Hygiene of the Optical

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.08.05
contemporary project of the Left's rethinking popular culture along postmodern lines. We don't get very far in specifying the kinds of politics that work in this new environment if we just stick with the strategies and concepts that are given to us by the tradition, whether Marxism, other radicalisms, or social democracy. On the other hand, if we acknowledge that politics is located elsewhere now, that doesn't mean that all of those given concepts and strategies are obsolete. I certainly don't think, for example, that class has become an inoperative term of politics. It's the insufficiencies of those given terms that need to be faced and rethought.

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Hygiene of the Optical

Portraits from Algeria, Morocco and Spain: An incomplete fiction on the Andaluz of North Western Africa and Southern Iberia in 24 acts, staged between Semana Santa and the Fiesta of San Isidro, 1993 by Michael T. Rauner
The masked startles by its silence. The unarticulated, the about to be, the hinderance of association as the play of light in the back-ground, how the black pointed hood stretches up. Interiority is externalized, nameless. To name is to be empowered; identification revokes anonymity. These themes are constants in Rauner’s work, from his early images of the homeless in San Diego, CA and Tijuana, Mexico.

Hoodless, suddenly an any boy holding the garb of celebration in his hand. The Festival of Semana Santa. Rauner’s recent work moves to reinvent the human form, to capture the celebration in humanity: the carnival of the face, the revelry that is the body paused for an observer.
3. 

*Tlemcen, Algeria. 1993*

Black and White Xerox of photograph (6”x 6”)

Titles, attempting certainty, exactitude, hover like butterflies, tenable yet blown. The choice in language is among certain possibilities; the choice in photography is infinite. The man of Tlemcen rests on his heels, fingers interlocked. A white wall, the blank hesitations. His jacket is military issue. His eyes shadowed. He has let his hair grow. A crack in the wall, a diminishing cascade of swirling, knotted bark in the far corner of the ledge. Travel is an empty option.

4. 

*Sidi Boumediene, Algeria. 1993*

Black and White Xerox of photograph (6”x 6”)

A stereoptician view. These men and women exist in simultaneity as historical images, circa unknown, viewed by contemporary eyes; as vehicles for contemporary self-reflection; as situations captured by the artist, eternally recurring; as men and women existing at the very moment you observe them in the photographs. Where is history? Where is story? Here, essentially, are their bodies.
5. Tlemcen, Algeria. 1993
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6" x 6")
His eyes are.
Shades of grayblack.
His bootlace, absent
in an eyelet.

6. Timimoun, Algeria. 1993
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6" x 6")
This soldier crouches easily, heels raised, an agile physique beneath his uniform. He is comfortable being observed. The blink of the camera selects, develops, places, recontextualizes. His eyes are somehow familiar, a soul establishing itself. Youthful, yes, but outwardly aged. What has this soldier seen that he knows the click of the camera shall not destroy, only capture? His eyes are the eyes of the man in Tlemcen.
7. Marakesh, Morocco. 1993
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6" x 6")
Gravity, solemnity, a vitality in stasis: this man could be a holy man, sitting straight under the weight of faith. A partial silouette, an edge between light and lightlessness, his epidermis sucks the light reflected from the wall, the body. Image is image. Image is object: the curve of the bald head repeats the shape of the wall detail behind. Where he is deep darks, the wall glares opacity. Blacks on white surrounding blacks, tenuous as belief, edged as any lie.

8. Essoura, Morocco. 1993
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6" x 6")
The spectacle is miniaturized, cropped. They are intangible as ghosts, angels paused in their work. White on white, air on air. Dimple of existence. Historically, photography was heralded as creating stability in the flux of the continual progression of existence so that existence itself could be examined in depth. Rapidity is either intolerable, or accepted without question. But photography has never been able to accomplish such a task. Stopped time does not equate the image offered. Time is not a motion, a gesture seeking completion like a tulip opening to light; it is not a duration: a shadow dragged across green grass. It is not made to be known, but lived. The image, however, must be known, trampled as the eye follows contours of shape, shading, its own history: the image of instant cessation.
9.  
*Asilah, Morocco. 1993*
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6" x 6")

10.  
*Cordoba, Spain. 1993*
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6" x 6")
What has happened happens recurringly, continually, and at that border of continuance and continual passing is Rauner's camera. Viewing is no longer polysensual but an act of the mind. This woman in black turned slightly to the right in front of the chipping, convoluted, chunked and wearing wall. Her inherent nobility denies a nostalgia for our own sorrows. Hands in gloves, the web of dark lace clouding her head in a mist, she stands at the gap between what she represents and what she is.
11.

*Oran, Algeria.* 1993

Black and White Xerox of photograph (6"x 6")

Beauty has traditionally been the subject of photography: Edward Weston’s peppers, or Andre Kertesz’s nudes, works framed by what cannot be seen through ordinary sight. Rauner re defines beauty as egalitarian. A woman’s shrouded head. Rauner reinvents the exotic, or rather, undoes the exotic like a spool: the eyes are not exposed. Any mystery dissipates to anonymity in the same way that a fully exposed anyface is simply a face. In fold upon elegant fold of cloth this woman’s claim of anonymity is her faith. What is beautiful is this faith, is the act of making minimal. But through her faith she is erased. That she believes is beautiful. That she believes is horrific.

12.

*El Jadida, Morocco.* 1993

Black and White Xerox of photograph (6"x 6")

With the flick of his index finger the universe varies: motion within an immobile frame. On the far side of each photograph as though it were a window out—movement. This boy tosses the stick, is about to toss the stick, tossed the stick and has caught it again. The simplicity of the act, his grin half realized. On the near, between us and the photograph—continual motion in relation to the already created: in the looking is the change. But this is a projection of our own in-out orientation; we are bounded by the surface of our skins. The borders of the photograph, contrary to the experience of living, offers an immobile point from which we can make sense of what was, articulate a meaning, however cognizant of borders.
Photography has made western society aware of its own ephemerality: history has been pulled into the present in the object of the photograph. History starts here, contained and consumed here. Our gaze turns toward a future of anticipating what images of the present we will suck into a future present tense; we have lost ritual. How else has photography become so important? The photographic image is fulfilling the prophesy of appropriation. The image and the thing have become two manifestations of the same spirit. Photography is both art (that which is) and depiction (that which is represented), and neither simultaneously as appropriated image.

He who creates a thing is forced to make it ugly. In the effort of creation one fights, and the result invariably is a certain ugliness. Those who follow, with time and distance for judgement, will do better and will please more, because they do not have to fight, they know what they are doing, where they are going, the thing having already been created.
— Pablo Picasso
When we make our way back, the shadow beneath his chin has deepened, the crease that delves into the forehead has widened. Something is there which was not there before. Consummation by shadow. The photograph cannot change, cannot rearrange its matter, yet it ripples, shifts. We catch it both coming and going, like a clock's pendulum at the bottom of its swing. The photograph continually recurs at the impending nonexistence of is. It is the present of no duration—a duration without length. But the photograph does not represent the image of reality: reality is neither static nor persistent. That we “see” something differently after viewing its photograph is the oddity of the art. This man’s face is still this man’s face—cheeks chubbed beneath the curve of glasses, the taut curls pushing out from beneath his cap. It is essentially a face. But it is also more: in that face (but really it is four faces: he is who he thinks he is, he is who he desires Rauner to think he is, he is who Rauner thinks he is, and he is who I the viewer (you) think he is), in that face is any of our faces.
That we see these images hanging in a gallery instead of on the mantle of the fireplace or on the desk of a co-worker participated in determining how we perceive them. Rauner demystifies the images we hold so dear by producing photocopies of prints of negatives of things: duplicate upon duplicate upon duplicate. He taunts us to take the image from the wall, out of the frame and be done with it: it can be reproduced with little energy. But we do not, will not.

Rauner rescinds the distance between cultures in the depiction of the foreign—we are moved closer. But the experience of the foreign is the experience of the unreality of the image, its remoteness, its remove. The image becomes information, leaving the realm of the ordinary. What is missing is the intimacy we attach to the images which make up our lives: a child, a sibling, a parent.
19. 

*Tlemcen, Algeria*. 1993
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6" x 6")

We occupy the same space Rauner occupied, taking his place as the object of this man’s gaze while simultaneously distancing ourselves as participant viewers. We are co-substantial with Rauner as the photograph is co-substantial with its subject. We become minimal: the viewer is replaceable in Rauner’s work, interchangeable, unnecessary in our singularity, necessary in our observation.

But Rauner cannot be distinguished from the images. He becomes his own subject, is consumed, sucked into the space between this man on the deserted Tlemcen road and where we stand. In this way, Rauner sacrifices what intimacy he can offer by stepping behind the camera. He becomes one of us.

20. 

*Beni Isiguen, Algeria*. 1993
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6" x 6")

When we look at photographs, at paintings, (an Arbus, a Hopper), and we identify a tangible loneliness, we are not labeling the piece so much as identifying our own predicament. We sense what we cannot access, that point toward which all the formal movements of the image are directed. In Arbus’ “Patriotic Young Man with a Flag”, the young man looks toward his right, over our left shoulder. In Rauner, however, each portrait stares directly into the lens, stares into the space we occupy and challenges us to step forward and identify our place, to say “I am here.” The paradox is that any place we claim is necessarily tangential to what is required for our participation. The place we are required to occupy is the point over our left shoulder existing only within each photograph; or, it is that space we both occupy as viewers in reference to the original image, and the space we cannot occupy because it does not physically exist. The anonymous, the presence of as complete and absent, what can have no name.
There is no way to compare the photograph of this man to our own situation except by using abstraction which has nothing to do with either. We are unique in this modern age of imagemaking in that we are constantly reminded that we constitute two events. The event of our biological limitation and the event of our consciousness, each corresponding to two distinct times. On the one hand, time’s duration is determined by biology, guarded by the progression of deterioration. The second is of mind, in memory. The image of this face, wrinkle folding into wrinkle as joy folds into sorrow, is as present as a mirror’s packed surface. These images have nothing to do with what they depict. If anything they are an attempt to keep what is unpredictable, what is truly foreign, under control. They are a magic.

Rauner is the man of a million afternoons where nothing happens. So what is, for Rauner, is the deletion of the exotic: the eyes, the mouth, the chin framed by the thick beard are simply human features. Rauner has masked this man’s participation in a greater whole: he is culturally bound by clothes, tint of skin, shape of features, yet it is hinted that he transcends his culture simply by framing, closely, the face. The references are present, but even these are fictions. He is historically situated (the Bic ballpoint pen in the shirt-pocket). Shuffle the names of the cities. Place, like narrative and time, looms arbitrary. Yet the spectre of what is always otherwise, always located, cannot be erased. Masks, however snug, maintain separation.

Rauner does not try to capture through the medium the “presence” of Morocco or Algeria or Spain, as though revealing an adventurer spirit. Presence cannot be apprehended by vision alone; it must be supplemented by the sensual, by the getting. He does not seek experience caught. He is after an approaching of the never to be achieved.
23.  
*Marrakesh, Morocco. 1993*
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6"x 6")
What these photographs finally confirm is simply that we are looking at them.

24.  
*El Jadida, Morocco. 1993*
Black and White Xerox of photograph (6"x 6")
The cloak. Gravel under. White wall.
Notes
The title of this poem text is from Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's journals (1925): "The hygiene of the optical, the health of the visible is slowly filtering through."

In places this poem relies on the texts of others, although the material is oftentimes reworked from its original source for purposes of rhythm and clarity. I gratefully acknowledge: Susan Sontag's On Photography, John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Malek Alloulà's The Colonial Harem, John Berger's And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos, and Saint Augustine's Confessions.

Acknowledgments
The author wishes to dedicate this piece to Tania, Anekka, and Christopher.