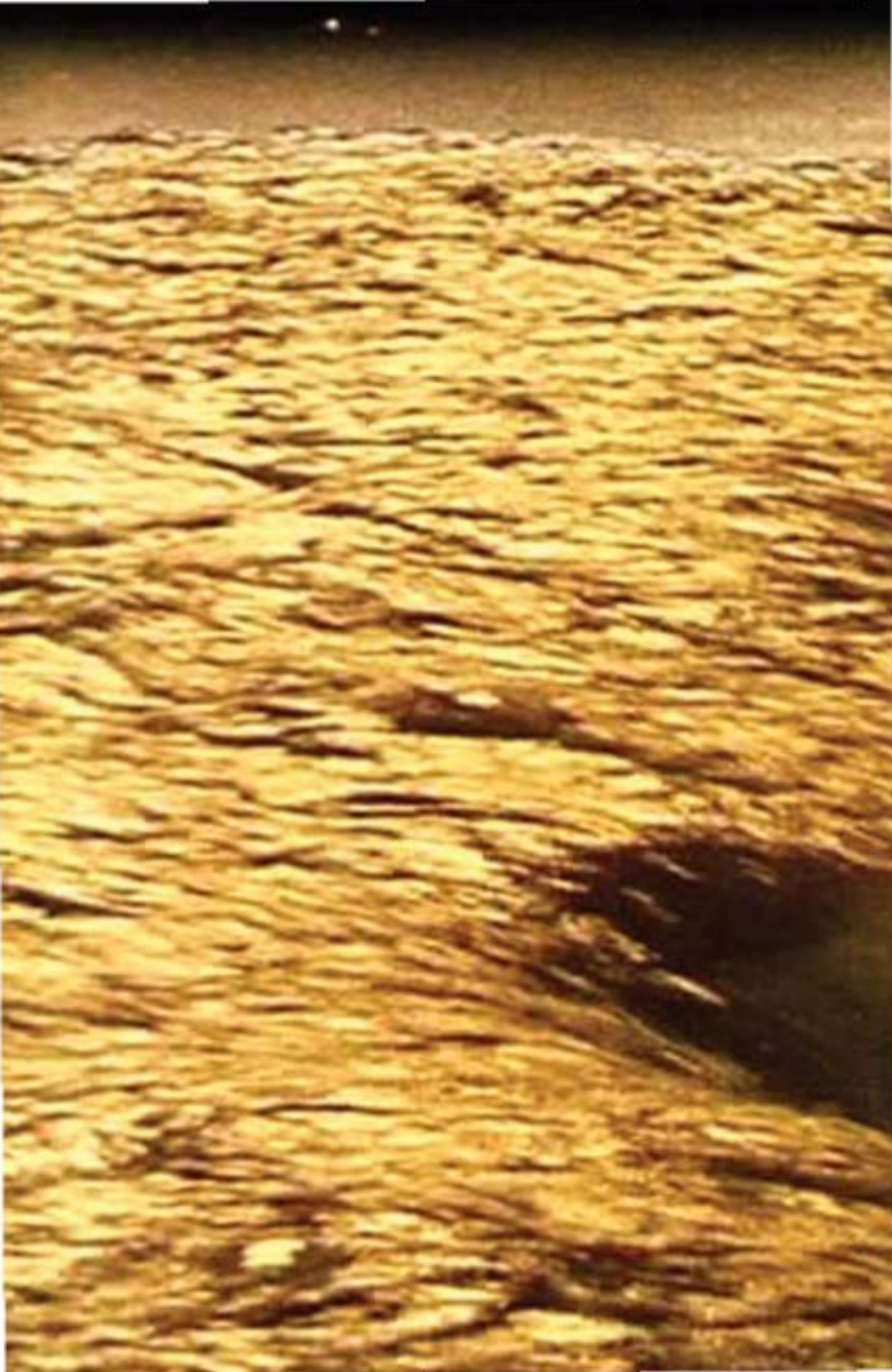


Disassembling
the Archive :
Fiona Tan
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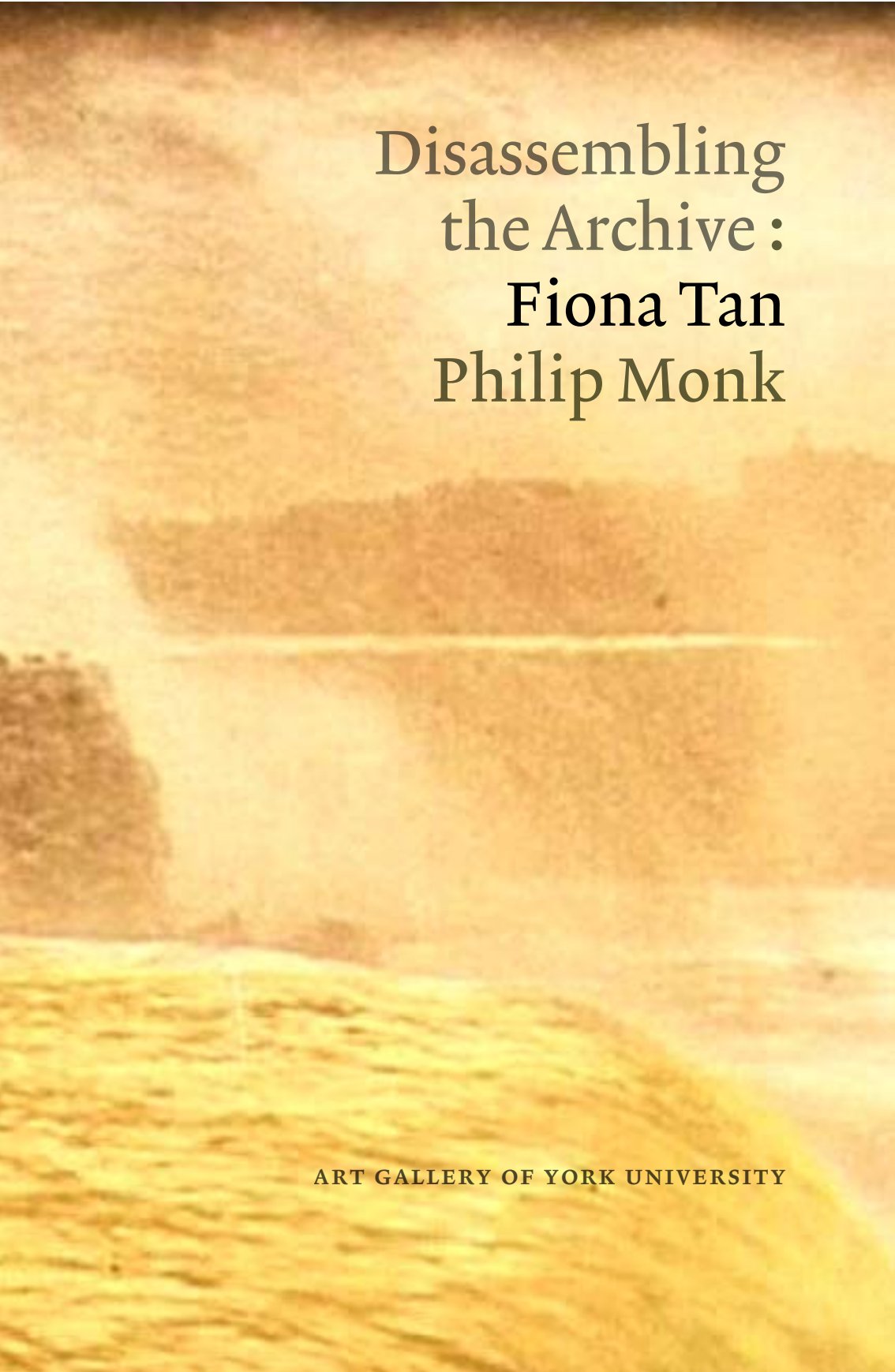












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ART GALLERY OF YORK UNIVERSITY





















Disassembling the Archive: Fiona Tan

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... l'ombre enfouie dans la profondeur par cette voile alternative ...

– Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés*

Correspondence





Saturday, September 2, 2006

Dear Fiona,

You must think that I've fallen off the edge of the world. Falling, I've recovered topsy-turvy, downside up in some skewed correspondence. To renew our correspondence perhaps means to articulate our lack of response – sorry... more correctly, *my* lack of response. You've already responded, indeed, corresponded. My response would always be belated.

Perhaps a belated response frees me. At the least, it exempts me from the protocols of correspondence, from following with a proper response, but not as the fiction of an excuse for not corresponding. Fiction is an irresponsible response. I don't excuse myself here. Does it correspond, though, I wonder? That is, correspond to you, to what you do? Oh, I'll always be responding to you belatedly, supplemental to your correspondence with others, however fictional your correspondence with them might be. What would others think of your correspondence if they knew how fictional it is? Your correspondence *and* the other, that is. It might unsettle things if protocol was not respected, not to mention provenance.

Your play with existing correspondence respects protocol in the fiction that it is. A fiction of the real, you might say. Your respect for the other, too, naturally respects protocol, at least in its forms of address and response. Fiction of the *Other*, as well, I'd say.

Where else could this fiction take place except in private through correspondence? (So many secrets of correspondence!) Correspondence is always private and covert at first, even if started in public, or, at least, in something public that is private at the same time such as an archive. An archive is public and private and regulated above all – but not only in the access it allows across the divisions of public and private, outside and inside. Its own fictions are masked by the authority through which it regulates this boundary as much as by the internal correspondences it calls classification. Your secret is well hidden there, hidden in the archive's secret. Nobody yet has guessed this secret of yours. I'll try to maintain your fiction in my correspondence with you. Disruption will be our secret. We'll respect it. Fiction disrupts. It might be hard to contain. It always was.

Writing this, I have to take care not to presume the fiction of a third-party reader in some future archive: you know, a reader



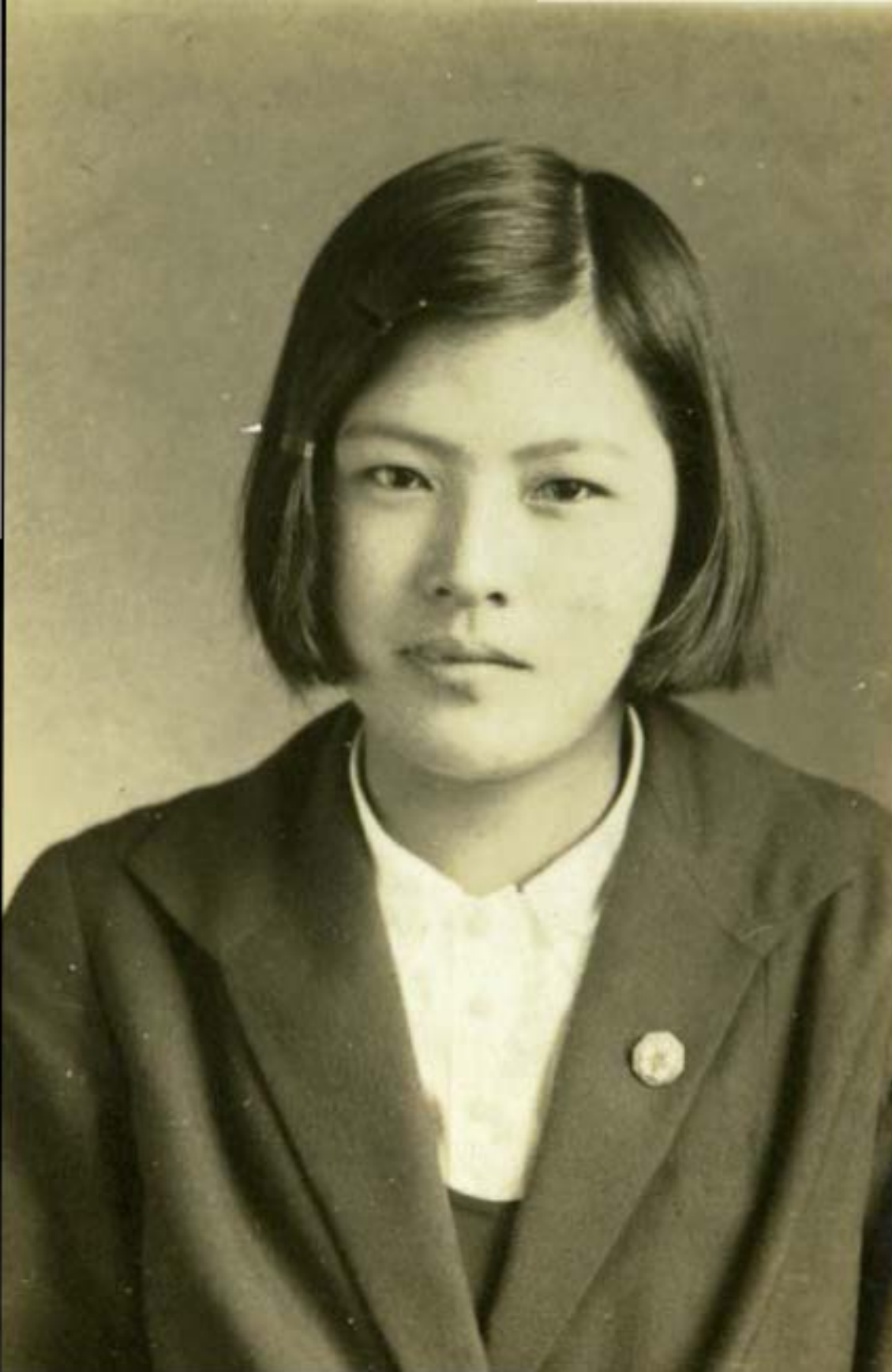


looking over my shoulder while I am looking at the images you were looking at, writing while imagining what you were looking at. I can hardly speak *for* you when I don't know whether I am even speaking *to* you here. I have to assume that my writing is fiction, too. I can hardly presume to say the truth about fiction, correspondence, or the archive, let alone photography. Right off, I have to admit that this is all speculation. Such an admission doesn't annul responsibility.

I imagine you found a collection of old photographs of what was in essence an archive. I *imagine* you found it because I have seen only the end product of your artwork, *The Changeling*. Your collection, I imagine, has now been put to a different purpose beyond its original use perhaps where you found it. (That is, if this context did not, in turn, have another context.) You say it is a photographic album, a yearbook, one of many in a series, of 1930s Japanese schoolgirls, each and every girl identically dressed in school uniforms with similarly bobbed haircuts. There are nearly four hundred photographs of these generically posed girls. Made within the genre of school portraits, they are pictures without the poise of individuality. As if it was not hard enough for these girls! But I am imagining. Their images are only dated photographs maintained by the chance of your encounter.

Where did this encounter transpire, Fiona? Your response, too, was after the fact of these images and their discovery. Your response to these images is a correspondence, but not, nonetheless, the context of correspondence which preceded you and assembled these likenesses. You write to these images by calling for a response from them that you then fictionalize. You are responsive to these portraits however much you fictionalize them in return, however much you fictionalize your response. Your response is fictional and not; that is, your response is fictional but your responsiveness is real. (Yet, who calls, writes to, or solicits the other in this correspondence between one and the other, self and image?)

I have to admit that I have been secretly sheltering another meaning by my use of “correspondence.” I’ve been writing as if “correspondence” is a communication between the two of us, as in my delayed letter here to you. But now that we have arrived at the photographic image, “correspondence” takes on the meaning of identity as if it were the very identity of meaning. The photograph is proof of identity in the absence of its referent. Essential to photography, this inaugural divide between the photograph and its referent sets off an abyss of divisions. Yet, critical interrogation always presumes adequacy between image and referent in order to secure a subject, *the subject: ourselves*. Photography, it seems, was made for *us*.





You and I, each of us is responsive to the image (your response is fictional, mine is speculative), even if – here is *our* secret – we are irresponsible to traditional thinking on the photographic image. This tradition addresses the image, calls it to attention of meaning and identity, and regulates it by its own hermeneutic discourse. As *writers*, we look on and write to the image, correspond with it, if not precisely correspond *to* it, that is to say, find our identity within it, if identity, in truth, is to be found in an image, a photographic image, even of ourselves. Take your album. Identity is missing altogether in what you found. Each girl is subsumed within every other within the overall organization of this archive as if all were produced serially from only one negative. Yet, from the accident of your encounter you saved one image, rescuing all for this one.

Sunday, September 3, 2006

I imagine your looking through my writing more than through yours, which is *Changeling's* soundtrack. I don't know when our correspondence will end or where my writing will lead me. I depart from an artwork. You arrive at it. Here is our difference.

Isn't your work all departure? I can't talk of arrival yet. Others, though, read your departure through their expectation of arrival. They've arrived before you, certainly before me. Their arrival simply reverses departure through which the image remains the same. Mind you, the photograph always stays the same throughout all interpretations: it is neutral. But now interpretation attempts to reverse the nether sides of the image in a silent struggle for its meaning, as if the photographic sheet was the border of contested territory. Critique's contest switches the subjects before and behind the camera lens, reversing power through retrospectively inverting possession of identity. All this transpires through some old photograph that neither subject now possess, both dead.

Unfortunately, these impatient critics only arrive at their own judgements by some sleight of hand that is as fictional as your procedures and as magical as the original act of photography. They have arrived without the labour or abandon of departure. Although their writing departs from your work, they're already waiting for you at *their* destination. They've arrived with a gift they think that they can retrospectively bestow through you: a gift of identity to the anthropological Other dispossessed by the colonial gaze.





Reversing front and back in a calculated exchange through the selfsame image cannot bestow a gift. No one can reverse possession as if the photographic index was a measure merely of identity. Here the photograph is only a token that changes hands in an imaginary restitution of identity. Nothing is disturbed by this restitution, least of all the subject of identity, which we make all the more secure in this equation, speaking equally for this new subject as much as for ourselves. The postcolonial gift of identity is a return that in no way threatens the image. This gift costs us little and returns a dubious moral prestige at the same time. Retrospectively bestowing this gift, could we ever imagine that this selfsame image, beyond any smug judgement we make of it, disturbs *our* identity? Is our lack of disturbance not a privilege we possess?

We're getting it backwards. Exchange never disturbs. We never disturb the image; it disturbs us. (Best to let it sleep if we don't want to disturb the sleep of consciousness.) To bestow an image as a gift only suggests that we think we possess the meaning of a photograph, indeed, that a photograph *has* meaning. Rather, I think dispossession is the immediate effect of any image. Every "primitive" has always known this. Postcolonial discourse discounts their knowledge. Any image that comes into our possession is only pretext for departure, but only as our own dispossession. In the West, we possess this other luxury: "*Fuir*,

là-bas fuir!” I’m talking about extant images, found photographs, or archival images, photographs that pre-exist us with which we have no history or connection, but from which we necessarily, even against our will, depart. We are powerless before images. We can only be dispossessed by images with which we have no personal connection. Dispossession is the image’s gift to us. We never arrive at an image; we only depart from it.

A difference of departure means a difference of arrival.
Departure is as speculative as arrival.

Again, I speculate. Or, rather, I give up speculating – the speculation purely of looking on – for the fiction of looking through writing. I am no longer speculating; I am writing. Fiona, I assure you that I am not discrediting those who have written so elegantly and persuasively about your work. I have no argument with them. It’s only that they miss half your work by concentrating on arrivals not departures. You are a *different* traveller, departing and not always arriving. Your departures are disruptive. Departure is disruptive. Disruption is departure. Arrival is never certain or desirable.

Fiona, I am destined for disruption. I’ll leave by alternative sail.





Monday, September 4, 2006

It's remarkable how secure the archive is. We secure it. We expect its protective, preservative edifice and protocols of classification to be secure. It's remarkable how secure the archive is in the universal agreement on its function ... and on the contagion it contains. In the Age of the Archive, we expect so. Photography is the name of this contagion. Archives pre-exist photography, but photography represents a crisis for the archive as more than a challenge for classification. For more than a hundred and fifty years, the span of the modern archive, photography was its crisis. One document among many, it was different. It was different from documents – and not only because, unlike documents, photographs were lodged and lodging at the same time. Documents are older than photographs and, therefore, command more status. They are legal standard. Documents are official record. They record acts and transactions. Of the real, photographs, nevertheless, do not possess the status of an act. They are passive, more reserve than record. The document's archival status is the performance and record of *its* act, which seals a transaction and declares it closed and capable of archiving. No wonder that the passive reserve of photography posed a problem.

Passivity, nonetheless, was an earthquake. It shook structure and ground. Photography's reserve unsettled the accumulated sediment of history's records.

Disaster. The archive's disaster. The disaster of the archive. To what disaster is the archive exposed? What could it not keep secure even though encrypted within its most secret self?

Passive reserve unsettled the spatiality photography already was the record of, thereby disrupting the spatial logic of the archive's classifications. The photograph was inherently unstable. It unsettled the ground of archival classification. It was the *abgrund* of its ground. The document that was photography (photography always *was*) reoriented its established record of the past by its, paradoxical, openness to the future. The temporally dissolvent photograph was porous even to its grain. The motion photography supposedly stilled was a disrupting movement that threatened classification.

Photography's reserve is unsettling. It is a means to speculate. Continuing speculation disturbs a collection of closed transactions.





So you do speculate after all, Fiona, in your deviant use of archival images. Fiction is deviation of use – misuse, perhaps, but use all the same. What use would the archive thereby serve the public in the request, let's say, of an artist? In a fictional request? Such use makes a fiction of documents. Can an archive still be an archive if it is oriented to the future and not the past, open not secure, open to the future? Archivists cannot anticipate future use by means of their classifications, which never contained the photograph's porosity. (How can the archive guard against this?) Photography was always open to the future even as documentary record of the past. Photographs cannot be secured. Here was a problem for classification. What record they were made photography escape classification. What record were they that made classification impossible? What record they are no one yet has established.

This would free you and me, Fiona. We would be free in what was most constrained. Everyone agrees on the repressive nature of the archive. (Just read anything on the archive and photography from Allan Sekula on.) Everyone thus agrees on the nature of photography. The archive need constrain, not just contain, photography. It answered a need. Photography disturbs *all*.

Friday, September 15, 2006

Technology was the event of this earthquake of which still photography was an advent. At that time early in the twentieth century, the photograph did not disturb the archive. The archive was built to house it from a disturbance photography already was. Some commotion secured photography in the archive. The outside commotion motion made, in the technical form and temporal shape of moving pictures, unsettled the archive even through the still photographs it now housed. Technology closed photography behind the archive's door, but not as any archival technique. Motion is the madness the archive contained. (Are we prepared to ask of which madness – photography or archive – we are speaking?) The archive stilled still photographs. Everyone agreed that still photography already was too much commotion.

The fault line of technological change sealed photography's fate to the archive. Technology was no judgement, though, as decisive as it was historically. Its event made others judge. Judgement sealed photography's fate as its own fault. Photography was a threat. It was guilty. It was condemned to the archive as the archive it already was. They were the same: photography and archive. But only one was a threat that the





other secured and contained. And since the judgements of these opinions were archived in books, in time they have become our opinions and prejudices. Locked away in an archive, sealed by a book, can a photograph still disturb? Can a still photograph disturb?

I need to digress here, Fiona, and wonder what of the current moment determines photography's meaning for us. What draws the two of us together in a different understanding and use of photography that evades photographic meaning in so far as the archive now determines it?

We accede to the archive, to a belief in the archive, as soon as we believe that from its origins photography was destined to it. Photography's assembly in albums already followed prototype; assembly in the archive was a categorical issue. Photography posed no problem – until some (one) image came to disturb.

Over its short history, photography has been remarkably consistent – remarkable in its consistency to disturb, that is. Indeed, as soon as the first portrait sitters had died and a younger generation then inherited photography's inaugural images in inheriting family albums, all of us always return

to the same image, every single generation of writers. We speculate on the same old images (whatever particular one doesn't matter) to ask about the generality of photography, to ask what photography *is* and what it *means*. We return to the same images to ask ourselves why we are disturbed otherwise, that is, disturbed by different details than those writers before us who were equally disturbed by photographs. Earlier writers pondered their disturbance even in the familiar familial. Some disturbance provoked them to analyze photographs, some of which were within their possession, to write personally and confidentially to them while exposing themselves publicly through this writing.

It's curious, that in this return speculation periodically marks, that each generation often skips to its grandparents' era to be struck by photography's disturbance, that is, by photography's difference for them. I'm thinking in particular of Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes, writing fifty years apart, the two responding to photography at different moments of crises of the image brought about by technological change: moving pictures for Kracauer; the transition from analogue to digital technology for Barthes. Consensus on photography's disturbance coincidentally reappears at moments of technological change, along the fault lines of its disruptions,





but after the fact of photography, which remains the subject and concern, always the source and termination of disturbance, always the same, even in its differential disturbance. Kracauer's and Barthes' analyses are indictments of loss for which photography is called to the dock. Consensus, nonetheless, draws contrary judgements.

Consensus comes down to a detail, to detail and disturbance, to detail in particular and disturbance in general. (You know where I am eventually going, Fiona, with this pairing here and above of *general* and *particular*, *each* and *every*, *one* and *all*.) Everyone agrees that photography disturbs, but we are disturbed in different ways and equally tolerant or intolerant of its effects. Some say that photography's meaning is this disturbance, a disturbance of detail. We disagree, however, on what to do about it.

I only recently read Siegfried Kracauer's remarkable essay "Photography," first published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1927 and now collected in his volume *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. (Can you imagine that at one time speculation on photography took place in public in newspapers and not furtively, as here, in private correspondence?) I find it hard to believe that Kracauer was this harsh on photography when

his contemporaries such as Walter Benjamin were not. Did his adherence to the new technology of film, especially to the radical practices of the 1920s, blind him to what we see in photography, to what we see in the same photographs he saw? He seems lost in another century believing photography to be one with the imperial culture of its invention, lost in the invention of an imaginary nineteenth-century museum to house it. He got lost in details. Overwhelmed.

Photography seems so antiquated in his essay, so bourgeois and nineteenth century, already so much archival detritus. It was one with a century that was anathema to early twentieth-century modernists and Marxists. From the first paragraph, indeed in the opening paragraph, Kracauer is so precise in his analysis of photography, so understated and strategic in his descriptions, pinpointing in detail all the terms through which to think photography's complexity, that I was shocked to read on and witness the sweep of his condemnation. Photography was a *disaster*. It was a disaster to consciousness. It was an unnatural disaster that could only be described by the disasters of nature. Consciousness was subjected to a "flood" or "blizzard" of photographs. This phenomenal "assault," which the commercial culture of illustrated newspapers and magazines suddenly was responsible for, was more pernicious than capitalism's rule





whose “secretion” photography essentially was. Photography *itself* was an indignity to man and nature, memory and consciousness. From the moment of photography’s invention in the positivist era of historicism, its effects had accumulated: on the one hand, as the “sediment” of history’s discharged “residuum”; on the other hand, as a disordered “jumble” of “garbage.” Photography had no need to be archived as the archive it already was. Photography was capitalism’s “general inventory,” historicism’s complete spatial and temporal inventory, the “central archive” of a civilization’s “warehousing of nature.” In Kracauer’s mind, photography already was a dusty museum. Photography was one more museum that, following the Futurist dictum, should be burned.

Disaster was in the detail, too much detail of too many photographs. Disaster was both the sedimented images *and* the jumble of photographs. Disaster contrarily answered to detail. Disaster was to detail as detail was to disaster.

It depended on how you looked at it. Detail and disaster: Here was the dilemma of photography. Or, at least, here was a dilemma for consciousness; it was not photography’s dilemma. Photography was passive to our plight. The dilemma was the image, always the image. The dilemma was disguised in the image in some detail. The photograph contrarily was either

some detail or *all* detail. As a general inventory of the natural and manufactured world, photography was all detail. Then again, the photograph – one photograph, *each* and *every* photograph – captured some detail. *Some* or *all*: The photograph always was so contrary.

P.S. Fiona, I'm adding this note later: Following on Kracauer and Barthes, we are at a third stage of the "crisis" of the photographic image, which is also a crisis of technology, in which the archive itself now determines photographic technology. The means by which images are circulated – and housed – determine the technology by which they are produced, that is, taken. Whereas for Barthes, digitized images still had their origin in film stock, now the Internet has determined that source (digital camera), circulation (Internet), and housing (computer) are all the same, digitally translatable into one another without any loss. (The Internet has made us all archivists as we use the computer to organize the information and entertainments of our personal lives.)





Sunday, September 24, 2006

Conveniently, I had to break from this correspondence, which allowed me, troubled by Kracauer's dismissal of photography, to return to his text. There was hope for photography, after all. It could be brought to some critical account, to a "task" particular to it. Photography could be ordered. It could be *re*-ordered: one and the same photograph or collection of photographs. Photography's hitherto "provisional" archival order could be rearranged, perhaps even in the "right order."

The right order would not be true, however. That is, it would not be true if it relied solely on photography. Photography was incapable of truth. Photography was split. It was split between what it could and could not do and what we could do with both. Photography was also split – strangely, given the threat of its disaster – by genre. Although Kracauer did not specify, it was divided between the conventions of landscape and those of portraiture. While the original unity of nature was lost in landscape photography, the truth of identity was impossible in portraiture: neither type of photograph corresponded. Could either even correspond to the conventions of their respective genres? Here is more than one dilemma for the archive, indeed, for genre classification in general. (Kracauer, however, put

each to other uses than my worry here of genre classification.) These two forms of pictorial representation were not always severed from each other in the truth they once commonly shared. Only with the arrival or, rather, rise of photographic technology was consciousness fully severed from nature. As the first photographers often were former painters, “the not yet entirely depersonalized technology of this transition period corresponded to a spatial environment in which traces of meaning [*Bedeutungsspuren*] could still be trapped.” What this technological trapping of meaning is, or exactly where it exists, I’m not sure, but even when Kracauer was writing this, modern painters were successfully composing their images “out of photographic fragments in order to highlight the side-by-side existence of reified appearances as they manifest themselves in spatial relations.” Advanced technology was still capable of capturing “remnants of nature,” but not contemporary “artistic photography” which hid its “technological essence by means of style.” Style, however, was only subterfuge. Unlike Kracauer’s cubist, Dadaist, or surrealist painters, artistic photographers then could not even depict a diminished reality when the truth of photography – its essence – was to diminish truth.

Photography had no meaning. It was incapable of truth or meaning. Worse, photography participated in the evacuation





of meaning of the very objects it depicted. (This was the war Kracauer waged against photography until he turned photography's diminishment to advantage.) Meaning corresponded, he insisted, to consciousness, not to the image. The "meaning" photographs offer their objects is their spatial appearance alone. ("For in the artwork the meaning of the object takes on spatial appearance, whereas in photography the spatial appearance of an object is its meaning.") Picturing the world, photography, nonetheless, was incapable of world history. It could not depict history. Attendant on the emergence of historicist thinking, photographic technology could only capture a spatial continuum complementing historicism's temporal continuum. Meaning, truth, and history were one, beyond photographic representation. "For history to present itself, the mere surface coherence offered by photography must be destroyed." Could we learn how to fragment photography as modern painting or film montage had used it to critical advantage when a photograph is only continuum (even in its grain)? That photography participated in the evacuation of meaning, paradoxically, was means to this end, but only if analysis was conducted, strangely, through *dated* photographs. Old and new photographs operated differently with respect to meaning – that is, with respect to their lack of meaning. Only through

the archive old photographs already were (that they were *in essence*), could we understand the archives of the present found, for instance, in illustrated newspapers. What no longer held together individual photographs was means to undermine any context (let's call this an "archive") that assembled them.

Such an act does not redeem photography, but it makes photography an allegory of the archive. Each archive is an allegory. Allegory is photography's meaning, but no single one: no single photograph, no single meaning, and no single archive.

Sunday, December 31, 2006

Fiona, I don't know whether to apologize to you or to me for this hiatus. Surveying a fragmentary text that has yet to be sent in its totality, it seems that I need correspond first with myself in order to recover some consistency of argument here – if there is one. I would be lying if I said work alone intervened with its rhythms of installations and exhibition openings. Yes and no. I had difficulty summoning the energy required to confront this corrosion of our notion of photography, which, *en abyme*, is also photography's corrosion of itself. Resistance was procrastination.





Truth to tell, I was forestalling an event that had already happened, an event that I was re-marking in this ellipse of suspension. Kracauer re-opened an abyss that your work had already opened in me.

Tuesday, February 6, 2007

Illustrated newspapers were the disposable culmination of photography's history as a "secretion of the capitalist mode of production," whose aim was "the complete reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus."

Photography represented the age. In capitalism's rule, a world given over to photography was also a world fundamentally laid bare by its economic laws. Photography was the image of this world possessed and archived in its generality and particularity.

Photography was also this image itself, photography *itself*.

It was both image *and* substance, picture *and* thing. It was a "warehousing of nature" that had, in turn, to be warehoused as the thing it was. In totality, this ever-growing stockpile of photographs served "as the *general inventory* of a nature that cannot be further reduced." All contingency severed by this most referential of arts, "the photographic archive assembles

in effigy the last elements of nature alienated from meaning.” Photography’s “task” was realized in this negation that divorced its relationship to the world.

Photography was doubly destructive: originally, at its source, at the *moment* it captured an image of the world; and, *over time*, in its reception, when liberated consciousness put photography to critical use. After destroying the unity of nature, over time photography destroyed the unity of itself. Not *literally*, you say! (If not literally, then how? This was an *event*, after all, for consciousness – a double event moreover, an event that repeated within the closed set of a photograph!) As the stockpile of photographs of photography’s own inventory of the world had steadily increased over time, “the disorder of detritus reflected” therein offered consciousness “images of the stock of nature disintegrated into its elements.” The negative task of photography now fulfilled in consciousness, consciousness – freed of the authority of any and all configurations – could dispose (and dispose of) these elements as it would. Freedom of disposition was not to command the world of the image through the image (a thing of the past), but to contest or undermine the authority of any assembly. It was “incumbent on consciousness to establish the *provisional status* of all given configurations, and perhaps even to awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of





nature.” All presumed “original order [being] lost,” any order, any configuration, any contiguity, even any contingency, and especially any archive were provisional. The daily archiving of illustrated newspapers, which typically set images side by side in an “optical inventory,” was no exception. If “the *contiguity* of these images systematically excludes their contextual framework available to consciousness,” another archival order must be determined. Meaning is contextual. Another configuration, the allegory of another archive might even show “the valid organization of things.” The disintegrated images of the past reveal the provisional status of the present in our hope for an ideal order to come.

Critical use does not exonerate photography, not even if liberated consciousness now wielded it as a weapon against capitalism. All through this essay, it was not so much capitalism as photography itself that Kracauer condemned. “Faith” in the archive rests on our “belief” in photographs. Belief is nothing but hearsay; the photograph is no evidence in itself. What it admitted could not be used as evidence – not even for itself, let alone what it depicted. Photography could not be exonerated before the subject whose truth it could not capture, even if it posed the subject to itself – *especially* if it posed the subject to itself. Kracauer condemned photography because it could not

be true: true to this human subject. Here was his problem – a problem of essence and truth of what was in essence not truth.

And what a list of complaints! All in the name of the memory image, of the “last image,” of history, or the “monogram,” so many other signifiers of the “truth” lacking in photography. All the more shame for those who had themselves photographed! Their vanity was exposed in their grand-children’s sudden laughter at their ancestors’ costumes and encumbered status. Laughter turned to fear when the “disintegrated unity” of these registrations only revealed a crime site even within the complacent bourgeois surroundings in which these subjects were comfortably cocooned. (These dupes were innocent victims, then.) What was once a photographic window on their world was now only a museum vitrine where all subjective individuality vanished in the generality of an ethnographic display. We encounter only ghosts in portraits when we anticipated the assured pose of personal identity. Photography “annihilates the person by portraying him or her.” Who could redeem these ghosts from photography, which portrays “not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her”? Subtracting the inessential, photography only presented the negative of a person. In that photography left behind only “fragments around a nothing,”





you would think its act was an inessential theft.
Photography left only the remains of what it could
not steal.

Defending this person, personhood in general,
Kracauer, in turn, stripped photography bare as
photography had stripped its subjects to what they
possessed. He did so by means of this selfsame
photograph, by what had by then become self-evident
in the photograph, evidence by which the photograph
would be condemned as it had already condemned
capitalism. Condemning and condemned, photography
had no alibi. Even the *elsewhere* of an alibi (photography's
alibi: the *there* of photographs) Kracauer disputed!
Photography as we know it was undone.

Fiona, forgive me. I'm getting ahead of myself,
already prejudiced by Kracauer even before the
evidence against photography's "assault" has been
admitted here, presented on behalf of a subject whose
presumed truth, the truth of the subject, already
condemns photography beforehand.

Friday, February 16, 2007

I had to recess in order to précis Kracauer's prosecution of photography, a prosecution that he conducts, as I have said, in the name of *truth*. Personally, I have no reason to be for or against photography, although, obviously, I cannot be neutral, that is to say, immune to its effects. Some say that effects are arguments. Don't expect me to advocate for photography when I am already its effect! I am not about to appeal Kracauer's judgement: Photography *is* guilty. It *is* destructive.

You would think, being iconic as well as indexical, that the portrait photograph captures something of the subject's status; that the resulting *pose* – of a person gathering him- or herself, concluding in the instant of the shutter closing – imprints itself as Kracauer's "monogram." You would be wrong. Actually, Kracauer's case against photography is quite brief, but its consequences are devastating. And not for photography alone. Yet, Kracauer set a precedent with photography that he himself would not follow.

Kracauer rests his case on the opposition between photographic representation and the memory image. The two are "at odds" with each other. Only memory images are significant





because “the meaning of memory images is linked to their truth content.” Memory retains only what is significant while photography grasps only what is given in the spatial continuum of the moment. Still, memory images lack transparency due to the “demonic nature of the drives.” Only a liberated consciousness penetrates behind the repressions and falsifications of memory “to the truth intended by a liberated consciousness.” “All memory images are bound to be reduced to this type of image, which may rightly be called the last image, since it alone preserves the unforgettable. The last image of a person is that person’s actual *history*.” A photograph reveals nothing of the subject. On the contrary, “a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow.” Only our grandchildren inherit this knowledge from images they inherit from us, which we mistakenly presume to embody something of our identity.

Kracauer adduces his evidence from old photographs where, time after time, the subject disappears dissolved into details or disintegrated into particulars – like a corpse. Spiriting away the subject, photography’s crime typically leaves only traces. Old photographs leave behind only “fragments around a nothing,” not enough to prove a subject’s identity. The subject disappears because it was never originally captured. Kracauer uses the precedent of past photographs to disabuse us of our belief in the

transparency of contemporary ones. *Photographs have no likeness!* If only we didn't adhere to this belief as we do to our notion of bourgeois stability, then the two would mutually dissolve.

I find Kracauer's analysis remarkable here when he says, "If photography is a *function of the flow of time*, then its substantive meaning will change depending on whether it belongs to the domain of the present or to some phase of the past." A photograph, it seems, is only interesting when it ages. When an image is current, we understand it for all the wrong reasons, referred by its mediating role as an "optical sign" to other functions of identification (i.e., recognition) in which the memory image plays a determining role. (The photograph of the diva refers not to the woman herself but to the "original" we experienced on the screen.) As an image ages, its semiotic value deteriorates, revealing it to be the empty cipher it essentially is.

Photography was condemned for what it could not do but only in so far as the effects of what it could not do were used to undermine the archive. Not any old archive, but its current configuration, that of the illustrated newspaper. In this essay, Kracauer describes two photographs: a sixty-year-old photograph of his grandmother when she was young and a contemporary image of a film diva. But his grandmother's





image is pulled from a family album while the film diva's image is embedded in an illustrated newspaper (two archival contexts, therefore). No matter whether eventually they would come to resemble each other over time, the two were now different: an old photograph resembled the archive more than the two images currently resembled each other. What Kracauer saw in individual photographs was repeated in the daily archives of illustrated newspapers, where a "blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference towards what the things mean." The old photograph and the contemporary archive were alike in the detritus they shored up against meaning. Image and archive were no different from one another. Doesn't this pose a problem for the archive, if container and contained are no different from each other in their general indifference?

In order to prove the provisional status of any (archival) configuration of images – for this was Kracauer's purpose after all, and the "task" of photography – photography had to be sacrificed, individual photographs, moreover. As unique or definitive as each impression was, every image was still provisional. Not only does its substantive meaning change over time, in some *fundamental* way the photograph itself, according to Kracauer, changes. It disintegrates into details before our eyes. Falling into fragments reveals the image's own provisional

status, but also shows the photograph's ultimate lack of correspondence to any original referent. To repeat: "The images of the stock of nature disintegrated into its elements are offered up to consciousness to deal with as it pleases. Their original order is lost; they no longer cling to the spatial context that linked them with an original out of which the memory image was selected. But if the remnants of nature are not oriented toward the memory image, then the order they assume through the image is necessarily provisional."

In this massive reordering of meaning and reordering of a mass of images, everything changed. Photographs most of all. Victim of the "*go-for-broke game* of history" (whose deconstructions and reconstructions it had initiated), something *within* photographs disappeared. Simply by a reorientation of axes of meaning, photographs no longer referred to their objects but corresponded across a system. "All right, so it's grandmother, but in reality it's any young girl in 1864.... This mannequin does not belong to our time; it could be standing with others of its kind in a museum, in a glass case labelled 'Traditional Costumes, 1864.'" Any system is an archive and vice versa.

Reordering photographic meaning affected even the photographs themselves. At the very least, all contingency that we think natural





to photography's indexical registrations dissolved as if in a reversal of an image's chemical apparition. All contingency was severed. This, I think, proves an archival problem to classify and house all these now homeless images, photographs suddenly severed from their referents. Severing contingency instituted the archive. It made the photograph into a document.

Are we prepared for the severity of this decision, which was also a judgement?

Saturday, February 17, 2007

Let's be clear. The archive was not yet necessarily a *physical* place. The "assault" of images – of disintegrated images showing us the provisional status of the present in our hope of a different ordering of the future to come – only proves the shifting instability of the archive, indeed, of any idea of the archive. Any settling, such as that of the regular, regulating ordering of illustrated newspapers, could be disputed. The authority of newspapers' "optical inventory" consisted in *not* announcing itself as an order or even as an archive. Based on the presumed transparency of the photograph, ordering was taken as given,

natural, or contingent to the world, whether that world was, as well, social, economic, or cultural. It had no need of authority in what was naturally and realistically given in and by an original order. Kracauer used photography against the archive. He unsettled photography in order to unsettle the archive. Once unsettled, however, the photograph would always unsettle even any right order. There was no end: no end to photography, no end to its unsettling.

Disintegrated into its elements, past photography for Kracauer was only an example that, in turn, could be dispensed with as the detritus it had become, archived as the “last historical stage” of pictorial representations “no different from earlier modes of representation ... assigned to a particular developmental stage of practical and material life.” Past photographs were disposed of without any consideration of how then to house them. Assigning photography to a developmental stage of history, it was as if Kracauer thus housed *and* burned photographs at the same time. Could this archive, then, ever exist? Only the *new* was assigned a positive task, an active not passive role, even though current photographs seemed to function the same as the old in capitalism’s totalizing inventory. Yet, it is not nineteenth-century photographers we think of, but his contemporaries Rodchenko or Moholy-Nagy, for instance, when Kracauer writes,





“[f]or the first time in history, photography brings to light the entire natural cocoon; for the first time, the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings. Photography shows cities in aerial shots, brings crockets and figures down from the Gothic cathedrals. All spatial configurations are incorporated into the central archive in unusual combinations which distance them from human proximity.” (Yet, again, as a persistence of the archaic even within new technologies, Kracauer might as well have been describing Faust’s flight on Mephisto’s cape past Gothic crockets in Murnau’s film *Faust* released the year before.) The differing spatiality of modern photographs accounted already for the disjunctive spatiality of the archive in which these images were to be configured. These photographers conceivably took context – and mobility – into account. Context accounts for the cognition photography was incapable of but which the transparency of art possessed. (Thus, August Sander’s project *Citizens of the Twentieth Century*, on which you base your 2002 video installation *Countenance*, was doomed from the start. Against Sander’s intention, the archival structure of his project immediately evacuated any identity he tried to institute through his occupational categories.)

Archives by nature are conservative, but there was one that was avant-garde. The avant-garde dictum to make it strange became

this new archive's ordering principle. Film montage's "strange constructs" flouted the "disarray" of illustrated newspapers. Surely, the dream logic Kracauer advocated for film he applied himself as an effectively surrealist strategy in his analysis of old photographs. Even grandmother's petticoat, it seems, now could be estranged in a conjectural new inventory anticipating the "valid organization" of things to come. Reordering is radical, even a conjectural one. Imagining, looking on an image, looking into a photograph, Kracauer saw that "the disorder of the detritus reflected in photography cannot be elucidated more clearly than through the suspension of every habitual relationship among the elements of nature. The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film. This possibility is realized whenever film combines parts and segments to create strange constructs." Before advocating film, Kracauer saw this in a photograph. *Every* photograph! Stirring up the elements of nature, Kracauer told us, was achieved *already, before* film, by still photography. Even though what had been stirred up was by now settled in past photographs, this was unsettled enough to disturb Kracauer and for him to stir up ordered newspaper inventories. I wonder, once stirred-up could photographs *ever* be stilled?





Sunday, March 11, 2007

Stirred up or dissolving, was photography ever classifiable? That is, photography *in itself*, not its subject matter? Between the two – one that stirs up and the other that dissolves – what remains of photography to classify?

The question remains: the question of remains. What remains of photography to be archived, photography's remains? Can these remains be archived or are they resistant to archiving? (I am struck by a resemblance between this dissolving document of the photograph and what Jacques Derrida observes of the "cinder" when he writes, "There the cinder is: that which preserves in order no longer to preserve, dooming the remnant to dissolution.")

I know that this sounds like pretentious play with language, Fiona, but Kracauer opened an abyss in the image itself. After Kracauer, we cannot be certain what remains of the photograph, even *within* it.

Freed of the burden of the past in the tasks of the present and the future, Kracauer lost interest in old photographs, in photography altogether. Yet, he has left us a troubling legacy.

Kracauer let loose a destructive photography, a photography that was in essence destructive.

Thursday, March 29, 2007

Disputing the “there” of photography by severing its natural contingency, Kracauer left the photograph to hang – as if in a dream. Loosed of referential anchoring in their spatial continuum, old photographs are perfect vehicles for time travel. Archives – such as your Nederlands Filmmuseum from which you draw your documentary film footage – send us on our way as if from various terminals. Yet, even before we depart on such a journey, this dream dissolves in the disturbance of dissolving photographs.

How literally should we take Kracauer’s contention of dissolution? He writes, “The grandmother dissolves into fashionably old-fashioned details before the very eyes of the grandchildren. “Vor den Augen der Enkel löst sich die Grossmutter in modisch-altmodische Einzelheiten auf.”

Her image dissolves before their very eyes! On turning the page of the family album! After the fact of photography! The photograph would





have to hold in reserve what it had already dissolved to dissolve again in front of us, before our eyes. (Our reception repeats the event of photography – but the event of photography obviously is other than we think, especially since it is marked, indeed, re-marked, by the – at least – double time of the photograph’s dissolution: divided at its origin and over time.) Let’s take the time to trace this dissolution through Kracauer’s words, distinguishing along the way between the photograph and the archive and, moreover, between photographs and artworks, paying attention as well to every mention of dissolution, disintegration, sedimentation, residuum, and detritus.

We start with grandmother, but she was only a pretense of his argument since “grandmother,” Kracauer claims, was a pretense of photography. Grandmother dissolves into details because she was never there. She was a ghost as soon as her image, or what composed her image, was captured. Her history was “buried as if under a layer of snow” – *immediately*, it seems. Already at its origin, not just over time, the photograph is “the sediment which has settled from the monogram.” A photograph captures “only the residuum that history has discharged,” not the subject herself. Since grandmother always already was a ghost, only her costume now commands attention. “If one can no longer encounter the grandmother in the photograph, the image

taken from the family album necessarily disintegrates into its particulars... . It is the fashion details that hold the gaze tight.” But like the grandmother, her costume, too, “dissolves into the sum of its details, like a corpse.” Both subject and costume dissolved, only “ballast” persists in the image as the bourgeois appurtenances of the photographic session. “This detritus [such as grandmother’s “high-Renaissance chair with its turned spindles”] was once present,” but now is only proof of “alien trappings,” so much so that the photograph itself, not just grandmother, becomes a ghost.

Let’s return to the children in front of the image of their grandmother, in the moment – the *memento mori* moment corresponding, we have to presume, to the shutter of the camera – of recognition of another sorts than that of identification. At the sight of their grandmother’s old-fashioned outfit, “they laugh, and at the same time they shudder.” With this shudder not only time divides. The image itself dissociates: “These trappings, whose lack of transparency one experiences in the old photograph, used to be inseparably meshed with the transparent aspects. This terrible association which persists in the photograph evokes a shudder.” Transparency, of course, belongs to art and to the final memory image, not to photography; photography captures only likeness within a





spatial continuum. But this temporally disassociated spatial continuum now reveals a “jumble that consists partly of garbage.” “Nothing of these contain us.” Without the subject, things fall apart. Only the false appearance of likeness and some dissemblance of spatial coherence made us believe things held together. No longer indices of a world, in consciousness these images cling instead to *us*.

Stemming from a divisive spacing within the image, while conjuring a “disintegrated unity,” this disjunction, whose disturbing temporal modality we still need to assess, is the first hint that a different configuration of “elements” is possible. Having passed from the grandmother, to her costume, and then to her furnished surroundings, Kracauer finds the same evidence of disintegrated unity in photographs of nature. Like the image of the grandmother, “even the landscape and all other concrete objects become costumes in an old photograph.” If the portrait photograph is destined, so to speak, to the ethnographic museum as evidence solely of period costume, the landscape photograph is destined to the archive, but only as it destines the archive to disruption.

P.S. Details and elements: I wonder what is the relation between a detail and an element? If “detail” is to the portrait, then

“element” is to landscape photography. But as landscape in photography also becomes a costume, and its elements perhaps details, we ask again, what is a detail? Is it the same as an element? A detail is the evanescence of an individual having become a ghost in the photograph, itself destined to the same corpse-like dissolution, whereas an element is a “stock of nature” that persists in the image. Photography “stockpiles” elements even though of the natural world. What then is a photograph? All detail and elements? Only detail and elements?

Friday, March 30, 2007

In this long detour around your work, Fiona, I fear I must be making a colossal error of understanding reading Kracauer. Residing in consciousness, meaning only changes there; nothing dissolves in the photograph itself. We can change the meaning that a photograph has for us, but, surely, consciousness cannot change the image itself. Yet, somehow, *over time and within* the image, Kracauer says, “elements crumble, since they are not held together.” Would the photograph not hold them together forever? Does not the spatial continuum or, rather, its representation, persist as long as the photograph’s paper support itself not crumble?





Kracauer had claimed this adherence as the very banality of photography. Essentially, a photograph is the “barren self-presentation of spatial and temporal elements [*Raum- und Zeitbestände*].” Every photograph shows this as the technology’s analytic constitution. But it is only dated photographs that dissolve into their elements, which are presumably sustained by the same photographic ground: “The old photograph has been emptied of the life whose physical presence overlay its merely spatial configuration.” Some image, however dead and however disintegrated its “elements,” remains. Yet, given that “elements [*Bestände*] crumble, since they are not held together”; that the photograph “consists of elements [*Teilen*] in space whose configuration is so far from necessary that one could just as well imagine a different organization of elements [*Teile*]”; that “photography merely stockpiles the elements [*Elemente*]”; and that “the images of the stock of nature [*Naturbestands*] disintegrated into its elements [*Elemente*] are offered up to consciousness to deal with as it pleases”; we might wonder whether any spatial configuration – not just the elements it sustains – can resist dissolution. In the photograph, Kracauer isolates elements that resist dissolution, but loosened from all configurations, where do these parts, which no longer cohere together, still adhere? What remains to be identified in

these elements' fragmentary state? What is the ground of the photograph on which the sedimentation it disposes appears if it, too, dissolves? Without a ground, what is photography? What sort of document is it? Groundless, can it be archived? Or does it iterate and contain within itself, as I suspect, the groundless fate of the archive?

Saturday, May 12, 2007

Were Kracauer to archive what he had just thrown away, were he to archive photography, how would he classify it? By what terms would he classify photography's "sheer accumulation" and vast disorder? In some sense, these terms would define what photography already was without any recourse to what individual photographs depicted. What photography was in essence provided the coordinates by which to classify its images: its "barren self-presentation of spatial and temporal elements." The archive would assemble photographs by means of the "organizing principle" by which photography itself assembled its images. Spatio-temporal coordinates provide the archive's first ordering principles, the fundament or ground of the discriminating and diversifying classifications that follow





to place individual photographs in their archival order. Since any photograph is the “spatial configuration of a moment [*die räumliche Konfiguration eines Augenblicks*],” we logically move from the general to the particular. Space becomes a locale, time specifies a date: grandmother in the studio of a court photographer, 1864.

Kracauer is quick, however, to disabuse us of any notion that photography can capture an original, let alone a likeness that bears a person’s identity, that is, that the photograph can carry any verifiable identification in itself. We only believe an image we encounter from the past by hearsay: “One has to believe the parents – who claim to have gotten it from grandmother herself – that this photograph depicts the very same grandmother” about whom stories are told as her image is passed from hand to hand and from generation to generation. Hearsay is no authority when even “eyewitness accounts are unreliable. It might turn out after all that the photograph depicts not the grandmother but a friend who resembled her.” “So it’s grandmother,” Kracauer admits, “but in reality it’s any young girl in 1864.”

If we look instead to the origin of the image and not to its reception for classificatory clues, we find that, according to Kracauer, photographers care nothing for stories, only for the dates and details that their images capture: any young girl in 1864. As practitioners, these technicians let the medium, not the subject matter, provide criteria for photographic classification: the aforesaid dates and details, which are the expression of the medium's optical-chemical combination. The date secures the image while securing itself: "the photograph ... must be essentially associated with the moment in time [*dein Zeitpunkt*] at which it came into existence." Less secure, details are only what they dissolve into. In time, grandmother dissolves into details and elements crumble because their spatial configuration no longer holds them together. Details dissolve and the ground gives way. Photography disposes of place and dispenses with it at the same time, but decomposed elements, it seems (if we believe Kracauer), can still be dated – 1864, for instance – even though the ground of their relationship disintegrates.

Space and time are indissolubly linked in a photograph in the moment the photograph captures. Though we think they are one in the image, over time even this association dissipates to the disadvantage of the spatial continuum. In Kracauer's schema, time is secondary to the spatial continuum for





determining photographic meaning: the “spatial appearance of an object is its meaning.” Yet, the photograph’s “substantive meaning,” he admits, depends on its temporal currency, past or present. Some other temporality is at work in the image to undermine its spatial configuration. (The spatio-temporal link is not just dissolved over time, the image captures their originary disjunction. This is why Kracauer can say that the photograph is sedimented at its origin and sedimented over time. Such is the disaster of photography.) In the end only a date remains, it seems, to classify an image; a date baptizes the image rather than any name. But is a date enough to secure photography’s place in the archive if time still is at work within the image? Photography is a time bomb. This event takes place inside the photograph inside the archive.

Looking at a photograph, we cannot see its temporal divide, either observing this disjunction at its origin or reading the trace of its dissolution over time. None of this is visible in the image. Or, at least, what we are concerned with here follows neither a visible logic nor a logic of the visible. In turn, this “logic” lends no visible order to the archive but rather opens the archive to its foundation’s abyss, an abyss of foundations.

Nonetheless, we still possess photographs. We can date them apparently and we can identify their elements, even though the latter no longer hold together. What the photograph originally assembled over time we receive disassembled. Some other support (within *and* as the photograph) persists as the ground of photography's "disintegrated unity," some other support, that is, than the spatial continuum itself. Kracauer claims that photography's task is to disclose "the previously unexamined foundation of nature," but does the archive's foundation remain stable given photography's dissolution even of the spatio-temporal foundation of nature? Does some other foundation remain beneath photographic appearance? Kracauer does not answer. As spatial configuration disintegrates into its elements, the spatial continuum itself (if they are not one and the same: "spatial continuum," "spatial configuration," and "spatial appearance") must dissipate or be perpetually dissolving. Disintegrated elements must then be supported by what originally assembled them in the photograph. Assembly does not merely dissolve over time; the photograph assembles and disassembles at the same time – at its origin and in our reception. Were Kracauer to archive photography, he could only organize and classify it through the double, contrary logic of this assembly and disassembly. Archive that it already is, photography





cannot constrain its mobile terms within the archive's own stable institutional logic. If the foundation of nature no longer exists outside its depiction, how can photography itself then have a ground? The surface of a photograph has the depth of an abyss.

In discarding photography, what Kracauer actually throws away is its ground. He left only photography's discarded elements, remnants that were only a stockpile of nature. Past photography for him was no more than a degraded ground of detritus – the “ground” by which, at the same time, the depiction became detritus. A degraded ground of detritus: here is photography's definition. It “is” photography's essence. A photograph is a substrate on which things are scattered or thrown as if a layer of soil or rock. Etymology tells us that a substratum is a surface on which things are strewn, the foundation from which things originate and their order develops. The photograph here is, rather, a disordered ground. This ground was no ground. Can such a thing as photography be archived, archived, moreover, without danger?

Questioning so much of our understanding of photography, dissolving even the photograph itself, Kracauer left nothing of photography to archive. Nonetheless, he archived what he abandoned. Kracauer abandoned photography for film

or, rather, abandoned photography to film. He archived photography's disaster within film's dream. A new technology, film itself had yet to be archived. Nonetheless, in the *present*, it too archived photography. Archiving photography within its movement, film could only be archived in the *future* when the "valid organization of things" was known, when the right order stabilized the archive. In the present, film was a living archive, though experienced as a dream. Archiving the moving image was as yet unthinkable.

P.S. Can sedimentation precede dissolution?

Sedimentation appearing at the origin is more problematic than sedimentation settling over time within the closed document of a photograph.

(That's right: an event happening within the closed event of a past image.) Photography's dissolution troubles us three times in its three-fold temporality: when it dissolves the subject or nature at its origin, in the immediacy of its snapshot, appearing then, though, as a coherent image; in the silent work of duration in some dark "archive"; then suddenly in our reception today – rightbefore our eyes.





Sunday, May 13, 2007

Having arrived at what Kracauer had discarded, I didn't know, Fiona, where I necessarily would go with such dangerous goods. Originally, after seeing *News from the Near Future* in Oxford, I wanted to use your work to speculate on the effects of the moving image on the archive. I, thus, proposed to you the thesis that became our exhibition: structured around time and the moving image, and, in my mind, the idea of disaster. Even before consideration of the moving image, Kracauer now offered me more proof than I needed that *still* photography alone swept away the secure foundations of the archive.

Of course, arriving where Kracauer had deposited me, I could not be sure whether he comprehended what he had discarded. Imagine then my surprise rereading Derrida's *Archive Fever* and immediately falling upon what had only been strewn, though it was fundamental, in my previous reading – namely that “the archive be deposited somewhere, on a subtle substrate, and at the disposition of a legitimate hermeneutic authority.” *Was I looking at a photograph here, I asked myself? Or, rather, in this tripartite structure, was I presented with photography, the photographic print, and photography's meaning?* It seems that the archive is destabilized by one of the terms it contains, but which is, as well, fundamental

to it: its subtle substrate. “This concept – or rather this *figure* of the substrate – marks the properly *fundamental* assignation of our problem, the problem of the fundamental. Can one imagine an archive without foundation, without substrate, without substance, without subjectile?”

I knew that the photograph already was an archive, which, thus, poses insurmountable problems for the archive. They were already the same, photography and the archive, although only one had the authority to contain and classify the other. I knew that Derrida had anticipated everything that I could say on more than just the archive – *everything*. Yet, I also knew, in thus discovering that the archival substrate and the photographic substrate were analogous, that this similarity might warrant investigation. Here was something new. My chance reading of Kracauer, and its troubled continuation here, seems to deviate so far from your work (bypassing getting to Barthes as well, you will have noticed). Yet, it radicalized photography for me in a way in which your work participates. But, as we know, Kracauer himself dismissed photography, archiving its dissolution in the stages of his argument. Titled “Photography,” his essay was really about the archive, which, in turn, by its conclusion, archives the subject of the essay’s title. It seemed to me that photography thus archived could not be contained. Kracauer’s





essay radicalized photography more than the archive, which is also to say that it eventually – or immediately – would radicalize the archive. I don't know, maybe this is well known in the field, a foreign field in which I am speculating, some would say trespassing. Maybe, but it seems to me that Kracauer contests nearly every other theory of photography, although his was only means to another end.

Well, given that I had initially intended to pursue the idea of the violence of the photograph as a violence to (the violence of) the archive, and that the idea of archival violence, of the *archivolithic*, was owed to Derrida, here was a foundation (which was both firm and unfounded) on which to renew Kracauer's radicalizing of the archive by maintaining his radicalizing of what it contained. Here was a coincidence that made some sense of the detritus Kracauer claimed photography to be; that made sense of the strange place where he left photography; that further articulated the degraded bare essence to which he stripped the photograph.

Sunday, June 10, 2007

Before hastily turning to Derrida's *Archive Fever*, I should return to your work, Fiona, or to the return through your work that takes place within the exhibition. Perhaps you know that at first I thought *The Changeling*, with its past emphasis on archival photography and portraiture, a disturbance to the concept of the exhibition. But who can say no to premiering a new work, especially one localized by your employment of the Toronto actor Martha Burns? And imagine being disturbed in an exhibition about, I thought, disturbance! Imagine disputing an artist's understanding of which works belong together when I was disputing others' interpretations of them! And how long after the flood of our new premises, which threatened the opening, was it before I realized that I had perhaps tempted fate with my *idée fixe* of disaster derived from viewing your *News from the Near Future*. Obviously, one cannot maintain a thesis on disaster without missing its event.

(Administered throughout the process of the exhibition, this lesson should not be lost on me as I now write this. In contrast to no thesis on disaster, a thesis on archival collecting is possible, indeed, legitimate, as Derrida notes in his "The Book to Come" lecture, "since the question of the future that we have been





asked to consider this evening concerns the book as much as the library, I imagine that there will be no surprise in rediscovering these motifs of the *thetic* position and the collection: of the gathering together that is statutory, legitimate, institutional, and even state or national.” Photography and fiction already contest the legitimacy of any statutory putting in place and authority that institutes the archive. In turn, we must question the *thetic* putting into place that establishes any logic of our relation vis-à-vis an artwork and vice versa. If it is not already contradictory, a *non-thetic* gathering, I think, would rather be the gathering *and* dispersing Maurice Blanchot writes of in Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés* [and of which Derrida has some reservations]. This has a number of consequences. In that a book or a narrative in general [such as *News from the Near Future*, if it is a narrative] collects and orders its elements [as *News* assembles differently derived archival footage], gathering and dispersing would de-program any predetermined narrative outcome. At the least, a reader or viewer could not maintain a secure standpoint outside the artwork that would not be undermined or swept away in and through the work’s duration. Moreover, any gathering together we call curating would not be exempt. As for writing, well, writing already is the test case here, given through Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés*.)

By now, so long after our initial communication, perhaps it suffices – in order to dispense with any preordained interpretation – to quote Blanchot on disaster by cutting and pasting what I emailed to you long ago after you expressed doubts about such a framework:

The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular; “I” am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me – an other than I who passively becomes other. There is no reaching the disaster. Out of reach is he whom it threatens, whether from afar or close up, it is impossible to say: the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit. We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future – that which is yet to come – if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future in which to think it.

The disaster is separate; that which is most separate.

When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come.





The disaster is its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster, the disaster has always already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or place for its accomplishment.

It is tempting, nonetheless, to think of the solitary figure perched on the ice-crusting rock isolated from shore in *News from the Near Future* as this “other than I who passively becomes other” left aside in the aftermath of disaster. His image, accompanied by the same plaintive musical refrain, opens and closes a narrative pieced together from archival film footage in which the image of water dominates. (Of course, I am telling you what you already know, Fiona, but please entertain my descriptions here while I sound out some lines of interpretation.) He is a lookout or witness to what follows – except what follows perhaps has already preceded. The ensuing narrative divides into two distinct parts. In the first, we are immediately drawn into the narrative flow as scenes swell from serene to unsettled seas and fishing boats of differing capacities and purposes are tossed in ever-rougher waters and higher waves. In the second, after a pause of black leader, running water leads us inland. We witness the sublime splendour of Niagara Falls, made all the more romantic by the old footage. Then we lose sight of other

presumably pacific waterways as rivers exceed their bounds to flood cities and towns. Citizens of the former are ferried through their deserted, sleepy cities while inhabitants of the latter wait isolated in domestic doorways lapped by rising waters. The two parts then link with the resolving return of serene sunset seas.

Returning too, our solitary sentinel again is lookout and witness. He is a lookout for the disaster to come; he is a witness to it already having taken place. Between the two, you weave a narrative, Fiona, which you subtly compose of light, sound, and time – a time missing, not just displaced, we should note, from the original documentary footage. If we seek to find meaning to this narrative, we lapse into binary constructs or metaphors of immersion and isolation: of the solitary community of the sea from which sustenance is hard won; of temporary suspension of activity in the spreading remove of floodwaters. Would our solitary lookout be one or the other: immersed or isolated? Where does he figure between inside and outside the disaster? In fact, there is no place for decision (no decision and no place of decision), no decision for us in the (passivity of the) disaster. Watching, we only repeat his liminal pose. (Such a position was a device of Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich, but we have to be wary so presuming that we do not assume the pose instead of a comical Buster Keaton hanging like a figurehead from the prow of a ship.)





No narrative, therefore, imposes itself, parsed, for instance, as in my descriptions above. But neither are we swept in an oceanic feeling of wholeness. Just as disaster “is foreign to the ruinous purity of destruction, so the idea of totality cannot delimit it.” Categories are in “errant disarray.” Errant, are we left, then, with no guiding thread, bereft of narrative, *or ...*

Down falls

the quill

a rhythmic suspension of disaster

to bury itself

in the primordial spray

whose frenzy formerly leapt from there to a peak

that is blasted

in the constant neutrality of the abyss

NOTHING

of the unforgettable crisis

or else

the deed

might have been achieved keeping in view every result that is non
human

WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE

a commonplace upsurge is shedding absence

OTHER THAN THE PLACE

a lowly splashing of some kind as if to scatter the vacuous action

at once which otherwise

by its deceit

would have established

the loss

in these infinite regions

of the swell

where all reality is dissolved

... *or* are we sustained, gathered, and dispersed by *pure* narrative? Such a narrative, seemingly, has no need of content. Each narrative would be – as Derrida describes “*the mise en abyme* of the discourse on *khōra*” – “the structure of an overprinting without a base.”

Fiona, you have loosed these film segments from their categorical holdings in the archive and gathered their dispersed elements together in a new rhythm. From what you’ve taken and edited, you’ve appended only sound. Apart from the occasional music, we sometimes hear a weave of voices, a confused chorus of ghostly, distant radio transmissions reputed to announce seafaring disasters: the muffled, anxious sound of news from the future announcing a past disaster. Adding nothing, your edits are just as much supplemental. From between the segments of found footage issue the counter-rhythms of another duration supplemental to that of the original – a time without origin in that it does not partake of the present the camera recorded. With the surge over time of sea into sea, dates disappear in this reediting just as spatial coordinates (which sea?) dissolve in this watery fold where all waters become one.





You especially know, Fiona, in this description of the film's action that I've failed to mention the prologue, before the title places the arrival of our solitary witness. In this rapidly edited sequence, a lone swimmer dives from an iron bridge, a crush of schoolgirls rush up a stony beach, and, commencing a race, a mass of swimmers dive into a river, heads bobbing like competing sperm. Then again, I've also failed to mention that this sequence of robust aquatics, too, was introduced by another, more idyllic image of seaside pleasure. The film opens from a grotto that composes this scene as if with an iris shot. From this vantage point, a bourgeois Edwardian mother and child spectate a sparkling sea. Tinting colours more than the film stock here. But it is immediately belied by the mechanical grain of the black-and-white film of the hurried sequence that follows of events only a decade or two later. It's almost chaotic, this sudden sequence of divers and swimmers, of one and many, abruptly halted by the title on the other side of which another (non-human) rhythm eventually rules. Nevertheless, this thesis of one or many must be resolved or dissolved in the watery narrative that follows. It seems that identity, nothing certain in itself, is to be resolved or dissolved in a narrative, by nothing as certain as narrativity itself.

Initially, we seem to forget the crowded prologue, caught up in the marine *longueur* that follows, pulled by its temporal tide. This errant narrative makes *me* forget that there is no division between these two themes in your work: identity and duration, the one spaced out in the latter as if in search of some genetic trace there. I see now that the elements that make up *The Changeling* already are in dialogue in *News from the Near Future*, and vice versa, as I now return otherwise through the exhibition to your Japanese schoolgirls.

P.S. Let me put the first part of Derrida's quotation in reserve here for potential use later: "As to the kinds of treatment these places have in store [the bibliotheque or library], let me just stress the traditional words I had to use to describe them, and which are all leads to follow for future reflection. These are the verbs poser, déposer, reposer, and entreposer. Like the presence of the Greek tithenai ('to put') in bibliotheke, they all point up the act of putting, depositing, but also the act of immobilizing, of giving something over to a stabilizing immobility, and so to the statute, to the statutory and even state institution, which alerts us to all the institutional, juridical, and political dimensions that we must also debate. Setting down, laying down, depositing, storing, warehousing – this is also receiving, collecting together, gathering together, consigning (like baggage), binding together, collecting,





totalizing, electing, and reading by binding. So the idea of gathering together, as much as that of the immobility of the statutory and even state deposit, seems as essential to the idea of the book as to that of the library.”

Thursday, July 5, 2007

One or many, the prologue to *News from the Near Future* returns us to the dilemma of *The Changeling*. We return via a reverse path through the exhibition past the disjunctive temporality of *Rain*, the upside down shadow world of *Downside Up*, and the buoyant exclamation of *Lift*. From our viewing of *News*, we return to *Changeling*'s archive with our categories unsettled. We are no longer so certain of our secure identities. In front of too many images to count of Japanese schoolgirls, we are inundated by likenesses – but no longer of the subjects to themselves. Instead, motion makes for likeness as each image seems to repeat in the following with the difference of a film frame. Implicitly serial, each portrait here is as if printed from a single negative.

Displaced from a yearbook, displayed on two wall-mounted computer screens, not immeasurably divided but folded open like a book by the crease of their corner installation, their two

faces mirror each other in their repeating difference. Yet, recto, one image is sustained to the verso of its verso, where nearly four hundred images succeed each other. “You” address this single image as if you were holding it in your hands, singling it out as the silent interlocutor of “your” voiceover. In the fiction of the scenario and the performance of the voice-over, only this portrait, in the time allotted to it alone, seems to *become* an image. This single image answers, or is made to answer, to its proliferation in a verbal series.

By necessity, I repeat the strategy you invented (having invented it for your subject as well): speaking to you, analyzing your work here as if in the third person. I am caught in the mirror you make of this work, the mirror you make of these images, a mirror that demands the fiction of writing. You invented it first, not as the voiceover itself, but in the fiction of the diary this schoolgirl keeps.

Addressing herself, “she writes in the first person. The diary is addressed as ‘you’ – in the second person. . . . She writes in the first person, but she thinks in the third.” “You,” the “you,” that is, I referred to a couple paragraphs above: *you*, Fiona, of course, *you* are not speaking here in this voiceover, which is given over to an actor practiced in performances of fictional identities. From the start, in





the script, division of identity is immediately blurred between two, or more, speakers here: “I or she.” “I,” a writer, elaborates a scene in which “she,” the girl from the photograph, speaks or writes. “I,” not Fiona Tan, but an artist, a writer, nonetheless, frames the scene within the fiction of mirrors reflecting mirrors, which not only reflects her relationship to this image but all possible ones: *“A writer can write herself. Can call the shots. Can paint the picture. I can make a work gleefully disregarding where the photos came from and perhaps distort the image. Anecdotal, autobiographical, it can be all these things. This is my self-centred starting point. A mirror’s mirror.”* In a mirror’s mirror, she (“I,” that is) seeks a self-portrait through imagining another: *“It would be good if I can get the text – this piece – to a stage where the words are making the image, making it visible. At that point will my voice sink into the image; word and image entwined and impossible to disentangle. But it feels just now like the only thing I have to say, only that the work is about finding a voice. For now I must not intrude but only look.”* With this little lie of only looking, the girl’s story begins, this girl whose “diary is her alter-ego, a faithful friend who never disagrees, who – like a mirror – never contradicts.” She, too, will find a voice, a series of voices, in fact, that divides her image. As if writing both to herself (her inner self) and to the outer skin of her school portrait, “she imagines herself her

grandmother, looking at old school pictures.” Then, “she slips into the skin of her mother, and she talks to her own portrait as if talking to a daughter.”

The girl troubles her own identity through the sometimes-troubling relation of her mother and grandmother to “her” image. Genetics and genesis entwine photograph and story but in no chronological order. Time is disjointed through the selfsame image – as the grandmother remembers her past through the anticipations of her youth in contrast to her actual life; as the mother hardly recognizes her daughter’s image as a “volatile mixture of mirror and not”; and as the daughter imagines the whole of which she is the divided outcome. The girl ends only to trouble the narrator when, at one point, the narrative folds its origin into its middle to reveal the chance event – the turn to this page of the yearbook – that set off this series of identifications. “I” says, “I turn the page. This girl could be me. There I am but I hardly recognise myself.” The picture holds her gaze to become this story, which unfolds as two narrative series nested (mirrored) in one another. If the chance event initiated the bifurcating narrative of/by the girl in the image, at the same time, this potentially infinite series now comes to a disillusioned close. “I” sought her *own* story in a fictional correspondence with the





girl. This story of disillusion was a self-portrait: a fiction of her own failure. The fiction of failure was a failure: *“This self-portrait then is a dreary shell and these photos are empty husks. Like a passage-way in a deserted hall of mirrors – mirrors mirroring each other, tiny nothings in-between. A self-portrait in search, yet again, of self.”*

Fiona Tan does not, thus, conclude with these words, only her fiction does. You, Fiona, assimilate writing to looking, which you dissimulate in the “only” looking of your supposed lack of intrusion. Failure of identification is implicit within the fictional “what if” of projection – an entwined correspondence that combines the “with” of writing to the “to” of the image. (“I”: “I would like to make a work that has the breath of promise. A breath held in anticipation, a ‘what if’.”) Writing imagines a diversifying affiliation with the image; every return it makes to the portrait divides the image. Temporal diversion possibly has no end: mirrors mirroring mirrors. Enclosing it, mirrors close only this fiction. Contrary to the narrator’s disillusion, the place between mirrors is not empty, waiting to be filled. It already is an archive. If Fiona Tan, the artist and writer, holds a mirror to it, she is both inside and outside. As author, she occupies no privileged place in this fiction or outside it. Inside this abstract archive, contents are no less secure. Nor the “inside” itself; not even the concept of inside is safe. “But

where does the outside commence?” Derrida asks. “This question is the question of the archive. There are undoubtedly no others.”

Does Kracauer threaten your archive, Fiona? Not at all. He facilitates its fiction. Severing photography’s contingency with the world, disputing any assumed contiguity – that is, certain placement – within the archive, and discrediting identity as a criterion of photographic meaning, he made all photographs and all archives available to other strategies, fiction above all.

Monday, July 23, 2007

Fiction, however, neither frees us of the archive nor frees the archive. Neither does it free us of photography nor from its effects. In spite of Kracauer’s optimism in the promise of avant-garde film instituting the right order of future archives, I am still troubled that he is not more troubled when he assigns photography to a historical stage (the assuring result of his Hegelian-Marxism), dispensing with its effects once photography has undermined the stability of the archive. Kracauer undermined photography in order to undermine the archive and in the process left photography as the fiction of a “disintegrated unity.” Could something so powerful be left behind without its effects continuing today?





What Kracauer left behind is his legacy: these left-behind photographs. He left them in their disintegrated state. We are left to archive these disintegrated photographs because, in our time, archive we must. But how are we to archive documents of disintegrated states without their disintegration being part and parcel of the principle of organization of the archive itself? Where any assembly must be disassembly as well? It seems to me that we are left with a number of issues: What is the nature of the disintegrated unity of the photograph? What is this image's support or ground, both in itself and in what it depicts? Given that the photograph already is an archive, how do we include it in the archive? How do we archive something, being both lodging and lodged, that comprehends this distinction between inside and outside?

Wednesday, August 15, 2007

What strikes me as radical in Kracauer's understanding of photography, which seems to go against common sense, is his revocation of photographic contingency. According to Kracauer, such severing – a result of technology's increasing domination of nature – was necessary for the liberation of consciousness. It was, moreover, photography's task. Photography was the last stage in

the historical evolution of pictorial representations from symbol to allegory to abstraction. Nature, photography, and the sign itself all shared an evolution that, however, dissolved the ties between them.

While this evolution was a “sign that consciousness has departed from its natural contingency,” only photography’s degraded state, which portrayed a disjointed nature laid bare by the economic laws of capital, made this understanding possible. “The foundation of nature devoid of meaning arises with modern photography.” This unhappy state was world historical but not the end of the story (only the end of history that photography could not depict). “The more decisively consciousness frees itself from this [natural] contingency in the course of the historical process, the more purely does its natural foundation present itself to consciousness.” Although devoid of meaning, photography’s disjointed sign could thus be put to opposing ends. “Less enmeshed in the natural bonds than ever before,” we are able to recognize even political regimes, such as capitalism, as temporary and not inevitable. Perception, photography, and political regimes are all equally provisional.





For those of us without a world historical view, born within the photographic regime, action is restricted to individual photographs. Photography's contingency is the very image of how we still falsely cling to nature, then to our possessions, and finally to the capitalistic social system. As "photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum," so we, too, confronted by its dissolving images, grasp details in order not to fall into disarray: "It is the fashion details that hold the gaze tight." The photograph is evidence, however, *proof* in fact, of consciousness's false clinging to its surroundings. Grandmother's image "proves that the alien trappings were incorporated into life as accessories. These trappings, whose lack of transparency one experiences in the old photograph, used to be inseparably meshed with the transparent aspects." The disintegrated fragments of the photograph "once clung to us like our skins, and this is how our property still clings to us today." But once the disintegrated images of the stock of nature "no longer cling to the spatial context that linked them with an original out of which the memory image was selected," once they are disjointed and divorced from any context, consciousness can deal with these free-floating elements as it pleases.

The past returns to rescue the present and thus unites the individual, through these degraded images, to his or her era, this last historical stage.

Monday, August 27, 2007

If meaning has departed from nature and is devoid in photography, consciousness, nonetheless, still demands a place for truth. The decisive trait that is the truth of the image, its truth-trait, is found by a liberated consciousness only in artworks and memory images, not in photographs. The devastating decision to sever signs from the world was necessary for Kracauer in order to preserve a place for truth. Withdrawing photographic contingency as a guarantee of verisimilitude saved transparency as the only means through which truth reveals itself to consciousness. The transparency of an object is nothing but “how it reveals itself to cognition,” not how it appears. Exactly reproduced by photography, the look of an object is an impediment to its understanding. “The resemblance between image and object effaces the contours of the object’s ‘history’.” Contingency fails to grasp the essential by failing to “touch upon what has been recognized as true.” Contingency and transparency are irreconcilable terms in Kracauer’s image world.

Problematically, transparent and contingent aspects are “inseparably enmeshed” in photographs. Yet, “the two spatial appearances – the ‘natural’ one and that of the object permeated by cognition – are not identical.” Only the disintegrating ground of the dated photograph separates the two, but this effect is not





immediately apparent. As transparent and non-transparent elements originally appear conjoined in space (still seemingly supported by the photographic ground), they must separate first on the vertical plane. As if we were looking through a glass pane into a museum diorama, we view everything in a photograph in its proper place; the camera's perspective orients the verticality of any scene. "The spatial continuum from the camera's perspective dominates the spatial appearance of the perceived object." Effacing the contours of an object's history, this optic cannot so much be corrected as rejected.

Contrary to a photograph, an artwork "approaches the transparency of the final memory image, in which the features [*Züge*] of 'history' converge [*zusammenschliessen*]." These decisive "traits" (*Züge*) are antithetical to the dissolving details to which we cling. Whereas photography dissolves traits or effaces the contours of an object's history, decisive traits preserve its truth. Both photography and the memory image assemble traits or elements, but photography's collection is disordered detritus (a disassembled assembly) whereas the memory image assembles its traits in orderly convergence as the contours of an object's meaning or a subject's history. Convergence opposes dissolution as its ordered assembly counters disintegrating disorder.

Persisting as a “disintegrated unity,” the image, however, does not then separate along the contours by which photography both effaces an object’s history and enmeshes its transparent and non-transparent aspects. It does not divide into two as a simulacrum and a proper representation. Never there originally, transparency remains a void. We are left only with a photograph’s fractured elements on photography’s riven ground.

When Kracauer wrote of the film diva that all the recorded details of her eyelashes and bangs were in their “proper place” (“Details sitzen richtig im Raum”), he was setting up photography for a fall. These coordinated details are only the semblance of what temporarily remains upright in the image. But with every old photograph we shudder at the image’s “terrible association” of “alien trappings” and essential traits as if we’ve seen a ghost. The photograph itself “becomes a ghost [*Gespensst*] because the costumed mannequin was once alive.” Uncannily, a shudder seems to emanate from the photograph as it conjures a disintegrated unity from the original scene. Indeed, the photographic sheet seems to shudder as if it had seen its *own* ghost. The photograph having thus spooked itself, the elements it sustained suddenly all fall down. The scene dissolves. The image breaks apart. Things fall to the ground. Right before our eyes.





Tuesday, August 28, 2007

It is not so much the photograph's ground but its elevation, so to speak – what the image keeps upright within it – that Kracauer's critique dissipates. In Kracauer's schema, a disintegrated ground is the consequence, not the source, of the dissolving image. This is why, in the end, he can dispense with it because he was only ever looking into the image, looking through it to the future. He was always only concerned with details, not the ground of the image and its after-effect. His care was only for how objects looked, how they looked in space, and looked to consciousness as the content of an image lacking any cognition. What remained after a photograph's disintegration – its detritus and degraded ground – was beyond consideration. Kracauer kept a proper place in consciousness for what was properly upright within the image as the last image of a person's history.

Wednesday, August 29, 2007

Grandmother is a ghost in the ghost of a photograph. Still, a simulacrum of life persists as the “image wanders ghost-like through the present.” (“Grandmother's costume is recognized

as a cast-off remnant that wants to continue to hold its ground. It dissolves into the sum of its details, like a corpse, yet stands tall as if full of life.”) A mere trace stands upright dissembling life. Yet, “what appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her. The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and were person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist.” Such is the perfidious Dorian-Gray-like quality of the photograph. Paradoxically, the sum of its details is a sum of its subtractions.

A cast-off remnant holds its ground by imitating life. Dissemblance keeps this remnant upright in the image; everything in the photograph is in its “proper place.” But what the photograph holds up, it dissembles because its support, foundation, or ground is rather a disassembly. The image “gathers fragments around a nothing.” The photograph is no more than a ghost and its garbage. When we dispel the ghost, all the rest is garbage.

Kracauer leaves photography in its debased and disintegrated state, as detritus or garbage (*Abfall*), remnants (*Überreste*), residuum (*Restbestand*), or sediment (*Bodensatz*). These are the so-called “elements” of photography that both compose it and





are left over in the image from its disintegration. Photographic detritus are the “elements” of the photograph – the details, particulars, or remains into which it dissolves. The English translator consistently uses “element” when Kracauer variously uses “*Elemente*” (element) “*Teil*” (part, portion, share), or “*Bestände*” (stock, supply, store). (The translator also translates *Einzelheiten* by both “details” and “particulars.”) Kracauer seems to reserve “*Elemente*” for the aspects of nature as they appear in a photograph and “*Teil*” or “*Einzelheiten*” for details of the image – of the disappeared individual or remaining apparel. Unlike the lack of transparency that “appears” when transparent aspects disappear in a photograph, elements of nature and details of photographs disintegrate and dissolve together. (None of this is visible in the present or visible to the present since time is disjointed in the image.) This lack of distinction between reference and referent – of what happens in nature and what happens in the photograph – is not an imprecision on the translator’s part alone, due to his sole employment of the term “element.” The two cannot be separated from their mutual process of configuration and disassembly, which happen “together” in both “places.”

Photography’s lack of transparency leaves a lack within the image, a lack surrounded by remainders. Lack is not an absent subject,

however. Invisible, it is the photograph's *abgrund*, which is not the opposite of a ground but the movement of its ungrounding. An unending process, this movement assembles and disassembles what occurs in the image. The photograph's discharge, dissolution, or disintegration leaves behind detritus, garbage, residuum, or sediment. *Abfall* (detritus or garbage) and *Zerfall* (ruin, decay, disintegration) are simultaneous and immediately continuous. There is no end to the process and no bottom to the photograph's *abgrund*. Disintegrated *unity* (*zerfallene Einheit*) is an appearance only.

P.S. The appearance of the world has taken on a photographic face to satisfy capital. Even the elements of nature are no longer natural; like goods in a warehouse, they are stock to be stowed away ("the images of the stock of nature [Naturbestands] disintegrated into its elements.") Photography not only documents this social fact of nature, its technique represents it: "photography merely stockpiles [verstaut] the elements." Photography is a commodity depicting other commodities in their alienated state. Under capitalism, even space and time are treated as commodities: "The barren self-presentation of spatial and temporal elements [Raum- und Zeitbestände] belongs to a social order which regulates itself according to economic laws of nature." Given that even space and time are disintegrated commodities with no foundation, the last stage of history, it seems, is only an unrealizable utopian space.





The disintegrative laws of capital continue anarchically to rule without the possibility of return to any stabilizing reassembly. The “right order” or “valid organization of things” is one other arbitrary configuration with no inherent value in itself.

Thursday, August 30, 2007

The last task of photography would be its own disappearance. With photography's assistance, capitalism would vanish. Conquer capitalism and photography was redundant. The fact of capitalism's persistence, and photography with it, does not argue against photography's disappearance in this scheme. The fate to which Kracauer condemned photography was accomplished before capitalism's actual demise. Kracauer dispensed with photography as a last stage presaging capitalism's disappearance. He spent photography's reserve by speculating through it on capitalism's destruction. He exhausted photography without archiving it, without recognizing it for the archive it already was. Even through his own analysis, he could not recognize photography for the dismantling *archive* it was, this “archive” that he himself instituted. Dismantling the archive of itself, photography worked silently to destroy any archive that afterwards housed it. Perhaps this

pre-archival fact had to be repressed (along with the knowledge that photography was an archive before the fact). One cannot step outside the historical process, not even at the last stage, without repressing the last effect: photography's destructiveness. This repression has consequences for consciousness, indeed, for a liberated consciousness that "assesses the demonic nature of the drives" through which we find the truth.

I said earlier, Fiona, that Derrida's deconstruction of the archive also makes sense of demonic photography's dismantling force. Photography cannot be so easily abandoned and left behind as an historical stage. It only seems to disappear in Kracauer's schema, but its dismantling disassembly continues to work elsewhere, and in one more archive than Kracauer perhaps wished to acknowledge as such. Demonic photography mimics the Freudian death, aggression, or destruction drive. This drive, Derrida writes in *Archive Fever*, "is at work, but since it always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own. It destroys in advance its own archive, as if that were in truth the very motivation of its most proper movement. It works *to destroy the archive: on the condition of effacing* but also *with a view to effacing* its own 'proper' traces – which consequently cannot properly be called 'proper.' It devours it even before producing it on the outside. The drive, from then on, seems not only to be anarchic,





anarchontic ... : the death drive is above all *anarchivic*, one could say, or *archiviolithic*. It will always have been archive-destroying, by silent vocation.”

Through its own disintegration and dissolution, the photograph destroys the archive of itself before it dismantles any and every external archive that houses it. Photography cannot reside in anything because it has no essence, no ideality, and no properties, nothing proper to it per se. Since its nature is to efface its own “proper” traces, it cannot be classified. Not purely destructive, photography preserves what it destroys as it preserves and destroys itself. It could be compared to what Derrida writes elsewhere in “Cartouches” that, “like all coffins, this one *simultaneously* keeps *and* destroys the keeping *and* the destruction of what it keeps *and* destroys.”

I don't want to use Derrida's critique as a corrective to Kracauer who, condemning photography, stepped outside history but not out of his adopted historical model, which has since outlived its effectiveness. Who wouldn't have been a Hegelian-Marxist – and a surrealist – in 1927? Derrida and Kracauer are discussing the same issues differently, only Kracauer seems to forget or repress photography's dismantling force, which he himself unleashed. But to continue with Derrida:

The point must be stressed, this archiviolithic force leaves nothing of its own behind. As the death drive is also, according to the most striking words of Freud himself, an aggression and a destruction (Destruktion) drive, it not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, as mnēmē or to anamnēsis, but also commands the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of that which can never be reduced to mnēmē or to anamnēsis, that is, the archive, consignation, the documentary or monumental apparatus as hypomnēma, mnemotechnical supplement or representative, auxiliary or memorandum. Because the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of said memory.

There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.

Let us never forget this Greek distinction between mnēmē or anamnēsis on the one hand, and hypomnēma on the other. The archive is hypomnesic. ... [I]f there is no archive without consignation in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from





the death drive. And thus from destruction. Consequence: right on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction, introducing, a priori, forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the monument. Into the “by heart” itself. The archive always works, and a priori, against itself.

Since I don't want to elaborate unnecessarily on what Derrida states succinctly and sufficiently above as confirmation of Kracauer's treatment of photography, I'll send you his book under separate cover. Needless to say, Derrida analysis here touches upon both photography's own radical self-effacement and Kracauer's need to eradicate photography.

Friday, August 31, 2007

To the photographer, the traits memory selects appear to be arbitrary fragments, while to memory, photography is a pile of garbage. Photographs only refer, without meaning or intention, to a disintegrated nature they merely depict. They cannot “encompass the meaning to which [memory images] refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments.” Likewise, “the artwork, too,

disintegrates over time; but its meaning arises out of its crumbled elements, whereas photography merely stockpiles the elements.” Both memory and artworks rescue fragments by restoring an interior meaning that is “linked to their truth content,” not to any likeness. The last image “alone preserves the unforgettable ... [as] that person’s actual *history*.”

In that “this history is like a *monogram* that condenses the name into a single graphic figure which is meaningful as an ornament,” the last image could only be an allegory, something divided not essentially singular. And, in that the monogram *collects* the subject’s history (converging crucial traits in the contours of this history), it must also be an archive. Kracauer fails to disclose this other archive that resides in consciousness, or exempts it from both the archive’s provisionality and the photograph’s degradation. Just as memory images “are organized according to a principle which is essentially different from the organizing principle of photography,” other rules, seemingly, operate in this secret crypt than apply to photographs and archives in general. To disclose this archive, or even to name it an archive, would be to expose consciousness to untruth, indeed, to allow it – Kracauer’s fear – to be “inhabited by a demonic ambiguity.”





This fear seems somewhat misplaced in an essay about photography and the archive, especially if we recognize that Kracauer's essay had a political aim: to change the order of things. The disintegrating photograph was to dismantle the archive and with it the social constructs of consciousness and society. Not that photography and the archive were opposed; their threats had the same effect on consciousness. They were the same in that the photograph – although Kracauer does not go so far as to admit it, even if his language states otherwise – already was an archive. (If Kracauer's aim was political, and if "the turn to photography is the *go-for-broke game* of history," photography was his first victim. There is a certain Leninist political vanguardism to Kracauer's argument. Witness this strange comment: "The tightly corseted dress in the photograph protrudes into our time like a mansion from earlier days that is destined for destruction because the city center has been moved to another part of town. Usually members of the lower class settle in such buildings." One might want to unravel what this means given that, after its political function, photography is disposed of by Kracauer.) Kracauer reserves his opposition – you could say it is his instituting opposition – for photography and the memory image. The truth of the last image must be protected against photography's corrupting influence.

The force of Kracauer's argument evidenced throughout his essay makes me wonder whether we are dealing here with a contradiction rather than an opposition. After all, Kracauer reacts with a destructive vehemence as devastating for photography as photography's supposed disaster is for us. Unleashed beneficially against the archive as an attack on capitalism, photography remained a threat to consciousness. Photography is a double threat that cannot be modulated: its only end is destruction. Better that it should disappear altogether than pose a danger to the purity of the last image; better that we degrade it so that we are freer to dispose of it. Kracauer protects the memory image from photography's depredations with the vehemence Plato reserved for the analogous antagonism of writing and truth, which Derrida analyzed long ago in "Plato's Pharmacy." Like writing, photography is inessential to truth. Still, according to Kracauer, it threatens the subject. Photography reproduces writing's strange, devastating powers: "Plato maintains *both* the exteriority of writing *and* its power of maleficent penetration, its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside." In reaction, "the purity of the inside can then only be restored if the *charges are brought home* against exteriority as a supplement, inessential yet harmful to the essence, a surplus that *ought* never to have come to be added to the untouched plenitude of the inside." Once again, Fiona, I am taking a shortcut through





Derrida. Since I don't want to rehearse his well-known argument, please, just substitute "photography" for "writing" or "*pharmakon*" in his text. Suffice it to say, Plato's pharmacy is an archive. As his opposition between truth and writing institutes philosophy as an opposition between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēsis*, so too, we must believe, these oppositions also found the archive, both the archive per se and the one Kracauer seeks to protect.

Like his contemporary Freud (as Derrida contends), Kracauer is constrained by the traditional metaphysics Plato instituted when it comes to privileging a particular psychic model that divides inside from out, respecting living memory (*mnēmē* as last image) and protecting it from a fallen, debased exteriority (the *hypomnesic* photograph). But the consequences of the metaphor of the model (in Freud's case, the "'mystic pad', this *exterior*, thus archival, model of the *psychic* recording and memorization apparatus," and in Kracauer's case, the archive of the photograph) demand "the necessity, inside the *psyche* itself, of a certain outside, of certain borders between insides and outsides."

Severing contingency divorced photography from exterior reference. Such a gesture took away the threat of the outside photography represented. It reduced photography, now bereft of signification, to incorporation within an archival system, as if

the archive could then contain these photographs with which Kracauer set out to destroy archives altogether! The two cannot so easily cancel each other. The archive divides inside and out in order to secure its interior. But if the photograph already is an archive, it repeats this division in any other archival residency that houses it with the advantage, or disadvantage, that it demolishes it at the same time.

Kracauer would have to acknowledge that what he denied admission to consciousness already constituted it: that the essential singularity of the memory image is already divided and its ideality contaminated. The “last image” is archived in consciousness as if it is a photograph. The concept of its essence, singularity, and finality is a falsifying arrest of a movement whose accompanying hope of a right order of the future, thus, can only be expressed as a still image. The last instant of a subject’s history, the last image of the monogram, is the same as the last image and instant of History. Yet, that still image is divided and contradictory. The instant of the last image is a product of consciousness analogous, you will have guessed, to film. Consciousness is divided the way film is divided in its motion, converging the contours of a series of still images. Just as film archives still photographs within its motion, so consciousness allegorizes the monogram as a suspension or





repression of photography's effects. Halting at a last image is impossible or an illusion. The last image is contradictorily divided between this arrest, which results in a still image, and its denial of the disintegration and dissolution of the still photograph, whose destructiveness it shares and which has no end.

Perhaps Kracauer could acknowledge this archive as such, but only by privileging the archive of consciousness as differing, in truth, from these two others: the archive of photography and the archive per se. But doesn't liberated consciousness share its privilege with the authority of the traditional archive? Both, if I might add on to Derrida's discussion of the archive, "inhabit this uncommon place, this place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*." Through consignation, both "coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration." The language of consignation or orderly collection that Kracauer consistently reserves for the essential finality of memory images in the end belies his commitment to the avant-garde unsettling of "every habitual relationship among the elements of nature." The concepts of order archived in his language are at odds with his political aims, but only if we consider that a "right order" following

the destruction of capitalism was contradictory to the violence Kracauer unleashed. Photography teaches us otherwise. Kracauer taught us so.

Only the degraded and homeless photograph remains without privilege. But only the photograph grants us access to the archive. Only the disassembling force of the photograph frees the disintegrated images of the dismantled archive from its internal correspondences through the reassembled fictions of artists and writers who tamper with its contents. Tampering with the archive, with its instituted order, memory, and history is a serious offence, a political offence sometimes. But who any longer controls the archive, or, at least, any institution of its authority? Archives are the politics of our time. Dividing, re-forming, and re-dividing the borders of the inside and outside, these fictions artists compose from its ruins are always political. Any tampering with archives – we could call this fiction – is political *and* artistic. Derrida agrees with Kracauer before him when he writes that any “destruction of the archive must inevitably be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations.” Is it any wonder that, political, archives are also the artistic issue of our day, the issue we all share? Each and every one of us. Each and every archive.





Sunday, September 2, 2007

Dear Fiona, as I've come full circle with this anniversary entry, it seems right to conclude here, as artificial as this gesture might seem. Before gathering these sheets in the annulus of an archiving by finally sending them to you, I would rather, in a new delaying tactic, set out again with another dispersive fiction, several. But that would be further procrastination. Hasn't my writing been fiction enough? I worry about my responsibility to you in this excuse of a conclusion. Shouldn't I finish with a thesis, finally? And one about your work? One or several for the one and several within your work? Drawn into the abyss of Kracauer's analysis might not have been a detour, after all, but only another way of discussion – an allegory, if you will. My interpretation is not only provisional but one permutation among many, one for each and every archival photograph and collection. A thesis? No, no thesis, not even a thesis of no thesis.

With love and respect,
Philip

P.S. "What assigns the singular to its date?" Had I time, I would have liked to pose Derrida's question to photography. After Kracauer, is this question possible? Would it jeopardize the singularity of our assignation, the accident by which I was called to your work through this correspondence?

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Fiona Tan installation Art Gallery of York University.



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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

The Changeling, 2005 – 06
Video installation

VOICE-OVER BY MARTHA BURNS

News from the Near Future, 2003
Video projection

Downside Up, 2002
Video installation

Rain, 2001
Video installation

Lift, 2000
Silkscreen
108 x 64 cm

*All works courtesy the artist and the
Frith Street Gallery, London*





The Changeling, installation, Art Gallery of York University.

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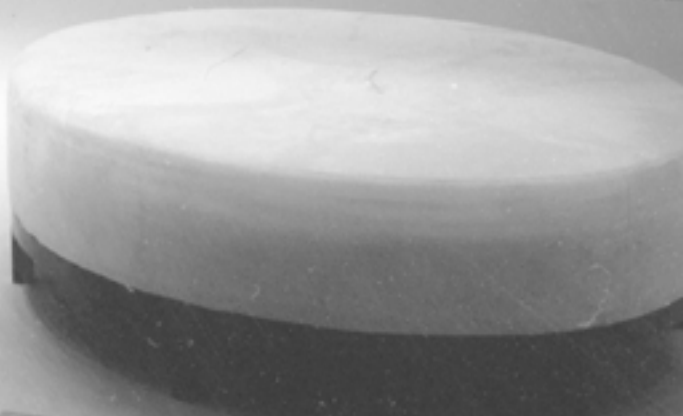
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Lift, 2000



Rain, installation photograph: Jean Brasille, Villa Arson, Nice



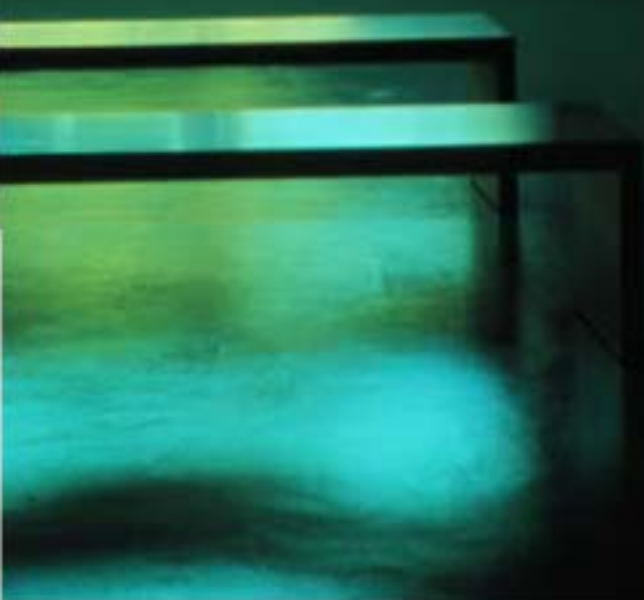


Downside Up, 2002





News from the Near Future, installation photographs: ????????





News from the Near Future installation photographs: Modern Art Oxford



















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