woven from the heart, is of the feminized realm of craft, conceived to keep idle hands busy, docile, and dutiful. Turning inwards, this gendered leisure³ is analogous to

Ä Derivative of the gendered division of labour wherein men were ascribed as fixers of (broken) things, and women as (home) makers, a process institutionalized in primary education through needlework as obligatory activity for girls and woodwork as requisite for boys.

interiority, to the private sphere, the female domain of the household, yet also to the mother herself, to the womb, the space of the ur-home, the primal inside. Inhabiting this domain, in an encounter with origins, with glee, Fouché in a role-reversal to the prescribed, engages in a tactile translation of the archive, giving president to touch, the sensual, above the mechanical click of the shutter. Photography has always been a masculine practice, from Hill, through Strand, Weston and till Avedon and beyond, the lens is the phallic extension of the heterosexual gaze, shooting what it aims at, the hunter not the hunted. By the tapestry process, and via embodying the gaze of the mother-photographer, Fouché is doubly partaking in the matrilineal, yet, in a reversal of the oedipal saga, he circumvents castration anxiety by negating the sight of the mother, in order to overtake her bond with the father. This incestuous desire, of an amorous conception of the father, fundamentally subverts the 'I do'-performative of matrimony, the speech-act christening the hierarchy of normativity itself, the 'till-death-do-us-part' consummated on the very honeymoon of this snapshot. Calculated, this paternal homoeroticism becomes searing, intimate and fetishist through its compulsive transcription as tapestry, a fixation predicated on a power over the ephemeral instance of *punctum* within the frame. Moreover, this is a queering, which, according to Jagose, interrogates "conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them"^{xvii}, a strategic politic that seeks to eradicate the sustained enterprise of latching the straight/gay dualism unto that of normal/abnormal. This is not the gaze of psychosis, it is just another sight, yet one the familial seems to resist. Here the microscopic discomfort acknowledged in his father's face upon the somewhat intrusive touch, is reflected upon solitarily, through a meditative, repetitive and cathartic process. A purging of the father-son relationship, itself the initial dogmatic vehicle of masculinity through rituals of confrontation and affirmation,

it is a consuming process, of mastery over uncertainties, which even then seems perpetually unsettled.

Arduous, this manual re-printing of the snapshot stands diametrically opposite to the immediacy, haste and whim of the photographic instant, Fouché's incarnation necessitating patience and time. Kim Gurney writes that his "handcrafted aesthetic" furthermore opposes a "contemporary taste for mass-produced objects, outsourced labour and general convenience culture"^{xviii}, a culture spawned from the age of technological reproduction that invented the camera. Out of the factory line, in a reversal of reproducibility through a move from hand to eye to hand, the singularity of Fouché's object retains what Walter Benjamin attributes as "aura", "a unique manifestation of distance"^{xix}. Yet, entwined in the tapestry itself is the photographic notion of time, which Stefan Banz calls "an extraction...from life...neither time nor space"^{xx}, a still, a slice of time dislocated from the continuum, frozen in an extended now, eternal, as Sontag maintains: "in the image-world, it *has* happened, and it *will* forever happen in that way."^{xxi} Time is of no consequence, infinitely reiterating the singular instance of the stolen moment on the beach - "Time's immobilization assumes only an excessive, monstrous mode: Time is engrossed"^{xxii} - as Barthes ruminates, yet in the tapestry Time is everything, thread for thread an hour glass, an abacus that is never enough. Rendered incomplete, the sky in the tapestry is an opening, a gap heralding a yearning to escape representational trappings. Suspended in its installation, it is visible from its flipside, exposing an underbelly of tangled threads and knots. In this transparent trace of production Fouché not only discloses his process, but also voices the underlying unfinished business, the loose ends, that transfuse our relationships and recollections exemplified in photographs. It does not only show us what we want to remember, but sincerely acknowledges complexities, how the imposition of a Cartesian grid fails. Nothing is seamless; Utopia always forsakes. The void in the tapestry is the distance between us, a multivocal aperture that addresses fissures in intimacy,

the unsaid, the ins and in-betweens in the familial, romantic, societal and generational.

Trapped somewhere between portrait and portrayal, *Aiden's Metamorphosis* (2010) is a figure in lace, a self, named and recalled. Venerating the uncanny relations one has to photographic images of oneself at a much younger age, transfused with demise, the work translates in threads a profile picture change on the diary-esque site, Twitter, by Aiden Shaw, gay cultural icon, pornographic actor and activist writer. Along with this cyber metamorphosis of self-visualisation, he posted the following tweet: "this pic is me 20 yrs ago, unmarked & unscarred & unscared. he makes me want to comfort him or fuck him, or both 1 after the other endlessly"^{xxiii}, which, in synthesizing a lamenting nostalgia for the good old days along with a narcissistic and auto-erotic lusting after the fountain of youth, casts Aiden as the father, the daddy⁴ and the lover. Roles permeated with and undone by time, particularly photographic time.

Afloat, Aiden is comprised of three layers of lace that echoes the shading of his body in nuances of aqua: mint, spindrift, and teal fragments, like yarns in a tale, contour the segments of his torso bathed in light, half-a-figure, like a crescent moon. Suspended at a remove from one another the shards become an anatomical archipelago, a tenuous blanket adrift in a sea of light. He is a marionette of (his own) memory, the black bobbins of his construction self-reflexively dripping off his figure, chimes in the wind. Redolent of romance, the bobbins here recall histories of sailors inscribing love-letters on the bobbins they carve for their beloveds whilst at

4

À The term 'Daddy', in gay jargon, humorously refers to the older man in a relationship with a much younger one. This light-hearted reference Fouché subtly ties with the serious historic account of the Roman emperor Hadrian, who, in mourning the death of his young lover, Antinous, literally enshrined and worshipped him through the creation of countless portrait busts of his countenance.

sea, the paramours in turn waiting away, crafting lace⁵ in longing. Slipping through the fingers, evanescent, amorphous, Aiden is a lyrical cenotaph to a former self and love lost, what Richard Breytenbach imparts as “a forlorn yearning, a fool’s errand”^{xxiv}. The black thread he is dangled from dematerialize afore a configuration of duct tape stuck behind on the wall, evocative of a censored graph, or crossed-out love poem. Angelic, he is also spectral, a phantom menace of absence, the ghost of times past. The hollows between his filaments of lace implicate us in his transitional portrait: reminiscence is not insulated; it is all-inclusive, making all complicit, enmeshed and imbedded.

Dwelling on the bygone through the photograph of the self becomes an inadequate practice, as this moment, “of near-zero duration” proclaims Peter Wolken is “located in an ever-receding ‘then.’”^{xxv} The photograph seizes this instant of memory in personal history, and asphyxiates it, albeit Sontag, “possess[ing] the past”, through “imprisoning reality.”^{xxvi} Here the reality of virginal naivety itself is reinscribed and dies at the hand of the really real, spectacular, testimonial authority of the that-has-been, that apparition which subsequently “relieves us of”, as John Berger concurs, “the burden of memory”; “the camera records in order to forget.”^{xxvii} The counter-memory and counter-reality of this photograph of Aiden from which Fouché fashioned this installation is forever greater than memory, outliving Youth; a zombie, what Barthes deems the “certificate of presence”^{xxviii} of Aiden’s, and our, future deaths. A *memento mori* it is both too much and not enough, and Fouché’s lace vestige becomes a stand-in for the keepsake snapshot, embodying the missing object, calling it to being and bringing it to life. It is a resurrection, the needle and thread operational in an open-heart surgery to resuscitate loss through affect. Giving solace, the craft of

À Lace making has now been usurped into craft guilds, exclusively female gatherings that Fouché entered almost as an imposter to develop his craft.

Fouché's hand is soft to remember, and gentle to cherish, exciting Barthes' "photographic ecstasy": "obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing."^{xxix} Breaking from the rectangular formations of the picture frame and his prior sculptural reworkings, the that-has-been becomes an it-will-be.

*

"Once the world has been photographed," Ritchin resolves, "it is never again the same."^{xxx} What comes before and after the release of the shutter is unequivocally altered, made strange, distant, melancholy objects. Through a surrealist "distance in time", Sontag laments, "the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own"^{xxxi}, as Louis Kaplan concludes, "[t]he photograph estranges, it estranges us."^{xxxii} The camera is amongst the distances between us, functioning as both wall and bridge. Desire, and the subsequent intimacy, touch and love, exists only through difference, through distance, yet the risk prevails for distance to become paramount, divorcing, and discarding the subject. It is through a delicate, careful and conscientious interlacing of desire, memory and loss, as manifest in the timelessness of the photographic instant and a queer politic, that Fouché approximates and occupies what Berger deems "an alternative photography",

The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory. The task will determine both the kinds of pictures taken and the way they are used.^{xxxiii}

Time after time, through the eye of the needle, Fouché makes closer and urgent another aperture.

i

À Barthes, R. 1984. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. London: Fontana. 64.

ii

À Sontag, S. 2008. *On Photography*. London: Penguin. 109.

iii

À Kuhn, A. 2003. Remembrance: The child I never was, in *The Photography Reader*, edited by Wells, L. London and New York: Routledge. 401.

iv

À Barthes, R. 1984. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. London: Fontana. 98.

v

À Doswald, C. 1999. Introduction, in *Missing link: the image of man in contemporary photography*, edited by Doswald, C. Zurich & New York: Kunstmuseum Bern & Stemmler. 14.

vi

À Sontag, S. 2008. *On Photography*. London: Penguin. 111.

vii

À Avedon cited in Fouché, P. 2006. *The distance between us: strategizing a queer, personal and social politic*. Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree Master of Arts (Fine Arts) at the University of Stellenbosch. 52.

viii

À Ritchin, F. 2009. *After Photography*. New York: Norton. 32.

ix

À Barthes, R. 1984. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. London: Fontana. 11.

x

À Ibid: 14.

xi

À Ricouer, P. 2006. Archives, Documents, Traces, in *The Archive – Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Merewether, C. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 67, 68.

xii

À Barthes, R. 1984. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. London: Fontana. 27.

xiii

À Ibid: 26.

xiv

À Ibid: 27.

xv

À Ibid: 45.

xvi

À Ibid: 59.

xvii

À Jagose cited in Fouché, P. 2006. *The distance between us: strategizing a queer, personal and social politic*. Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree Master of Arts (Fine Arts) at the University of Stellenbosch. 5.

xviii

À Gurney, K. 2007. Emotional Exorcism. *Art South Africa* 5(4), Winter: 58.

xix

À Benjamin, W. 2008. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin. 39.

xx

À Banz, S. 1999. The Photograph as Misunderstanding, in *Missing link: the image of man in contemporary photography*, edited by Doswald, C. Zurich & New York: Kunstmuseum Bern & Stemmler. 31.

xxi

À Sontag, S. 2008. *On Photography*. London: Penguin. 168.

xxii

À Barthes, R. 1984. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. London: Fontana. 91.

xxiii

À AidenShaw. 2010. this pic is me 20 yrs ago, unmarked & unscarred & unscared. he makes me want to comfort him or fuck him, or both 1 after the other endlessly. *Twitter* [Online]. Posted 9:20 AM Nov 6th 2009.

xxiv

À Breytenbach, R. 2008. *The black widow: Convoluted Involvement: Pierre Fouché*. Pythagoras TV [Online].

Available: <http://pythagoras-tv.ning.com/profiles/blogs/the-black-widow-convoluted>

[2011, April 17].

xxv

Ä wolken, P. 2003. Fire and Ice, in *The Photography Reader*, edited by Wells, L. London and New York: Routledge. 76.

xxvi

Ä Sontag, S. 2008. *On Photography*. London: Penguin. 163.

xxvii

Ä Berger, J. 1980. *About Looking*. New York: Pantheon. 55.

xxviii

Ä Barthes, R. 1984. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. London: Fontana. 87.

xxix

Ä Ibid: 119.

xxx

Ä Ritchin, F. 2009. *After Photography*. New York: Norton. 23.

xxxi

Ä Sontag, S. 2008. *On Photography*. London: Penguin. 57-58.

xxxii

Ä Kaplan, L. 2010. Photograph/Death Mask: Jean-Luc Nancy's recasting of the photographic image. *Journal of Visual Culture* 9(45). 54.

xxxiii

Ä Berger, J. 1980. *About Looking*. New York: Pantheon. 58.