Article

Back to the (Winter) Garden: On Still Video, Motion Pictures and the Time of Early Photography

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Abstract: This essay, which reframes elements of my 2015 book, *Daguerreotypes: Fugitive Subjects, Contemporary Objects*, returns to the lacuna at the heart of Roland Barthes's reflections on photography: the so-called "Winter Garden" photograph of his mother as a little girl. An image that is lovingly conjured but forever withheld, this photograph is the fulcrum of a theory of photography that emerged from the conjunction of mourning and desire. For Barthes, and all those working in his wake, the absent photograph is something of photography's primal scene. With attention to the work of Eve Sussman and Simon Lee, their 2011 three-channel HD video *Wintergarden* and her 2018 NFT *89 Seconds Atomized* in particular, this essay takes readers "back to the garden" to think about the time of early photography. To do so, this essay considers a range of contemporary videos that mine and mime the conventions of photography to produce static, durational encounters with stillness in a medium that is anything but, ultimately, revealing the truths and fictions of photography's founding moment and fundamental logic.

Keywords: still video; early photography; Barthes's *Winter Garden*

1. Introduction

Why would an artist use the technology of motion pictures to create the appearance of stasis? By the appearance of stasis, I do not mean the freeze-frame, as pioneered by Dziga Vertov in his 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera* or as deployed by François Truffaut to conclude his 1959 *The 400 Blows* (*Les Quatre Cents Coups*). Rather, I mean the deliberate attempt, in film and video, to produce the illusion of stillness, to create a projected image so static that it might be mistaken for a photograph. Tacita Dean, Thomas Struth, and Gillian Wearing are just a few of the contemporary artists who produce seemingly "static" video portraits, the stamina of their stock-still subjects dramatized in perpetuity by the video loop. For some scholars, the answer to this question is philosophical. In engaging temporality as an internal dimension of the photograph, such artistic gambits shift our understanding of photography from an ontological foundation to an epistemological one (Drucker 2010). But, what if the answer to this question is not, or is not only philosophical but historical? The work of Eve Sussman and her various collaborators, particularly her 2011 three-channel video installation *Wintergarden*, takes us down that proverbial path; through its allusions and illusions, it leads us back to a garden that might well be understood as photography's primal scene.

2. Fission

On 7 November 2018, the Brooklyn-based digital laboratory Snark.art coupled the logic of blockchain technology with the medium of video art to launch itself into the economic arena of NFTs. Working collaboratively with Sussman, they offered a tantalizing preview of their first piece, *89 Seconds Atomized*, whose premise and promise was to shatter the last Artist Proof of her 2004 Whitney debut video *89 Seconds at Alcázar* into 2304 digital blocks, or "atoms." A behind-the-scenes video piece that dramatized the swirl of activity in the royal palace, the crescendo and diminuendo of the before and after necessarily absent

from the pictorial moment that is Velázquez' *Las Meninas,* Sussman's 2004 *89 Seconds at Alcázar* gives us artist, children, dwarves, king, queen, and even the dog as players in a backstage drama that extends the time of painting back into a fictive realm immediately preceding its grouping of figures and forward into the moments just after their fixed poses have been relaxed. In fact, a good deal longer than the titular eighty-nine seconds, clocking in at twelve minutes and screened in a continuous loop, *89 Seconds at Alcázar* stands as a cinematic rejoinder and an artistic footnote to the extensive art historical literature on the painting. Moreover, in theoretical terms, Sussman's original piece might be said to have cracked open the Velázquez canvas, if not the entire medium of painting, to the claims of time. For in reimagining the before and after of the painterly scene, Sussman expanded the perpetually present tense of painting into a cinematic distension of Lessing's "pregnant moment", reaching back into the past and ahead into the future, projecting the painting into a realm that was at once historical and hypothetical.

In contrast to this first foray into what, given the concerns of this Special Issue, might be called "trans-mediality", Sussman's 2018 blockchain experiment *89 Seconds Atomized* dispersed the time-based medium of video, and in turn, the Velázquez painting that was its foundation and inspiration, not into time but into space, albeit a virtual space: namely, the radically decentralized, digital domain of networked computers. Gridded out like a Renaissance drawing, each particle of this process of digital fission had a resolution of 400 pixels and maintained the running time and complete soundtrack of the original video. At once a commercial and conceptual gambit, the individual NFTs that comprised *89 Seconds Atomized*, had a starting price of $120 per atom (which was payable with a credit card or cryptocurrency). With each NFT uniquely assigned to its owner, the complete set of 2304 atoms could only be reconstituted into a whole through communal screenings or loans orchestrated by their owners. Of course, owners could always watch their own pieces when and if they chose. However, unless the entire community of collectors collaborated to create a collective situation of viewing, the piece could never be reconstituted; screenings would always have atoms missing and permutations would proliferate. To date, the piece remains scattered and shattered.

3. Algorithm

89 Seconds Atomized was not Sussman's first experiment in electronic art. In 2011, Sussman harnessed the power of computing to produce her *whiteonwhite:algorithmicfilmnoir*, a deliberately non-linear, anti-narrative exercise in perpetual cinematic becoming. Realized by a purpose-built piece of software that could edit its nearly 3000 clips of footage and sound in real-time to create an infinitely variable sequence of shots and non-synchronous sound, the film never reaches a conclusion, let alone coalesces into a coherent whole. Its auteur supplanted by an algorithm, its drama determined by the data files of a compendious digital archive, *whiteonwhite:algorithmicfilmnoir* is a genre film that is rendered at once generic and enigmatic through the churning permutations of code.

Conceived and realized with Simon Lee and other members of the Rufus Corporation, the ad hoc group of collaborators with whom Sussman had been working on her projects since 2003, *whiteonwhite:algorithmicfilmnoir* was created from footage captured and staged during a two-year trip across Central Asia, en route to the Caspian Sea. During that trip, Sussman also collected the raw footage for what emerged, at least in terms of its first gallery screenings, as something of a companion piece: the 2011 three-channel video installation, *Wintergarden.* Both pieces depict the interiors and exteriors of mid-century Soviet residential and industrial sites, their varying states of decay and neglect conveying the extent to which the founding utopianism of those architectures has long since given way to political failures and entropic forces. However, where Sussman's *algorithmicfilmnoir* is perpetually in motion, unspooling its scenarios of scientific experiment and surveillance in a shifting sequence of disordered scenes, *Wintergarden* is a rigorous filmic exercise in stillness, so much so that, at a glance, it could be mistaken for a triptych of photographs (For an image of the triptych, please see the link to the Christine Tierney Gallery in the notes)[1].

A sustained look at *Wintergarden*'s shots of the crumbling surfaces and poignantly individuated balconies of the prefabricated, Khrushchev-era housing reveals extremely subtle but incontrovertible evidence of movement. Some of this motion is internal to each shot. Some is structural, in the slow dissolve from one seemingly photographic image to the next. Whatever the particular revelatory detail that destroys the initial illusion of stasis, sustained observation makes clear, if only in retrospect, that at no point is *Wintergarden* entirely still. There is constant, if at times imperceptible, animation. Yet, until that point of recognition, the piece does an extremely persuasive job of appearing to be static, of creating the illusion that it is not filmic but photographic.

Were *Wintergarden* alone in its aesthetic gambit, it would have little bearing beyond an account of Sussman's work. However, it is not. Instead, it joins a ranging body of contemporary work that deploys technologies of the moving image (film, video, digital) not to dramatize the oft-rehearsed distinction between photographic stasis and cinematic movement but in a defiant challenge to this enduring opposition, to open the idea of the static photographic image to the dynamics of movement and time (Saltzman 2015).

4. Duration

Each and every time that we pose for a picture, we inhabit the time of early photography: the time of long exposure. When we still ourselves before the lens of the camera, we embody that history of the medium (Friday 2006). This is not to say that theorists from André Bazin to Roland Barthes were wrong to fixate on the mortifying implications of the photographic pose. We need only remind ourselves of the fact that David Octavius Hill held his portrait sessions in a cemetery—where else could he find such uninterrupted stillness? —to assimilate once and for all the idea of death in life that is both the photographic pose and the photographic portrait. That said, even if, in posing, we still ourselves as if in death, proleptically performing our inescapable futures, we also engage in an act of retrospection. Each time we prepare for our imagistic arrest, we not only anticipate our own mortality, but remember the time of early photography. Such is the genealogy and paradox of the pose (de Duve 1978).

Nowhere is this time of long exposure more vivid than in the work of those artists of the moving image who have demanded that a person pose before the lens of a movie camera, stock still, for seconds, minutes, or even as long as an hour. Warhol asked it of his subjects in the 1960s in portrait sessions, the eponymous screen tests. Yet, even as he asked his subjects to still themselves before his camera, in an exercise that wed the playful spontaneity and contemporaneity of his beloved photo-mat with the nineteenth-century social practice of the carte-de-visite, not all participants obeyed that mandate (Arthur 2003). Some attempted to turn their faces into rigid masks, broken only by the blink of an eye or the tightening of a facial muscle; others exaggerated the movements of their eyes and lips, nodded and gestured, or even moved about with willful abandon. Moreover, even as he directed his subjects to still themselves before his camera, his ambition was less to assert a photographic truth than to dramatize a cinematic one (Bruno 2007). An embryonic cinema created in the thrall of contemporary culture, *Screen Tests* was a project that saw its correlate on the surface of his contemporaneous silk screens, where the film reel stuttered to a stop to produce a photomechanical image-archive of celebrity, death, and disaster, their repetitions like so many painterly freeze-frames.

Warhol may have been the first, but he was by no means the last to demand static poses before a motion picture camera. Agnès Varda asked it as well when, in the penultimate shots of her 1974–1975 documentary *Daguerreotypes*, she directed each of her subjects, the shopkeepers on her block of the rue Daguerre, to hold a pose before her camera, this time, explicitly, as if for a photograph. In the concluding sequence of shots, each take lasted roughly seven seconds, and the merchants posed as if before the antiquated camera of their street's namesake, miming the rigid and sustained posture that once would have been necessary to fix their likeness in a daguerreotype. They stand in their shops as if they are in the confines of a nineteenth-century portrait studio, both in and out of time. They pose,

and, in so doing, they are exposed. For in French, pose signifies both the "pose" of the model and the time of photographic "exposure" (Didi-Huberman [1982] 2003).

In more recent years, perhaps no contemporary video installation has more forthrightly declared its allegiance to the (early) photographic situation of long exposure and to the bodily demands and attendant fictions of the daguerreotype, than Gillian Wearing's 1996 group portrait, *Sixty Minute Silence*. *Sixty Minute Silence* repeats and extends the concluding conceit of Varda's *Daguerreotypes* largely through insisting on the utter stillness of her posing subjects; in this case, twenty-six actors are costumed in the uniforms of a local constabulary. Depicted both seated and standing, the police force captured in *Sixty Minute Silence* delivers a masterful performance of order and control, channeling its duties into the collective maintenance of its authoritative posture. From the fixed camera position to the disciplined stillness of its subjects, *Sixty Minute Silence* is a study in the conventions and scenarios of early photographic portraiture, taking us from the light-bathed glass hothouses of Daguerre's disciples to the darkness of the archive that came to be constituted in Bertillon's prefecture of police. At first glance, *Sixty Minute Silence* is utterly persuasive as either a monumental back-lit photographic transparency or a vivid slide projection. As a work of video art, it is a simple, dramatic declaration of the bodily discipline required during the time of long exposure. It takes us into the durational dynamics of photography while laying them bare. It gives us, through cinematic means, the photograph, as if unfolding in time, growing into, and developing into a picture.

A similar discipline organized the subjects of Thomas Struth's 1996–2003 series of individual video portraits, *The 59th Minute*. Realized as a set of monumental video headshots, each measuring 14 × 24 feet, the scale is such that for all the steady posture of the various portrait subjects, an art dealer, an architect, a student, and Struth's godson, even the tiniest movement or disturbance in the visual field is registered. Over the duration of each sitting, we see not only what happens to a body over the hour-long session, be it the occasional blink of an eye, a stifled yawn, or an otherwise involuntary movement, but we also see what shifts in the surroundings, from the fading of natural light to the passing of a breeze. However, if the series *The 59th Minute* shares with *Sixty Minute Silence* a dramatization of the time of long exposure, it is less a lesson in the historical dynamics of duration than a window into the ongoing place of such constitutive practices in Struth's own photographic practice. As with his streetscapes, which use a relatively long exposure time to achieve their clarity and precision, in his family portraits, he employs a similarly long exposure time: as long as eight seconds. Additionally, if this durational situation allows him to capture his subjects with a kind of disquieting intensity, as registered particularly in the fixity of their gazes, it also makes clear that time's passage remains a constitutive if invisible part of the fixed and finished photographic image.

Though more muted, and indeed, elegiac than Wearing's exercise in bodily control or Struth's rather affectless portrait studies, something similar was at stake when Wearing's compatriot Tacita Dean captured Merce Cunningham in a sequence of seated, static poses. For even if Dean's choreography of stillness seemed less concerned with simulating the look of photography than with honoring Cunningham's contribution to choreography and dance and dramatizing the consequences of age on a body dedicated to movement, it is a piece that insists upon the time of long exposure. *Merce Cunningham performs STILLNESS (in three movements) to John Cage's composition 4′ 33″ with Trevor Carlson, New York City, 28 April 2007 (six performances, six films)*, 2008, conceived and recorded just months before his death, lives on in a perpetual present, distributed upon multiple monitors and screens, extending that durational session into the televisual future as *memento mori*. Pressing the idea of the photographic capture of the subject into the perpetual present of the video loop, a recursive time that evinces its own sort of perdurance, *STILLNESS* makes vivid all the infinitesimal incidents of quiet drama that accrue to a portrait when yielded in the time of long exposure, while, at the same time, mourning all that slips away.

Additionally, if these works of film and video find ways to tarry with time, they are by no means an isolated phenomenon. Indeed, in a cultural moment when Christian Marclay's

The Clock trumped the tedium of Warhol's filmic experiments in endurance by creating a precise and mesmerizing cinematic time-piece which was composed entirely of clips amassed and assembled from the disparate archives of world cinema, time, and time's passing, again took center stage in the arena of contemporary art (Doane 2002). At once a deconstruction and reconstruction of cinematic time, Marclay's *Clock* took apart the conceit of narrative time even as it regulated its fictive, compressed rhythms into the metronomic beat of a perfectly calibrated clock, accomplishing, in cinematic form, and in twenty-four hours, what artists like On Kawara and Hanne Darboven have conducted in painting and on paper for calendrical time over many, many years. Marking time as it does, even as we give ourselves over, for more time than we might imagine possible, to the multiple seductions of Marclay's *Clock*, we literally never lose sight of time. The rigor of its method is such that we could set our watches to it.

In this respect, Marclay's *Clock* stands in radical opposition, not just to Warhol's work, but to that of contemporary artists, Wearing, Struth, and Dean among them, who, following the lead of the structuralist filmmakers of the 1960s and 70s, from Michael Snow to Chantal Akerman, have freed us from the modern tyranny of an unrelenting, synchronized pulse and brought us into the realm of "real" or subjective time (Margulies 1996). In contradistinction to Marclay, Wearing, Struth, and Dean find their artistic antecedents and analogs not only in Warhol and Varda but in everything from Douglas Gordon's transformation of the cinematic logic of twenty-four frames per second into the day-long epic that is his *24 Hour Psycho* of 1993, to Bill Viola's adoption of an accelerated shooting speed that produces the vivid illusion of slow-motion, first in his 1995 *The Greeting* and increasingly refined in his ongoing series of individual and group portraits that take us into an operatic range of emotion, to Anri Sala's reprise of the slow zoom of Snow's *Wavelength* in his 2005 Berlin video *The Long Sorrow*. All are artists who have deployed cinematic techniques to stretch rather than structure time (Bellour 1990). More to the point, in considering the durational video portraits of Wearing, Struth, and Dean, or the installations of James Coleman, David Claerbout, Nancy Davenport, Nan Goldin, Thierry Kunzl, Beat Struli, Fiona Tan or Sam Taylor-Wood, it is clear that in this contemporary moment, the divide between the media of photography and cinema, and the borders between still and moving images, is becoming increasingly blurred (Beckman and Ma 2008).

5. Illusion

Sussman's *Wintergarden* navigates these same borders and boundaries, plunging viewers into the disorienting dynamics of recognition and misrecognition. That we can see Sussman's *Wintergarden* as a triptych of photographs is a function of its seemingly deliberate flirtation with the perceptual dynamics of trompe l'oeil. Most immediately, there is the conceit of the picture frame. The casing of each slender LCD screen is completely covered in black matte duct-tape, in what could only be understood as a purposeful masking of the characteristic surface sheen and the tell-tale tiny green light of the televisual monitor. Further, there is the matter of its utterly immobile subject, architecture (the Soviet courtyards and facades a return of sorts to the earliest *camera obscura* experiments of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, whose bitumen-sensitized, polished pewter plates slowly yielded impressions of the courtyard below his second-story workroom). No longer analog but digital, no longer photographic but filmic, each shot nevertheless restages something of its pictorial inheritance in the interest of illusion. Tight and uniform in focus, fixed with an almost mathematical precision on the central axis of a given apartment's balcony, stasis overwhelmingly trumps motion. Even the cuts from balcony to balcony are almost entirely seamless, sequenced in dissolves so gradual and rigorous in their alignment that the switch from one shot to the next is wholly imperceptible, apprehensible only when it becomes belatedly apparent that certain individuating architectural details are indeed marginally different. Additionally, even these slow dissolves are not a telling feature of the installation, as the individual images could just as well have been those of a beautifully orchestrated slide show, one of the sort that James Coleman made so central to his practice (Baker 2003).

Finally, *Wintergarden* might be particularly luminous. However, plenty of contemporary artists now display backlit photographs, the light box of the bus stop advertisement or the vestigial slide library repurposed to intensify the color and brightness of a photographic transparency.

Why would Sussman and her team labor to produce the unsustainable illusion, in video, of the photographic? Why use moving pictures to make still ones? When, in antiquity, Zeuxis attempted to pull back the curtain cloaking Parrhasius's canvas, an extraordinary example of painterly mimesis was immediately acknowledged. Zeuxis may have painted grapes so life-like that birds swooped down to peck at their flesh, but he was no match for Parrhasius, who painted a curtain so persuasive that even a great artist could confuse it for the real thing. In this parable of the perfect copy, visual verisimilitude is the highest of artistic achievements. A picture succeeds, even if it is a false copy, because it simulates the natural world.

In the case of *Wintergarden*, the illusion is not, or is not primarily, of the natural world, even as we are suspended between two imagistic arenas of realism: the cinematic and the photographic. In viewing Sussman and Lee's piece, it is not that we find ourselves gazing at framed vistas of Soviet architecture only to realize that the frame we took for a window is, instead, that of a picture. No. We stand before these videos and think we are looking at photographs. However sophisticated we may be regarding the conditions of photographic representation, we hold one thing to be true. With the release of the shutter, photography arrests the flux of pure sensation. As objects, photographs are static. They are testaments to and enactments of the stoppage of both movement and time.

In *Wintergarden*, there is no narrative climax, no moment equal to that dramatic instant of Zeuxis reaching for the curtain to find before him merely a painted mirage. There is, instead, only an accretion of minor moments: a branch registers the faint breath of a breeze, a resident of the apartment block passes behind the glass, and another occupant pulls back or adjusts a curtain. However, these incidental moments of animation have all the force of revelation. Once noticed, the illusionistic spell is broken, and the static images, the presumptive photographs, irreversibly give way to moving pictures before our eyes.

Perhaps most revelatory is the following: if the particular amalgam of expectation and simulation allows us to (mis)perceive video as a medium of stasis, it simultaneously allows us to (mis)perceive photography as a medium in motion. Indeed, before the piece comes into intelligibility as the video installation that it is and always already was, we see photography transforming itself before our eyes. Something has riven its surface, broken its equipoise. In turn, the presumptively photographic camera does not so much fix the subject before its lens as capture flux and flow. Ultimately, then, it is not, or not only an architecture of a waning empire that is the subject of these photographs, but something about photography itself.

That Sussman's stealthily cinematic installation might release photography from the constraints of its material condition is entirely congruent with her ongoing art historical project, one which mobilizes the animating possibilities of cinema to loosen the grounding conditions of painting and introduce into the warp and weave of its surface the dimensions of space and time. First there was *89 Seconds at Alcázar*. In a proposition about painting that is also the reconceiving of one medium through another, the art historical and cinematic fantasy that is *89 Seconds* sets the stage for an even more ambitiously imaginative project, her 2007 *Rape of the Sabine Women*. Where Jacques-Louis David's *Sabines*, to cite just one of the pictorial iterations of that classical tale, re-staged the critical moment of intervention as a dramatic plea for peace in the aftermath of the Terror, Sussman positions her *Sabines* at the dawn of a different revolutionary era and gives us the abduction and intervention as but two scenes in the dramatic unfolding of a five-act experimental feature film.

Despite the female courage depicted in David's painterly allegory, the rights of women were not even among those to be tallied in the list of failed promises of the Revolution. Similarly, Sussman's depiction of the early 1960s would suggest that for all the architectural and sartorial trappings of progressive modernity, the rights of women were still frustratingly

out of reach. Sussman's Sabine women find themselves trapped in the social dynamics and cultural expectations of the period just before their liberation. Tragically, even heroically, Sussman's Sabine women enact their destinies in that liminal historical moment when Betty Friedan was only just giving voice to the malaise that had no name: the feminine mystique. Thus, even as Sussman's *Sabines* reaches its inevitable, perpetual, and devastating conclusion, we know what has yet to happen and what is still to come. We know that a set of social and political changes are on the horizon and that a new era will soon dawn.

For all the ways that retrospection confers the illusion of imminence upon the historical, the constitutive fictions of historical practice (and progress) are not, however, Sussman's subject. Rather, even as she looks beyond the frame of the image, it is immanence that Sussman gives to her art historical subjects, opening her work to the possibilities of what it might hold within itself. Even when her work flirts with transcendence, as, for example, in her transposition and projection of Kazimir Malevich's supremely utopian pictorial ambition into the filmic experiment *whiteonwhite:algorithmicfilmnoir*, it seems more concerned with extending than vanquishing the material limits of painting. As such, *whiteonwhite* offers a cinematic and computational counterpoint not only to Malevich's suprematist vision but also to Robert Ryman's melancholic, or, following the logic of Yve-Alain Bois, mournful repetitions of what it may still mean to paint white on white, to play out the game of modernist painting and find infinite variation within even the most reductive pictorial idiom: monochromatic abstraction (Bois 1986). Understood in these terms, *whiteonwhite* re-imagines that postwar moment of aesthetic reckoning as a kind of cold war confrontation; the humanizing gesture of individual brushstrokes is re-scripted as the anonymous outcome of mathematical algorithms, computer code churning through the clichés of a cinematic genre like so much pigment on a canvas.

6. Winter Gardens

With *Wintergarden*, Sussman's cinematic investigation of all that is immanent, or latent, in the image shifts from the history of painting to that of photography. One need not even bear witness to *Wintergarden*, fall prey to its illusionistic dynamics, to begin to understand just how deeply it opens the photographic image to its history. For if we break its compressed, portmanteau of a title, *Wintergarden*, back into its component parts, *Winter Garden*, it is a piece that forthrightly proclaims its photographic imperatives and inheritance, in ways that transcend its glancing repetition of Niépce's early experiments. For while there may be no *Winter Garden* photograph included in the canonical history of photography, nothing by Daguerre or Nadar, Talbot or Cameron, Weston or Adams, Evans or Eggleston, in the history of its theorization, there are two. The first is invoked in Walter Benjamin's "A Small History of Photography" (Benjamin [1931] 1979). The second, fifty years later, is summoned in Roland Barthes's last work, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Barthes [1980] 1981). In turn, each comes to bear the weight of exemplarity.

First, to Benjamin. For all his investment in the evidentiary status of the photographic image, he was also fully attuned to its artifice and conceits. The exotic flora of the winter garden is the backdrop for a photograph of a young Kafka, posed "isolated and forsaken" in his broad-brimmed hat amidst the palm fronds of its landscape (Benjamin [1931] 1979). A scene of immeasurable sadness, one that Benjamin conflates later, in the exilic memoirs of his Berlin childhood, with an image of himself at a similar age, in his little history of photography, it is a marker of the constitutive fictions of the medium (Benjamin [1932–1934] 2006). Beyond the poignancy of its portrait subject, the palm fronds function for Benjamin as a reminder of the backdrops that came to decorate and disguise the early photographic studio, filled as those spaces were with the props and supports needed to steady the human subject in the time of long exposure.

For, of course, it was only well into its short history that photography came to be understood under the sign of Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" as an artifact of instantaneity. In its earliest incarnation, it was nothing of the sort. At the time of its invention and adoption, the photograph was the record not of an instant but of a durational

encounter: a considerable period of exposure during which, to cite Benjamin once more, "the subject as it were grew into the picture" (Benjamin [1931] 1979). There was, over the course of its early history, a slowness in the process. As Georges Didi-Huberman writes of early photography and early photographs, they were "slow to prepare, slow to exploit, slow to expose, slow to develop" (Didi-Huberman [1982] 2003).

When Niépce succeeded in producing a heliographic image of the view from his dormer window in Gras, it took hours of summer sunlight to register the shifting scene. In turn, that first photographic picture, in effect, contained those hours, as if the image were sedimented with time. Some years later, when Daguerre first demonstrated his process, the exposure time was so long that he confessed the technique was not practical for portraits. Within months, others tinkered with the chemistry and procedures (the French government placed Daguerre's process in the public domain), and the exposure time was reduced from minutes to seconds. However, even once Daguerre and others refined the process, making it more practical for the studio and beyond, the image remained the material trace of time unfolding before the lens.

By the time Benjamin wrote of the photograph of the six-year-old Kafka, the snapshot had long since been displaced the studio portrait, and shutter speeds had dwindled to fractions of seconds. However, as we know from both philosophical and scientific investigations, even an instant opens onto the infinite. Duration, in turn, is not simply the situation of *early* photography but the situation of *all* photography. Photography, like cinema, is a time-based medium. As such, it is in that vanishing divide between photography and cinema, in its dissolution of medial boundaries, that Sussman's *Wintergarden* finds its footing.

Released from its material limits, Sussman's *Wintergarden* revealed what is latent in the surface of a photograph, namely, durational time. To witness Sussman's work is to be suspended somewhere between stillness and motion, somewhere between the fixity of the photographic image and the flow of the filmic reel; it is to be freed, once and for all, from the constraining inheritance of Enlightenment aesthetics. Such qualities and characteristics were upheld in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to establish and maintain the distinctions between painting and poetry; however, in the twentieth century, photography and cinema (and, within the history of painting, figuration and abstraction) give way to a blurring of boundaries that now exemplify the work of art in a post-medium, or trans-medial age (Krauss 2000).

If Sussman's *Wintergarden* takes us back to a winter garden photograph that captures both Kafka's and Benjamin's childhoods and also returns us to that durational moment in the studio, Barthes's *Camera Lucida* summons a third childhood winter garden photograph: not his own, but his mother's. His mother as a little girl, posed in a winter garden, is the photograph through which he mourns her loss, the photograph through which he grasps her essence and her evanescence. Part repetition, part renunciation of Barthes's prior writings on photography, *Camera Lucida* is composed in two parts, each comprised of twenty-four individual sections. In it, he puts forth an account of photography that is as much a work of mourning as it is of philosophical investigation, at once an instance of oblique autobiographical encounter with the psychic economies of grief and desire and a direct theoretical inquiry into the material conditions, semiotic conventions and phenomenological dynamics of the medium.

Camera Lucida is not a book, for all its use of images from the history of photography, that may be said to illustrate its subject. How does one illustrate that thing that an individual alone can see or indeed feel? If the *punctum* is for Barthes the defining detail of the photograph that is utterly subjective, that pierces him, arouses him, holds him, moves him, it is also, like the eponymous Winter Garden photograph that comes to anchor and unmoor his account, fundamentally elusive. The Winter Garden photograph, the photograph of Barthes's mother as a little girl that emerges as the fulcrum of the book, is nowhere reproduced. Like the image created on the retina by the *camera lucida*, the Winter Garden image is wholly internal, private. Indeed, as a metaphor for the kind of seeing that is at stake for Barthes, nothing may be more apt than the *camera lucida*. For the view that *Camera*

Lucida offers is retrospective and introspective, formed at the juncture of memory and desire.

In *Camera Lucida*, or, for that matter, anywhere in the collected oeuvre and ephemera of Roland Barthes, there is no Winter Garden photograph. The question then takes shape: was there ever such a photograph? Might it have been an invention or a fantasy (Batchen 2008)? Split in two at precisely the point Barthes's text shifts from a retrospective contemplation of the medium to its encounter with his mother's death, *Camera Lucida* becomes a book animated and haunted by maternal absence, literally, figuratively, and photographically (Knight 1997). There is, at a late point in the text, a picture of his mother as a young girl. However, it is not the Winter Garden photographic of his most poignant musings. Instead, it is a different photograph, depicting his mother, her brother, and her paternal grandfather: a photograph to which Barthes gives the title for its dramatization of his lineage, *La Souche*, *The Stock*. Further, at the critical moment of epiphany, at the precise moment of narrating the discovery of *the* photograph that so captures his mother's spirit and essence, it is another image, a photograph of Nadar's mother, that accompanies the text.

Notably, at exactly the point in the text that Barthes introduces the primal pictorial scene, the vertiginous photograph of his mother as a child, indeed, his child, whom he nursed through her final days, the image through which something about the medium, and his own mortality, is made most palpable, Barthes includes not *the* image but a surrogate, a photograph of someone else's mother, not young, but aged. A doubly absent presence, Barthes's mother is conjured through filial words alone. Ultimately, Barthes's decision, as author and narrator, to withhold or perhaps even invent that image of his mother as a young girl, to refuse reproduction of *the* image that constitutes the crux of his reflections on photography, puts his account back into a time *before the image*, a time when there was only memory and the historical imagination with which to constitute the fugitive human subject, to wrest it from mortality and oblivion.

7. Fusion

Forty years later, the lacuna at the heart of *Camera Lucida* is all-the-more haunting for its uncanny prescience. Either withheld or imagined, another way to describe the confabulation that is Barthes's Winter Garden photograph is simply *virtual*. Indeed, if anything has shifted the terms of photography in the years since Barthes penned the words that animate *Camera Lucida*, it is digital technology. No longer wedded to a photochemical base, no longer a material trace of contact, in the shift from analog to digital, the photographic image trades the logic of indexical relation for one of numerical abstraction. A medium without materiality, light transformed into code, the digital image may still be a form of luminous writing. Yet it relinquishes the pencil of nature for the false perfection of pixilated form.

Transmittable instantly and infinitely, the digital image accelerates and obviates the process of photomechanical reproduction. Neither original nor copy, both original and copy, the digital image exists in an ever-expandable network of electronic archives. Additionally, with no negative to tether it to its moment of creation, and no contact sheet to register its context of creation, its disappearance is a matter of deletion, not destruction or decay. A simulation of its former self, photography has become its own impostor. Emptied of its indexical relation to the real, photography has become its own fugitive subject.

This brings us back to Sussman's *89 Seconds Atomized*: a collaborative experiment that presses the logic of digital dispersal to its limits. Realized through a form of aesthetic fission, it pushes a piece, founded in painting, furthered in the video, and then fractured into NFTs, into a virtual netherworld where artwork is conceived as an atomic particle. Indeed, if Sussman's trompe l'oeil three-channel video project *Wintergarden* re-staged one of photography's primal scenes not in the perpetual Eden of the winter garden but, instead, in the bleak surround of a postwar Soviet housing block, *89 Seconds Atomized* gives us a glimpse of art's nuclear winter, where Velázquez is not just re-imagined in and through

the medium of video, but pictures and their progeny are rendered eternally invisible and irretrievable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Note

1 https://www.cristintierney.com/exhibitions/64/works/artworks-412-eve-sussman-and-simon-lee-wintergarden-2011/, accessed on 21 July 2023.

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