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Abstract
This essay explores Ralph Eugene Meatyard’s enigmatic amateur photography from a philosophical perspective, aiming to expose the consistency of Meatyard’s investigation of faciality and ontological doubt throughout his career. By employing the Deleuzian notion of the diagram, used to specifically analyze Francis Bacon’s and other painting practices, and showing its applicability to Meatyard’s amateur photography, I aim to reveal the complexity of Meatyard’s art and explicate their so-called Symbolist suggestiveness as well as to show how the medium-specific boundary between painting and photography is fundamentally put into question.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard’s photographs are some of the most enigmatic artworks in the history of the medium due to their resistance to the photographic tendencies of the time, his decidedly amateurish stance and photographic exploration of ontological uncertainty through producing a sense of visual “out-of-jointness” and casualness at the same time. Desolate, run-down places and leisurely human figures wearing grotesque masks, curious reflective surfaces and strange shadows combine to evoke a sense of altered reality; a more abstract idea is injected into the image, which, paradoxically enough, remains mysterious and unexceptional all at once. Meatyard’s photographs invert the typical ground-figure relationship known in fine arts since the photographer tended to find the location first and then place his figures in the designated environment. According to Meatyard’s son Christopher, “He picked the environment first. Then he’d look at the particular light in that moment in that place, and start composing scenes using the camera” (qtd. in Zax). The journalist David Zax explains further that “With the shot composed, he would then populate it, telling his subjects where to place themselves, which way to face, whether to move or stand still.” Another means to escape the photographic figuration was Meatyard’s technique of no-focus photography where the image becomes a blurry image of potentiality, instead of fixed, designated, grasped objects and their relations. This compositional proce-
dure distances the photographic image at the very stage of its inception from the documentary ontology with which the photographic technology has been linked from its invention onwards.

For Walter Benjamin, the photograph famously freed art from its mystifying aura and brought to consciousness the optical unconscious – those gestures, movements, and sights that go unnoticed when forming part of an uninterrupted flow of images in movement (217–252). Yet, surprisingly, the indexical and objective nature of the photographic image was contested by the very first nineteenth-century art photographers such as Edward Steichen, whose early photography (before the First World War and his later entry into the fashion photography) has been linked to the Symbolist movement in painting and literature. In his book on Steichen, Dennis Longwell contests the then well-established linkage of the famous photographer to the Impressionist movement by finding a common feature between Steichen’s enigmatic photographs and Symbolist art, which, in Paul Verlaine’s words, exudes a “deliberate ambiguity; hermeticism; the feeling for the symbol as a catalyst (something which, while itself remaining unchanged, generates a reaction in the psyche); the notion that art exists alongside the real world rather than in the midst of it; and the preference for synthesis rather than analysis” (qtd. in Longwell 13). Longwell claims that placing Steichen’s photographs in this “Symbolist context […] will give to this early work the recognition it deserves for its contribution to the Symbolist photographic tradition that leads to our time” (12). Significantly for the present essay, this Symbolist photographic tradition includes such photographers as Duane Michals, Jerry Uelsmann, Edward Weston, Lucas Samaras, and Eugene Meatyard (Longwell 18–19); the latter’s ambiguity I shall attempt to explicate in this essay.

The necessity of such further investigation into Meatyard’s photography is facilitated by the lack of attention to the more philosophical aspects of this practice. Curiously, little has been written in academic circles about the photographer’s works, at least in more theoretical or philosophical terms since biographical overviews and brief contextual mentions do exist. Even a relatively recent study by Moa Goysdotter called Impure Vision – American Staged Photography of the 1970s, which in its subject matter begs for the inclusion of Meatyard, does not reference the photographer even once while his peers Michals, Samaras, Weston and Uelsmann receive a lot of attention and detailed study. Meatyard’s artworks have received a fair amount of praise and interest from fellow photographers, in art circles and art magazines but the academic viewfinder cannot seem to detect the importance the material has yet to offer – unjustifiably so, since these photographic artworks are deceptively simplistic and contain serious theoretical implications and philosophical
acumen that can be gleaned from deeper analysis. The scholarly sources that do discuss his works tend to focus on Meatyard’s intertextual references to such literary works as Ambrose Bierce’s writing, specifically his short stories, which is understandable as such references give an easy interpretative framework to those wishing to explain that enigmatic quality of the photographer’s works.

For instance, a doctoral dissertation by Therese Mulligan focuses on the relationship between Meatyard’s photography and poetry, and M. Kathryn Shields claims in her essay on Meatyard’s literary intertexts that by placing a mask on individuals, who were usually from his circle of family and friends and thus very specific individuals, and referencing literature in his titles, his photographs “often take on a literary, even narrative, quality. The anecdotes behind the photographs are often as intriguing as the images themselves, because the figures become characters in a visual myth and the masks suspend their representations between fact and fiction. Meatyard’s masked characters become universal specimens, representing no one yet relevant to everyone because their identity is not revealed visually” (87). These masks are therefore a perfect means to make the factual image fictional, to rip the specificity away from the individuals’ very faces, making them into universal figures, generic in their nature as literary characters, as specimen, as ideal rather than specific. Such an explication resonates well with Meatyard’s own reasoning that “the idea of a person, a photograph, say, of a young girl with a title ‘Rose Taylor’ or the title ‘Rose’ or no title at all becomes an entirely different thing[.] ‘Rose Taylor’ is a specific person, whether you know her or not. ‘Rose’ is more generalized and could be one of many Roses—many people. No title, it could be anybody. [The mask therefore] serves as non-personalizing a person” (qtd. in Zax).

Yet, I would like to suggest that this erasure of specificity and personhood achieved through deformation of the face through masking, no-focus photography and other techniques later discussed in this article has much deeper philosophical implications. A face is not just a body part allowing one to easily recognize an individual; it is a body part negating the body – the abstract negating the concrete, the signifier negating the signified. Thus, the function of a face can be abstracted – seen to be an abstract machine – and identified as operative in other instances besides encountering human faces. The French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari described this function of a face as faciality: “The signifier is always facialized. Faciality reigns materially over that whole constellation of significances and interpretations (psychologists have written extensively on the baby’s relations to the mother’s face, and sociologists on the role of the face in mass media and advertising). The despot-god
has never hidden his face, far from it: he makes himself one, or even several. The mask does not hide the face, it is the face” (115). It is important that the thinkers connect this quality of faciality to photography as the “photo, faciality, redundancy, significance, and interpretation are at work everywhere. The dreary world of the signifier” (116). But when faciality’s machine does not function as it is supposed to, that is “when the face is effaced, when the faciality traits disappear, we can be sure that we have entered another regime, other zones infinitely muter and more imperceptible where subterranean becomings-animal occur, becomings-molecular, nocturnal deterritorializations overspilling the limits of the signifying system. The despot or god brandishes the solar face that is his entire body, as the body of the signifier” (115). Erasing the face reinstates that which is erased by the face, be it the body, the Baconian “brutality of fact” or the affect. In short, this is what Meatyard achieves as well.

In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze explores the idiosyncratic art of Francis Bacon, who is one of the most accomplished erasers of faciality for in Bacon “the Figure, being a body, is not the face, and does not even have a face. It does have a head, because the head is an integral part of the body. […] Bacon thus pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: to dismantle the face, to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face” (20–21). Bacon achieves this by using his famous techniques of local scrubbing and what Deleuze calls “asignifying traits” (21) where “Sometimes the human head is replaced by an animal; but it is not the animal as a form, but rather the animal as a trait – for example, the quivering trait of a bird spiraling over the scrubbed area […] [or] the man’s shadow itself assumes an autonomous and indeterminate animal existence” (22). Either by painting the figure and then scrubbing and distorting localized areas of the painting or already painting a distortion performed mentally before even touching the canvas, especially the face, the artist hinders the abstract machine of faciality from functioning, from making the figure representative of something or someone, from becoming a signifier – from becoming photographic. One can take the famous example of Bacon’s rendering of Diego Velázquez’s *Portrait of Innocent X* (1650). Bacon’s repainted figure of the pope is in the process of being erased and deformed by the scrubbed lines, erasing the face for the sake of the black void of the scream, where in Bacon’s own words he is able “to paint the scream more than the horror” (qtd. in Deleuze 60). In an interview with David Sylvester, Bacon admitted that he painted the pope from a photograph of the Velázquez, never even having seen the original. This way the effacement is rendered even more powerful since the original’s aauratic power is effaced through the means of mechanical reproduction and then further disfigured in the process of Bacon’s asignification.
Deleuze names such a process (abstract machine) of erasure of faciality a ‘diagram,’ a notion that he borrows from Michel Foucault. For Deleuze, Foucault’s diagram is that abstract layer ordering various assemblages of objects, bodies, matter, which is non-reducible to the sum of its constituents and can be identified on an abstract, virtual level in heterogeneous assemblages. For instance, the panoptical diagrammatic function of the prison system can be found in educational and military institutions as well since “Between different systems there is ‘unformed and unorganized matter and unformalized, unfinalized functions’. This abstract level of intermingling functions is what constitutes the dimension called the diagram” (Zdebik 4). The concept of the diagram becomes immensely important when describing Bacon’s art in The Logic of Sensation and, despite its origin in Foucault’s writing, in Deleuzian thought has tended to be associated mostly with the field of painting and fine art. When discussing his art with Sylvester, Bacon called his scrubbed areas ‘graphs,’ which was translated into French as ‘diagrams’ and Deleuze used this coincidence to establish a resonance between this philosophical notion and Bacon’s artistic procedure (Zdebik 18). Deleuze states that this “is what Bacon calls a ‘graph’ or a diagram: it is as if a Sahara, a zone of the Sahara, were suddenly inserted into the head; it is as if a piece of rhinoceros skin, viewed under a microscope, were stretched over it; it is as if the two halves of the head were split open by an ocean; it is as if the unit of measure were changed, and micrometric, or even cosmic, units were substituted for the figurative unit. […] It is as if, in the midst of the figurative and probabilistic givens, a catastrophe overcame the canvas” (Deleuze 100).

Deleuze calls the Baconian diagram a diagram of sensation because its function is to make sensible something that is not a matter of pure intellect, representation, figuration, signification – it expresses the power of forces: “The diagram is thus the operative set of asignifying and non-representative lines and zones, linestrokes and color-patches. And the operation of the diagram, its function, says Bacon, is to be ‘suggestive.’ […] [I]t is precisely through the action of these marks that the visual whole will cease to be an optical organization; it will give the eye another power, as well as an object that will no longer be figurative” (Deleuze 101–102). One can already see the resemblance of such a diagrammatic function of art to the Symbolist essence as previously described by Longwell through Verlaine in their common power of suggestion, the beholder’s ability to be affected by it without fully grasping the content of the affect. However, the diagram is not bound to solely Baconian artistic techniques and Deleuze identifies the presence of various other types of diagrams in such artists as Vincent van Gogh where the “diagram, for example, is the set
of straight and curved hatch marks that raise and lower the ground, twist the trees, make the sky palpitate, and which assume a particular intensity from 1888 onward” (Deleuze 102).

In his exploration of multiple diagrams, the philosopher implies that the tracing of the diagram can serve as an analytical tool allowing not only to differentiate such diagrams but also to date them, to distinguish when the artist confronts it most intensely or when it transforms or disappears. The demonstration of this conceptual tool is perhaps most productive when it allows Deleuze to clearly distinguish the two famous modern art movements, abstract painting from abstract expressionism, showing that their abstract ways of functioning are in fact diametrically opposed. The forms of abstract painting (such as Piet Mondrian’s or Wassily Kandinsky’s paintings) are digital and “it follows that what abstract painting elaborates is less a diagram than a symbolic code, on the basis of great formal oppositions. It replaced the diagram with a code” (Deleuze 104). Conversely, in abstract expressionism “the abyss or chaos is deployed to the maximum. Somewhat like a map that is as large as the country, the diagram merges with the totality of the painting; the entire painting is diagrammatic” (Deleuze 104). Jackson Pollock’s canvases are filled with chaotic sensations that almost haptically and physically assault the beholder, yet they are pure signifying desserts and chaos, entirely escaping figuration and signification, but expressing an affect nonetheless.

I want to propose that the Deleuzian notion of the diagram can be of great use when describing and analyzing Meatyard’s photography and creative process as well. However, the most problematic issue that needs to be addressed before proceeding to the analysis is the fact that Deleuze’s concept is so deeply rooted in the medium of painting and, as demonstrated above, the photograph serves as the very example of signification and facialization. The two exceptions are Gérard Fromanger’s “photogenic painting” (Deleuze and Foucault) and Duane Michals’s narrative photography, both discussed in detail by Foucault. Fromanger “used projected photographic slides of ‘current events,’ most of which he had photographed himself, as the bases for his compositions. These photographs were of a documentary kind and often not concerned with major news stories or events seen as news. He photographed life on the street or street scenes in which his own figure could later be implied in the painting with the trace of a silhouette or shadow in a contrasting color. For Fromanger, ‘seeing it better’ meant photographing the motif and expanding it into a slide projection with his own presence at the scene part of the painting process” (Soussloff 98). As such, these paintings, based on photographic ephemera as they are, do not function as an index, as Catherine M. Soussloff notes, not in the famous sense defined by Ros-
salind Krauss where the photographic image is “that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples” (qtd. in Soussloff 109). Gary Shapiro summarizes the different takes of Foucault on the two artists in the following manner: “Whereas Fromanger took painting into the street through photography, Michals captures and provokes fragile moments of ‘thought-emotion’” (333). For Foucault, in agreement with Michals, the indexical nature of photography is precisely the aspect that allows its detour into the realm of experimentation and aesthetics to become so much more powerful and effective as “photography has an advantage in provoking thoughts about the unseen, spectral, and dreamlike because it is initially taken to be a more realistic medium than painting” (Shapiro 333).

Both Michals and Meatyard, along with such other notable photographers such as Samaras and Uelsmann, are representatives of interpretative photography and “phototransformation” for art critic Terry Barrett; interpretative photographs “are self-expressive and reveal a lot about the worldviews of the photographers who make them. They are exploratory and not necessarily logical, and sometimes they overtly defy logic. They are usually dramatic rather than subtle and are generally concerned with formal excellence and good print quality” (Barrett 70). Such photographs reveal something about the world not in the same sense that indexical capturing, snapshotting does but in the manner that fiction always says something true about the world while remaining fictional: “Photography is, of course, the art of duplication par excellence. However, the function of duplicating reality does not satisfy Duane Michals, who insists that the important thing is not the appearance of things, but rather their philosophic nature” (Camus 4). Thus, precisely due to their characteristic phototransformation, such photographs are able to express and allude to philosophical ideas instead of simply capturing the given ephemeral dance of the light particles. Nevertheless, it is easier to relate Michals’s photography to the Deleuzian diagram since the manual act of erasure and disfiguration of faciality is more evident in his creative process.

Michals often juxtaposes the image and the text by scribbling something on the photographs, using a series of photographs and text to tell a story, incorporating ghostly double exposures as well as including careful compositions that trick the eye and force one to doubt what one actually sees. Most famously perhaps, Michals created a series of photographs to poetically illustrate a facet of quantum physics in his Dr Heisenberg’s Magic Mirror of Uncertainty (1998). These techniques do draw a parallel to Bacon’s local scrubbing rather neatly. However, Meatyard’s photographs are often not treated, they are carefully composed, but the transformation of reality happens in front of the camera, before the shot.
is taken, not afterwards. What is captured by the camera remains unchanged by the photographer. Yet the diagram does pass through most of Meatyard’s photographs because the erasure of faciality and figuration is not a precise set of painterly techniques. Rather, according to Deleuze, “The diagram is a possibility of fact – it is not the fact itself. Not all the figurative givens have to disappear; and above all, a new figuration, that of the Figure, should emerge from the diagram and make the sensation clear and precise” (110).

Meatyard’s diagram, which I am about to explore, functions slightly differently from what can be observed in Michals or Bacon. The most significant aspect of his photographs is their careful composition combined with the fact that they retain an impression of ephemerality, of an accidental exposure of something about reality that usually remains hidden from sight. Deleuze notes that the “essential point about the diagram is that it is made in order for something to emerge from it, and if nothing emerges from it, it fails” (159). The manual aspect of the diagram (manual scrubbings, drip painting, non-figurative lines) results in a visual whole and permeates it, creating something qualitatively new. The first clearly observable and datable step in the manifestation of Meatyard’s diagram happened “in 1958 or ’59, [when] Ralph Eugene Meatyard walked into a Woolworths store in Lexington, Kentucky. An optician by trade, Meatyard was also a photographer—a ‘dedicated amateur,’ he called himself—and he kept an eye out for props. He might drop by an antiques store to buy eerie dolls or emerge from a hobby shop with a jar of snakes or mice cured in formalin” (Zax). But that day in Woolworths he chanced upon “a set of masks whose features suggested a marriage of Picasso and a jack-o’-lantern. […] Over the next 13 years, Meatyard persuaded a procession of family and friends to don one of the Woolworths masks and pose in front of his camera” (Zax). When injected into the photographic image, these masks became much more than a simple curious prop or compositional detail; they entail a transformative operation – an abstract machine, a diagram – deforming and reforming the internal logic of the entire Meatyardian image – even the photographs that do not contain these masks are affected by the same abstract operation.

One may start with an untitled photograph (Figure 1) taken in 1970–1972, depicting two figures, one female figure wearing one of these grotesque masks and another figure of an elderly male, sitting on the two sides, front and back, of an old, beaten-down car – an artefact more at home in a car graveyard than on an empty street. The postures of the figures are leisurely and reminiscent of something one would find in an old family photo album. The locus that immediately draws attention and transforms this image is the grotesque mask of an old, deformed hag
covering the face of the woman. But the process of facial erasure does not stop here. One is then bound to observe the slightly fluid features of the old man’s face which due to the combination of focus, light and texture of an aging, soggy skin appear to be melting off, the exceedingly large glasses are also awry, creating an appearance of a mask – and, in fact, he is wearing a mask, only less obvious and easier to mistake for a face. The gentleman’s countenance starts to escape indexicality and figuration only in relation to the more obvious mask. Yet the effect of the diagram does not stop here either. Then, one sees the object in the middle of the two figures – the top of the derelict car, which is covered by plastic and appears to be too masked, not quite its usual self either. Something about this photograph is undeniably off since the three main figures in the foreground are ontologically transforming in front of one’s very eyes – from an index into a sensation of an intuitive idea.

Figure 1: Ralph Eugene Meatyard, “Untitled,” 1970–1972. © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
One of the most well-known works by Meatyard is his lifelong project of *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* series, of which the aforementioned photograph forms a part, where the same principle is explored in many iterations. The series consists of different photographs showing Meatyard’s wife wearing the mask of an old hag and another person (a friend or a relative) wearing that far less obvious mask of an old man, posing in suburban settings. Meatyard named all these individuals Lucybelle Crater – a reference to a short story by Flannery O’Connor – thus depriving them of their individual personhoods or even a fictional specific identity – if every person is named Lucybelle Crater then the name itself loses its power to point to an individual (real or fictional), becoming generic, deprived of the power of a proper name, its signification, facialization. The compositions often appear to be rather casual and typical of family photography. Yet what happens when the diagram of defacialization enters the image through the masks is that the entire composition starts to shift and put into question the very subject being depicted. For instance, the photograph, “Lucybelle Crater and Eastern Man’s Friend Lucybelle Crater” (1970–72) in Figure 2, shows the figure of what appears to be a middle-aged man wearing the mask of an old man, leisurely standing on some steps, one arm on his waist, and leaning towards a white brick wall of a house, near the entrance. Behind him, one sees a woman in the mask of a hag. The two figures are grouped together on the right side of the composition; the left-side is slightly asymmetrically occupied by a tree.

Such a haphazard composition is typical of amateur photography, where the “composition may be a bit off, crooked or awkwardly framed. People may squint into the camera or their faces appear contorted by the harsh light of an unexpected flash. Objects close to the camera can look amorphous and out-of-focus, while other objects may appear too far away to clearly identify” (Becker 30). One can even say that Meatyard exaggerates such inherent amateur aesthetics. The man in the photograph is looking straight at the viewer, but his gaze is empty, a black void behind hollow eyes. The woman seems to be gazing off into the distance, her face turned to the right. These masks further make their postures seem unnatural, the significance of such a positioning of the figures seems hard to fathom; the shadows from the tree branches extend through the wall and cover the human figures, creating a mysterious fabric of light and shade. In the man’s shirt pocket, one sees curiously placed glasses – only one leg is peeking outside of the pocket, creating a serpentine shape – it perceptually lingers between the animate and the inanimate. Even more importantly, starting on the male figure’s torso and extending towards his feet, one observes a huge dark shadowy figure superimposed on the man’s body – presumably Meatyard himself, although the posture makes
it difficult to even discern the shadow figure’s gender. The photograph exudes an accidental and intentional quality at the same time, appearing to go beyond the immediate reality it depicts and expressing something more abstract, which is nevertheless hard to pinpoint.

Family photography has been explored in such studies as Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect (1981) by Julia Hirsch, Jo Spence and Particia Holland’s anthology Family Snaps: The Meaning of Domestic Photography (1991), Annette Kuhn’s Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination (1995), and Marianne Hirsch’s Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory (1997) as well as her anthology The Familial Gaze (1999). According to Hirsch’s seminal text in family photography studies, the “family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of those rituals. […] As photography im-

Figure 2: Ralph Eugene Meatyard, “Lucybelle Crater and Eastern man’s friend Lucybelle Crater,” 1970–1972. © The Estate of Ralph Eugene Meatyard, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

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mobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates family myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history” (*Family Frames* 7). Such photographic ephemera have thus a pronounced institutionalizing dimension and in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms are molar machines (Deleuze and Guattari 4), fixing the identity of the subjects into a system, preserved for posterity and self-perpetuating as a form and content. Therefore, the choice to deform and transform the family photograph’s imagery has significant aesthetic and philosophical implications as one witnesses the erasure of faciality in the context of one of the most facialized, molar genres of photography.

Meatyard captures the precise moment of transformation, when stable and fixed ontological essences – family structure – expressed through photographic means, equivalent to figuration in painting, are deformed by the virtual forces of defacialization, instability – the figures and the landscape are what they are but also are not what they are – the molarizing and molecularizing forces are captured in the image at the same time. What this results in, the affect and the unease it evokes, can be intellectualized and defined as ontological doubt. To take another illustrative example “Lucybelle Crater and gnomist friend from W 6th St’s friend from Vassar College, Lucybelle Crater” (1970 – 1972) in Figure 3 positions the two masked figures in front of a fence. The figure on the left is standing straight, her posture is rigid, hands hang in a doll-like manner. She stands on a mound and this makes it seem as if she might be slightly levitating above the ground; behind her head one sees a spike that visually turns her into a doll or a scarecrow hanging on a wooden pole. The other figure wearing the less grotesque mask is also less artificial and more relaxed in her body posture, yet even in this case she is positioned in a manner that makes it appear as if a tree is growing out of her right shoulder. The darker tones of her face (the old-man mask) blend into the crown of the tree and her face becomes almost identical in its texture to the trunk of the tree. The ontological status of these objects and figures transforms, undoing the stability of implied immobilized familial life, a process initiated by the masks and enveloping the image as a whole.

This subtle indistinguishability and constant ontological vacillation between the human and the doll is also observable in other photographs of the series such as “Lucybelle Crater and her P.O. brother Lucybelle Crater” (1970–1972) where the masked figures are seated in front of a car on the grass, their torsos slightly tilted to the right, which gains an unnatural, uneasy sense of forced positioning (something one would observe in a dollhouse setting). If one would remove the masks, the posture itself would not have such an affective force and would not become as significant beyond simply being an accident, an immobilized snapshot of
the constant flow of time. While staying with this photograph, it is also worthwhile to briefly return to the notion of the gaze. The figure wearing the old-man mask always retains that voided gaze, while the hag’s face has exceedingly large, exaggerated rubbery doll-like eyes. Considering the very genre of family photography (equivalent to portraiture in painting), the gaze itself has additional meaning. Hirsch has noted the importance of the gaze not only in individual family photographs but also as facilitated by the entire structure of the family album where “the family is in itself traversed and constituted by a series of ‘familial’ looks that place different individuals into familial relation within a field of vision. When I visually engage with others familially, when I look through my family’s albums, I enter a network of looks that dictate affiliative feelings, positive or negative feelings of recognition that can span miles and generations[.] […] It is
the context of the album that creates the relationship, not necessarily any preexistent sign. And when I look at her [Hirsch’s great grandmother’s] picture, I feel as though she also recognizes me” (Family Frames 53). The masked gazes then invert this relationship, making any kind of familial recognition impossible. For Deleuze, Bacon’s self-portrait contained a similarly empty gaze: “Bacon’s own head is a piece of flesh haunted by a very beautiful gaze emanating from eyes without sockets. And he pays tribute to Rembrandt for having known how to paint a final self-portrait as one such block of flesh without eye sockets” (Deleuze 25). However, whereas Bacon’s self-portrait turns the face without eye sockets into flesh (a body without a face), Meatyard’s masks turn the familial gaze into the gaze of matter without spirit, a hollow substance – both are different instances of defacialization.

The importance of the doll in relation to the deforming force of the mask and the diagram of defacialization is observable in many other photographs as well. For instance, “Untitled” (1962) in Figure 4 shows a group of people lined up in front of some trees: two boys, one slightly older than the other, and a female figure holding a white mask of a middle-aged man in front of her face. In front of this masked figure there stands a small girl gazing at the naked doll – one of those dolls resembling a toddler – held in the hands of the younger boy in the middle. The boy’s legs are wide apart, a pose mirrored by the outstretched hands of the doll he is holding. The other boy is also holding an identical doll by its face in one of his hands. This composition, as is typical of Meatyard, is casual, accidental, and yet meticulously constructed, signaling an emergence of a structure from contingency. Compositionally, the heads of the older boy and the masked figure are on the two sides of the vertical axis, slightly above the horizontal axis of the photograph. The light hits the mask in such a peculiar manner that the hair and the top of the mask are made to emanate light and glow from within. A leafless tree branch extends straight across the mask, reaching and pointing towards the face of the older boy. One observes that the facial structure and expression of the boy and the mask are nearly identical, a familial resemblance between the human flesh and the plastic is formed; the mask defacializes the essence of the human. In the middle, the younger boy occupies the center of the photograph, his own face visually rhyming with the faces of the two naked dolls. The mask initiates the deforming force that affects the entire scene depicted, transforming its nature as the actual faces become mask-like and doll-like, and the actual dolls and the mask acquire a different status than simple props and everyday objects. Again, the real force of the image is not to reveal an essence, but to suggest, invoke an uncertainty about essences.
Is the scene a snapshot of contingency? Is the scene metaphorical and fictional? Or is it expressing a philosophical idea by enfolding the latter in the former and showing that even contingent reality is fictional?

An equally interesting case of defacialization are those photographs that deform indexicality only through composition and play with natural lighting conditions. One instance thereof is Untitled (Boy in Window and Boy in Grass) (ca. 1950). This early work shows two derelict wooden house structures (a house and possibly a shed); through a decayed, broken part of the wall a human head is peeking, framed by darkness and the remaining part of the wall in a manner making the head appear mask-like and detached from body. In front of the house one sees dry tree branches and overgrown tall grass in which a small boy wearing a hooded coat is lying; his head is facing the ground and one sees a black void instead of a face, framed by the light-colored hood. Uncertainty about the nature of this scene enters the image through such lighting and composition. A simple
everyday scene captured in a snapshot may reveal a certain strangeness and unease in its figures, objects, and positions, which can be a result of a trick of light or become revelatory of a different, heretofore unseen essence of reality – precisely the facet this photograph explores.

In *Madonna* (1964), as Judith Keller describes, two shadowy figures of a woman and a small girl are positioned “before an arched window. The pious atmosphere created by this framing is contradicted by Madelyn’s [the model’s, Meatyard’s wife’s] everyday dress and by the dilapidated Venetian blinds behind her. Unlike a traditional religious icon, this Madonna gazes sternly into space, while her small child stands facing the maternal loins from which she sprang” (Keller 86–87). What this photograph suggests is again an uncertainty about the essence of the scene. The arched windows and the broken Venetian blinds create rows of light and dark stripes pointing towards the female figure in the center of this structure; the shadows erase the individual features of the two figures, making the image appear more abstract, painterly, and universalized in its subject matter. Yet the simplicity of the dress and the haircuts of the woman and the girl – a bob and a ponytail – as well as the derelict setting of this scene appear to contradict the implied universal significance and reverential status of the image. Again, the philosophical problem the image poses is whether one is seeing an elevated, symbolic, spiritualized image of the everyday or one is rather being exposed to the falsely superimposed, fabricated significance upon contingency and accident. *Madonna* is too affected by the logic of the diagram precisely through its lighting and composition, which entails a constant vacillation between the two essences, without any resolution.

Meatyard’s no-focus photography does not contain masks, dolls or even faces and yet can be seen to be a dark precursor – since this series (late 1950s) of photographs predates Meatyard’s fateful visit to the Woolworths store – to the defacialization machine materialized in the said artifacts. The logic itself can be observed in Meatyard’s methodical strive to escape and erase facialization inherent in indexicality. As Barbara Tannenbaum explains in her essay “Fiction as Higher Truth: The Photography of Ralph Eugene Meatyard,” the photographer would take various photographs using an unfocused lens and “then wait two or three months before developing them (the negatives). After that interval, he was no longer able to identify the scenes or objects, he had succeeded, at least for himself, in detaching the images from a bit of reality on which they had been based” (31). These photographs show blurry and shadowy images that at once appear to suggest a shape, a form, an object, and to refuse to define it in any substantial terms. One can identify the same sensation and perception as in the *Lucybelle Crater* series since the function of this type of diagram
is exactly the same – to capture the phenomenon’s oscillation between a fixed form, its being a sign, and its escape from such fixed signification and indexicality. What one is exposed to is the sensation and idea of *something* without being able to perceive what that something is; thus, the subject of these photographs can be defined as *somethingness*. As such, it again leads to ontological doubt since one is encouraged by the photographs’ suggestiveness to infinitely contemplate the image in an attempt to determine and capture its essence, which cannot be achieved with any certainty – an attitude to existence resonant with certain philosophical ideas of Meatyard’s time. Rebekah Modrak and Bill Anthes see this drive to escape the reality of fixed essences as typical of the *Zeitgeist* and of certain strands of art photography: “Like many Western artists at the time, Meatyard had become fascinated with the Eastern philosophy of Zen Buddhism, in which objects have meaning beyond their physical attributes. Meatyard was influenced by photographer Minor White’s belief that photography (through abstraction, sequencing, and close-up details) could be used to liberate objects from their everyday reality” (12).

Not the entire Meatyard’s oeuvre is generated by the operative principles of the same diagram. His *Abstractions* and *Light on Water* series (late 1950s–1960s) visually closely resemble the contemporaneous abstract expressionist movement in painting. What one sees in these striking photographs are no longer forms suggestive of objects and substances but a chaotic play of shapes, swirls of color and paint, lines, stains, cracks and circles; the image no longer insinuates a depth, a scene behind the lens, a snapshot of contingent, independent reality, inviting ontological doubt, but is located entirely on or near the picture’s surface, its shapes are suggestive of texture and materiality – are haptic. Subsequently, rather than resonating with Bacon’s diagram, these series relate to the diagram Deleuze identified in abstract expressionism that “offers an entirely different response [to the problem of modern painting], at the opposite extreme of abstraction. This time the abyss or chaos is deployed to the maximum. Somewhat like a map that is as large as the country, the diagram merges with the totality of the painting; the entire painting is diagrammatic” (104). Unlike in Bacon’s art or Meatyard’s *Lucybelle Crater* and *No-focus* series, in abstract expressionism and Meatyard’s abstractions, the defacializing agent is not localized and contained but is the locus of the entire image. As a result, there is no figuration, indexicality or faciality to erase since the entire photograph and painting is the very event of erasure, pure chaotic deformation and *only* that force of deformation as the photograph and the “painting thus becom[e] a catastrophe-painting and a diagram-painting [or capturing] at one and the same time” (Deleuze 105). What is then the fundamental difference between diagram-painting and diagram-capturing
(photography)? The abstract expressionist painting inscribes its manuality on its very surface; the swirls and lines rise above, escape the flat surface whereas in a gelatin-silver print that surface implies such manularity only to negate it and collapse it into the surface of the photograph; it captures the interplay between the haptic and the optic. Meatyard’s abstractions, it follows, cannot be affected by the same diagram as his previously discussed series, but neither can they be understood as a carbon-copy of abstract expressionist painting. These series entail a distinct diagram, which occupies the in-between space of uncertainty between the haptic and the optic.

In closing and summarizing my argument, I would therefore like to suggest that Meatyard’s photographic practices prove a significant and often contested point regarding the grey zone of medium-specificity in regards to painting and photography. Namely, philosophically investigating Meatyard’s works has shown that photography cannot a priori be categorically and ontologically distinguished from painting as being characterized by its indexicality and ephemerality, no matter how indexical, accidental, and untreated the photographic image might seem. While an analog photograph will always be a result of capturing and in that specific sense indexical and different from painting, a photograph’s essence – how it treats the captured image, destabilizes its meaning, makes the ephemeral abstract or, in Meatyard’s case, induces an irresolvable vacillation between the real and the imaginary, the ordinary and the uncanny, the face/spirit and the faceless/matter – might be just as complex and asignifying as in the case of modern painting. Consequently, Deleuze’s concept of the diagram can be applied to Meatyard’s photographic practice despite being a concept used to exclusively better grasp asignifying and non-figurative practices in painting. The application of this concept in the context of Meatyard’s photography has allowed identifying the idiosyncratic logic of defacialization that can be found in these mysterious images, explaining in more precise terms their Symbolist evocativeness and “deliberate ambiguity; hermeticism; the feeling for the symbol as a catalyst (something which, while itself remaining unchanged, generates a reaction in the psyche)” (Verlaine qtd. in Longwell 13). The results of this exploration allow one to conclude that Meatyard’s art photography strongly resonates with the contemporary artistic practices of Bacon and abstract expressionism without being completely reducible to either.

However, Meatyard’s photography is not only an expression of its own time but contains a certain futurity, making it particularly relevant in today’s context of the digital age, photographic ubiquity, and fabrication. If one takes a closer look at the numerous presumably unedited, unaccredited, often bizarre and yet also casual photographs that circulate
around the internet and are subject to wild theories and speculations, even subject to the so-called “creepypastas” – horror-related urban legends that self-perpetuate on the internet – one spots a similar tendency to insinuate ontological doubt about the nature of such images. Is it a fabrication, a staged scene or is something nefarious happening? While such digital and digitized images induce such doubt, they cannot be said to be the results of the Meatyardian diagram of defacialization, i.e., of the abstract logic methodically employed in many different photographic series of his. By virtue of such consistency, one can even claim that Meatyard’s photographic art not only harkens to these future practices but also investigates them, exposing the linkage between indexicality both as proof and impossibility thereof, the zone between familiarity and strangeness produced by photographic capture. One of William Mitchell’s famous distinctions between analog and digital photography is thus challenged by Meatyard’s case. Specifically, it opposes the claim that due to their inherent mutability, only the digital images question “our ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real” (14), drawing and photography, introducing an uncertainty about the signifier and the signified (15). Meatyard’s photographs wear their indexicality as a mask; these snapshots of familiar, ephemeral reality transform in front of one’s eyes and question the fundamental ontological distinction between reality and appearance, turning the essences of the everyday and the familial into mere appearances, masking another reality beyond fixed signification, individuality, and faciality.

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Works Cited