
Abstracting Photography

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Far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object. —Ferdinand de Saussure

It is indeed the characteristic of the sadist that he humiliates his object and then—or thereby—satisfies it. —Walter Benjamin

Lets begin with two images. . . —Rosalind Krauss

The issue of what constitutes “Photography” as an ontological category has again gained currency. A reaction to the often-cited sense that somehow the term, and the practices it describes, have lost their historical and theoretical footing, now representing an amorphous field of loosely connected practices. The charged debates of the late seventies and eighties between the staid Photography department of The Museum of Modern Art, and “postmodernist” critics who attempted to dislodge its monopoly on photographic history had given Photography a position of importance, an energy that has, by this time, all but petered out. Between the loss of photography’s status as an urgent intellectual battleground, and its denaturalization by a series of technological developments, an impenetrable fuzziness has descended over what Photography—as an aesthetic and theoretical discourse—actually is, and what might be at stake in reopening this discussion of Photography’s identity. In the wake of what are now decades old polemics, bits, pieces, and fragments of previous formulations, and aesthetic conventions litter Photography’s theoretical landscape. As George Baker wrote in his essay “Photography’s Expanded Field”, “Critical consensus would have it that the problem today is not that just about anything image-based can now be called photographic, but rather that photography itself has been foreclosed, cashiered, abandoned—outmoded technologically and displaced aesthetically.”¹ In other words, the Barthesian theorization of the “this has been” *contained* in the photographic image, has become the “this has been” *of* Photography itself.

This lack of certainty with regard to what constitutes Photography as an object of inquiry can be seen for all its abstractness as a mirror of the problem of theorizing the photograph, the clash between the

apparent concreteness of the photographic referent and its slippery contextual play. Yet the term persists past its supposed theoretical and practical disintegration, and with it a forlorn pastiche of critical theorizations and aesthetic conventions that repeatedly confront a metaphor for their own self-imposed failure in the photographic image.² In melancholic retrospection, the photographic object itself represents the loss of a unity, dispersed within an equally fragmented field that for the art historian requires it to be resituated, re-pictured, a condition that prompts Baker to go on to say “...the terms involved only now become more complex, the need to map their effects more necessary, because these effects are both less obvious and self-evident.”³ Baker proposes to “read” the contemporary condition of Photography through an earlier text, that of Rosalind Krauss’ “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” at times going so far as to transplant his terms and formulations into direct quotes from her text, inhabiting her text as much as her text prefigures his own.⁴ The task at hand for Baker is to re-picture the scene of dispersal, to connect terms *again*, yet with the nagging sense that this effort is self-defeating, retrograde, it becomes a gesture of traumatic re-enactment that concludes in another moment of defacement and dispersal (in the end his drawing is scribbled over by one of the artists it is meant to contain⁵). Seeing this as a state of crisis for the medium (and thus the historian/critic who defines it), Baker performs as the allegorist does, reading his own moment through a temporally displaced other, the status of the photograph conflated and reread through the urgency of critique in 1979, his own position as a critic within the contemporary academy metaphorically and metonymically tied to that of Photography’s ebb and flow as an ontological category: “For the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory.”⁶ In this, Baker, as allegorist displaces history with pictures, pictures that resist the linear causal chains of historical development and opt instead for the simultaneity and formal morphology of the image.

So I am going to start where Baker started, with a picture, a frame, or more exactly, a square, that serves as an emblem of a past moment in art history and Photography’s most contentious and heady days, and that, like all pictures, attempts to patch a leak, cauterize a wound. In this as in many cases, it is the picture alone that signifies the wound it is meant to remedy. Baker’s text, like that of the text from which he adapted his title, represents a current historical dispersal in the quaternary field of Algirdas Julius Greimas’ semiotic square (referred to in Krauss’ text

as a Piaget or Klein group), a strategy for expanding binary oppositions into a larger field of interrelations. In 1979, Rosalind Krauss deployed this same picture when confronted with what she perceived as a crisis for the categorical language of the critic, a challenge to its ability to manage its domain. Her text ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ sought to rescue a category that was “in danger of collapsing” from the sheer heterogeneity of objects it had been called upon to describe⁷, arguing that in the discussion of post-War American art, ‘categories like sculpture and painting have been kneaded and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything.’⁸ To prevent the dam from bursting, Krauss outfitted the field with a corral, framing a sequence of coordinates whose discrete interrelations were compressed into dotted lines. For Krauss, this was a far-reaching methodological crisis, but redeployed by Baker (who acknowledges that the situation for photographic discourse is radically different) it takes on a personal dimension, reflecting his own intellectual development couched in the oedipal relations of teacher and student, and staged as an interpenetration of models and methodologies. As Baker writes, “Now I have been drawing Klein groups and semiotic squares ever since I first met Rosalind Krauss, and the reader by this point will not be surprised to learn of how fondly I remember sitting in her office conjugating the semiotic neutralization of things like the terms of gender and sexuality, some twelve years ago.”⁹ He then places his present theories into the voice of the past, and through his voice, the past speaks of the present. The switch from Krauss’ impersonal and authoritative assertion of a condition, to Baker’s superimposition of historical moments, and interplay of theoretical argumentation and introspective reflexivity, further emphasizes the sheer distance that separates their respective positions in time and methodology, allegorizing this rupture thoroughly.

Krauss’s map was nothing if not timely, indicating both the grip that Structuralist analysis had within a certain mode of theoretically fluent art criticism, and the attraction of artists of the time to structuralist theory’s usefulness in fracturing totalizing unities. It was, in other words, deeply embedded in its cultural moment, one need only think of Smithson’s “non-sites”, Martha Rosler’s *The Bowery In Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*¹⁰, (or more explicitly her *Semiotics of the Kitchen*), or the writings of Robert Morris, Dan Graham, Mel Bochner, or Allan Sekula, to see the wide effects of structuralist formulations on the American artistic landscape. Even

more so, semiotic considerations seemed equally well entrenched, making Krauss’ use of Greimas’ Semiotic square and its modular geometric form all the more resonant with the aesthetic conventions of the time (Darboven, Weiner, Kosuth, Morris, LeWitt, et al.). It is a moment when the art historian, far from looking backward on an arrangement of artists’ practices, directly participated in an active debate with them. Perhaps no group of artists took this understanding of signification to heart more than “The ‘Pictures’ Generation,” whose work, generally speaking exploited the fracture between sign and referent that Structuralist and deconstructive procedures laid bare. In their hands, the image was, like the Kraussian understanding of modernist sculpture, a homeless, free floating signifier, its meaning derived solely from context, that was, in no way, inherent to it. In their hands, when an image spoke, it spoke of this distance. Perhaps, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello write in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2006), “artistic critique is currently paralysed by what, depending on one’s viewpoint, may be regarded as its success or its failure.”¹⁰

It seems no coincidence that in response to the dual rise of institutional critique and appropriation art, that the conceptual dimensions of allegory would offer renewed interest to some of the most vocal and ambitious critics of the time (arising in particular with regard to the re-theorization of the avant-garde through the writing of Peter Bürger). This interest produced two major texts published just two years apart, Craig Owens’s “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism (Parts 1 & 2)” (1980), and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh’s “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art” (1982).¹¹ In the allegorical formulation of institutional critique (derived in equal parts from both texts), the artwork re-examines the condition of exhibition, usually along the axes of its physical, economic or architectonic properties, proposing that selected aspects, activated by artistic “intervention,” be read in tandem with the institution that contains it. In contrast, the critical action of appropriation, following the pathway of Pop back to its roots in the readymade, was targeted at the instrumental use of images and the repressive categorisations they tacitly asserted.

Both Buchloh’s and Owens’s texts provide ample disclaimers regarding the potential political agency of their chosen subjects, while Buchloh maintains that at least some of the artists within his text run the risk of merely replicating alienation (here speaking specifically of Sherrie Levine and Dara Birnbaum),

producing works whose “ultimate triumph is to repeat and anticipate in a single gesture the abstraction and alienation from the historical context to which the work is subjected in the process of commodification and acculturation.”¹² Owens acknowledges an even more bleak state of affairs, when first observing that Robert Rauschenberg (within Owens’s text, offered as a paternal figure to “The ‘Pictures’ Generation”¹³), “enacts a deconstruction of the museum, then his own deconstructive discourse [that] – like Daniel Buren’s – can take place only within the museum itself. It must therefore provisionally accept the terms and conditions it sets out to expose.”¹⁴ And then concluding, “we thus encounter once again the unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced precisely in order to denounce it. All of the work discussed in this essay is marked by a similar complicity, which is the result of its fundamentally deconstructive impulse.”¹⁵ This point is reiterated by Buchloh some twenty years later in the preface of his anthology *Neo-Avant-Garde and the Culture Industry* (2000), where he surmises that the panoply of artistic challenges to the culture industry, which “range from mimetic affirmation (e.g. Andy Warhol) to an ostentatious asceticism (e.g. Michael Asher) that – in its condemnation to a radical purity of means – more often than not in the last decade had to risk losing the very ground of the real upon which critical opposition could be inscribed.”¹⁶ Conscribed to the arguments laid out for them, the practices positioned to overturn institutionalised structures (be they in the form of cultural or economic authority), and constituted within the critical reading of allegory, offer only further evidence of the invulnerability of the institutions they identify, by their inability to exist without them. It should be noted that a similar implication of “critical failure” (Owens’ term) is at play in the work of these critics, i.e. that in their deconstruction of the institutionalised rhetoric of validation they rely on the authority granted to them through processes of accreditation, peer review, etc. in order to present their critique of those very procedures by which legitimacy is naturalized.

The proposition of materialist critique carries with it a seductive promise, not only that the world of appearances can be punctured, shedding light into its darkened recesses, but also offers that there is something to be found lurking behind the curtain, a repressed “truth” that lies dormant within all things. In the writing on Photography, this returns to a stasis, an unrepresentable cleavage. In the photograph laying things bare often leaves nothing but an abyss. Writing on the work of Troy Brantuch, Douglas Crimp offered that, “...the result is *only to make*

pictures more picture-like, to fix forever in an elegant object our distance from the history that produced these images. *That distance is all these pictures signify*.”¹⁷ This appraisal was not uncommon among his contemporaries, Craig Owens, in “Photography en *abyss*” went further indicating that this quality of doubling, and its reflexive understanding, was “...a property of the photograph itself,” an instance of photography speaking *from the abyss*.¹⁸ Using Robert Smithson as an example, Owens writes “In a photograph, Smithson casts a shadow over the presumed transparency of photographs; he raises serious doubts about their capacity to convey anything but a sense of loss, of absence.”¹⁹ This absence is theorized as death for Barthes, for “... however ‘lifelike’ we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of the apprehension of death), Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.”²⁰ An argument that echoed Sigfried Kracauer in his 1927 essay “Photography” when he wrote, “That the world devours [photographs] is a sign of the *fear of death*. What the photographs, by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image. In the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present, and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it.”²¹ Kracauer saw photography as demolishing memory (the real), the core of a liberated consciousness (the very mnemonic real that Barthes saw as the redemptive *punctum*, a wound that opened up in the surface of the banal *studium*, or the social history that the photograph was a part of).

Since its inception, the photographic image has been strongly associated with displacement and destruction, a triumph of images over material. Writing in 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes claimed that with the advent of photography (for him distilled in the verisimilitude of the stereograph), “*Form is henceforth divorced from matter*. In fact matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please.”²² This destruction is totalizing, in Vilém Flusser’s multivalent study of photography, this conundrum of the photographic image is inescapable “Nothing can resist the force of this current of technical images—there is no artistic, scientific or political activity which is not

aimed at it, there is no everyday activity which does not aspire to be photographed, filmed, videotaped.... In this way, however, every action simultaneously loses its historical character and turns into a magical ritual and an endlessly repeatable movement. The universe of technical images, emerging all around us, represents the fulfilment of the ages, in which action and agony go endlessly round in circles. Only from this apocalyptic perspective, it seems, does the problem of photography assume the importance it deserves.”²³ This is the Frankenstein-like becoming of the photograph, itself a conflation of the concrete with the image, a place where the real is a priori an image, and vice versa.

As signifying surfaces, images are abstractions. The logic of the abstraction is the reduction of four dimensions to a two dimensional surface. As Roland Barthes argued (and as Baker cites in his afore mentioned text), “The goal of all Structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic, is to reconstruct an ‘object’ in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the ‘functions’) of this object. Structure is therefore actually a simulacrum of the object, but a directed interested simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible...”²⁴ To put it another way, Structuralism is primarily concerned with abstractions, the proliferation of abstractions that we encounter in the world, or more specifically the source (“real”) from which the chosen abstraction has developed and must be thus reconstituted backwards from (because, of course, this “real” is obscured by the abstractions it generated), and to this end, Structuralism adds another layer of abstraction, another image to the conceptual heap. The discourses around ideology critique, critiques of representation, identity, etc. in so far as they are concerned with images, seek not only to reconstruct the object or origin point of the abstraction (source text, or “real”) in the physical or temporal circumstance of the creation of the image (people, places, things, times), but the socio-political origin of the abstraction, uncovering it’s ideological formulation nestled deep within. This usually results in the unveiling of some form of power that instrumentalizes the image, be it from a capitalist, colonialist, racist, hetero-sexist, sexist etc. episteme, each of these an ideological tool that seeks to maintain the relations between dominant and the subordinant forces. The potent question for the Structuralist is thus a question of framing, or more exactly, how do these images “frame” the real relations of power such that the interplay of dominance and subordination are maintained?

But this is somewhat beside the point, for to confuse a photograph for an image is to subject the concrete world (the real relations between things) to another in a sequence of abstractions (a photograph after all is present in four space-time dimensions, constructed of worldly material, and not simply reducible to an immaterial imago/likeness). The term image is not an ontological umbrella under which a photograph can be classified, but more so, a conceptual tool that functions in a particular way, and ceases to function if applied in a circumstance where it is asked to do something other than what it was designed for. To confuse this is to turn a relational idea into an ontological one. Perhaps this confusion of photographic theory for the analysis of images is why the discourse on photography shifted from a focus on its instrumentality, to a concern that photography no longer truly exists, of course, this only after photography as a concept had been fully *imagined* (imaged). Subsumed in a digital or ideological dispersal at the whim of a multitude of discursive instrumentalizations, its supposed dissolution has become so utterly complete that whatever it is that photography was, it no longer is (if it “is” at all), becoming a “void” or the site of “death.” It is comforting to propose that something is “behind” images in a metaphysical sense, even if this something is an absence (or death, as Barthes and Kracauer among others have proposed).

In sharp contrast to the most prominent tactics of non-photographic aesthetic programs of the late 80’s and 90’s, approaches that showed renewed interest in bricolage, social networking, and rough-hewn or vernacular aesthetics, photography of the era seemed to be codifying around a diametrically opposed array of concerns. The photography of that moment favoured the staid genre forms of the pre-modern Beaux-Arts exemplified in an almost obsessive adherence to Renaissance pictorial formulae. Making use of art’s own reflexive theatrical death mask (the institution), architectural tropes—ubiquitous in both contemporary photography’s presentational affect, and its subject of choice—performed a tautological affirmation of the cold geometries of the white cube within monolithic proscenia, as if reassuring spectators of their ontological belonging in the museum’s hallowed halls. The depopulated city scenes, and emptied serial structures of the seventies art photography grew into Plexiglas monoliths, an odd hybrid of architecture’s industrialized materiality and painting’s scale. Its photographic alternative embraced the notion of the archive, a reiteration of organizational power, or as Benjamin H.D. Buchloh put it with regard to conceptual art,

an “aesthetics of administration”. It was as if in the wake of the troubling recognition of photography’s malleability in the hands of instrumental use, and its critical reappraisal by artists and critics in the sixties and seventies, the contemporary production of photographs required turning back to a time before avant-gardist debates, or postmodernist dismantling to something akin to the pictorialism of salon painting, and the hearth of the Natural History Museum. Such works become metaphors for the instrumentalization of the photograph, a negative parody of this foreclosure, these can be considered as nothing more than an image of the photograph’s base social condition in the art world, that evasive quality that Krauss termed “exhibitionality”.²⁵

The Great Exhibition of 1851, held in London’s Hyde Park, defined the conditions of exhibition in the modern sense. From the early 1500s onward the term “exhibition” had only specialised legal meaning, referring to a giving of evidence: literally to “hold out” before a higher power. But with the Great Exhibition, and in World’s Fairs that followed, the antiquarian meaning and implications of the term blossomed. The Crystal Palace was not of the world of buildings and monuments. It was a machine, a container for vistas, a scrim upon which spectacle could occur; a proposal that was alien to the public affirmation of cultural stability that architecture had come to represent. It was perpetually new, a structure whose modular construction allowed endless substitution. At every turn, its interchangeable serial components shone with a “fairy like brilliance,”²⁶ as if dropped from the heavens. Architecture and vision became a singularity rendered in iron, as though Alberti’s diagram of Renaissance perspective had been made concrete. If the Crystal Palace was the first building that fully capitalized on the theatrical spectacle of exhibition, the readymade was the first art object to be solely constituted by theatrical distance. Here the ritual act of viewing became the artwork’s material, the object itself a hollow shell, a decoy. Thierry de Duve put it succinctly when he wrote that, in the wake of the readymade, the only truth to which the art object could attest was the power of its own name, rendering palpable the “pact that would unite the spectators of the future around some object...that added nothing to the constructed environment and did not improve on it but, quite the contrary, pulled away from it, bearing no other function than that of pure signifier.”²⁷ It seems no coincidence that just as Duchamp brought the foundational theatricality of art objects to the fore, the “zero point” of painterly materialism would surface thousands of miles away as a theatrical backdrop. In 1913 Kazimir Malevich was

asked to contribute costumes and set designs for the Cubo-Futurist play *Victory over the Sun*. Aside from the almost unwearable costumes, Malevich produced a series of concept drawings for the sets, which, in stark black and white, appear like preparatory sketches for the Suprematist canvases he would begin producing two years later. When asked about his tautologically titled *Black Square* (1915), and its placement at 45 degrees in the top corner of the room of the 1915 exhibition 0.10, Malevich referred back to these early set designs as its origin. The monochrome was thus situated as both the material negation of the painterly image (an object that operated by pictorial resemblance), and the symbolic negation of the very thing that made vision possible.

While *Black Square* is often credited with being the first monochrome, this is not actually the case (not that being first matters). Some thirty years earlier this totem of total materialist refusal was realized by the poet Paul Bilhaud, in an exhibition staged in the apartment of the writer Jules Lévy in October of 1882. Such modernist notables as Edouard Manet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and Richard Wagner were given a peek at what would be framed as their legacy.²⁸ For the exhibition, Bilhaud contributed a small black painting titled *Combat de nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit* (*Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night*), a joke that was stolen not once but twice, first by Alphonse Allais who produced a book titled *Album Primo-Avrilesque* (1897) which expanded the series to a range of color swatches (and contained no mention of Bilhaud, despite their acquaintance) and later by Malevich, who in the same year as *Black Square* produced the painting *Red Square* which included a particularly Bilhaudian parenthetical addendum in its title (*Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*). The invisibility of the site of work was here matched by the invisibility of the marginalized, both relegated to infrastructural obscurity. Daily life’s representability was again scathingly parodied, the quotidian again displayed in absentia. Such mistrust of images has become a staple of modern life (and that is not to say images aren’t an ancient bugbear, golden calves and the like operating as the exemplar of societies on their downward spiral), although Photography, not painting, has been the primary recipient of this ritual derision for the past half-century. Stoic deconstructive critique, and hedonistic celebrations of nihilism often result in identical outcomes; it is just the captions that change. One is prompted to wonder how many times we can restage this anxious war on images to satisfactory effect?

While contemporary art has proven hesitant to veer into overt allegorical play, science fiction displays little reticence. In the 1968 episode of *Star Trek*, “Spectre of the Gun”, Captain Kirk and crew set out under strict orders to contact an advanced yet unknown race called the Melkotians. Warned off by an automated buoy, they proceed to the surface of the planet, since their mission of peace came with the stipulation from their superiors that this contact must be made “at any cost” (peace at any cost being an American hallmark, a silent nod to the Vietnam war). On the planet the crew are transported into a schematic version of the American Old West, specifically the very moment of the shoot-out at the O.K. Corral, finding they occupy the role of the losers of this fight. Although the scene is notably fictitious (even to the crew), death is not. As Dr. McCoy observes “In the midst of what seems so unreal, a harsh reality. This is not a dream.”

No matter what claims they make to the inhabitants of this virtual world, no one believes they are who they say they are, instead they are seen as an unwanted group of outlaws, familiar enemies who refuse to leave despite the townspeople’s warnings. That the Old West town is partial (missing walls, facades, and other architectonic necessities) is explained within the narrative as being the result of missing information in Kirk’s knowledge of the site, yet the other reason for the town’s appearance was the show’s budgetary restrictions, which forced the producers to recycle parts of Old West sets on Paramount’s studio back lot. The scene of the crew’s confrontation with its own historical mythology (they were after all, space cowboys, colonizing “the final frontier”) occurs in remnants of past Hollywood narratives, a bricolage of the ruins of past fantasies, past scenes, past viewpoints. As the crew waits for the impending showdown, it is reasoned that the only way to transcend this prison is to reject the fiction all together (an insight coming from their condescending superego in residence, Science Officer Spock). As Spock goes on to warn, “I know the bullets are unreal, therefore they cannot kill me. The slightest doubt, and the bullets will kill you...” and then offering, “they do not exist. Unreal, appearances only, they are shadows, illusions, nothing but ghosts of reality. They are lies, falsehoods, spectres, without body. They are to be ignored.” But realizing this is not enough, for they cannot remove the kernel of doubt about the reality of what they see, and this doubt, or more exactly, this belief in the facticity of images is exactly what will kill them. Only after a mindmeld with Spock is the crew immune to the weapons used against them, the “false consciousness” of the world of images

transcended, they are then allowed audience with the timid yet advanced aliens, an audience we never see in the episode, for we are still in the world of sets and allegories, just as the crew was when they landed on the planet, capable perhaps of understanding fictions, but not able to ignore them. An alien world that is beyond images is also beyond representation, a zero point that the crew of the Enterprise proved itself worthy of, but as television viewers we have yet to do the same.

But what of Malevich’s zero point of painting, and its proposed transcendence? With the climate in post-revolutionary Russia progressing into Stalinism, Malevich returned to his pre-Suprematist foundations, producing canvases that aped his antecedents, first Cubo-Futurism, and at its most extreme, impressionism. Stranger still, Malevich backdated these works, so that his Suprematist works remained the forgone conclusion of these styles, turning his own progression into a parabola, doubling back on itself. Since he held to the conviction that he had come closest to the endpoint of painting in his late thirties, the height of purism in form, there was nowhere to go but backward.

The endless circulation of purisms in a culture of copies, where political life is framed as a struggle of images, always seems to lead to the same place, back into the blank, which leaves the sites of production camouflaged in plain view, like Paul Bilhaud’s preemptive joke on monochrome painting’s radicality. In the debris of such battles, one is prompted to ask where does the ground of the real that these struggles are supposedly in the service of actually lie? In the wake of these double negations individual producers are relegated to one more modular element, the social field appearing as a static constellation of interchangeable parts. The citizen subject realized as a relational component, a unit of measure, an abstraction. But what of the visceral residues of work? Where labour’s vulgar bodily exertions are required, it exists out of view, in off-hours, backrooms, cellars, and distant factories, negotiated in private communications and invisible transports, sanitized by aggregation, illegible in seductive surfaces. The question most urgent for photography is no longer what inherent meaning it may contain (whether it be interminable presence of the aesthetic formalists, or the essentialized condition of contingency and ideological instrumentalization of the social critics) but more so how specific photographs construct and organize social space in a concrete and immediate way.

As viewers, our role is usually to dissolve into these frames, into an aggregated mass: out of time, out of space, and into an abstract gleaming world. Yet, seeing ourselves as part of the mass, our individuality in a perpetual vacillation between disappearance and reappearance, does not have to be debilitating. Rather, it can be a source of strength. Autonomy has historically emerged from marginal zones; pirates and radicals hide like rats in the walls, housewives stage mini-revolutions in their kitchens, office workers in their cubicles. An understanding of this can make it clear that production is a common fact, a daily ritual of compromise enacted with various levels of awareness, but present nonetheless as a lingering force. We can be both inside and outside of the picture, one of its parts and one of its producers; there need not be a stratified hierarchy in our relationship to aesthetics. The images that alienate can be brought to earth, given bodily form. The truth of the matter is that all images require a material existence, and we must resist the urge to transform the material world into an image world. In this photographs appear key. This is not an either or choice, but a realization that images are indistinguishable from their material supports, one cannot exist without the other. The embedded compromises and negotiations present in any production and their subsequent lack of instrumental solidity need not be seen as dirty secrets. This would not be an absolutist proclamation of the corruption of authorship, but rather, an assertion that this authorial position is a communal one of transparency and subterfuge at once. In this realization, there is a middle ground of negotiation. All production—even “authorship”—is comprised of myriad transit points and competing forces which deceptively assume the appearance of solidity.

The world we see from transitional spaces—the world outside the window; the world from the perspective of escalators, people movers, monorails, and shopping centres—has become an intellectual bogeyman, a storage container for all our alienations. These infrastructural interstitial zones stand as compromised, indeterminate way stations between chimerical destinations. As an open field they occupy the space of bare fact, which we should approach with suspicion, but they are also unprocessed, and this has potential. Perhaps it is our presumption that all things, in order to exist, must have a determinable authorship and a plausible origin story is what renders these plays of compromise inscrutable. Seemingly monolithic expressions of power, such as images, are a similar accumulation of compromise and negotiation, containing gaps where any visitor may assert their own agenda. We too are collaborators, even if we

choose to relinquish our place in the credits. The answer seems less to reorganize a seemingly chaotic field, or re-enact nihilistic failure, but allow a discourse’s “crisis” to open up what were seemingly foreclosed possibilities. These momentary openings, the pockets between, their ruins, their transitory spaces, their ignored seams and forgotten vistas, promise a site from which the either/or of utopian and apocalyptic thinking—or the political/formalist opposition—can be dismantled, and production can be both symbolic and literal at once.

WORDS WITHOUT PICTURES
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1. George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field" *October*, vol. 114, Fall 2005, p 122.
2. Thus we are confronted with the recurring theme that what is missing from a photograph, constitutes what it is truly about. An approach most notoriously deployed by Walter Benjamin when he wrote that the work of Atget derived its meaning from its appearing like a "recently evacuated scene of a crime," in his "Short (Small) History of Photography".
3. G. Baker, op sit., p 138.
4. For example, on page 127 Baker writes/quotes "'That is' to really paraphrase Krauss, 'the [not-narrative] is, according to the logic of a certain kind of expansion, just another way of expressing the term [stasis], and the [not-stasis] is, simply, [narrative].'" Baker's insertions are represented within the text as brackets, or "breeches" in the continuity of Krauss' voice through which Baker's formulations bubble up.
5. "At any rate, when I first sketched my graph for the artist with which I began, Nancy Davenport, she quickly grabbed my pen and paper and began to swirl lines in every direction, circling around my oppositions and squares, with a look that seemed to say 'What about these possibilities?' *My graph was a mess*. But the photographer's lines, though revolving around the field, had no center, and they extended in every direction." *ibid.* p 140. [emphasis added]
6. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, (tr. John Osborne), London and New York: Verso, 1998, p 185.
7. Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field,' *October*, vol.8, Spring 1979, p.30.
8. *ibid.* p33.
9. Baker, p.128.
10. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Gregory Elliot), New York and London: Verso, 2006, p.466.
11. Neither Owens nor Buchloh mention the other's work despite various similarities in reference and argumentation, and the assumed awareness the two authors had of each other's work.
12. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art', *Artforum*, September 1982, p.56.
13. 'Pictures' is the title of an exhibition curated by Douglas Crimp that opened at Artists Space, New York in September 1977, including works by Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith. An essay of the same title was published by Crimp in *October*, vol.8, Spring 1979, pp.75–88, which was an expansion of Crimp's essay that accompanied the exhibition.
14. Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism (Part 2)', *October*, vol.13, Summer 1980, p.71.
15. *Ibid.*, p.79.
16. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avant-Garde and the Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, New York and Cambridge: October Books, 2001, p.xxi.
17. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures", *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), p.85. *italics added*.
18. Craig Owens, "Photography *en abyme*", *October*, 5, (Summer, 1978), p. 78
19. *Ibid.* p 88.
20. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (Hill and Wang: New York), 1981. Tr. Richard Howard. P 31-32.
21. Sigfried Kracauer, "Photography" in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge London), 1995. Ed/tr, Thomas Y. Levin. P. 59.
22. Oliver Wendel Holmes, "The Stereoscope and Stereograph." *Classic Essays on Photography*. (Ed. Alan Trachtenberg). New Haven: Leete's Island, 1980. p 80.
23. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (London:Reaktion Books), 2000. p 20.
24. G. Baker, op sit. p 124.
25. Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces", in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (The MIT Press: Cambridge/London), 1985, pp131-50.
26. Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace, 1851–1936: A Portrait of Victorian Enterprise*, London: Hugh Evelyn, 1970, p.34.
27. Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (trans. Dana Polan and Th. de Duve), Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p.115.
28. Phillip Dennis Cate, "The Spirit of Montmartre" in *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor, and the Avant-Garde, 1875-1905*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, Phillip Dennis Cate and Mary Shaw.