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Violent Embrace

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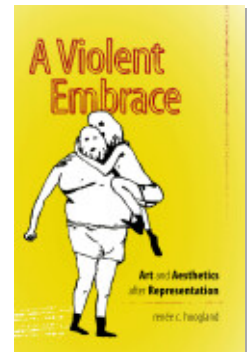
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The entire history of representation . . . is . . . traversed by
the fissure of absence, which, in effect, divides it into the absence
of the thing . . . and the *absense* [sic] *within* the thing.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*

FOUR THE GROUNDLESS REALITIES OF ART PHOTOGRAPHY

If there is one form of visual cultural production that at once marks the rise of commodity culture and that lends itself to co-optation in and by an increasingly market-driven art world so as to become highly lucrative Business Art, it would be the prototypical mode of mechanical image reproduction: photography. True, the work of photographers like Richard Barnes today unabashedly presents itself in art galleries and museums on a par with more traditional forms of fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although the place and function of photography has shifted dramatically since the invention of the new medium in the early nineteenth century and its popularization throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the still occasionally ambivalent position of so-called art photography—is it art or is it documentation?—finds its origins in an aspect inherent in its function as a visual medium as such. For photography has from its very beginnings incorporated a fundamental ambivalence, a tension between the technological, mechanical nature of the camera and its operations on one hand, and the tool's ability, as well as its users' desires, to create beautiful images on the other. The phrase "art photography" is an expression of this ambivalence, and an appropriately awkward one.

With the modifier "art" (in "art photography"), however, an additional ambivalence is brought, quite literally, into the picture, in that the mechanical

medium's mode of (re)production is bound to clash with conventional art historical assumptions about the origins and aesthetic value of artworks, that is to say, with respect to the former, the genius of the individual artist, or his or her personal experiences—indeed, to recall Mieke Bal's take on Louise Bourgeois, her or his personal memories—and with respect to the latter, the notions of authenticity and originality, the work's depth of meaning, its placement in the overall hierarchization of art into high and low forms, of art and craft, and, of course, its market value.

In line with such ambivalence, most contemporary definitions of the term “art photography” happily embrace what literary scholars designate the “intentional fallacy,” the error of trying to determine a work of art's success on the basis of the maker's intentions—which, we know since Wimsatt and Beardsley, are neither available nor somehow retrievable from the work itself.¹ Popular reference books list “art photography” as “photography that is done as a fine art—that is, done to express the artist's perceptions and emotions and to share them with others,”² or, while duly acknowledging that it is a “somewhat vague term,” similarly state that the “underlying idea” of the phrase is that the “producer of a given picture has aimed at something more than a mere realistic rendering of the subject, and has attempted to convey a personal impression.”³ Other sources stipulate the second, more mercantile aspect through which certain material objects in the postindustrial world tend to become recognized as “art” by insisting that art photography distinguishes itself from its more commercial and documentary uses (often referred to as photojournalism) in foregrounding its production and use as “high-quality photographic prints” that are “usually reproduced in limited editions to be sold to dealers, collectors or curators, rather than mass reproduced in advertising or magazines,” and that will “sometimes be exhibited in an art gallery” or museum.⁴

It will be clear that within the larger context of this book, my interest in art photography neither concerns the person or genius of the individual maker nor his or her intentions in producing work that may (or may not) qualify as art, nor the work's market value. As before, I do not consider objects of aesthetic creation as primarily the *result* of certain forms of making and doing—even if, in this case, mechanical ones—but as involuntary forces, as forms of making and doing themselves, as expressive materiality with its own immediacy and vitality. It is therefore the ambivalent operations of art photography in the second sense, that is, as large, meticulously produced prints that form part of or constitute exhibitions and which *thereby* come to function *as* art, that will be one of my guiding concerns in this chapter. Let me briefly explain why it is precisely this highly contingent aspect of art photography that is at once key to and that considerably complicates the ambivalence at the heart of the photographic image per se.

Though ostensibly straightforward, the term “exhibition” is in itself ambivalent. As a noun it designates both the act of exhibiting and a collection of things (goods or works of art, etc.) for public display. The former sense relates exhibition to demonstration, manifestation, expression, presentation, and presentment; the latter establishes its connection to exposition, explanation, exposure. Both senses are present in the word’s use with reference to art. Yet what the phrase “art exhibition” more importantly conveys is, first, the unbridgeable gap between that which is on display, that which presents, manifests, exposes itself—indeed, that which marks itself off as (the) Other—and the public, the viewing subject, the spectator who finds herself exposed to, if not beholden by, the exhibited goods confronting her. Second, and at the same time, the designation “art exhibition” inscribes the inevitable *rapport* or relation between the two, between Self and Other, between the object and the subject of the display, between artwork/image and recipient/viewer, which is constituted in the event that I call the aesthetic encounter. “Exhibition” thus highlights the separation between the “parties” involved in such encounters, as much as it designates the contracting force field between them, which marks them as actual occasions of experience, of feeling. This ambivalence is perhaps most poignantly expressed in the word’s disreputable cousins, “exhibitionist” or “exhibitionism.” Here, the act of exposure literally cannot but mark the distance between that which is shown, exposed, put upon display, on one hand, and the involuntary observer of the exhibited goods on the other, while yet equally powerfully inscribing this very act as a form of relation, a *rapport*, the establishment of a contact zone. These interconnected meanings or valences of the term “exhibition” point up my concern with art photography as not necessarily “something more,” yet as definitely something different from a “mere realistic rendering of the subject,” and they furthermore mark its function as an active, singular, and decidedly modern mode of artistic expression.

All this is by way of introducing my inquiry into the functioning of photography in the context of contemporary art theory, its operations in what I have earlier called the arts of the present and, by extension, and to slightly twist around the title of Jacques Rancière’s recent study, the future of the image.⁵ My approach to these broader questions runs through selected works of Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra (1959–), whose work offers a productive site to explore art photography from a neo-aesthetic perspective, that is to say, as art-work, as a “harnessing” of creative forces that escape both the terms of representation and those of identity or identification.

Dijkstra started out as a freelance photographer, working for journals like *Elle*, *Avenue*, and *Elegance*, and gained her international reputation as an “art photographer” with large-scale portrait series in color that have been widely exhibited since the beginning of the 1990s. Her photographic approach has been

categorized as strictly conceptual, and her portraits have often been associated with those of the German portrait and documentary photographer August Sander (1876–1964), as well as the work of American photographer and writer Diane Arbus (1923–1971), an association about which I will have more to say shortly. Since the mid-1990s, Dijkstra has, in addition to a large-format still camera, been using the camcorder, and has exhibited videos at, among others, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Folkwang Museum in Essen, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and most recently the Guggenheim Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Her work is quite rightly considered *art* photography in the various senses mentioned above, partly because her portraits move beyond documenting lives and recording moments, partly because they are primarily on display in galleries and museums and reproduced in expensive, limited-print catalogues and art books.⁶

Dijkstra's photographic portraits have fascinated me since I visited her large solo show of the same title ("Portraits") in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2005.⁷ I am furthermore drawn to her work because of the variegated, often conflicting critical evaluations it has received from both art historians and other critical theorists. Such confusing, if not confused, responses are not unique to Dijkstra. They equally characterize a large part of the critical engagement with associated contemporary art photographers since photography from the early 1980s began moving away from its journalistic functions and was self-consciously and deliberately to be made to hang in art galleries and museums. Both the philosophical and theoretical interest in art photography today and the controversial place it still occasionally occupies in the world of art criticism suggest something about the importance of the photographic image, as it does about the image more generally, and its changing role in our increasingly visual culture. And, as my opening comments suggest, it is the ambivalence or elusiveness of art photography itself that, more than any other medium of visual expression, testifies to the need to address the function and significance of the image not only outside its representational functions, but also beyond the parameters of Baudrillard's notion of the "simulacrum,"⁸ that is, as a perversion or a pretense of reality or as something that bears no relation to reality whatsoever, and beyond Guy Debord's critique of the "spectacle" as a self-fulfilling control mechanism for society, the "*negative expression* of living value" in a commodity culture in which the "perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as *eminently* perceptible."⁹ Within a conceptual framework taking its cue from, among others, Whitehead's theory of pure feeling and Deleuze's (Nietzschean) onto-aesthetics, that is to say, an aesthetics of existence as an ontology of pure sensation, the clear-cut distinction between image and reality that the terms "simulacrum" and "spectacle" in this context

suggest does not really make much sense. Furthermore, as the central terms in an overall negative critique of contemporary culture, in the sense discussed in the previous chapter, neither “simulacrum” nor “spectacle” allow us to inquire into the actual aesthetic operations of photographic images to address their power in their presentness, in their givenness, as organized activity, in everyday life.

Amidst the expanding range of theoretical and critical perspectives on the visual, on visual culture, and on what Susan Sontag has called the contemporary “image-world,”¹⁰ as well as in the context of current art critical debates, the photograph takes up a privileged position. This is not particularly surprising, because the potential function of the photographic image, not as a representation of something else, but as presentation of itself—in other words, the consideration of photography not as an “objective” medium, but rather as operation of art—has, as suggested, been disputed from its emergence. As early as 1859, Baudelaire, father of modern art criticism, wholeheartedly rejected the modern medium, which he foresaw would put an end to artistic creation as such. As he writes in his commentary “On Photography”:

If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally. It is time, then, for it to return to its true duty, which is to be the servant of the sciences and arts—but the very humble servant, like printing or shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature . . . Let it rescue from oblivion those tumbling ruins, those books, prints and manuscripts which time is devouring, precious things whose form is dissolving and which demand a place in the archives of our memory—it will be thanked and applauded. But if it be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends solely upon the addition of something of a man’s soul, then it will be so much the worse for us!¹¹

Although the shadow of painting would continue to haunt the modern new medium throughout the twentieth century, it is well—perhaps too well—known that Walter Benjamin in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) had already rejected the whole “nineteenth-century dispute as to the artistic value of painting versus photography,” which seemed to him both “devious and confused.” While he thus forthrightly dismissed photography’s struggle to find its place among other artistic media and, indeed, its claim to aesthetic credentials, Benjamin nonetheless attributed great importance to the debate as such, because in his view it pointed up the as-yet-unrecognized transformation of the “entire nature of art” that he believed to have been heralded by the “very invention of photography.”¹²

Rosalind Krauss points out that Benjamin had earlier, in a slightly less well-

known essay titled “Little History of Photography” (1931), presented the “decay of the aura as a tendency within [the medium’s] own history.” At that point, however, Benjamin was still primarily concerned with the “contemporary return to the authenticity of photography’s relation to the human subject.”¹³ Accordingly, Krauss suggests that a shift occurred in Benjamin’s thought on photography, from the earlier essay, in which he regarded it as an autonomous medium that could claim its own specificity and enabled the “common” people to acquire a clear sense of their social realities, to his view expressed in the later essay on mechanical reproduction, “in all its modern, technological guises,” as both “source and symptom of a full-scale demise of th[e] aura across all culture.” This, Benjamin foresaw, would profoundly affect art itself, art as “celebrator of the unique and the authentic,” in that it would “empty [art] out completely.” As Krauss asserts, this shift in his view on the role of photography and of mechanical reproduction generally confirms Benjamin’s critical role in turning photography into a theoretical object and thus ultimately, in the dismissal of the “very idea of the independent medium, including that of photography.”¹⁴

In a recent essay on the photographic image, Jacques Rancière duly returns to Benjamin’s shifting position on the medium, not in order to argue in favor of one or the other, but instead to maintain that Benjamin in fact turns the early and still ongoing debate over photography as an artistic medium “on its head.” Rather than separating the latter’s emphasis on photography’s genius in establishing the human subject in his or her social context from the medium’s function in producing its own obsolescence, Rancière takes these two positions together and places them in the historical context of the early years of the twentieth century. Assuming the rapid commodification of photography at the time to be inseparable from its role in reconfiguring the domain of art as a whole, Rancière maintains that Benjamin at once “made mechanical reproduction the principle of a new paradigm of art,” and that he declared mechanically produced images to be the “means toward a new sensible education.” Instead of merely initiating its own obsolescence, the photographic medium for Benjamin, in Rancière’s gloss, becomes a participant in the “construction of a sensible world where men of the age of the masses could affirm their existence as both possible subjects of art and experts in its use.”¹⁵ This dual emphasis, pace Krauss, is as clearly articulated in Benjamin’s earlier essay, “Little History of Photography,” as it is in the later, more famous one on mechanical reproduction.

In 1931, Benjamin, for instance, refers to Eugène Atget’s (1857–1927) Paris photographs as “the forerunners of Surrealist photography.”¹⁶ In 1935, in contrast, he asserts that, with Atget’s photos of Paris (see figure 4.1), “photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.”¹⁷ Such optimism about the political significance and social potential



FIG. 4.1 Eugène Atget, *Shop front of "Courone d'or," Quai Bourbon*, 1922. Gelatin silver print, 17.7 × 22.4 cm (6¹⁵/₁₆ × 8¹³/₁₆ in.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, David Hunter McAlpin Fund, 1962 (62.548). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. ARTstor Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art—Images for Academic Publishing

of the mechanical medium, which is conjoined throughout with an appreciation of photography's aesthetic dimension, is, however, similarly pronounced in Benjamin's 1931 discussion of the series of portraits by the progressive photographer August Sander (1876–1964), *People of the Twentieth Century* [*Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*] (see figure 4.2): Sander's work, Benjamin argues, underscores photography's revolutionary role, similar to that of psychoanalysis, in making what he defines as an "optical unconscious" available to consciousness,¹⁸ thus enlarging our knowledge of the social world.¹⁹

Benjamin's optimism, however modified, about the political potential of mechanically reproduced images, and his equal insistence on the aesthetic dimension of the new medium, testify to the inherent ambivalence of the photograph in its very emergence as a theoretical object—in its unique, at least in a predigital age, operation as not only a representation and a connection to the social world, but also as presentation, as creative production. That the former aspect of photography has generally taken precedence over the latter in twentieth-century discussions of the medium may be partly attributed to the fact that its potentially edifying, revolutionary potential can equally readily be used to conservative, if not reactionary purposes, another instantiation of the medium's immanent ambivalence and the widely divergent uses to which it can be put, even in its purportedly straightforward documentary functions. There is, perhaps, no bet-



FIG. 4.2 August Sander, *High School Student*, 1926. Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{4}$ in. (24.1 \times 13.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection, Purchase (1852.2001). ©Die Photographische Sammlung / SK Stiftung Kultur–August Sander Archiv, Cologne; ARS, New York, 2013 © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.



FIG. 4.3 (left) Visitors awaiting entry into the exhibition “The Family of Man,” organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, at Government Pavilion, Johannesburg, Union of South Africa, from August 30 to September 13, 1958; photographer unknown. Permission of the Estate of Edward Steichen. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

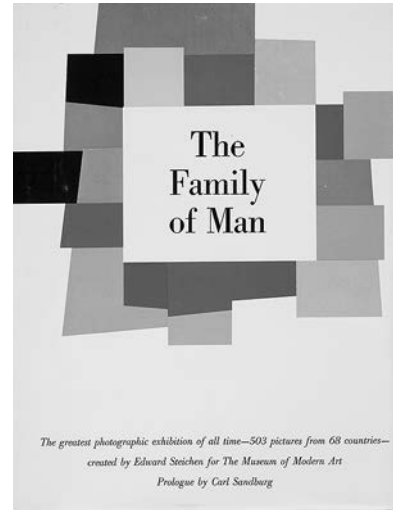


FIG. 4.4 (right) Cover of the exhibition catalogue *The Family of Man*, by Edward Steichen. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1955. Offset, printed in color, 11¼ × 8¾ in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Permission of the Estate of Edward Steichen. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

ter counterexample to the social, “critical” photography of such leading early twentieth-century photographers as Atget and Sander than that of the mid-century American photographer Edward Steichen.

Ostensibly following in the footsteps of his radical predecessors, and thus in an equally seemingly truly “Benjaminian” tradition, although from a radically different political position, Steichen achieved in 1955 what he considered to be the “culmination of his career” by curating the wildly successful exhibition *The Family of Man* (see figures 4.3 and 4.4). First shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the exhibition subsequently traveled to thirty-eight countries and was viewed by nine million people. Shortly after its opening, *The Family of Man* was turned into a book of the same title, whose fortieth anniversary reprint alone has sold more than four million copies.²⁰ What was and continues to be the appeal of this immensely successful collection of photographic images?

In the prologue to the first edition of the book, Steichen’s brother-in-law, Carl Sandburg, claims that the undertaking of “A Family of Man” constitutes a “camera testament, a drama of the grand canyon of humanity, an epic woven of fun, mystery and holiness.” Steichen’s aim, Sandburg continues, in collecting

503 photos by 273 photographers, both famous and unknown, in sixty-eight countries, was visually to prove the universality of human experience and photography's role in its documentation: "Though meanings vary, we are all alike in all countries and tribes in trying to read what sky, land and sea say to us. Alike and ever alike we are on all continents in the need of love, food, clothing, work, speech, worship, games, dancing, fun. From tropics to arctics humanity lives with these needs so alike, so inexorably alike."²¹ And the photographs are here to prove it. Seen in the context of the global divisions produced by World War II and, no less significantly, Cold War America, as well as in light of the growing racial and gender divisions that marked the U.S. domestic situation at the time, these grandiose claims may neither be surprising nor do much to obscure their author's, if not the entire project's, ideological stance. In their conservatory, if not ultraconservative thrust, Sandburg's comments were taken up by Roland Barthes, in one of his early writings on photography, a scathing critique that formed one of his monthly contributions to *Les lettres nouvelles*, a selection of which would later be published under the title *Mythologies* (1957).

Barthes effectively dissects the "ambiguous myth of the human 'community'" proffered by Sandburg and the "pietistic intention" underlying *The Family of Man* exhibition as a whole. He rejects the projection of what we today would probably call "our global community," which he considers to be based on the "very old mystification which always consists in placing Nature at the bottom of History," a classic humanist mystification that results in the erasure of the real differences that history and culture make on the lives of real men and women. Barthes, in not immediately addressing the function of the photograph in the creation and preservation of this myth, appears to accept its "common sense" definition, that is to say, the photographic image not as reality but as what he elsewhere (a few years later) will describe as the "perfect *analogon*" of reality, as a "message without a code."²² Interestingly, at least for my purposes here, Barthes does, in the earlier essay, explicitly point up the complicit function of the photographic medium when he goes on to state, "The failure of photography seems to me to be flagrant in this connection: to reproduce death or birth tells us, literally, nothing."²³

Assuming in 1957 a position that stands in direct opposition to that of Benjamin in 1931, Barthes unceremoniously rejects the photograph's potential as a medium to render the "human subject woven into the network of its social relations."²⁴ He nonetheless adds a new layer to the photograph's transformation into a theoretical object in a Benjaminian sense, as, in Krauss's terms, effecting both a change in the object, which, due to the "structure of reproduction," becomes more and more available to the masses, and in the subject, "for whom a new form of perception operates" as a simultaneous result of mechanical reproduction.²⁵ If it is indeed the photograph's political function qua reproduction that Barthes cashiers in this

essay in spite of his later, semiotic analysis of it as a “message without a code,” it is the earlier argument that he will pursue in his subsequent writing about the medium, which would culminate in his short book *Camera Lucida* (1980; hereafter *CL*),²⁶ published three years after his mother’s deeply mourned death and a few months before his own unexpected death.

Camera Lucida, together with Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* (1977), was for many years one of the most influential critical, if not quite theoretical books on photography—Rancière calls it the “absolute reference for thought on photography in the 1980s.”²⁷ Sontag’s *On Photography* has lost much of its critical significance, perhaps especially in the digital age, because of its almost absolute dismissal of the controlling, desensitizing, “anaesthetizing” effects the celebrated essayist and political activist attributes to the mechanical medium’s operations in its redefinition of reality, its “way of imprisoning reality,” as well as for “depersonalizing our relation to the world.”²⁸ The disconnection between the representational subject of an image on one hand, and a presumed, pre-existing referential reality on the other, literally made manifest and enabled by digital imaging/composition, adds to the already quite tenuous nature of the grounds upon which the supposition of a “world” outside our perception, beyond our aesthetic prehension of it, rests, and has rendered Sontag’s contribution to the discussion “on photography” decidedly dated.

Camera Lucida, in contrast, continues to provoke discussion even though not just Sontag’s but Barthes’ ideas as well have been severely criticized since the 1990s, especially, again, because of the increasing untenability of some of his claims in the light of digital technologies. Such criticisms do nothing to detract, however, from one of Barthes’ most significant insights into the unique operations of the still strictly mechanical (at the time of his writing) rather than digital medium. For it is in *Camera Lucida* that Barthes elaborates his famous distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum* of the photographic image, a conceptualization that not only inscribes the essential difference between the representational level of the photographic image and its existence as artifact, but also, perhaps even more importantly, one that shifts attention away from the photograph as the work of an individual artist/genius/photographer, or the subject (world, reality) photographed as an object of analysis, to its effect on the viewer or spectator, or, more precisely, on the individual beholder.

In a highly personal account of the profoundly emotional effect of a picture of his mother taken when she was a child—the in/famous “Winter Garden Photograph,” the only image he discusses at length but does not reproduce within his text—Barthes defines photography as asymbolic, as irreducible to the codes of language and culture, and as something that acts on the body as much as it engages the mind. In the distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum*, it is

the conscious mind that perceives and processes the former. The *studium*, Barthes submits, derives from culture, from a certain form of polite education that generates a kind of “average affect”; it is the “application to a thing, a taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment . . . without special acuity” (CL, 26). Since the *studium* is a wide field of general interest and of “inconsequential taste,” the recognition of its operation in a particular image means to “encounter the photographer’s intentions,” to understand them and to negotiate one’s own position in relation to them (CL, 27–28). If we derive any pleasure from the *studium*, it would seem to be the kind of pleasure that Kant defines as “interested,” the “barbaric” taste that involves charms and emotions, and not the experience of beauty, the exercise in selfless attention that is essential for “disinterested” aesthetic contemplation. Or, in the alternative terms of a more popular art criticism, the intentional fallacy in Barthes is transformed into the relatively uneventful “average affect”-response, the “demi-volition” mobilized by the photograph that, in its turn, is invested in by the perceiver’s “sovereign consciousness” (CL, 27, 26), in brief, the photograph in its representational function.

The *punctum*, in contrast, Barthes describes as an element that is neither sought out by the perceiver nor inserted into the photograph by the photographer. It is thus im- or pre-personal. This element “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” the viewer. The *punctum* additionally interferes with, disturbs the *studium*; it is a “prick” or “punctuation” that “bruises,” is “poignant,” and that affects the perceiver on the nonconscious level of her or his embodied being (CL, 26). This element—in Barthes, the wounding or piercing detail—would appear to produce the kind of agitation that Kant primarily associates with the “terrifying sublime,” but what I have, in previous chapters, identified with the prepersonal forces of affect, and, in a more limited, artistic context, described as the force of “uncontrollable beauty.” In terms of the founding ambivalence of photography, the *punctum* is what I have designated above as the photograph in its eventness, its presentness, which at once mobilizes and constitutes its affective force, the involuntary operation of some point or mark that—perhaps not unlike what Bakhtin designates the “aesthetic object,” which, as we shall see in a later chapter, may equally be connected to the Lacanian *objet petit a*²⁹—not having been inserted into the image by the photographer nor sought by the viewer, forges the viewing subject’s involuntary relationship with the image itself.

In this model, as in Benjamin’s several decades before, the photograph as medium disappears; irreducible to the transmission of knowledge or information, its operation, that is to say, the affective force mobilized by the *punctum*, constitutes, in the words of Rancière, the “transfer of an absolute singularity”—which he defines as the thing or person represented but which I would argue to be the

thing or subject presented, qua image—to “another absolute singularity.”³⁰ For Rancière this second singularity is the individual viewer, a suggestion I would like to qualify substantially by claiming that this cannot be the same, “unpunctured” viewer that entered into the aesthetic encounter, but instead the produced, the newly constituted self (re-)organized by the *punctum*’s affective force.

Essential for Barthes’ radical distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum* is, it will be clear, first, the condition that the photographer is unconscious of, or at least not in control of, the piercing detail that enters the photographic image: the *punctum* is a detail that was not intended by the photographer but that only obtains in the artifact contemplated by the viewer, in the actualization of the aesthetic event, as organized activity. A second aspect, however, that is essential for Barthes’ elaboration on the difference between the *punctum* and the *studium* is the intimate, private, one-on-one situation in which he assumes the viewer to observe, study, dwell in and with the photographic image, and for Barthes this especially, if not exclusively, pertains to photos of human beings. *Camera Lucida* has often been denounced for its many internal contradictions, if not for its blatant sentimentality. With the advent of the digitization of the image, and, no less importantly, with the invasion of photography into art museums and exhibitions, it is on account of these two central underlying premises that Barthes’ model of photography itself has become increasingly problematical, even if the two aspects of his distinction between the *punctum* and the *studium* do not come in for the same criticism or raise the same problems.

Some critics have claimed that the digitization of photography, and with it the photographer’s almost unlimited control over the image, her powers of manipulation over what we see in it, irrespective of the referent, diminishes, in the words of Geoffrey Batchen, “our collective faith in the photograph’s indexical relationship to the real.” While this discussion, as we have seen, started much earlier, with Benjamin, it is with this latest technological development that, Batchen maintains, people have generally come to fear that photography will cease to exist as an “autonomous medium.” In line with this type of lament, others have claimed that that which Batchen calls our current, “post-photography” moment, not only entails the disappearance of photography as an independent entity, but also renders Barthes’ notion of the *punctum* obsolete. His argument against such lamentations, which is that we may have reached a moment after, but not beyond, photography, in that the photographic “as a rich vocabulary of conventions and references lives on in an ever-expanding splendor” across a range of artistic practices, strikes me as persuasive.³¹ I simultaneously concur with James Elkins’ assertion, made in the context of a debate with Michael Fried on the nature of the medium, that photography’s digitization has nothing to do

with the operation of the *punctum*. Since the discovery of the piercing detail, the event of the *punctum*, occurs on the side of the viewer, it remains unaffected by the evolution in the medium's technology.³²

The second central aspect of Barthes' model of photography, however, his emphasis on the privacy of photographic contemplation and the idiosyncrasy of the perceiver's affective responses, seems less impervious to the changes of time or to technological developments. Having not so much to do with photographic and reproductive technologies per se, but rather with the ways the photographic functions, shows itself, and operates in the world, this aspect may seem to be fundamentally compromised in the postphotographic era, where the photographic obtains within a shifting configuration of social, artistic, and economic "conventions and references."

The battle between painting and photography over their respective aesthetic credentials, starting in the nineteenth century and resulting in a gradual turning of the tables with what Krauss identifies as the "triumphal convergence of art and photography that began in the late 1960s,"³³ appears to have come to a (provisional?) close at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Photography currently assumes a leading role in the world of art and design, increasingly blurring the boundaries between itself and other media, and, as already mentioned, appearing on the walls of a growing number of museums and art galleries from the 1980s onwards. By moving into the public sphere of the museum, where large-format photographs assume the status of monumental paintings and take up their place among video and other installations, contemporary art photography significantly complicates the notion of the *punctum*.³⁴

Equally important, however, is that the expanded purview of the photographic has not remained restricted to the domain of art photography or been confined to the walls of museums and art galleries. The digitization of the image has similarly profoundly affected the way news, fashion, and other forms of "documentary" photography, as well as what Elkins calls "vernacular" photography, meaning the private, personal, domestic, and domesticated pictures that Barthes, at least in *Camera Lucida*, is primarily concerned with, appear and function in the world. What is still sometimes called photojournalism is no longer a mode of image production restricted to venues such as newspapers, television, and other traditional media; "news" and "informative" images are increasingly likely to show up across a range of media, while fashion photography additionally often crosses over from one branch of the postphotographic into the other by making its way from magazines and store websites into art shows and galleries. Nor can "vernacular" photography be any longer considered strictly personal or domestic, because most of us have learned to share all these precious, "captured," and formerly largely private moments across a similarly wide range of semipublic

domains such as Flickr, Tumblr, Facebook, and so on, succinctly referred to as Web 2.0 social media.

Rather than the undermining of the significance of or the dislodging of the distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum* itself, it is, I suggest, because of the attenuation of the indexical relation between the photographic image and the real, and the move of photography away from its traditionally private and/or medium-specific sites into the complex, multimedia contexts of our increasingly visual and visualizing culture, that the digital revolution can be argued to have landed us in what Batchen's defines as a "post-photography" moment. This "moment" clearly invites a reconsideration of the function and effects not only of the photographic image, but of the image as such. Still, since my overall interest in this book lies with a more narrowly defined realm of visual art (and aesthetics) after representation and not with new media culture as a whole, I will in this and the following chapter limit my focus to different manifestations of the photographic image "post-photography." I turn to Rineke Dijkstra, whose work, as suggested earlier, offers a provocative venue for a reconsideration of art photography today, while allowing me further to unfold a nonrepresentational model of aesthetic inquiry.

Dijkstra's best-known and probably most widely exhibited and distributed work comprises various series of imposing portraits of otherwise indifferent individuals, featuring awkward-looking teenagers on various beaches in Europe and the United States (see figure 4.5), young mothers holding their recently born babies, toreadors after their first bullfights, male and female Israeli soldiers, a French young man at various stages in his career in the Foreign Legion, a female asylum seeker gradually blending into the culture of her adopted country.

All these portraits are carefully posed. The photographed subjects look straight into the camera. They appear fully aware of being seen, of being looked at by the photographer for the precise purpose of being captured in a picture/by the camera. They do not therefore offer the inadvertent traces of the real many early photography critics believed to be captured by the most popular form of "vernacular" photography, the snapshot.

Susan Sontag, for instance, dismisses the leveling and demeaning effects of everyday amateur photography, but at the same time insists that "photographic images are pieces of evidence in an ongoing biography or history . . . photography supplies not only a record of the past but a new way of dealing with the present." Cameras, unlike brush and paint, she goes on to argue, "establish an inferential relation to the present (reality is known by its traces), provide an instantly retroactive view of experience."³⁵ On this view, the snapshot is not something that may "bruise" or "wound" the perceiver in his or her private contemplation, as Barthes would like us to believe, or, to put it slightly differently, it is not a site or locus



FIG. 4.5 Rineke Dijkstra, *Odessa, Ukraine, August 4, 1993*. Chromogenic print, image: 117 × 94 cm; frame: 153 × 129 cm, edition of 6. Image: 35 × 28 cm; frame: 62 × 52 cm, edition of 15. © 2013 Rineke Dijkstra. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, NY

of aesthetic experience itself. In Sontag's discussion, "vernacular" photography rather becomes a quintessentially twentieth-century phenomenon of alienation, the proof, the manifestation, the inscription of everybody's everyday existence at one remove, after the event; it is a private existence that in the digital age would appear to have removed itself even more from our everyday experience, becoming virtually public by being shared through a variety of ubiquitously accessible social media. Functioning as works of art, Dijkstra's portraits, I argue, do not aspire to provide any such evidence, whether of private or public existence, nor do they reveal a trace of the real. As images presenting themselves to my view, they do not offer an inferential relation to an external reality, past or present, and they do not inscribe histories or biographies—not even in the series of individual subjects captured at different, consecutive moments of their lives (in social reality). Instead, they constitute carefully composed beings of sensation that invite me, urge me to "become with them" (*WP*, 177).

Of colossal proportions, meticulously finished, and largely static in their composition, these portraits do not operate as representations of something else, a record of the past, nor do they offer a "new way of dealing with the present." They do not pretend to be anything but pictorial monuments, but not monuments in the traditional sense as solid, permanent, material objects that commemorate and celebrate important events or exceptional people in the past. Surely they may be seen as carefully marked moments in time. Such moments, however, in their very singularity as visual materiality, as expressive matter, become insignificant, indifferent almost, interchangeable; the socio-historical dimensions of space and time are merely inscribed in the works' titles, which consist of date and place and sometimes include the subject's proper name, but never in the images themselves. The reality of these portraits, their presentness as images, does not refer to an underlying, pre-existing, or ulterior social reality, or past present. On the contrary, their reality is the reality of the pictorial surface, and it is the pictorial surface that functions as a monument in the sense suggested by Deleuze and Guattari, that which is preserved in the work of art, the percepts and affects that become materially expressive, pass into sensation, and address us as a "bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves" (*WP*, 167).

Put in different terms, Dijkstra's teenager in a green swimsuit on a Polish beach, for instance (figure 4.6), evokes other images, other "blocs of sensation," such as Botticelli's or Ingres' "Venus," or the latter's "Spring" (see figures 4.7 and 4.8), rather than documenting the life of a social subject, whether in the politically progressive tradition of August Sander or following the trajectory of the "pietistic," universalizing efforts of Edward Steichen.

Instead of presenting a humanistic typology of "the family of man," Dijkstra's series of beach portraits, for example, insert themselves into, revive, and—because



FIG. 4.6 Rineke Dijkstra, *Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26, 1992*. Chromogenic print, image: 117 × 94 cm; frame: 153 × 129 cm, edition of 6. Image: 35 × 28 cm; frame: 62 × 52 cm, edition of 15. © 2013 Rineke Dijkstra. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, NY

of their undeniable mechanical reproduction—also transform a long-standing pictorial tradition that seemed to have been overthrown by the new objectivism of earlier twentieth-century and especially documentary photography. As photographic images, they appear to partake of both traditions, complicating them, questioning, if not unraveling them, opening them up to new becomings, rather than enacting what Rancière describes as the “rediscovered union between two statuses of the image that the modernist tradition had separated: the image as representation of an individual and as operation of art.”³⁶

In their latter function, as what I have called the photographic image as an act of creation, in its eventness, its presentness, and thus as operation of art, Dijkstra’s portraits neither typify, typologize, nor document, despite the suggestion of documentation evoked by their titles—which we *read* rather than *see*. This does

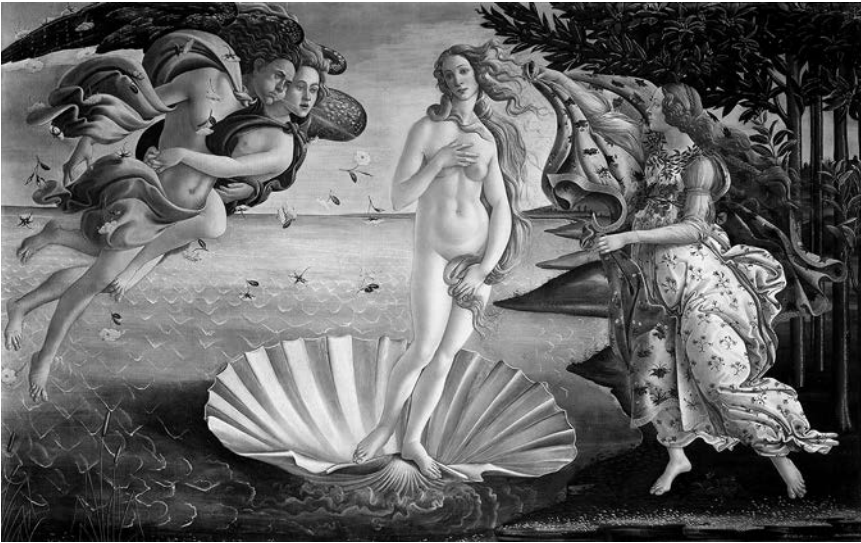


FIG. 4.7 (above) Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, post-restoration, ca. 1484. Tempera on canvas, 68 × 109 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (172 × 278.5 cm). Uffizi, Florence. SCALA / Art Resource, NY



FIG. 4.8 (left) Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *The Source*, 1856. Oil on canvas, 163 × 80 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

not mean, however, that they do not also present individuals, even if, as portraits, they do not function in the tradition of twentieth-century social photography, that is, by making an “optical unconscious” available to consciousness and thus enlarging our knowledge of the social world. The differences in attire or location, the idiosyncrasies of their posture, and corporeal self-presentation notwithstanding, the subjects in these photographs are present at the same time that they are ultimately dispossessed of their social identities. Functioning simultaneously as portraits and as pictorial surfaces, the photographic images themselves participate in the construction of, in Rancière’s words, a “sensible environment” that reaches “beyond its own specificity.”³⁷ The affective force they mobilize is thus both similar to and different from that of the *punctum*: similar in that their “piercing” or “bruising” effect, their poignancy, cannot be reduced to the intentions of the photographer nor to the will or desire of the perceiver, but is something that arises from the scene of the aesthetic encounter or event; different in that this scene is neither personal nor private but rather a momentary convergence of affective forces actualized in an event that is both impersonal and presubjective. Whereas the effect of the aesthetic encounter with Dijkstra’s portraits is perhaps adequately captured in Rancière’s earlier cited phrase—the “transfer of an absolute singularity” to “another absolute singularity”—this transfer is divested of any personal, subjective, or social significance and instead comprises “beings of sensations,” beings, in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s terms, “whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived” (*WP*, 163).

By foregrounding the ways in which these portraits present themselves to me first and foremost as pictorial surfaces, as monuments in a Deleuzian-Guattarian sense, and not as representations of something else, I deliberately distance myself from art historical appreciations of Dijkstra’s work that focus on the spectator’s possibilities for identification or that perceive in these works, as Canadian critic Thérèse St.-Gelais does, “potential collective—or even communitarian—affinities that can be detected in certain signs and characteristics.”³⁸ Such “readings” of these monumental works do not focus on their presence as images, or even as images per se, but instead on their potential meanings, which are erroneously assumed to be somehow retrievable, or “read off” of what St.-Gelais boldly claims to be the artist’s “desire.”

Not only does St.-Gelais fall headlong into the trap of the intentional fallacy, she actually goes a step further in depriving Dijkstra’s works of their uniqueness qua works of art by insisting on placing the artist in a photographic tradition that stretches from Sander to Arbus. In doing so, however, she is forced into a twisted argument, asserting that Dijkstra’s work expresses an attempt to show “what is universal in the common,” that is to say, that the photographer’s desire is a kind of reversal of Arbus’s equally putative intention to reveal the “uncommon

in the common³⁹—a curious move that additionally returns us to a “pietistic” humanist tradition à la Steichen, detected and effectively rejected by Roland Barthes as early as 1957.

In trying to avoid such reductive readings and move toward a nonrepresentational and what I would call, admittedly awkwardly, a post-Baudrillardian and post-Debordian approach of contemporary art photography, I take my cue not only from Deleuze and Guattari, but I also find a rich conceptual resource in Jean-Luc Nancy’s alternative philosophical (rather than art historical) writings, especially his collection of essays on images and visual art, *The Ground of the Image* (2005; hereafter *GI*).

The image, Nancy boldly proclaims, is “always sacred,” in the sense that it is separate, cut off, set aside, at a distance. Since the term “sacred” carries too many religious overtones, however, and religion is precisely the “observance of a rite that forms and maintains a bond,” he decides to call the sacredness of the image “*the distinct*.”⁴⁰ The distinct is always marked off by a trait or a line, “no longer of the order of touch,” yet “not exactly untouchable . . . but rather an impalpable.” The distinct may be at a distance, set apart, in two ways: it is “separated from contact or from identity,” and/or “it does not touch, and it is dissimilar.” This, then, according to Nancy, is the nature of the image:

It must be detached, placed outside and before one’s eyes (it is therefore inseparable from a hidden surface, from which it cannot, as it were, be peeled away: the dark side of the picture, its underside or backside, or even its weave or its subjectile), and it must be different from the thing. The image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially. (*GI*, 2)

Nancy goes on to point out that the distinct may well be set apart, impalpable, but that it is nonetheless also a force, an “energy, pressure, or intensity . . . not to say a violence.” What needs to be explained, then, is the way the image—always marking itself as image, distinguishing itself through a trait, puncture, or incision—both gives itself by such a trait and “how what it thus gives is first a force, an intensity, the very force of its distinction” (*GI*, 2).

Nancy’s exposition of the image in its ostensible simplicity—a thing that is not the thing—is in the first place helpful in attempting to approach Dijkstra’s portraits as operations of art, as organized aesthetic activity. It is nonetheless his emphasis on such distinctness as a force, a force that “has no use . . . and is not presented in a manifestation,” that allows me to reflect upon the ways these portraits affect me as what I tried to articulate in my introductory comments on the term “exhibition,” that is, as simultaneously that which is shown, on display, and that which shows itself as essentially Other, and that to which I am simultaneously, voluntarily or involuntarily, exposed, that which draws me into

their composition, into the “compound of percepts and affects” that make me, to recall Deleuze and Guattari, “become with them” (*WP*, 177). It is as instantiations or actualizations of exhibition/exposure, as distinct from their representational function, and thus emphatically not as sources of potential recognition and/or identification that I find Dijkstra’s portraits to mark themselves off most forcefully, or poignantly, as sites of intensity or a violence.

As the other of form, Nancy’s concept of force in relation to the image is the “intimate and its passion,” that which has withdrawn in and upon itself and is distinct from all representation. To re-evolve Barthes’ notion of the *punctum*, it is the puncture or trait that marks the image as sacred; the distinction of the distinct is its separation, and its tension or intensity is “that of a setting apart and keeping separate which at the same time is a crossing of this separation” (*GI*, 3). In other words, only by being set aside, by separating itself off from representation, by withdrawing into itself, and by becoming impalpable, the image sets up a force field into which I may enter, in which I may grasp the passion or violence of the image, without the establishment of continuity. There is no possibility for identification between me, the perceiving subject, in my exposure to the pictorial surface of the image, and its subject, that which is represented in the image. Rather, to cite (and slightly pervert) Rancière’s phrase again, there is “transfer of an absolute singularity” to “another absolute singularity,” which is not something that obtains between individual subjects or between subject and object, but which is the “work of sensation” (*WP*, 191). To put it differently, in my exposure to what shows itself in the image, qua image, I am subject to a certain “energy, pressure, or intensity . . . not to say a violence,” which is unequivocally not the violence of representation. Rather than forging or maintaining a bond, the force field of the image constitutes a contact-zone in which I may experience shock, confrontation, or embrace, but my crossing of that zone does not obviate the distinction of the image. In Nancy’s terms: “An intimacy is thus exposed to me, but for what it is, with its force that is dense and tight, not relaxed, reserved, not readily given” (*GI*, 3).

In the world of things, as much as in the realm of representation, continuity operates through making connections, the indistinct being bound together in a homogeneous space: recognition, identification, typification, all belong in this realm. In the heterogeneous realm of the distinct, however, the “unbound” or, indeed, the “unbinding” prevails. The force of the distinct, the way the image gives itself through the trait that sets it apart, ultimately “transports us to . . . its very unbinding” (*GI*, 3). Such unbinding, and the violent, if not violating force of the distinct, which is at the same time the force of the passion of the image, its intensity, I experience most powerfully in my encounter with a particular series of Dijkstra’s portraits titled “Julie,” “Tecla,” and “Saskia,” three young Dutch mothers

clutching their newly born babies to their visibly violated postnatal bodies.⁴¹ (As an aside, natural childbirth is the rule in the Netherlands.) The subjects in these pictures stare at me directly, frontally, unreservedly; their bodies' nakedness and the inexpressible intimacy between their own and their infants' bodies in this postpartum moment are exposed to me, but not readily given. The exclusivity of that corporeal bond, "placed outside and before my eyes," to which I find myself exposed in my encounter with the image—impalpable yet passionate—both inscribes the distance between us (Other/Self, object/subject) and forges the *rapport* between us, engages me in the violent embrace of the force that transports me to its "very unbinding," into the actual occasion of un/becoming that is constituted in the aesthetic event. The singularity of each of these images, in their inescapable presentness, in their distinctness, violently draws forth an intimacy, pulling and extracting something from me, precisely by withholding it, and thereby exert its deterritorializing force.

As Nancy points out, the word "portrait" is etymologically linked to the Latin verb *pro-trahere*, to draw forth. His elaboration of this aspect—he calls the portrait the "image of the image in general"—enables us to see how Dijkstra's photographs touch us while remaining impalpable; their force extracts an intimacy while remaining at a distance, setting up a relation of discontinuity. Their force is that of a calling-forth, an unbinding, a violence even, or, to use a Deleuzian term, a line of flight, a becoming-other. This is perhaps, paradoxically, most strikingly evident in the two series of photographs that follow their subjects through different stages of their lives: those of "Olivier," captured at different intervals through his career in the French Foreign Legion (see plates 9 through 11), and those of "Almerisa" (see plates 12 through 14), marking her various transmutations through a life as, respectively, a refugee, an asylum seeker, and an immigrant in the Netherlands.

Rather than tracing a line of continuous becoming, of natural, social, or professional development, these portraits, in their individual separateness, their distinctness, pull me into their force field by throwing their force in front of me, projecting a line, a tracing, that instantiates a discontinuity, the distinct jumping toward the indistinct without ever linking up with it. Looking at these portraits (admittedly, over and over again), I am exposed to their presentness, entangled in their intensity, but their force is the force of withholding; the photographic image cannot but mark its unbinding, or deterritorializing force. As such, all these portraits mock Steichen's mystification of a "family of man" as much as they implode any easy or reassuring notion of communion. Dense and tight, reserved, and not readily given, their intimacy precludes identificatory continuity, which can only occur on the plane of the indistinct. As instantiations of the transfer of an absolute singularity to another absolute singularity, my repeated encounters with them over time are, moreover, never the same from one viewing to the

next. Simulacra in the sense suggested by Deleuze, they are “systems” or “series” in which I find “no prior identity, no internal resemblance . . . what is displaced and disguised in the series cannot and must not be identified, but exists and acts as the differentiator of difference” (*DR*, 299–300). Presenting themselves in their spatiotemporal separateness, each moment of exposure, the actual occasion of my experience of them, reinscribes the ambivalence marking their operation as works of art, as acts of creation. Their intimacy violently confronts me with the unbridgeable gap between that which exposes itself, that which is (the) Other to my Self, and, at the same time, calls forth the contracting force of the encounter, takes me up in a ceaseless process of becoming-other, of discontinuous transformation, and produces me anew.

In its actualization, the aesthetic encounter with Dijkstra’s portraits defies any notion of artistic intention, as much as the works themselves resist signification and definition. It is in this sense that Dijkstra’s portraits, and that of several other contemporary photographers, mark themselves off as art and forfeit photography’s earlier documentary or informative functions. And it is this kind of photographic work that, by extension, offers itself up as a productive site to rethink the function and effects of the postphotographic image and critically reflect upon its future. That such reflection, pace Barthes, by no means needs to be restricted to images of one or more human beings, but rather encompasses the postphotographic “vocabulary” as such, will be a central supposition of my discussion on “ruin porn” in the next chapter.