
Exposures series

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RÉFÉRENCE

London, Reaktion Books, 2007-present.

- 1 Reaktion Books' *Exposures* series, edited by Peter Hamilton and Mark Haworth-Booth, is comprised of 13 volumes and counting, each less than 200 pages with 80 high-quality illustrations in color and black and white. Currently available titles include *Photography and Australia*, *Photography and Spirit*, *Photography and Cinema*, *Photography and Literature*, *Photography and Flight*, *Photography and Egypt*, *Photography and Science*, *Photography and Africa*, *Photography and Italy*, *Photography and the USA*, *Photography and Japan*, *Photography and Death*, and *Photography and Anthropology*. Each volume is of interest on its own for the particular thematic intersection it explores and for its survey of pertinent examples and approaches to its theme, but, taken as a whole, the interest of this series resides less in photography itself as a historical issue, or in its various and sundry applications or "exposures," and more so instead in the conjunction that joins the two categories together.
- 2 The titular "and," in other words, is given to us by the series as something like photography's verb, its distinctive activity or operation, and as such, the range of potential photographic subjects is, by definition, limitless. This speaks volumes about photography as a distinctive form of relating to the world. It would be hard to imagine a parallel series devoted to writing, say, or art, or belief, or desire, or thought because each of these categories assume a subjective directedness and consistency that photography at once aims for and belies. Photography, we are to understand from the rhetorical construction of the series and its formulaic titles, passively registers knowledge or impression or exposure or fleeting interest, rather than being an active expression of faith or beauty or truth or conviction. Photography and this, photography and that, "photography and" ad infinitum—this format figures the technological, sensual, and epistemological condition of the artistic subject becoming

the photographic subject, the modern subject becoming postmodern, the human becoming machine, the enlightenment subject becoming the subject of liberalism.

- 3 This is not a new insight. Simple, unending, unrestricted iteration, simple, unending, unrestricted amalgamation has been photography's cross to bear from the beginning and, as such, it has always borne the cross's promise of torment and redemption both. We might remind ourselves of the far-reaching implications of this role by adapting some wording from Alain Badiou: "Since it is sure of its ability to control the entire domain of the visible"—he says of capitalism generally but, for our purposes, we can narrow to its indiscriminate, all-consuming, photographic gaze—it "no longer censures anything." By accepting this "permission to consume, to communicate and to enjoy," he says, all "art, and all thought, is ruined" and the only remaining way to experience redemption rather than the unending low-grade torment of the progressive devaluation of everything is to become "pitiless censors of ourselves."¹ Put differently, we might say that when photography is experienced with the ease of guilty pleasure—as staring, for example, or shopping, or as voyeurism or surveillance, or as the simple, unbridled promiscuity of vision that scrutinizes everything and anything—it presents us with the torment of the consumer's alienation, the torment of the commodification of vision. By contrast, when it is experienced with the more taciturn pleasure of guilt—as the pleasure of a chaste vision or vision contained by the discrimination of taste, moral reasoning, or political purpose—it promises redemption. Of course, this does not mean that censure or chastity or taste are themselves good. Rather it means working out rightful restraints for the natural licentiousness of photography's mechanical means is the only way to resuscitate the promise that inheres in all art and all thought.
- 4 This general theme of photography as loss, photography as dissipation of the promise of art and thought in its mechanically accelerated proliferation of images, is touched on one way or another by most of the volumes in the series, and it cuts several ways. For example, while Maria Golia offers a kind of high bar for art and thought in *Photography and Egypt* when she quotes André Malraux's adage that "Egypt invented eternity," she says this only to point out that, by the time of the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1923, the "commodification of Egypt's antiquities, with photography as mediator, was complete." (*Photography and Egypt*, 31, 39) It goes without saying that it was not just pyramids and other figures of eternity that photography would make into tchotchkes: in the wake of the simultaneous influx of tourism and George Eastman's film and processing business, travel guides would inevitably advise visiting Europeans and Americans that it was "poor Egyptians" who make for "the most kodakable attitudes and occupations." (*Photography and Egypt*, 60) She makes a similar argument about indigenous photography, tracing it from its early, heady days at the dawn of the twentieth century as a form of popular sovereignty to its subsequent domination by the post-revolutionary state. Responding to the familiar argument that photography teaches us to see the world freshly, she concludes that it might be better understood as "a process through which we have grown accustomed, over time, to see less, or not at all." (*Photography and Egypt*, 63)
- 5 John Harvey makes a related point about spirit photography in his *Photography and Spirit*: "The democratization of photography, like that of the Bible during the Protestant Reformation," he explains, "implied a loss of an authoritative interpretation and manipulation by an elite." Without the mediating role of art and the institutions that governed its aesthetic claims, or religion and the institutions that governed its

spiritual claims, spirit photography came to mean many different things to many different people. Spirit, like beauty, faced a gross inflationary pressure or a loss in value as the sheer number of spirit images and spirit image-makers multiplied many fold. As a result, photography's effect on the idea of spirit would be like capitalism's more broadly on Christianity. Instead of seeing spirit anew, Harvey tells us, "the image of the spirit proliferated and disintegrated," no doubt contributing, it might be added, to our late modern inability to see spirit at all. (*Photography and Spirit*, 144)

- 6 Kelley Wilder tracks a similar loss of substance in *Photography and Science*. In the "first, pre-photographic decades of the nineteenth century," she writes, the mantle of "observer" called up the high purpose of Enlightenment science in the work of Jean Senebier or Carl Linneaus, or even that of the Renaissance fusion of art and science in the work of Leonardo and Michelangelo. (*Photography and Science*, 18) That is, scientific observation in its modern, pre-photographic form aspired to an active, synthetic intelligence that not only took note of the world accurately but also made sense of it through a process of progressive and integrative accumulation of insight. This would change significantly under the influence of photography as observation came to be rendered passive, positivistic, mechanical, and devoid of art and thought. In Wilder's view like that of Harvey and Golia, thus, photography's machine-like vision came to stand for a loss of the enlarged humanistic vision that was just coming into its own in the name of renaissance and enlightenment and, thus, a loss of the promise of art and thought as new and improved substitutes for the older universalism of divine revelation. Vision that had been a passive receptacle for the revelations of God before the humanism of Renaissance and Enlightenment activated it, in other words, would be returned to its premodern passivity by photography in the face of a mute, mechanical nature. "This rhetoric of passivity," she writes, "would have the artist rendered obsolete, the hand uninvolved, the imagination untapped." (*Photography and Science*, 55) Such understanding would come under considerable pressure from scientific and artistic developments, particularly after the onset of the twentieth century, but it would also live on as both a point of tension and site of promise.
- 7 Indeed, as with the two-sided nature of the Christian cross, there has always been a companion view that suggests that photography's mechanical, reductive quality was not only a travesty of the burgeoning human potential promised by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment but also a blessing, and for the very same reason that it was a loss or depletion of that human potential. As a rule, social abstraction always cuts two ways. On the one hand, it inevitably dehistoricizes, dehumanizes, and degrades by reducing people to cogs or units or numbers or simple iterations and thereby diminishes the significance of their particularities, their individualities. Photography abstracts in this way with its unceasing proliferation of one photograph after another in an incessant production of trivial difference. On the other hand, abstraction also has the potential to historicize, humanize, and dignify by creating the base condition for collective identification. As cogs, units, numbers, or iterations, we share common purpose in our united systematicity—the critical question, of course, is the character of that purpose. To put it in Badiouian terms, the endpoint of abstraction is the empty set—a condition that photography may gravitate to better than any other medium or form because of its dramatically productive and radically decentralized multiplicity—and as such it stands for a condition of sociality or social self-understanding whose purpose is yet to be determined.

- 8 This promise of photographically derived sociality is also a theme taken up in one or way or another in many of the volumes in the series but I will highlight just two. We can cast that promise with François Brunet as being in a state of tension between index and icon. Photography, as he has it, has always been understood as a tradeoff between nineteenth-century concepts of science and art, between “a technically and socially based standard of (visual) truth” and a “culturally sanctioned expression of the creative self,” or between photography’s innate “we’, the discourse of nature and society,” and post-Romantic literature’s hard-wrought “I” or the discourse of “individual expression.” (*Photography and Literature*, 10-11) In its most reduced form, this is a battle between the general and the particular, or between the systematic standards provided by religion, science, and socialism, on one side, and the free-ranging standards developed by liberalism’s individualized expressive subject, on the other. What photography promises as index rather than icon, or as absence of the individual expressive subject rather than its presence, thus, is something like the possibility of a rebirth of enlightenment, a rebirth of emergent social being, against its profanation in the market. Brunet labels this “photography’s point of view” to distinguish it from the points of view given by individual photographers or photographs and concludes his volume by linking its “ethics of photographic abstention” to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the optical unconscious. (*Photography and Literature*, 150) On its own, this point of view promises nothing more than an empty set, of course, but as such it is a promise of systematicity and, thus, sociality nonetheless.
- 9 In a related manner, David Company takes up the opposition between the narrative temporality of film and the pause or suspension of that temporality by the still photograph. Drawing on Raymond Bellour and Roland Barthes, he refers to that suspension of time as “pensive,” as a moment of anticipation “when things are in the balance.” (*Photography and Cinema*, 96) This balancing act is the same one we have been addressing: between part and whole or between the alienation of the liberal subject who experiences herself as a social fragment, on the one hand, and the alienation of the empty set or abstract social being, on the other. Where photography would initially seem to play the role of the fragment in this opposition, and film that of the composite whole, these positions are effectively reversed as we come to understand the narrativization of film as a particularization, as a single story that closes down on the possibility of other narratives. A photograph, on the other hand, because it opens up the question of its relation to any and all other photographs as if they were all frames in a giant omnidirectional film, invokes the question of the whole. In short, photography provides the necessary abstraction, or abstention, or capacity to be Badiouian “pitiless censors of ourselves” such that we might see the forest for the trees. As Company puts it in the context of the film-still photography of Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall, “Only when it is stilled do we have the necessary distance to contemplate the filmic-ness of film.” (*Photography and Cinema*, 135)
- 10 Because the *Exposures* series presents us with the idea that the meaning of photography is in principle endless and unbounded, it raises a productive question about photography’s ontology. Photography is uniquely well suited to address mereological questions—questions about the relation between part and whole—that are neither the matter of cultural identity, on the one hand, nor that of the individual consumer’s self-differentiation and self-adaptation in the open market, on the other. Photographs exist in dynamic relation to each other and that relation is one of value that is difficult to

dissolve completely into the molten realm of market exchange. Photography has always been a social medium, in other words, and in ways that art never was. In this regard, it is never only fragmented personal meaning, on the one hand, and a generalized superstore of enticing and distracting society-of-the-spectacle commodities, on the other, but also a semiotic and socio-affective factory. As Marx said about factories generally, “Not only do we have here an increase in the productive power of the individual, by means of cooperation, but the creation of a new productive power, which is intrinsically a collective one.”²Factories make production more efficient and thus more powerful, of course, but they also create a productive subject—that of collective production itself—with the capacity to use its enhanced power on behalf of the factory owner or for itself. Photography’s great promise, like its great threat, arises from this factory-like quality: its endless proliferation of “exposures,” its homogenization and liberalization of value, its distinctively modern power of social abstraction, its opening up of the possibility for alternative collective forms. Like Twitter and Facebook in the run of uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, so with photography: it is a power in the balance, a socially productive force ever waiting to come into its own.

NOTES

1. Alain Badiou, “Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art,” *Lacanian Ink*, number 23, 2004, pp. 100-19.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, London, Penguin, 1975, p. 443.