

## INTRODUCTION TO RONALD KAY'S “*On photography* Time split in two”

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Ronald Kay’s “*On photography* Time split in two” was originally published in Santiago, Chile, in *Del espacio de acá* (1980), a book that emerged within the context of a dictatorial regime clandestinely contested by a combative literary and artistic avant-garde front. *Del espacio de acá* is a theoretical-poetic text dealing with the temporal, phenomenological, and metaphysical aspects of photography as a mode of technological reproduction and its sociocultural specificity within Latin America; it is also a sophisticated analysis of the visual practice of Eugenio Dittborn as it relates to the aforementioned political context.<sup>1</sup>

A 1976 exhibition of Dittborn’s work in Santiago’s Galería Época, titled *Delachilenapinturahistoria*, set off a novel and unprecedented critical praxis that saw theorists and artists working in conjunction and publishing critical books or “catalogues” wherein text, visual object, and formal arrangement remained at all times in dialogue and functioned as each other’s ground or support. Out of Dittborn’s exhibition emerged the first of such collaborative projects (a book titled

<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Dittborn (b. 1943) is a visual artist who, since 1983, has dedicated himself primarily to his *Airmail Paintings*. Working with pliable, lightweight surfaces and varied materials, his numerous *Airmail Paintings* travel the world in large envelopes and are unfolded and displayed in different artistic venues. Dittborn often incorporates reproductions of old photographs on his surfaces, particularly those that patently embody an institutional practice of documentation and surveillance (ID photos and mug shots, for example), thereby alluding to the Chilean dictatorial reality.

V.I.S.U.A.L. *Dos textos de Nelly Richard y Ronald Kay sobre 9 dibujos de Dittborn* [1976]), which saw Kay, Dittborn, and the critic Nelly Richard working in conjunction. Following these events, Kay's writing on artistic production would constantly return to Dittborn's work, informing such publications as *Del espacio de acá* and *N.N.: Autopsia* (1979). Nelly Richard, for her part, would turn her critical attention to different artists, including Carlos Leppe, whose work she analyzed in *Cuerpo correccional* (1980). The contemporaneous publication of *Del espacio de acá* and *Cuerpo correccional*—four years after Dittborn's exhibition and the publication of V.I.S.U.A.L.—may be said to mark a few important developments within the Chilean cultural field: it consolidated Kay and Richard as reference points for art critical discourse; it highlighted the increasing importance of the “task of the editor” in the dissemination of literary and artistic production; it confirmed the strength of an independent and politically subversive publishing front working outside the confines of the university, the academic profession, and institutional sponsorship; it emphasized the importance of forging meaningful dialogues between theory and art, and between these two fields of knowledge/experience and the political domain; and, last, it brought to the fore a critical writing practice which—recognizing that words are neither innocent nor transparent, and viewing language itself as a kind of battlefield—consciously and strategically used linguistic and rhetorical devices, inventive formal arrangement, and semantic polyvalence to create rich, thought-provoking, allusive, and elusive texts.

The two-pronged nature of Kay's *Del espacio de acá* mentioned above (a general reflection on photography's mode of being, on the one hand; an interpretation of Dittborn's work, on the other) is foregrounded from the start by the two subtitles given to the book. The full title on its front cover reads *Del espacio de acá: Señales para una mirada americana* (On the Space over Here: Signs for a [Latin] American Viewpoint).<sup>2</sup> After the dedication page (“a Helena”), the title changes to *Del espacio de acá: A propósito de la pintura y gráfica de Eugenio Dittborn* (On the Space over Here: On Eugenio Dittborn's Paintings and Graphic

2 *Del espacio de acá* is notoriously difficult to translate, in great part because of the inherent ambiguity of *Del* (“concerning,” “about,” “apropos,” “on,” “regarding,” etc.) and *acá* (technically, “here,” but a “here” that is not necessarily deictic; rather, a “here” that reflexively utters its own distance or farness with respect to another space or “there”; *acá* is therefore closer to “over here”). Other options for rendering this title in English include: *About This Space*, *Regarding This Space*, and *On/Regarding/About/Apropos This Space over Here*.

Art). On the one hand, then, the text identifies itself—albeit tentatively, with the tentativeness afforded by the word *señales*—as descriptive, even prescriptive, of a Latin American “viewpoint,” where “viewpoint” can be read as a mark of cultural identity (a Latin American way of “looking at things,” “doing things,” “thinking”); Kay’s text would provide (and itself also embody) the rough sketches, framework, signals, or “signs” of a Latin American cultural specificity, which necessarily defines itself in contrast to an opposing and culturally dominant space—predictably, Europe or the “Near West.” On the other hand, the second subtitle reduces the text’s critical scope to Chile and to the visual production of one of its foremost contemporary artists; in this modality, the text identifies itself as a commentary or gloss on a singular art project. By prefacing both of its analyses as articulations issuing from the space “over here,” the text positions itself and its author in the “marginal” site that Latin America occupies (by imposition or internalization) with respect to Europe. It does so, of course, with some irony—as with the jocular “en Chile estaba la Grecia” (“There in Chile was Greece”) that prefaces Kay’s translation of Ezra Pound’s “Propertius,” which I briefly mention below—conjuring up, reaffirming, and at the same time criticizing the notions of center and periphery, North and South, Near West (Europe) and Far West (Latin America and Chile), the transcendent and hegemonic space *de allá* (over there) and the immanent and peripheral space *de acá* (over here).<sup>3</sup>

As my brief analysis of the title of his 1980 book shows, Kay’s philosophical and theoretical texts are purposefully polyvalent and multi-layered, as well as highly lyrical, unorthodox, and unapologetically nonacademic; his poetic writings, conversely, are intensely conceptual and challenging. All in all (and to return, as Kay himself frequently does, to the use of geological metaphors), Kay’s writing may be characterized as possessing multiple semantic and linguistic strata. As a poet, Kay has published *Variaciones ornamentales* (1979), *Deep Freeze* (2000), and *Punto de fuga* (2001). As a translator, he has rendered into Spanish Ezra Pound’s “Homage to Sextus Propertius” (1919), itself a “translation” of the Latin poet’s elegiac work. Kay’s editorial creativity shows in

3 Along the same critical lines and as an obvious nod to Kay’s text, Eugenio Dittborn would publish in 1983 a short text titled “Nous les artistes des provinces lointaines” (We the Artists from Far-Away Provinces) in the September issue of the Parisian journal *Artpress* 62: 14–15. Dittborn’s text is inspired by and a commentary on the participation in the Paris Biennale—a year earlier, in 1982—of Chilean artists from the *neovanguardia*, including Carlos Leppe, the group CADA, and Dittborn himself.

the fact that his translation, *Propertio* (2005), includes, in facing-page format, Sextus Propertius's own elegies and Pound's translations, along with Kay's renderings; Kay's book also incorporates photographs of excavation sites of ancient Roman ruins and urns, a 19th-century Chilean municipal building, a naval ship, the mouth of the Aconcagua River, and a curious epigraph by Violeta Parra, mentioned above, that reads "en Chile estaba la Grecia" ("there in Chile was Greece")—editorial decisions that blur the lines between translation and original, a standard book and an "artist's book." Kay's theoretico-philosophical output includes *V.I.S.U.A.L.* (with Nelly Richard, 1976), *N.N.: Autopsia* (1979), *Del espacio de acá* (1980), and *Circuito cerrado* (2001). Many of these books, it should be noted, were written during the 1960s and 1970s, but not published until recently, in part because of the strict censorship imposed on all areas of information and cultural expression during the military dictatorship.<sup>4</sup>

Kay's production departs from a very troubled and politically tumultuous scene in which the "Chilean Path to Socialism" had been violently and abruptly interrupted by the Pinochet-led military coup of 1973—a spectacular and widely televised event that culminated in the suicide of Salvador Allende inside the National Palace and the end of his socialist political project.<sup>5</sup> The military junta's rule would officially last until 1990, and (as is the case with other Southern Cone dictatorships that were contemporary with it) was characterized by countless cases of murder, torture, disappearance, human rights violations, and censorship. During this time, Kay worked at the Department of Humanistic Studies of the School of Sciences and Mathematics at the Universidad de Chile, where he led seminars on theater and on the work of Antonin Artaud. His 1974 seminar on Artaud, titled "Signometraje" (Signfilm), incorporated a performance project that was photographically recorded and published in book form as *Tentativa Artaud* (2008). People attending his seminars included notable figures like Catalina Parra, Diamela Eltit, and Raúl Zurita.

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4 Most of Kay's books can now be legally accessed and downloaded through the website of the Centro de Documentación de las Artes Visuales (<http://centrodedocumentaciondelasartes.cl/g2/cgi-bin/library.cgi>). The CeDoc, as it is most commonly called, is an archive that aims to catalogue and preserve the record of artistic production (and related documents) of post-1970s Chile.

5 For a provocative reading of the military coup as an avant-garde "event," with particular emphasis on the image of the Moneda Palace ablaze, see Willy Thayer, "El golpe como consumación de la vanguardia," in *El fragmento repetido: Escritos en estado de excepción* (Santiago: Metales Pesados, 2006), 15–47.

In 1975, Kay edited the journal *Manuscritos*, the visual layout of which was managed by Catalina Parra, with only a single yet highly influential issue being published. An anomalous journal in terms of its visual presentation (to the point that it could be considered an artist's book, as Justo Pastor Mellado suggests),<sup>6</sup> *Manuscritos* included a host of emerging and consolidated voices, among them Nicanor Parra and Raúl Zurita. The latter debuted in this journal with a hermetic and allegorical poem titled "Areas Verdes," which would later form part of his renowned *Purgatorio* (1979). It is with the publication of this journal that Kay, along with Nelly Richard, arguably begins to shape the theoretical conversations around artistic production and its relation to dictatorship in Chile—simultaneously influencing, organizing, and granting profound conceptual depth to a heterogeneous field of experimental and politically subversive art and literature.

In general, an avant-garde spirit defined the post-1973 literary and artistic landscape in Chile. Blurring the lines between art, politics, and life, the artists and writers of this period were skeptical of grand narratives and totalizing enterprises, from both the conservative right and the communist left. Although these cultural figures can be catalogued into distinct groups, each with its own artistic and theoretical agenda (with Nelly Richard, Carlos Leppe, and Carlos Altamirano forming one group; Zurita, Eltit, Francisco Brugnoli, Lotty Rosenfeld, Fernando Balcells, and Juan Castillo forming the group CADA; and Ronald Kay, Eugenio Dittborn, and Catalina Parra forming another group),<sup>7</sup> the totality of their artistic production has been generally clustered under the name *neovanguardia* (neo-avant-garde).<sup>8</sup>

6 Justo Pastor Mellado, "Revista *Manuscritos* y la coyuntura catalogal de 1975," *Justo Pastor Mellado* (blog), July 2003, [http://www.justopastormellado.cl/gabinete\\_de\\_trabajo/articulos/2003/20030714.html](http://www.justopastormellado.cl/gabinete_de_trabajo/articulos/2003/20030714.html). Justo Pastor Mellado is a highly respected voice in post-1970s Chilean cultural (particularly artistic) debates, belonging to the same constellation as Kay, Nelly Richard, and others. Pastor Mellado regularly publishes essays and reflections on his blog.

7 Robert Neudstadt, *CADA día: La creación de un arte social* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 2001), 23.

8 Within the Latin American context, Chile is known for possessing an enduringly strong avant-garde literary tradition, to which Kay in many respects is a contemporary heir. Since the beginning of the literary avant-gardes in the first part of the 20th century and up to today, Chile has never found itself without a powerful, and eventually institutionalized, avant-garde voice (Huidobro, Neruda, Parra, and Zurita would comprise a potential unbroken genealogy). An initial avant-garde wave may be said to have comprised the work of *creacionista* poet Vicente Huidobro (1893–1948), the early facet of Pablo Neruda's (1904–73) work, most notably his *Residencia en la tierra* (1933), and

With regard to Kay's theoretical production, the highly conscious textuality and frequently unorthodox formal arrangements of his books distort the boundaries among philosophic, poetic, and artistic discourse. This characteristic has also made Kay—for better or worse—a difficult figure to digest, incorporate, or appropriate into the theoretical landscape of what might reductively be called (Post) Dictatorship Studies. Kay, in other words, is both an ineludible referent (scholars discuss his influential presence during and after the dictatorship or refer to his work *as a whole*) and an elusive, slippery figure (no one, to my mind, has yet undertaken a thoughtful *close reading* of his texts). In truth, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distill a theory (of political violence, art, photography, etc.) from his written work. To this we must add that, as a university professor who up to today has given numerous yet unrecorded courses, lectures, and talks, his ideas are also expressed in a constitutively ephemeral fashion. Kay's writing is inappropriable, unquotable, and therefore perennially “unfashionable” because it is not theory in the conventional sense. In some instances, for example, his theoretical output is “polluted” by subjective and biographical contingency. This is the case with *Circuito cerrado*, which discusses, in the first person, the book's conditions of production and publication, and which is also framed by photographs that implicitly reference Kay's life: after the front cover, a Wehrmacht soldier surrendering in the streets of Paris, which alludes to Kay's Germanic heritage (Kay was born in Hamburg in 1941), to the fact that his father was a soldier in the German army, and to Kay's inherited guilt as a result; before the back cover, a photograph of a young Catalina Parra, Kay's first wife and the daughter of the famed poet Nicanor Parra.

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the (politically and aesthetically) revolutionary poetry of Pablo de Rokha (1894–1968), who contributed to that so-called *annus mirabilis* of Western literature with a volume titled *Los gemidos* (1922). A second wave encompassed those poets grouped around 1938 under the name *Mandrágora* (with an eponymous literary journal), among them Braulio Arenas (1913–88), Jorge Luis Cáceres (1923–49), and Enrique Gómez Correa (1915–95). Finally—and although they may be grouped with the aforementioned wave—two influential poets justly deserve to be either individually singled out or jointly hailed as comprising their own avant-garde period. One is Nicanor Parra (1914–), a centenarian figure who literally *lived* the majority of the 20th century, is still alive, and whose *Poemas y antipoe-mas* (1954) deserves particular note; the other is Enrique Lihn (1929–88), a highly self-conscious poet active both before and during the dictatorship, but who is not typically aligned with any program or group. The legacy of both Parra and Lihn permeates the moment in which Kay finds himself.

As Kay himself thoughtfully points out, the original and unorthodox marriage of lyricism and theory that characterizes his writings can be described as the deployment of “strategies of language.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than hiding behind or founding his “truths” on a solid theoretical apparatus, on robust concepts that ultimately hinder what he may want to say, Kay’s writing—by which I mean *each* contingent text—embodies a singular theoretical utterance, one that cannot be easily appropriated, iterated, or translated. The distinct, exemplary rhetoric generated in each text thereby “charges language with the responsibility of what it says.” The fluctuations between “fotografía” and “instantánea” (the latter term rendered, perhaps infelicitously, as “the take” in this translation) to alternate between the technical, mechanical connotations of the photographic medium, on the one hand, and its temporal implications, on the other; the use of the word “detenimiento” (“arrest”) to describe the photograph’s effect on time—a word that also denotes the action of apprehending or detaining in the juridical sense, such that the photographic act could be read as a kind of “policing” of time; the use of parallel structures to “convince” the reader by means of the incantation of formal repetition as much as by argument and content (as in the paragraphs that begin with “It is terrifying,” “It is fascinating,” “It is agonizing”): These represent only a few instances by which Kay charges his own language with extreme weight and responsibility.

The text translated below, “*On photography* Time split in two,” is the first chapter of *Del espacio de acá*, where it appears under the title “El tiempo que se divide.”<sup>10</sup> In its present form, however, this text constitutes a coherent, autonomous piece that offers dense and provocative reflections on photography’s relation to temporality.<sup>11</sup> Yet Kay’s interest

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- 9 “Conversaciones con Ronald Kay—Capítulo 5,” YouTube video, 55:10, posted by “CCPLMChile,” March 8, 2013, <http://youtu.be/MvojklArDgc>. The idea of charging “language with the responsibility of what it says” is also taken from this interview.
- 10 Originally published as Ronald Kay, “El tiempo que se divide,” in *Del espacio de acá* (Santiago: Editores Asociados, 1980; repr., Santiago: Metales Pesados, 2005), 20–25. This present translation is based on the Metales Pesados edition. As Kay himself points out in the book’s back matter, this text is composed of excerpts from “Digression on Photography” (Digresión sobre la fotografía), a chapter appearing originally in the book *Das Objektiv der Zeichen*, in 1972.
- 11 Kay’s text also offers some reflections on the connections between photography, geology, and paleontology, reflections that could be productively paired with poetic, literary, and visual representations of the Chilean desert. One such potential pairing would include a recent documentary by Chilean director Patricio Guzmán, *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), which grants its viewers a vivid and poignant portrait of a natural landscape (the desert) as a site of loss and memory. Set in Chile’s northern Atacama Desert, Guzmán’s

in photography is not only philosophical, but also personal (he is an avid collector of photographs) and politically grounded. As was the case for other artists and poets working in the dictatorial context of post-1970s Chile, photography became a medium particularly suited to embody, evoke, and deploy a number of politically pertinent concepts, such as memory, testimony, nostalgia, surveillance, and disappearance. Photography, for Kay, implies a certain violence, a kind of catastrophic tear or rupture in the continuum of time, “the isolation, the baffling emancipation of the image from the immediacy of things and beings,” as he states in the translation below. As I mentioned earlier, the “detenimiento” or arrested characteristic of the photographic gesture also evokes the idea of violent, police-like apprehension. Yet photography is also an eminently nostalgic mode of perception, persistently turning to the past in order to document, quote, or rescue it. Photography confirms the disappearance of its object, poignantly announcing—even denouncing—its death. What the photograph captures is destined to die, a fate that the mechanical capture mutely and emotively declares.

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documentary depicts a group’s indefatigable search for the remains of relatives tortured, killed, and disposed of in the desert by the dictatorial police. This story is combined with a separate yet analogous “astronomic” narrative, which includes footage of the cosmos and interviews with astronomers explaining their own careful search and research on interstellar phenomena that, due to the immense distances that light must necessarily travel to reach Earth, can approach them only *as past*—as ancient, potentially extinct events. As the place with the clearest atmosphere in the world, Atacama is for astronomers the perfect site from which to gaze at the stars. As the driest place in the world, Atacama, too, is the ideal site for the material preservation of organic remains (humidity decomposes bodies, a fact that probably escaped a dictatorial police otherwise careful to destroy the traces of its destruction). What ties archeology, astronomy, and paleontology to the postdictatorial experience is the act of searching for and exploring a difficult and at times inscrutable past. In the heart of the driest place on the globe, astronomers, archeologists, paleontologists, mothers, fathers, relatives, and partners tirelessly search for possible answers to and remnants of those things that propel their passion: a star, an artifact, a bone, a constellation, a corpse. Anything buried and preserved under the desert’s surface; anything, too, encountered in the transparent, nocturnal sky, is a kind of fossil—an object mute yet imbued with a dense narrative and history. Long before *Nostalgia for the Light*, Kay had proposed the *fossil* as a different name for, or concrete figuration of, the remnant, that stubborn trace that resists destruction and that is then unearthed, exposed, and regarded, in all its enigmatic inscrutability, by a stunned witness (be that witness an artist, critic, reader, or viewer). Criticism, but perhaps more specifically *writing*, is for Kay an archeological task. Thus, in the brief note that opens *Del espacio de acá*, he equates writing with the fossil by stating that his texts “[m]erely signal the vestiges of some cataclysm.” As with fossils, texts, for Kay, “are simultaneously condensed multiple, distant moments on which, coming to the surface and bursting out of them, one discovers and distinguishes part of what was submerged” (19). In “*On photography Time split in two*,” he describes photography as “fossilized writing” and as “[p]etrified cinema,” and the beings captured therein as traces of “antediluvian animals” on “fossil rocks.”



In this way—through the implicit reference to the disappearance of beings and photography’s attempt to delay or arrest that disappearance—Kay’s text represents a thoughtful contribution to the issue of political disappearance and art’s role in foregrounding it, without, of course, offering any kind of prescription, program, or straightforward answer.

For the first time, this translation brings Kay’s writing to this, our near-Western, Anglophone context. Insofar as it constitutes a short selection of Kay’s *Del espacio de acá*, and a mere fragment of his total output, this translation perhaps only hopes to spark further interest in and pursuit of his writing. Alluding to the closing words of “*On photography Time split in two*,” I hope the reader can recognize its revolutionary force.

**NOTE** I would like to thank Ronald Kay for his invaluable input in preparing this translation, which would be all the poorer had it not benefited from his unmatched attention to syntactic and semantic minutiae. On many occasions I felt as though we were co-writing a text rather than translating an original piece (a case in point being the title of the piece, which after much discussion changed from “*El tiempo que se divide*” to “*On photography Time split in two*”).

## *On photography* Time split in two

RONALD KAY

Photography delays time to the point of its arrest. The nameless energies that compose time are intercepted, precipitated, distributed, congealed, and materially captured in the photographic scene. Camouflaged in the stains that light spreads in the negative of his own image, enthralled by the luminous mimicry that exteriorizes him in the mechanical likeness of himself, man is brought to the fore by means of spatiotemporal dimensions proper to an *other* spontaneity, a different materiality, an alternate path, a new fatality, a reaching to be known. Reincarnated in the strange sectioning of time introduced by the photographic machine, the human anatomy composes a physical language that actualizes it according to a fulminating order.

What energies, what currents are put in circulation, what constellations are linked when the light penetrates and invades, burns, stains, and ignites the sensitive bromide and silver nitrate strata (for example, at 400 ASA), when each rock's speck is hurt by the light that carries the image?<sup>1</sup> Through the wound opened up by the light on the photo-sensitive surface, the shape of an image shattered against the expanse of the

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1 The photograph is a geological phenomenon in miniature.

negative is forever preserved. What takes place is a cosmic catastrophe: the isolation, the baffling emancipation of the image from the immediacy of things and beings. In the open of the perturbed photo-sensitive surfaces, the cruel birth of an image is exhibited, no longer tied to the contingency of events, but fixed and set free in the optical footprint, apart and autonomous. This detachment annihilates the primacy of objects in the visual field; an annihilation that each and every photograph exhibits as its reverse: the tragic spectacle of the withdrawal of life, infused in each photograph like a paranoid image within an image.

Beyond capturing the flux of life and saving it, arrested, for the archives of memory, the lens's eye violates what is seen, traverses its fleeting and perishable time in order to arrive at an artificial one: the infinite, synthetic present.

The technical eye's focus entombs the statues and everything they embody in black and white (or Technicolor), in the arrested—ever identical and iterable—chronology of automatism; it uproots them from organic oblivion and makes them reappear, mute and duplicated, on the stable surface of the take.

Generated by a perception that is not that of the senses—present yet overrun, detached yet fixed, void yet overwhelmed by eternity—humanity, turned into a mechanical effigy, remains besieged by the abrupt chemical silence, which intercepts the habitual look onto itself.

The lens drains all noise, subtracts the ear from the photographed; hearing at the same time loses its contact with the voice—the living organ, the internal caress—invented and articulated by language, and which, being the most complex and differentiated code, the most visceral and abstract code, was and is the common and shocking entrance into humanity. Through it, man, ephemeral and fragile, listens and speaks its sense.

The photograph—with the vast layers of silence that its surface extends over the materiality of things and the aura of persons—creates that internal distance, the void that in those same retained fractions of time attracts the echo of future events, that is, the intercalation of a

different zone of perception, the impalpable sight of unborn eyes, the latency of other voices—alien, remote, successive—that may speak the landscapes of a memory not directly attained by the senses.

The voice is bound to the instant, fleeting and incomparable, and to an intangible order and imperative within that very instant; what the ear ventures in giving passage to the interior voice—through whose intonation alternate the somatic traces that dictate it—is the translation and stamp of its inalienable, moving, perishable presence—its own destination in transitory time.

The take makes the moment *démodé*<sup>2</sup> even before it happens; as a technical procedure, the take, among other things, makes the moment contemporaneous to the first photographs. Outward appearance is photographically demolished. The arrested gestures fall into the camera like prostheses that have long and imperceptibly supplanted the body. Appearance becomes the costume of itself: its paralysis and abandonment resounds in a *dernier cri*. In the focus of the objective lens, the mechanical anatomy, the skeleton of the surfaces, become apparent. In the mirror of photography—written by light—classical narcissism suffers a fundamental retouch; being reflected in it means, *sub specie aeternitatis*, to experience one's own absence, to look face to face at death in the fascinating duplicate of one's own likeness. Photography that displaces the blinded human figure onto the marvelous, onto the glamour of silver bromide (who does not want to see himself photographed?), is the makeup, the Elizabeth Arden product from Thanatos by means of which forms are cast with the appearance of life—civilization's death masks. Photography is a supplementary, second (isn't it also the first?) skin framed by bordering another space, another time, the permanent transition zone toward an order withdrawn from us. What survives is the lens and its sightless eye. Living flesh is reduced to the inorganic function of giving purpose and action to the photographic apparatus and, simultaneously, of setting up the multiple *tableaux vivants* for an absent order undermining all limits.

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2 Photographic perception mechanizes what is perceived. As a product of the instrument, the “instant” is withdrawn from chronological flight and inserted into the synchrony of photographic language as an iconic sign (time precipitates into space), thereby making itself available; the grammar of synchrony makes [the instant] annexable to other times and other signs.

*All the forms of auxiliary apparatus which we have invented for the improvement or intensification of our sensory functions are built on the same model as the sense organs themselves or portions of them: for instance, spectacles, photographic cameras, ear-trumpets.*

FREUD, "A NOTE UPON THE 'MYSTIC WRITING-PAD'"

From Freud, we can infer that the camera is not only the materialized extension of our perceptive apparatus, but also the exteriorization of certain motional functions. Beyond pure vision, photography is also the amplification and restructuration of our tactile faculties, the objectification of certain actions, that is, their extension and automatization. The camera's shutter release intervenes in external movement, detains, and fixes it on the negative. The photographic apparatus pierces into the density of things, uproots beings from space, withdraws them from the perishable, exposing them onto the sensitive surface and draining them of their excessive spatiality so as to hold, shelter, and locate them virtually<sup>3</sup> as pure visible footprints. This intervention without molecular destruction, this cut that the apparatus exerts on the flux of appearances is simultaneously the transposition of these appearances onto another medium. Transfigured, the runner keeps on running, graphically petrified in the take. Such an immobility is imposed on him that the runner's appearance in the image is kept in suspense and breathless, akin to the long disquieting wait that follows certain decisive events—gun shots, rapes, homicides.

The mechanism of the shutter release exteriorizes and materializes a tic; it is the *mechanical metaphor* of a repetition compulsion. With the shutter release, this amplified, independent, and objectified automatism is inscribed again in the new photogenic exterior of our body. By applying onto our somatic presence the now external meter of the automatic, this meter captures and formalizes the very unconscious automatisms of our presence, transcribing them on the visual plane.

The detour of this transcription exposes the automatism, the laws, and the uniformity inherent in the expressivity of the human organ-

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3 Divesting things of their spatiality entails the restitution of their inherent virtuality. This is also implied in the colloquial use of the verb "to perpetuate." Visible permanence can be produced only on the basis of this originary virtuality—the virtuality of things in language.

ism; it makes visible the *automatic writing* of gestures, whose inaccessible code keeps us imprisoned. Their hieroglyphic characters are embedded in the silver bromide crystals, much like the buried tremors of antediluvian animals on fossil rocks. Petrified cinema.

In the stoppage of writing's corporeal strokes, the particular and unique present has been moved onto the atemporality of the unconscious, where before and after, actual and virtual are reversible. By means of this displacement—monstrous distance and mobility—the contemporaneity inherent in the photographed moment is given its own prehistory. Nonetheless, it is this very distance that enables the potential understanding of that atemporal present. To comprehend it entails consciously crossing and traversing the very distance of displacement; in other words, it means reaching the time and space wherein the photographed event has been effectively placed. Only by means of this traversal can the withdrawn present be retroactively recovered and actualized.

Photographs possess a rare quality: beyond simply registering an event by means of its optical footprint, every photograph stands as the invisible material inscription of the potential look of a witness. (This virtual role is first, and contingently, assumed by the photographer). This fated witness is not only a dynamic virtual presence within the photograph, but also, and above all, within the event itself, since the negative constitutes a translation (by means of contact) of the event—its material continuation in other times, places, and situations. The photograph is nothing less than the always-virtual interpolation of those other distant times in the apparently closed and concluded continuum of the event. The photograph proposes a different physics, a retrophysics rather than a metaphysics.

It is terrifying that this writing—emancipated—could be one's own amplified, iterable, and stratified body—our photographic flesh.

It is fascinating that this unexpectedly public body acts at a distance, formalized and regulated in its mechanical reproduction.

It is agonizing to break open this fossilized writing, to envision and mobilize its alphabet, which writes us by inescapably inscribing us in a collectivity that communicates through a presence opened up by the image.

The cruelest events and most arresting acts; the records of Hiroshima's destruction; the reproductions of the exterminated natives

of Tierra del Fuego; photographs of a box camera taken during the emptiness of a Sunday morning; the snapshots of Benny Kid Paret's passion; all of them continue indelibly, perpetuate themselves unforgettably in our precarious eyes, transmitting, with identical precision, their inexhaustible information even long after those eyes, our ephemeral eyes, will have disappeared. Memories that cannot come to an end.

A rigorously mechanized chronicle is registered in the actions fixed by a limitless time; its actors are the sudden stereotypes of an always anachronistic now. A past that never existed is incessantly reborn through the bodies incinerated by the light in the negative.

In the frozen agitation of the synthetic gestures of war pilots, of swimming champions, of children ravaged by hunger, of women in the pose of ecstasy, are channeled the energies delayed by the posthumous trauma that the camera inflicts on the photographed moment.

An apocalyptic history is being written through the exact light and shadow proofs revealed in the positives.

From the gestures that escalate to the critical point of their stoppage in order to find their moment in the retained time there derives a chronology of unprecedented dimensions. Apprehended by the measure of a startling logic, they articulate the movement within the blocked images.

In the visual excretion of reality, humanity continually evacuates its death drive, reverting with each cliché to an inorganic stage, to the stillness of crystals, to the primal age of matter.

Reaching one's own absence through the prehistory produced by the take signifies the ability to grasp a past of which one is not conscious, but which has long been occupied by optical technology under the pretense that it is nothing but an immediate and obvious reflection of what is visible.

History has been expropriated by the dogma of representational optics. Herein lies the origin of the ideological component of visual information media. As long as the dogma of instrumentality is maintained—that is, as long as it is believed that the photographic relation is produced in the evidence of the visible and its straightforward reproduction; and as long as we do not recognize, instead, that it traces its signs in the enigma of the visible—we will remain hostage to the repetition of our own absence.

To know oneself in the photograph is, among other things, to recognize oneself as the effect of the machine, as the fabrication of its work. To penetrate the *foreign body* generated by the mechanical likeness demands that we overcome a dialectic obstacle: the fact that each one of our senses and movements has been virtually impounded by the mechanisms of technical reproduction. Already our body is always, virtually, a photograph. From this point of view, the possibility of presence appears as “something terrifyingly energetic and perturbing, as a still-active, movable element within an immobilized expression.”

The material translation, transfer, and transport of the photographically-registered occur at the instant of the take. In this doubling, the sudden scission of a temporal fission takes place; this splitting introduces a decisive alteration within the structuration of time. An action that we may call “x” is, from a specific chronic point, distributed into two differentiated temporal orders that are nonetheless mutually connected (specifically, the link is the photograph). The moment of division and distribution constitutes an interchronic moment. By means of the lapse of passage from one time to the other, “x” action simultaneously occurs in two forms: as the transitory form of an event, and as the invariable version of its photographic documentation. The sudden, actual scission of time’s nucleus during its photographic transfer produces and establishes a synchronicity. By means of this synchronicity two temporal orders—the one unique, perishable, and contingent, and the other unending, conserved and “eternalized” in the photograph—share the same plane, deferring their effects and impacts. Through the instrument’s physical penetration into the fraction of time, out of the interval of time and *by means of contact*, duration, solidified as visibility, is violently extracted. Within the photograph, both orders enter into a reciprocal relation of citation and become, on the basis of this relation, generally quotable: the transitory, which having produced and producing as footprint the constant of the take, is included and in-cited in it as inscriptive energy; and the permanent, which, because of its emancipated persistence (the purported final product of transcription) becomes technically reproducible and thus quotable, subject to be combined at will. In this mechanism of reciprocal citation inherent in the photograph, dwells the latent documentary virtue of the optical footprint.

Clearly, the constitution of the photograph is not the effect of a mere reflection, but rather a translation that achieves the constructive



separation of organic sight from the mechanical eye, the *visible* dissociation between the optically-conscious and the optically-unconscious, formalizing them in differentiated sign systems; it achieves the possibility, therefore, of being at the same time *within* sight and *outside* of it, without abandoning the visible. In this way, photographic sight appears as the critical instance of the physical eye: herein resides its revolutionary force.

TRANSLATED BY OSVALDO DE LA TORRE