

# Reinventing the Medium

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1. This essay is about looking back: looking back at the path that led to the triumphant postwar convergence of art and photography that began in the 1960s, but looking at it from this moment at the end of the twentieth century when such a "triumph" must be bracketed by the circumstance that now photography can only be viewed through the undeniable fact of its own obsolescence.<sup>1</sup> It is as well about looking back at the theorization of this aesthetic convergence in the hands of all those poststructuralist writers who were themselves considering the historical reach of its operations by looking back at Walter Benjamin's announcement of its effect in his "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:" It

*This essay was written on commission by the DG Bank in Munich for the catalog of its collection of twentieth-century photography. At the time of its conception my thoughts on the subject were directed by two events. The first was my recent experience of the work of James Coleman and the questions it raised for an earlier set of assumptions about photography; the second was the then upcoming Yale "Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin" conference for which I necessarily had to revisit my notions about Benjamin's theorization of photography. There being no plans at the time to publish the Yale papers, I decided to structure my written argument so that I could present it in that context. This version of my Yale paper is published here by courtesy, then, of the DG Bank. That section of it which presents the example of Coleman's work is a highly telescoped version of the argument developed in Rosalind E. Krauss. "'And Then Turn Away': An Essay on James Coleman," *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997).*

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<sup>1</sup> Art and photography first converged in the 1920s, in Soviet photomontage practices and in the dada and then surrealist integration of photography into the ver<sup>y</sup> heart of their movements. In this sense the postwar phenomenon is a reconvergence, although it was the first to affect the market for "high art" itself in a significant way.

will be significant, further, that though Benjamin's text was interpreted in all the thrust of its predictive and positive orientation to the future, his own favorite posture was that of looking back, whether in imitation of the surrealists' connection to the outmoded discards of recent history, or in the guise of Klee's *Angelus Novus*, who greets historical progress only by looking backwards at the storm of its destruction.

Several strands braid together, then. The first could be called photography's emergence as a theoretical object. The second could be identified as photography's destruction of the conditions of the aesthetic medium in a transformative operation that would affect all the arts. The third could be named the relationship between obsolescence and the redemptive possibilities enfolded within the outmoded itself.

2. Whether it was as the prime example of Roland Barthes's mythology or of Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum, by the 1960s photography had left behind its identity as a historical or an aesthetic object to become a theoretical object instead. The perfect instance of a multiple-without-an-original, the photograph – in its structural status as copy – marked the site of so many ontological cave-ins. The burgeoning of the copy not only facilitated the quotation of the original but splintered the supposed unity of the original "itself" into nothing but a series of quotations. And, in the place of what was formerly an author, the operator of these quotes, in being redefined as *pasticheur*, was repositioned to the other side of the copybook to join, schizophrenically, the mass of its readers.

Barthes, in particular, was further interested in the structural irony that would allow photography, this wrecker of unitary being, to perform the semiological sleight-of-hand whereby in the seamless of its physical surface the photograph seemed to summon forth the great guarantor of unity – raw nature, in all its presumed wholeness and continuity – to cover the tracks of photography's own citational operations. Its participation in the structure of the trace, the index, and the stencil made photography thus the theoretical object through which to explore the reinvention of nature as "myth," the cultural production of it as a mask behind which the operations of history and of politics could be kept out of sight.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957); trans. Annette Lavers, under the title *Mythologies* (New York, 1972). Barthes's theorizations of photography include "The Photographic Message" and "Rhetoric of the Image," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), pp. 15-31. 32-51, as well as "The Third Meaning," pp. 52-68, hereafter abbreviated "TM"; and *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981).

In Baudrillard's hands this mask became the model of a final disappearance through which the object-conditions of a material world of production would be replaced by the simulacral network of their reproductions, so many images peeled off the surfaces of things to enter the circuit of commodities in their own right. If in an earlier version of commodity culture the mobility of exchange-value relentlessly replaces the embeddedness of use-value, in its latest manifestation, then, both of these yield to the phantasmagoria of Spectacle in which the commodity has become image only, thus instituting the imperious reign of pure sign exchange.<sup>3</sup>

But photography's emergence as a theoretical object had already occurred at the hands of Benjamin in the years that elapsed between his "A Small History of Photography" in 1931 and his more famous text of 1936.<sup>4</sup> In 1931 Benjamin is still interested in the *history* of photography, which is to say in photography as a medium with its own traditions and its own fate. He believes the genius of the medium to be the rendering of the human subject woven into the network of its social relations. Stamped on the photographic portraits made during the first decade of the medium's existence was the aura of both a human nature settling into its own specificity-due to the length of the pose-and a social nexus exposed in terms of the intimacy of its relationships-due to the amateur status of these early practitioners (Hill, Cameron, Hugo) making portrait pictures for their circle of friends. Even in the early stages of photography's commodification, after the spread of the commercialized *carte de visite*, the celebration of photography's inherent technical possibilities meant that precision lenses would marry the confidence of a rising bourgeois class to the technological prowess of a new medium.

The decadence that was soon to engulf this medium was thus not just due to its having yielded to the commodity but to that commodity's having been swallowed by kitsch, which is to say, the fraudulent mask of

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<sup>3</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> "A Small History of Photography" was published in *Literarische Welt* in the September and October issues of 1931. See Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," *"One Way Street" and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (New York, 1979): hereafter abbreviated "HP" Benjamin wrote a first draft of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in the fall of 1935 (completing it in December). He began to revise it in January 1936 for publication in the French edition of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (trans. Pierre Klossowski, under the title "L'Oeuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5 [1936]: 40-68). Because the French version imposed various cuts in Benjamin's text, he reworked the essay again in German. This ultimate version to be published only in 1955. See Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." *Schriften*, ed. Theodor Adorno and Gretel Adorno, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1955), I:366-405; trans. Harry Zohn, under the title "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969); hereafter abbreviated "WA."

art.<sup>5</sup> It is artiness that erodes both the aura of this humanity and its possessor's authority, as the gum-bichromate print and the accompanying penumbral lighting betray a social class under siege. Atget's response to this artiness is to pull the plug on the portrait altogether and to produce the urban setting voided of human presence, thereby substituting, for the turn-of-the-century portrait's unconscious *mise-en-scène* of class murder, an eerily emptied "scene of a crime" ("WA," p. 226).

The point of Benjamin's "A Small History of Photography" is, then, to welcome a contemporary return to the authenticity of photography's relation to the human subject.<sup>6</sup> This he sees occurring either in Soviet cinema's curiously intimate rendering of the anonymous subjects of a social collective or in August Sander's submission of the individual portrait to the archival pressures of serialization.<sup>7</sup> If he also deplores the photographer's benighted struggle to acquire aesthetic credentials "before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning" ("HP," p. 241), this does not assume the radically deconstructive position Benjamin would take five years later, in which photography is not just claiming the specificity of its own (technologically inflected) medium but, in denying the values of the aesthetic itself, will cashier the very idea of the independent medium, including that of photography.

3. In becoming a theoretical object, photography loses its specificity as a medium. Thus in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin charts a historical path from the shock effects courted by futurism and dada collage, to the shocks delivered by the unconscious optics revealed by photography, to the shock specific to the montage procedures of film editing, a path that is now indifferent to the givens of a particular medium. As a theoretical object, photography assumes the revelatory power to set forth the reasons for a wholesale transformation of art that will include itself in that same transformation.

"A Small History of Photography" had pictured the decay of the aura as a tendency within photography's own history; "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" will now see the photographic – which is to say-mechanical reproduction in all its modern, technological guises – as both source and symptom of a full-scale demise of this aura across all of culture, so that art itself, as celebrator of the unique

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin speaks of the decadence and the "sharp decline in taste" that overwhelms photography by the 1880s (Benjamin, "HP," p. 246).

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, writing after the 1929 crash, comments: "It would not be surprising if the photographic methods which today, for the first time, are harking back to the pre-industrial heyday of photography had an underground connection with the crisis of capitalist industry" (Benjamin, "HE" pp. 241-42).

<sup>7</sup> On the relation between Benjamin's analysis of Sander and the debates about photography engaged in by the Soviet avant-garde, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture," in Melissa E. Feldman, *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art* (exhibition catalog, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 9 Sept.-30 Oct. 1994).

and the authentic, will empty out completely. Its transformation will be absolute: "To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility," Benjamin states ("WA," p. 224).

The change that the theoretical object makes clear to Benjamin has two faces. One is in the field of the object where, through the structure of reproduction, serialized units are rendered equivalent, much as in the operations of statistics. The result is that things are now made more available, both in the sense of more proximate and more understandable, to the masses. But the other kind of change is in the field of the subject for whom a new type of perception operates, "a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" ("WA," p. 223). This extraction Benjamin also describes as prying objects from their shells.

In a variant of one of the sections of his essay, Benjamin comments on the recent appearance of a theory of art focussed precisely on this perceptual act of prying objects from their contexts, which in and of itself can now be reinvested with aesthetic force. Referring to the position Marcel Duchamp elaborates in the *Green Box*, Benjamin summarizes it as follows: "Once an object is looked at by us as a work of art, it absolutely ceases its objective function. This is why contemporary man would prefer to feel the specific effect of the work of art in the experience of objects disengaged from their functional contexts [*crossed out*: torn from this context or thrown away] ... rather than with works nominated to play this role:"<sup>8</sup>

Thus acknowledging the intersection between his own theoretical position and that of Duchamp, Benjamin's "work of art designed for reproducibility" is seen to have already been projected as the ready-made; and the perceptual act that extracts "the sense of the universal equality of things," even from a unique object, is understood as that of the photographer framing pieces of the world through the camera's lens whether he or she takes the picture or not. That this act alone is aesthetic means that an entire world of artistic technique and tradition drops away, not only the skill required to make the older forms of "works nominated to play this role" – painting, say, or sculpture – but also the technical skills of exposure, developing, and printing requisite to photography itself.

4. The triumphal convergence of art and photography that began in the late 1960s is contemporary with the sudden explosion in the market for photography "itself." But, ironically, the institutions of art – museums, collectors, historians, critics – turned their attention to the specifically photographic medium at the very moment that photography entered artistic

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, "Paralipomènes et variantes de la version définitive," trans. Françoise Eggers, *Écrits français* ed. Jean-Maurice Monnoyer (Paris, 1991), pp. 179-80.

practice as a theoretical object, which is to say, as a tool for deconstructing that practice. For photography converges with art as a means of both enacting and documenting a fundamental transformation whereby the specificity of the individual medium is abandoned in favor of a practice focussed on what has to be called art-in-general, the generic character of art independent of a specific, traditional support.<sup>9</sup>

If conceptual art articulated this turn most overtly (Joseph Kosuth: "Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art.... That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a *kind* of art.")<sup>10</sup> and if one branch of its practice restricted the exploration of "the nature of art [in general]" to language – thus avoiding the visual because it would be too specific – most of conceptual art had recourse to photography. There were, perhaps, two reasons for this. The first is that the art interrogated by conceptual art remained visual, rather than, say, literary or musical; and photography was a way of adhering to the realm of visuality. But, second, its beauty was precisely that its way of remaining within this realm was itself nonspecific. Photography was understood (and Benjamin once again was the first to pronounce it so) as deeply inimical to the idea of autonomy or specificity because of its own structural dependence upon a caption. Thus as heterogeneous from the outset – an always potential mixture of image and text – photography became the major tool for conducting an inquiry on the nature of art. that never descends into specificity. Indeed, Jeff Wall writes of the importance of photoconceptualism that "many of Conceptual art's essential achievements are either created in the form of photographs or are otherwise mediated by them."<sup>11</sup>

It is this inherently hybrid structure of photography that is recognized in one of the major gambits of photoconceptual practice, when Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966) or Robert Smithson's "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967) assume the guise of photojournalism, marrying written text to documentary-photographic illustration. This would become the model for many other types of photoconceptual work – from the self-imposed shooting assignments of

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<sup>9</sup> The theorization of the move from the specific to the generic that dominates artistic practice of the 1960s, although ultimately deriving from Duchamp, has occupied Thierry de Duve in essays such as "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas;" in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964* ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 244-310 and "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism," *October*, no. 70 (Fall 1994): 61-97.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," *Studio International* 178 (Oct. 1969): 135; rpt. as "Art after Philosophy, I and II," in *Idea Art, A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York, 1973), pp. 70-101.

<sup>11</sup> Jeff Wall, "Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* (exhibition catalog, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 15 Oct. 1995-4 Feb. 1996), p. 253.

Douglas Heubler or Bernd and Hilla Becher to the landscape reportages of Richard Long or the documentary pieces of Allan Sekula – as it would also generate a variety of narrative photoessays, from those by Victor Burgin or Martha Rosler to those by younger artists like Sophie Calle. Its historical origins, as Wall points out, are to be found in the avant-garde's original embrace of photojournalism in the 1920s and 1930s as a way not only of opening fire on the idea of aesthetic autonomy so carefully preserved by "art photography" but of mobilizing the unexpected formal resources in the look of "nonart" contained in the haphazard spontaneity of the documentary photograph.

Indeed photography's mimetic capacity opens it effortlessly onto the general avant-garde practice of mimicry, of assuming the guise of whole ranges of non- or anti-art experience in order to critique the unexamined pretensions of high art. From Seurat's emulation of art nouveau posters to pop art's travesty of cheap advertising, a range of modernist practice has mined the possibilities of turning imitation to its own use. And, as the whole cohort of appropriation artists demonstrated in the 1980s, nothing is so inherently equipped for this strategy of impersonation as the mirror with a memory that is photography.

Photoconceptualism chose, as its second strategic dimension, the mimicry not of photojournalism but of brutishly amateur photography because, Wall further argues, the look of the utterly dumb, hapless picture, the image divested of any social or formal significance – indeed, stripped of any significance at all – and thus the photograph in which there is nothing to look at, comes as close as photography can to the reflexive condition of a photograph about nothing but its maker's own persistence in continuing to produce something that, in its resistance to instrumentalization, its purposive purposelessness, must be called art. A reflection thus on the concept of art itself, which as Duchamp had once put it can be seen as nothing more than the "impossibilité du fer" – his pun on the impossibility of making<sup>12</sup> – Ruscha's pointless gas stations or Los Angeles apartment buildings or Heubler's utterly artless duration pieces exploit the amateur's zero-point of style to move photography to the center of conceptual art.

5. Photography's apotheosis as a medium – which is to say its commercial, academic, and museological success – comes just at the moment of its capacity to eclipse the very notion of a medium and to emerge as a theoretical because heterogeneous object. But in a second moment, not too historically distant from the first, this object will lose its deconstructive force by passing out of the field of social use and into the twilight zone of obsolescence. By the mid-1960s, the amateur's Brownie camera

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<sup>12</sup> Denis de Rougemont, "Marcel Duchamp, mine de rien," interview with Marcel Duchamp (1945), *Preuves* 204 (Feb. 1968): 45; quoted in de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 166.

and drugstore print, which the photoconceptualist exploits in order to obtain the look of "no art," have yielded to a new phase of photoconsumerism in which, as Wall notes, "tourists and picnickers sporting Pentaxes and Nikons" mean that "average citizens come into possession of 'professional-class' equipment," and "amateurism ceases to be a technical category."<sup>13</sup> What Wall does not say, however, is that by the early 1980s those same tourists would be toting camcorders, signalling that first video and then digitalized imaging will replace photography altogether as a mass social practice.

Photography has, then, suddenly become one of those industrial discards, a newly established curio, like the jukebox or the trolley car. But it is at just this point, and in this very condition as outmoded, that it seems to have entered into a new relation to aesthetic production. This time, however, photography functions against the grain of its earlier destruction of the medium, becoming, under precisely the guise of its own obsolescence, a means of what has to be called an act of reinventing the medium.

The medium in question here is not any of the traditional media – painting, sculpture, drawing, architecture – that include photography. So the reinvention in question does not imply the restoration of any of those earlier forms of support that the "age of mechanical reproduction" had rendered thoroughly dysfunctional through their own assimilation to the commodity form. Rather, it concerns the idea of a medium as such, a medium as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support, conventions out of which to develop a form of expressiveness that can be both projective and mnemonic. And if photography has a role to play at this juncture, which is to say at this moment of postconceptual, "postmedium" production, Benjamin may have already signalled to us that this is due to its very passage from mass use to obsolescence.

But to grasp Benjamin's theorization of the outmoded, itself triggered by specific works of surrealism, and to interrogate its possible relation to the postmedium condition I've been sketching, one must follow Benjamin's example by addressing particular instances in which the obsolescent could be said to have a redemptive role in relation to the very idea of the medium. I therefore wish to pursue such an instance, examining its various aspects—not just its technical (or physical) support, but the conventions it goes on to develop. This examination can lay before us, with greater vividness than any general theory, what the stakes of this enterprise might be.

The case I have in mind is that of the Irish artist James Coleman. Coleman, whose work evolves out of and past conceptual art in the mid 1970s, has used photography in the form of the projected slide tape as

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<sup>13</sup> Wall, "Marks of Indifference", pp. 264, 265.

the almost exclusive support for his work. This support – a slide sequence whose changes are regulated by a timer and that may or may not be accompanied by a sound track – is of course derived from commercial use in business presentations and advertising (we have only to think of large displays in train stations and airports) and is thus, strictly speaking, not *invented* by Coleman. But then neither did Wall *invent* the illuminated advertising panel he adopted as the support for his postconceptual photographic practice. In both practices, however, a low-grade, low-tech commercial support is pressed into service as a way of returning to the idea of a medium. In Wall's case, the medium to which he wishes to return, taking it up where it left off in the nineteenth century just before Manet would lead it down the path of modernism, is painting, or more specifically history painting. His desire is to move that traditional form forward but now with constructed photographic means.<sup>14</sup> Thus though Wall's activities are symptomatic of the present need to reconsider the problem of the medium, they seem to partake of the kind of *revanchiste* restoration of the traditional media that was so characteristic of the art of the 1980s.

But Coleman cannot be said to be returning to a given medium, although the fact that the luminous projections occur in darkened rooms sets up a certain relation to cinema, and the fact that in them actors are portrayed in highly staged situations evokes a connection to theater. Rather, the medium Coleman seems to be elaborating is just this paradoxical collision between stillness and movement that the static slide provokes right at the interstice of its changes, which, since Coleman insists that the projection equipment be placed in the same space as the viewer of his work, is underscored by the click of the carousel's rotation and the new slide's falling into place or by the mechanical whirl of the double projectors' zoom lenses changing focus to create the effect of a dissolve.

6. Roland Barthes had circled around a similar paradox between stillness and movement when in his essay "The Third Meaning" he found himself locating the specifically filmic – what he thinks of as film's genius as a medium – not in any aspect of cinematic movement but rather, paradoxically, in the photographic still. It is in the horizontal thrust of movement itself that Barthes sees all of narrative's drive toward symbolic efficacy, which is to say, the various levels of plot, theme, history, psychology on which narrative meaning operates. What the photographic still can deliver in opposition to this is something that strikes Barthes as counternarrative, which is to say a seemingly aimless set of details that

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<sup>14</sup> That Wall wishes to "redo" the masterpieces of nineteenth-century painting is obvious from his decision to stage a variety of recognizable narratives, such as Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* in his *Picture for Women* (1978), or Courbet's *Source of the Loue* in his *The Drain* (1984), or a combination of Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* and Meissonier's *The Barricades* in his *Dead Troops Talk* (1991-92). Wall's supporters see this staging as a strategy for reconnecting with tradition. I feel, however, that such a reconnection is unearned by the works themselves and must therefore be characterized, negatively, as pastiche.

throws the forward drive of diegesis into reverse as it were, scattering the coherence of the narrative into a disseminatory set of permutations.

This counternarrative, with its resistance to the filmic illusion of real time, is where Barthes locates the specifically filmic. A function of the still, the counternarrative is not, however, merely opposed to movement. Rather, it is to be sensed in the context of the "diegetic horizon" of the rest of the story against which the still photograph unfolds its contents, but in negative relation to which the still is able to generate what Barthes will call "an inarticulable third meaning," or also an "obtuse" meaning. If painting or photography are deprived of this diegetic horizon, the still internalizes it not by being a "specimen extracted from the substance of the film" but rather because the still is the fragment of a second text that itself must be read vertically. This reading, open to the signifier's permutational play, institutes what Barthes calls "that *false* order which permits the turning of the pure series, the aleatory combination ... and the attainment of a structuration *which slips away from the inside*" ("TM," p. 64). And it is this permutational play that he wishes to theorize.<sup>15</sup>

It might be possible to think of a film like Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, made up entirely of stills, as having proposed an instance of such theorization in practice. For *La Jetée* is about staging the film's final image – in which the hero sees himself in the impossibly suspended, immobilized instant of his own death – as a vision that can be prepared for narratively but can only be finally realized as an explosively static "still." For all its focus on stillness, however, *La Jetée* is intensively narrative. Proceeding in what turns out to be a series of extended flashbacks – memory images, each of them understood as grasped from the flow of time and slowed to a stop – *La Jetée* moves slowly but relentlessly toward what turns out to be the retrieval and explanation of the barely intelligible glimpse of the hero's collapse with which it had opened. Indeed, in its peculiar drive toward climax it might be said to want to essentialize film itself in terms of that framing moment in every movie where "The End" hangs motionless against a blackened screen in an apotheosis of narrative understood as the production of an all-embracing, all-explaining structure of meaning.

In contradistinction to this, many of Coleman's works evoke endings in the form of actors lined up as if for a final curtain call – in fact *Living and Presumed Dead* is nothing but forty-five minutes of such a lineup – although since these are staged and restaged within the works as finality without any closure, they both underscore the motionlessness of the slides themselves and set the image of the final curtain into what Barthes had

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<sup>15</sup> If ... the specific filmic ... lies not in movement, but in an inarticulable third meaning that neither the simple photograph nor figurative painting can assume since they lack the diegetic horizon . . . , then the "movement" regarded as the essence of film is not animation, flux, mobility, "life," copy, but simply the framework of a permutational unfolding and a theory of the still becomes necessary. ["TM," pp. 66-67]



FIG. 1.—James Coleman, *Living and Presumed Dead* (1985).

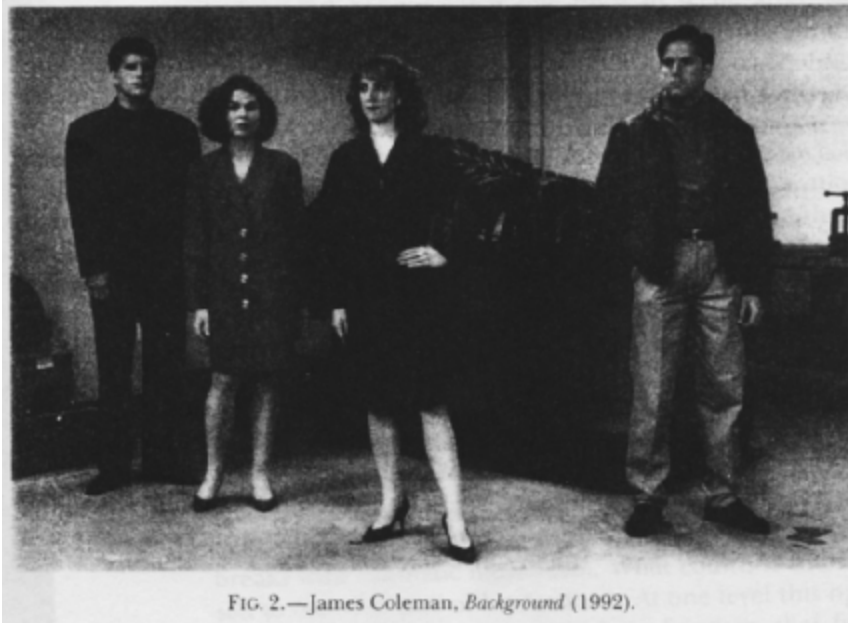


FIG. 2.—James Coleman, *Background* (1992).

called the permutational play of the still's relation to the diegetic horizon of the sequence (figs. 1 and 2). Indeed, Coleman's *Living and Presumed Dead* is entirely conceived on the idea of permutation, as its linear assembly of serialized characters (generated by alphabetic sequence: Abbax, Borrax, Capax, and so on) do nothing throughout the work but change

places among themselves to form different enigmatic groupings in the exaggeratedly horizontal lineup.

In Coleman's work the diegetic horizon is not only registered in the naked fact of the photographic sequence itself but is further coded in the individual images by the sense many of them exude of having been shaped by other types of narrative vehicles, most specifically the photonovel. And indeed it is this resource, this most degraded form of mass "literature" – comic books for adults – that Coleman will exploit in his transformation of the physical support of the slide tape into the fully articulate and formally reflexive condition of what could finally be called a medium.

For in the very grammar of the photonovel Coleman finds something that can be developed as an artistic convention, both arising from the nature of the work's material support and investing that materiality with expressiveness. This element, which I will call the *double face-out*, is a particular kind of setup that one finds in scene after scene of the story (whether in the photonovel or, nonphotographically, the comic book), especially in the dramatic confrontation between two characters. A film would treat such an exchange through point-of-view editing, with the camera turning from one interlocutor to another, interweaving statement and reaction. But a book of stills can afford no such luxury and must sacrifice naturalism to efficiency, since the multiplication of shots necessary to cut back and forth from one character to another would dilate the progress of the story endlessly. Therefore the reaction shot is conflated with the action that has instigated it, such that both characters appear together, the instigator somewhat in the background looking at the reactor who tends to fill the foreground, but, back turned to the other, is also facing forward out of the frame. Now with both shot and reaction shot projected with a single frame, what we find in both photonovel and comic strip is that in the highest pitches of emotional intensity, the double face-out presents us with the mannerism of a dialogue in which one of the two participants is not looking at the other.

For Coleman's project it does not matter that the double face-out breaks with dramatic illusionism. What counts is the way it addresses itself to the structure of his medium. At one level this operates in relation to the double face-out's subversion of suture, that filmic operation in which the viewer is bound into the very weft of the narrative. A function of point-of-view editing, suture describes the viewer's identification with the camera as it turns back and forth within the dramatic space, causing the viewer to leave his or her externalized position outside the image to become visually and psychologically woven – or sutured – into the fabric of the film.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The classic text on point-of-view editing and suture is Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," *Screen* 18 (Winter 1977-78): 35-47.

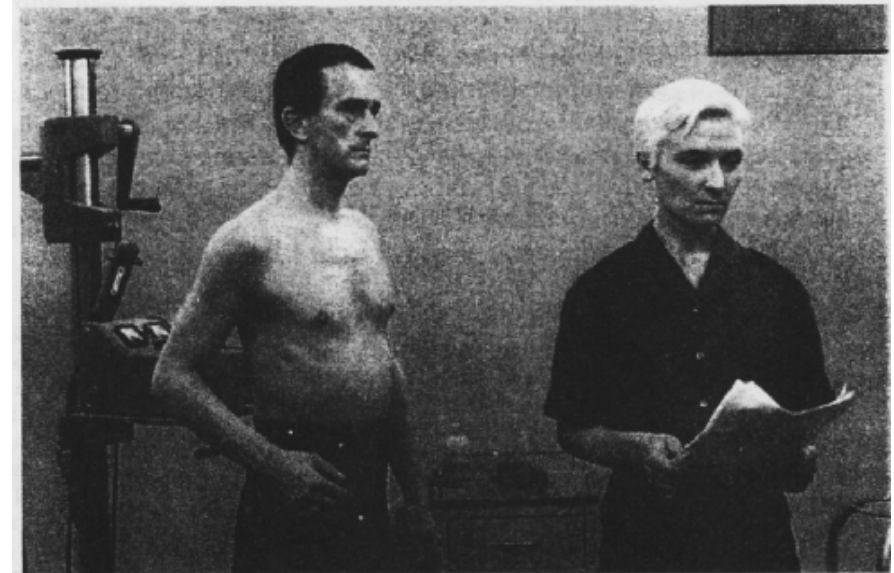
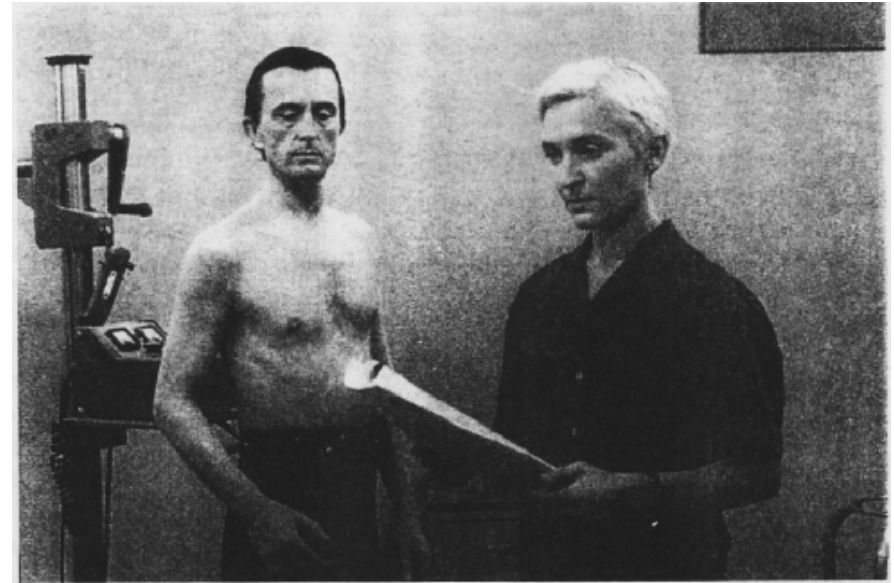


FIG. 3.—James Coleman, *Seeing for Oneself* (1987).

Yet this very refusal of suture allows Coleman to confront and underscore the disembodied planarity of the visual half of his medium; his work being photographically based, there is no other recourse than to unroll the density of life onto a flat plane. In just this sense, the double face-out's own flatness takes on a compensatory gravity as it becomes the emblem of this reflexive acknowledgement of the impossibility of the visual field to deliver its promise of either lifelikeness or authenticity.

The frequency of the double face-out's occurrence within Coleman's work signals its importance as a grammatical component of the medium he is using it to invent (figs. 3, 4, and 5). For this convention not only operates to articulate his medium along its visual dimension but can as well be doubled at the level of the sound track that gives it added gravity, as when in a work like *INITIALS* the narrator keeps returning to a question that serves as the poetic description of just this mannerism: "Why do you gaze, one on the other ... and then turn away ... and then turn away?"

The fact that this question is quoted from a dance drama by Yeats, his 1917 *The Dreaming of the Bones*, indicates, though it does not insist on, the seriousness with which Coleman intends to invest the lowly materials from which he is fashioning his medium. For if Coleman turns toward the by-now outmoded, low-tech support of the promotional slide tape or the degraded mass-cult vehicle of the photonovel, it is not with the postwar avant-garde's attitude of a parodic embrace of the trashy look of non-art



FIGS. 4 and 5.—James Coleman, *Initials* (1994).

or its violent critique of the alienated forms of Spectacle. It is not, that is to say, in the conviction that there is no longer a possibility for something like a medium to exist. Rather, in this drive to invent a medium, Coleman's determination to mine his support for its own conventions is a way of asserting the redemptive possibilities of the newly adopted support itself; although at the same time – it must be emphasized – the production



of the medium *within* the commercialized support disallows from the outset any notion that the site of this invention will be that of a pre-given, privileged space called Art.<sup>17</sup>

7. The photonovel had been named by Barthes as one of several cultural phenomena to have access to the "third meaning" in which a signifier is set in play against the background of a narrative it never serves. If this group, which Barthes calls "anecdotalized images," works collectively to place obtuse meaning in a diegetic space, Barthes nonetheless singles out the photonovel; "these 'arts,'" he says, "born in the lower depths of high culture, possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier (related to the obtuse meaning). This is acknowledged as regards the comic-strip," he adds, "but I myself experience this slight trauma of *significance* faced with certain photonovels: '*their stupidity touches me*' (which could be a certain definition of obtuse meaning)" ("TM," p. 66 n. 1).<sup>18</sup>

Not all of Barthes's examples of this kind of pictogram, however, are from the lower depths of culture. The *images d'Epinal*, cheap, colored woodcuts popular in the nineteenth century, do share this condition, but not other examples on Barthes's list, such as Carpaccio's *Legend of Saint Ursula* or the general category of stained glass windows.

Perhaps it is Barthes's deep allegiance to Proust, as intense as Benjamin's own, that provides the context in which the relationship among these various objects seems not only justified but somehow satisfying. For we only have to think of the opening pages of *Swann's Way* and the young Marcel's enchantment with the projections of the magic lantern slides on his bedroom walls to realize that childhood's endless capacities for narrative invention married to the dreaminess of the luminous image are preparing us for Marcel's later glimpse of the Duchesse de Guermantes kneeling below the stained glass windows of Combray Church.<sup>19</sup>

The argument has been made that for Benjamin, too, the magic lantern show was endowed with a complex power. For not only could it be

said to be the very embodiment of phantasmagoria as ideological projection, but it could also be thought to produce the inverse image of ideology, which is to say phantasmagoria as constructive rather than merely reflective, the magic lantern as the medium of the child's permutational powers at play against the diegetic horizon.<sup>20</sup> Indeed the magic lantern functions in Benjamin's thought as one of those outmoded optical devices, like the stereopticon slide (Benjamin's model for the dialectical image), which can brush the phantasmagorical against its own grain to produce an outside to the totality of technologized space.

For Coleman as well, this resource of the magic lantern show, lodged within the commercial slide tape as a kind of genetic marker, is central to his project. It tells of an imaginative capacity stored within this technical support and made suddenly retrievable at the moment when the armoring of technology breaks down under the force of its own obsolescence. To "reinvent" the slide tape as a medium – as I am claiming it is his ambition to do here – is to release this cognitive capacity, thereby discovering the redemptive possibilities within the technological support itself.

Benjamin's "A Small History of Photography" had already described certain photographic practices of his own day performing a retrieval of the "amateur" condition of photography's first decade, although he was not using *amateur* in the sense given it by a postwar avant-garde to mean incompetent. Rather, it conveyed what Benjamin thought of as the ideal of a relation to art that was nonprofessional in the sense of nonspecialized. Benjamin had spelled out such an ideal in a text he wrote one year after "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," his "Second Paris Letter: On Painting and Photography," undertaken for the Moscow edition of *Das Wort* but refused for publication. There he connects the amateur status of early photography to the preimpressionist situation in which both the theory and practice of art arose from the continuous discursive field maintained by the academies. Claiming that Courbet was the last painter to operate within this continuity, Benjamin pictures impressionism as the first of the modernist movements to have courted a studio-based esoterica with the result that the artists' professional jargon both gave rise to and depended upon the critics' specialized discourse.<sup>21</sup> Once again, then, this first decade of photography's history operates as a kind of promise folded within its medium of an openness and invention before the rigidification of the image as commodity.

In 1935 Benjamin had articulated his idea of the onset of obsolescence as a possible if momentary revelation of the utopian dreams encoded within the various forms of technology at the points of their

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<sup>17</sup> In Cindy Sherman's adoption of the "film still" as the beginning of a photographic practice that will go on to evoke other narrative forms, such as the love comic, the fairy tale, the horror story, and so on, we see another highly consistent and sustained practice of the kind of permutational play against the diegetic horizon that Barthes theorizes in "The Third Meaning." It is clear that Sherman's work needs to be examined in relation to the phenomenon of inventing a medium rather than the almost exclusively photoconceptualist concerns that have been projected onto it.

<sup>18</sup> Barthes uses Julia Kristeva's term *significance* to signal the play of the signifier as it eludes meaning (the signified) and registers instead the rhythms and the materiality of the body's opening onto pleasure.

<sup>19</sup> Proust himself compares the effect of the slide projection to the colored glass: "In the manner of the master-builders and glass-painters of gothic days it substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colors, in which legends were depicted, as on a shifting and transitory window" (Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff [1913; New York, 1928], p. 7).

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<sup>20</sup> See Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley, 1993), p. 229.

<sup>21</sup> See Benjamin, "Lettre parisienne (no. 2): Peinture et photographie," *Sur l'art et la photographie*, ed. Christophe Jouanlanne (Paris, 1997), p. 7i9.



inception. If he had steadily claimed a political future for photography, that was not how Benjamin described its birth in the two essays straddling "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (in 1931 and late 1936). There we get a glimpse of photography's both hooking into the cognitive powers of childhood and opening up the promise of becoming a medium. At the moment, now, of its obsolescence photography can remind us of this promise: not as a revival of itself or indeed of any of the former mediums of art, but of what Benjamin had earlier spoken of as the necessary *plurality* of the arts (represented by the plurality of the Muses), a plural condition that stands apart from any philosophically unified idea of Art. This is another way of stating the need for the idea of the medium as such to reclaim the specific from the deadening embrace of the general.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Benjamin, 'The Theory of Criticism,' *Selected Writings, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 218. The relationship (and opposition) between the plurality of the Muses, with each Muse the genius of a specific medium – visual art, music, dance, and so on – and the general, philosophical concept of Art is explored by Jean-Luc Nancy in "Why Are There Several Arts and Not Just One," *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Calif., 1996), pp. 1-39.