We are here but where are you?

Urban Encounters Conference

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We are Here, but Where are You?

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This paper addresses contemporary theoretical arguments about the digital image. I want to challenge some of the assumptions about the pre-digital image that new theories of the digital re-circulate. I am going to argue that in order to draw a sharp distinction between a digital networked visual culture and earlier forms of visual culture, theorists of the digital have been too selective about the characteristics of pre-digital photography that they emphasize.

They rightly argue that the digital image is not principally visual, that it is also a surface manifestation of data, determined by specific algorithms, invisible to the observer of the image. As a consequence, it is argued, we have moved beyond representation and this constitutes a significant break between analogue-chemical photography and digital photography. This is the part I want to challenge. Specifically, I suggest that the notion that we have moved beyond representation is based on a specific understanding of representation and of its role in photography — which involves, first of all, the idea that an analogue-chemical photograph was organised around resemblance and perspective, and that it was dependent for its meaning on its status as an analogue trace. While this is true

of certain kinds of photographic practices, it is not invariably or essentially the case. More worryingly, digital image theorists sometimes repeat ideas about photographs that photography theorists might have thought had already been quashed. For example, William Mitchell writes "Images in the post-photographic era can no longer be guaranteed as visual truth — or even as signifiers with stable meaning and value" - the problematic part of the sentence is that "no longer" - as if photographs had ever been guaranteed truths, or had stable, incontestable meanings.

In my view, theories of the digital have a tendency to exaggerate the break between digital and analogue and to assume that all photography prior to the digital image can be lumped together as one medium, one technology and one set of practices. I want to give some perspective, to temper a little this notion of a dramatic historical rupture, and to complicate the notion of photographic representation.

I do not dispute that photographs can be traces of the real, that they can be about the "having -been-there" of an object, that they represent things in the world, nor that they can possess relatively stable significance. Rather, what I dispute is the idea that this is an adequate characterisation of the analogue chemical image, against which to contrast a new kind of digital networked image.

I am going to use 1930s American documentary photographs, by John Gutmann, Walker Evans and Helen Levitt, to rethink the assumptions about analogue, chemical photography implicit in these theories. I will start with the most famous of the three photographs I want to discuss here, which is the only one which is not an "urban" photograph:

This is Walker Evans, *Kitchen Wall in Bud Field's Home, Hale County, Alabama, 1936.* It was taken as part of Evans' work with the writer James Agee on the project of photographing Alabama sharecroppers and their homes, a project which resulted in the 1941 book *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*. Evans rejected humanist, sentimental documentary for an attention to surface and wear and tear — not only on the faces of his subjects but on the physical objects that surround them, especially the wood walls of their dwellings. Agee too focussed excessively on this wood in his text, writing, for example:

"wherever the weathers of the years have handled it, the wood of the whole of this house shines with the noble gentleness of cherished silver"

"the great and handsome scars of this vertical and prostate wood"

In Evans photograph, as in Agee's text, wood is attended to in extreme detail, in all its materiality and physical presence, and yet at the same time it stands for something other than itself, representing the lives of the sharecroppers.. In other words, in the photograph and in the text, distressed or weather-worn wood is simultaneously literal and metaphorical.

I have deliberately chosen this photograph because it shares several qualities with the other two photographs I am going to discuss: first of all, it is the image of a surface parallel to the camera lens, there is only a shallow depth and very little sense of perspectival space. It is a compressed, flattened, self-consciously modern rendering of pictorial space. It is attentive

to material detail, yet it seems to be "about" something other than what it is "of". As part of the book *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*, it is also part of a new kind of American documentary realism. In a 1988 essay on this book, TV Reed wrote:

"Written near the end of the thirties when the vast mound of documentation seemed to have buried reality rather than to have clarified it, *Praise* embodies the proposition that representational systems are always inadequate, always miss the real, but that this inevitable inadequacy calls for greater aesthetic-political reflexivity and commitment rather than abandonment of the attempt to imagine the real." (Reed 156)

He also says that the book is "fuelled by fury" against the documentary genre that claimed to give readers and viewers a direct access to the real, especially to the reality of the impoverished and underprivileged. This photograph, in other words, is part of a kind of anti-documentary (or reflexive documentary) practice that attempts to challenge the notion of representation as a means of direct access to the real.

The second photograph I want to turn to is from the same year (or possibly the following year - the date is a little uncertain). It is John Gutmann's, *We Are Here But Where Are You?* taken in San Francisco, in either 1936 or 1937.

Unlike the Walker Evans photograph, the image is completely flat: there is no scene, no depth, though there is texture. In this respect, it veers towards pure reproduction, like a photograph of a painting, or Xerox copy of a written text. This is a photograph that almost completely erases itself as photograph and presents itself as just a text or surface to be read. In terms of depiction, it offers nothing but boards blocking any kind of scenic view.

Indeed it is hard to know whether this is a horizontal or vertical surface and there are no clues to help the viewer mentally organise the picture into a scene.

Like Evans, Guttmann is attentive toward the grain of the wood, but the boards are not just scrawled on but stabbed, burned or shot, peppered with tiny marks. As with the accidental traces of cooking in Evans photograph, the whole surface is the result of human activity. And yet, there is no-one and almost no-thing in this image: “We are here” it says, but no-one is visible. The question "where are you"? is clearly written for the absent addressees, Sophie and Mae, but it also implicates “you”, the reader-viewer, raising the question of where you (or Gutmann) are standing. We are given a date that Sophie and Mae were present but, at the point when the photograph is taken and at the point when it is being viewed, they are gone. The photograph is not simply a trace of the past, but a trace of a trace of the past: and while we can safely assume the message is no longer still "live" eighty years later, it is unclear whether it was already a dead letter, a defunct piece of communication at the point when Gutmann took the photograph.

As with Evans' photo, this photograph has a content that is not present in the picture. These marks, these boards, this writing all suggest a story of loss and displacement, consistent with the dust-bowl and the great migration of this period. Arguably, this is a portrayal of a new kind of American experience of internal migration and separation.

The image draws us into a conversation, in which we, like Gutmann, are interlopers or eavesdroppers. This is a story of everyday missed encounters and frustrations, suggested not just by the legible text but also by the crossings-out, and the other marks.

The photograph does not (as pre-digital snapshots did) say flatly “I (or it) was here”, or in the case of mobile phone images "here I am, now". It differentiates itself from both the snapshot and the realist documentary image by refusing to be what Roland Barthes termed a "certificate of presence". It deals not only with what is before the camera, but in what is not there, what has slipped from view. It represents something both immediate and proximate and at the same time, out of reach, ungraspable.

I am going to end with one final image: an untitled photograph by Helen Levitt*, taken in* New York 1938-1940. At first sight, this photograph of the chalk inscription “Button to Secret Passage Press” might be read as about the creative imagination of the child, particularly in the context of Levitt’s wider work, and her interest in children and in their use of New York urban space as a space for play. But we can also read it as a reflection on the act of taking a photograph.

As with Gutmann’s photograph, we are presented this text at the expense of a scene. We face the stone wall of a building, on which chalked writing implies another world beneath or behind this barrier. The drawn button suggests a kind of magic, in which something becomes real simply by its being depicted. In the nineteenth century photography had lent itself to magic and spiritualism because of its capacity to conjur into presence that which was not physically present. Button pressing too is a kind of modern magic. Push-buttons set off a chain of events that have no direct relationship with the fingertip action of pressing them. They are associated with a kind of capriciousness and irresponsibility, as well as with a sense of power. On the one hand we have the human freedom to press the button, a

gesture that requires no skill at all, on the other a program, a black-boxed sequence of events, over which the button-presser has no control.

The button on the camera which sets off the shutter opens the way to a secret passage which is the image. There are two ways of thinking about photography: one which says the camera is a positivist tool, which can depict only that which is placed before it, can only skim the surfaces of things; and another which sees the camera as penetrating beneath the surface of things, revealing an 'optical unconscious' (Walter Benjamin would say it is capable of both of these, simultaneously).

Positivism asserts that there are no hidden depths, no dark places inaccessible to human knowledge or to science: all it knows is surface. The street tells us otherwise: a place of marks and runes, of messages that are not for us and passages we cannot enter. It marks the borders of private and public space. This is where we can link the idea of a photography that does not straightforwardly represent back to the theme of urban encounters: for what we encounter on the street is not all surface: there are doors, entrances, secret passages to inside-worlds and underworlds. The street, the exterior space of the city, always points elsewhere, inside, to what is concealed and off-limits. Photography can do this too.

One argument is that what is off -limits and out of scene is a social reality that the photograph fails to penetrate: big data, complex algorithms, the machinations that produce the visual image. Another argument (mine) is that the photograph has always had and, still has, the potential to depict what is not before it: that representation has never been simply a matter of traces of past moments and events.

We find ourselves now in a period where "the vast mound of documentation seemed to have buried reality rather than to have clarified it" as TV Reed puts it in the earlier quote. Digital culture theorists point to what else this process of incessant documentation is producing — they suggest what is at stake here is not what is depicted but what happens in the process of taking and circulating the image, what kind of data is being accrued and exchanged. This is important, but to take our eye off representation, to abandon the visual as mere surface manifestation, is to develop another blind-spot, this time towards the making and reading of nuanced and complex representations of our own reality. In opening one secret passage, we might take care not to close another.