On Photography
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Melancholy Objects

Photographs, which turn the past into a consumable object, are a short cut. Any collection of photographs is an exercise in Surrealist montage and the Surrealist abbreviation of history. As Kurt Schwitters and, more recently, Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz have made brilliant objects, tableaux, environments out of refuse, we now make a history out of our detritus. And some virtue, of a civic kind appropriate to a democratic society, is attached to the practice. The true modernism is not austerity but a garbage-strewn plenitude—the willful travesty of Whitman's magnanimous dream. Influenced by the photographers and the pop artists, architects like Robert Venturi learn from Las Vegas and find Times Square a congenial successor to the Piazza San Marco; and Reyner Banham lauds Los Angeles's "instant architecture and instant townscape" for its gift of freedom, of a good life impossible amid the beauties and squalors of the European city—extolling the liberation offered by a society whose consciousness is built, ad hoc, out of scraps and junk. America, that surreal country, is full of found objects. Our junk has become art. Our junk has become history.

Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information. Photography has become the quintessential art of affluent, wasteful, restless societies—an indispensable tool of the new mass culture that took shape here after the Civil War, and conquered Europe only after World War II, although its values had gained a foothold among the well-off as early as the 1850s when, according to the splenetic description of Baudelaire, "our squalid society" became narcissistically entranced by Daguerre's "cheap method of disseminating a loathing for history."

The Surrealist purchase on history also implies an undertow of melancholy as well as a surface voracity and impertinence. At the very beginning of photography, the late 1830s, William H. Fox Talbot noted the camera's special aptitude for recording "the injuries of time." Fox Talbot was talking about what happens to buildings and monuments. For us, the more interesting abrasions are not of stone but of flesh. Through photographs we follow in the most intimate, troubling way the reality of how people age. To look at an old photograph of oneself, of anyone one has known, or of a much photographed public person is to feel, first of all: how much younger I (she, he) was then. Photography is the inventory of mortality. A touch of the finger now suffices to invest a moment with posthumous irony. Photographs show people being so irrefutably there and at a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have already disbanded, changed, continued along the course of their independent destinies. One's reaction to the photographs Roman Vishniac took in 1938 of daily life in the ghettos of Poland is overwhelmingly affected by the knowledge of how soon all these people were to perish. To the solitary stroller, all the faces in the stereotyped photographs cupped behind glass and affixed to tombstones in the cemeteries of Latin countries seem to contain a portent of their death. Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people. Some working-class Berliners in Robert Siodmak's film Menschen am Sonntag (1929) are having their pictures taken at the end of a Sunday outing. One by one they step before the itinerant photographer's black box—grin, look anxious, clown, stare. The movie camera lingers in close-up to let us savor the mobility of each face; then we see the face frozen in the last of its expressions, embalmed in a still. The photographs shock, in the flow of the movie—transmuting, in an instant, present into past, life into death. And one of the most disquieting films ever made, Chris Marker's La Jetée (1963), is the tale of a man who foresees his own death, narrated entirely with still photographs.

As the fascination that photographs exercise is a reminder of death, it is also an invitation to sentimentality. Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past. One recent book arranges in alphabetical order the photographs of an incongruous group of celebrities as babies or children. Stalin and Gertrude Stein, who face outward from opposite pages, look equally solemn and huggable; Elvis Presley and Proust, another pair of youthful page-mates, slightly resemble each other; Hubert Humphrey (age 3) and Aldous Huxley (age 8), side by side, have in common that both already display the forceful exaggerations of character for which they were to be known as adults. No picture in the book is without interest and charm, given what we know (including, in most cases, photographs) of the famous creatures those children were to become. For this and similar ventures in Surrealist irony, naïve snapshots or the most conventional studio portraits are most effective: such pictures seem even more odd, moving, premonitory.

Rehabilitating old photographs, by finding new contexts for them, has become a major book industry. A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs). A photograph could also be described as a quotation, which makes a book of photographs like a book of quotations. And an increasingly common way of presenting photographs in book form is to match photographs themselves with quotes.

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The past itself, as historical change continues to accelerate, has become the most surreal of subjects—making it possible, as Benjamin said, to see a new beauty in what is vanishing. From the start, photographers not only set themselves the task of recording a disappearing world but were so employed by those hastening its disappearance. (As early as 1842, that indefatigable improver of French architectural treasures, Viollet-le-Duc, commissioned a series of daguerreotypes of Notre Dame before beginning his restoration of the cathedral.) “To renew the old world,” Benjamin wrote, “that is the collector’s deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things.” But the old world cannot be renewed—certainly not by quotations; and this is the rueful, quixotic aspect of the photographic enterprise.

Benjamin’s ideas are worth mentioning because he was photography’s most original and important critic—despite (and because of) the inner contradiction in his account of photography which follows from the challenge posed by his Surrealist sensibility to his Marxist/Brechtian principles—and because Benjamin’s own ideal project reads like a sublimated version of the photographer’s activity. This project was a work of literary criticism that was to consist entirely of quotations, and would thereby be devoid of anything that might betray empathy. A disavowal of empathy, a disdain for message-mongering, a claim to be invisible—these are strategies endorsed by most professional photographers. The history of photography discloses a long tradition of ambivalence about its capacity for partisanship: the taking of sides is felt to undermine its perennial assumption that all subjects have validity and interest. But what in Benjamin is an excruciating idea of fastidiousness, meant to permit the mute past to speak in its own voice, with all its unresolvable complexity, becomes—when generalized, in photography—the cumulative de-creation of the past (in the very act of preserving it), the fabrication of a new, parallel reality that makes the past immediate while underscoring its comic or tragic ineffectuality, that invests the specificity of the past with an unlimited irony, that transforms the present into the past and the past into pastness.

Like the collector, the photographer is animated by a passion that, even when it appears to be for the present, is linked to a sense of the past. But while traditional arts of historical consciousness attempt to put the past in order, distinguishing the innovative from the retrograde, the central from the marginal, the relevant from the irrelevant or merely interesting, the photographer’s approach—like that of the collector—is unsystematic, indeed anti-systematic. The photographer’s ardor for a subject has no essential relation to its content or value, that which makes a subject classifiable. It

is, above all, an affirmation of the subject's thereness; its rightness (the rightness of a look on a face, of the arrangement of a group of objects), which is the equivalent of the collector's standard of genuineness; its quiddity—whatever qualities make it unique. The professional photographer's preeminently willful, avid gaze is one that not only resists the traditional classification and evaluation of subjects but seeks consciously to defy and subvert them. For this reason, its approach to subject matter is a good deal less aleatoric than is generally claimed.

In principle, photography executes the Surrealist mandate to adopt an uncompromisingly egalitarian attitude toward subject matter. (Everything is "real.") In fact, it has—like mainstream Surrealist taste itself—evinced an inveterate fondness for trash, eyesores, rejects, peeling surfaces, odd stuff, kitsch. Thus, Atget specialized in the marginal beauties of jerry-built wheeled vehicles, gaudy or fantastic window displays, the raffish art of shop signs and carousels, ornate porticoes, curious door knockers and wrought-iron grilles, stucco ornaments on the façades of run-down houses. The photographer—and the consumer of photographs—follows in the footsteps of the ragpicker, who was one of Baudelaire's favorite figures for the modern poet:

Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects…. He sorts things out and makes a wise choice; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry.

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