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Title: Forgetful photography: John Stezaker and the politics of escape

I suspect, or hope, that I'm not alone in having a vague fear, every time I download photographs from my phone or a memory card, that I'm actually going to lose the images I've just taken. Invariably this is a misplaced fear – the files transfer across the devices and everything works; but seeing the warning message that asks me to confirm that I really *do* want to delete my images still provokes my mild obsessive-compulsive behaviour to double, then triple check that the images really *are* there.

This is, I assume, a variation on the fear which technology generates in us when we can't completely trust or rely on it: the constant need to back up data, and to then make backs of those back ups, ad infinitum *just to be sure.* The fear being that the machine might forget. This duplication generates its own problems, of course – writing this presentation, I saved a copy to the cloud, another to a memory stick, there's a version on the laptop, plus I printed out this paper copy. I'm not sure – confessing this now – where the line between being diligent and prepared, and excessively neurotic might lie, but in my desire to not loose important files, my documents and information proliferate, invariably becoming unmanageable; and, of course, the files become

undelete-able, because I never know – definitively – if I might, one day, just need the information…

The inability to escape this accumulation of information is, I believe, a symptom of what has been called semio-capitalism. The build up of my apparently self-generated data, my photographs, sets in motion these increasingly neurotic anxieties driven by the fear that everything important might be lost. What originally appeared liberating (that I could store all my images discretely on a hard drive instead of cluttering up space in files of negative and contact sheets) transforms into a form of unreliable, potentially forgetful, code that has apparently managed to seize me 'from the inside'. I suggest it's a form of semio-capitalism for the reason that this neurosis is a product of digital, dematerialised information storage. This technology has created, in Deleuze's words, a "numerical language of control […]" such that we have become 'dividuals' – that is to say analyzable "masses, samples, data, markets, or 'banks'". The contradiction that we are living with, however, is that within semio-capitalism control over our own information becomes subject to, or is translated into, a slippery, unmanageable language; my digital data becomes a substance that oh so easily escapes the use-value I originally intended for it. It can both disappear, and be lost, *or* it can be communicated in forms that I have no control over. And, as we know so well, this data becomes the exchange value for a form of

capital that has the goal of 'controlling the whole of society'. Quite simply, 'capital has become a semiotic operator'.

What does this have to do with photography, memory and escape?

Currently there is an enormously diverse range of photography responding to the issue of surveillance and control. One could mention (for example) practitioners such as Mishka Henner or Trevor Paglen, or Günther Selichar's cold screen series as work that attempts to picture the mechanics of semio-capitalist control. But I want to extend how we think about representing these systems of control that memorise and/or forget our data and information to try to consider how photography can not only document this type of control – not just picture the sites that control us, or where there are points of 'leakage' in the networks of control – but also how photographs themselves imitate the struggle for representation and control. If Henner or Paglen might be described as materializing the abstract content of semio-capitalism, I want to think about the way photography 'itself' mimics fluctuation in agency, the tensions between disappearance and appearance, and the manipulation of memory and forgetting. This is an ugly way of describing what I'm trying to do, so it's easier to explain what I'm aiming at by showing some examples.

I'm trying to think, here, about how a medium that is dedicated to recording and memorialising presence and time is also capable of showing us what it's like to escape from representation, or forget.

So – again referring to Henner – there are examples of photography where absence is prioritised. Where the ostensible subject of the picture is deliberately withheld – for example John Hilliard's works about colour and the monochrome. Is there, in these examples, something 'within' photography that is resistant to certain forms of communicative control?

<div align="center">Section 2</div>

This brings me to the work of John Stezaker. Stezaker's work is now very well known, so initially I only want to emphasise a couple of points about his practice. Firstly, the way it can be understood as being premised on the processes of recollecting and forgetting.

Probably his most familiar work is the *Mask* series which are, I suppose, portraits. These images are constructed from archival images where the people represented in the pictures are – in most instances – unidentifiable. Partly this is because we've forgotten who the actor or celebrity was – they've disappeared from our collective 'image memory' – and partly because Stezaker has done something to their faces, faces which usually form the 'background' or base layer of the collage. This

means we literally cannot see the complete portrait. Stezaker's intervention can take the form of placing another image on top of the face (and I think this is generally true for most of the mask images) or, in a series like the *Shadows*, cutting through the surface of photographic print. When there is a cut between two photographic surfaces, the interplay between images can get fiendishly complicated to describe or understand. Part of the pleasure of the images is looking for those areas of cross over – where something in one image informs or partially carries over into the other picture. Having previously tried to closely describe these pictures, I've been struck by the remarkable experience – through the inability to find the right words – of how these pictures, that are apparently so simply constructed, are so difficult to write about; and I don't think this is an insignificant clue in explaining why these pictures are so compelling.

I think, in some way, Stezaker's work – when it really 'works' – puts us in a place where it's difficult to communicate clearly what images are: we can see clearly what we're looking at, but somehow we can't adequately put the pictures into a meaningful, signifying frame. The images are, I would argue, clear to understand at the level of visual construction but fundamentally opaque at the level of comprehension. We can fall back on strategies to do with using aspects of the artist's

biography to explain the pictures (the *Third Person Archive*, the images of steam), but ultimately this is a profoundly unsatisfactory approach.

What I think is more productive is to try to describe the awkward experience the images give us; I think that experience is one where we start to feel a slight loss over the control of visual meaning – it's as if, when we're really taken by one of these images, we're entranced. Now normally, I'd be highly suspicious of this kind of language talking about images – at best it's mystification, at worst it's open ideological manipulation. Stezaker, however says this:

"Art is […] confrontation which opacity, with something that is not transparent. It has a mystery about it. And yes, I do see my work as a kind of resistance to accountability, of any kind. […] in the work, when something interesting happens in the work, it's something that resists the idea that I began with. It's something that suddenly creates a blockage, that I can't account for. Like a seizure, it creates a crisis"

He has also stated, though, that:

"If I said my work was just about opacity and obscurity it would be untrue, because a lot of it is also about an attempt to try and communicate, legibly"

And he summarises by simply saying that "it's always a contradiction." The experience of entrancement, then, that I'm trying to describe isn't some orphic stupefaction, it's much more disturbing. It's something to do, I believe, with being caught in the tension between movement and stillness, remembrance and forgetting.

In her book *Under Blue Cup,* which is about the experience of losing her own memory due to aneurysm, Rosalind Kraus writes about the way we physiologically retain cinematic images. The point she makes is a familiar one, but worth repeating because of how it might help us understand Steaker's work. Krauss writes:

> "Cinematic motion is based on the physiological fact of the "persistence of vision" by means of which any visual stimulus induces a ghostly copy of itself (called afterimage) which remains on the retina […] masking the slippage from that stimulus to the next. So we never "see" the replacement of one film frame by another; we cannot witness the movement of the filmstrip through the projector's gate. It is this invisibility that enables the illusion of continuous motion on which cinema rests. So many parts of the cinematic apparatus are invisible in just this way: the screen [...] is instead permeable and unlocatable"

I believe that Stezaker's work cuts into this flow, with the result that –

when the images are most compelling – something indescribable

appears. Stezaker's cut isn't the same kind of incision that Benjamin

spoke about in his work of art essay (Benjamin talks, there, of the

surgeon – his synonym for the editor or montage artist – cutting and

penetrating surface reality to reveal the truth of what lies underneath).

This is the classic avant-gardist strategy of photomontage, and if you've

read one of Stezaker's many interviews he's always careful to reject the

description of his work as photomontage. Stezaker's work therefore

doesn't quite fit T.J. Clark's definition of a modernist practice based on a

dialectical negation – Clark's practices of negation. Similarly, if one of

the tensions that defined modernism was between attention and

distraction or absorption and theatricality – with 20th century art

practices invariably being defined in relation to these canonical

categories – then Stezaker's work presents us with a further

problematisation of those choices and descriptive groupings, as the

collages seems to work across these classifications.

It probably makes more sense to consider Stezaker's work as part of

the legacy of the darker strands of Romanticism and Surrealism; but the

point I want to make, however, is that his images seem to hollow out a

very equivocal temporal space. They don't illustrate some stalled, post-

modernist conciliation – a deconstructive bridge between binary

oppositions – rather they picture a strange delaying, or refusal of communicative flow: specifically they are an intervention in the movement of time, memory and any form of cinematic totality and immediacy.

Stezaker puts it better – he says: "cinema is about forgetting, but you interrupt the mechanism in some way in order to allow you to remember"; and he has gone further claiming that "cinema is a form of perceptual violence, but it is one to which we have become habituated in, being subject to it and through absorption in the narrative continuum." In a curious way, then, what the collages might be doing is prising apart or dismembering a certain form of temporal flow, creating either some kind of shattered time or a trace of a counter-memory. The time we 'see' in the images could therefore actually be described as being slightly 'out of time' – we experience a disjointed sense of (for want of a better word) after-wardness or (in Freudian terms) *nachtraglichkeit*. In Stezaker's words "I am interested in images that don't come from my time."

The figures, faces and actors in the collages are consigned to a double form of forgetting and memorialisation as a result of Stezaker's manipulation of the images: the faces are edited or cut through in a process of creative disfigurement, but only to make us slow down and

look harder. I think, then, that what the images show – what is almost remorselessly fascinating about them – is that they picture what happens to perception when the process of accelerated communication fails or is interrupted. They show us the mechanics of faulty attention, faltering memory, and how misleading the seamless form of immediate 'now-ness' that communicative capitalism tries to instantiate actually is. Quoting Stezaker again: "I believe that what is at stake in the obsolete image is actually the condition of seeing itself. I think that we don't see current consumer objects or images in their circulatory immediacy." These are therefore pictures about slowness, forgetting; but they are also pictures that, paradoxically, represent these experiences in a medium which is precisely predicated on memory and being present in a 'here and now'. To put it another way, they are photographs that are always on the verge of escaping from the foundational conditions that define the medium of photography.

Section 3

In a curious way, then, I think Stezaker's images provide a sort of answer to Deleuze's question "What do you see when you don't see anything?" What we see is a refusal – they're the pictorial equivalent of Melville's Bartleby – these are pictures that would prefer not… prefer not, perhaps, to be photographs. This is a photographic practice based on escape and forgetting.

Adam Phllips, in his book on Houdini noted that "To escape – or, of course, to be unable to escape – is often linked to a sense of failure." If Stezaker's pictures are photographs trying to escape the photographic condition, are they actually 'failed' photographs? Stezaker's collages are about the flaws in temporal flow and the hesitations and defects in photographic memory; in a way they are almost anti-photographs, but not quite: they are photographs that want to escape their temporal condition but fail. This failure to escape photography is not, though, a simply negative thing precisely because, as Stezaker notes, "the function of art […] is to *not function*." If there is any potency in this form of non-function or failure it perhaps resides in an eerie, radicalisation of Kantian disinterest: that the disappearing, neutralising work of art is now a potential avenue of escape from the all-embracing, transformative power of semiotic-exchange value; and to escape semiotic-exchange value means escaping use value, and failure may be the only option to achieve this. To escape this type of recuperation in communicative capitalism may now require a curious, perhaps dangerous, form of occultation or masking – a type of hiding and misrecognition – an inability to communicate. When even existence, time and memory have become measurable sciences of control, nonexistence, failure and escape become tactics to avoid that control. As Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker have suggested, "future avant-garde practices will

be those of nonexistence" with the question of nonexistence being to

"develop techniques and technologies to make oneself unaccounted for"

Conclusion

In Stezaker's work the visualisation of forgetting and disappearance

might just be a weak form of political resistance. I suspect he would be

mildly horrified by such a claim; I believe, though, that his pictures

suggest that forgetting – as the escape from a reductive will-to-

presence and reified, managed memory – is not merely a failure to

remember, but a paradoxically potent form of fragile resistance against

semio-capitalism's desire to colonise the image and the imagination.