

Paper Graveyards is neither a work of traditional art history nor is it literary criticism. It is not strictly a history of ideas either, notwithstanding its very obvious erudition. Rather, in drawing upon all of these methods and approaches—and with extraordinary attention to language and style—Cadava's writing examines the spectacular explosion of images during the last twenty years as a prompt to discuss not simply specific images but the role and place of these images in our everyday life.

Considering work by Félix Nadar, Roland Barthes, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Fazal Sheikh, Susan Meiselas, and others, Cadava delineates different modes of reading that, taking their point of departure from the conviction that the past, the present, and the future are always bound together, provide us with a training manual of sorts for understanding visual material in the twenty-first century. These generously illustrated essays actively expand our literacy by reconstructing the networks of relations that inhabit the plural worlds of images, and create a genealogy of what we still call "an image," even when, with every day that passes, we perhaps understand less and less what this might mean.

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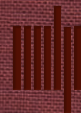
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PAPER
GRAVEYARDS



EDUARDO
CADAVA

PAPER
GRAVEYARDS

Drawing in Tongues

Nancy Spero
Lovers, 1962



Leon Golub
Bite Your Tongue II, 2001



The force of subjectivity in late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks free of them—not in order to express itself but, expressionlessly, to cast off the illusion of art. Of the works themselves it leaves only ruins behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the spaces it has violently vacated. Touched by death, the master's hand releases the heaps of material it had previously shaped. Its tears and fissures . . . are its final work. . . . This illuminates the contradiction whereby Beethoven's last works are deemed both subjective and objective. The fragmented landscape is objective, while the light in which alone it glows is subjective. He does not bring about their harmonic synthesis. Acting as a force of dissociation, he tears them apart in time, perhaps in order to preserve them for the realm of the eternal. In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes.

—Theodor Adorno
“Beethoven's Late Style”

I'm not trying to imitate a photograph. I'm trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then I am practicing photography by other means. . . . [T]hose of my paintings that have no photographic source (the abstracts, etc.) are also photographs.

—Gerhard Richter
interview with Rolf Schön

I want to throw drawings in all directions. That's my ultimate intent.

—Leon Golub
unpublished interview with Robert Enright¹

IN HIS 1937 ESSAY “Beethoven's Late Style,” Theodor Adorno suggests that the late works of Beethoven are more fractured and fragmentary than his earlier ones, less able to be brought under any kind of unifying experience, and even more wild and unconstrained than the earlier works. As he tells us, speaking not only of Beethoven but of all important artists, “the maturity of a significant artist's late works is not like that of fruits. They are not usually round, but furrowed, even ravaged. They tend to lack

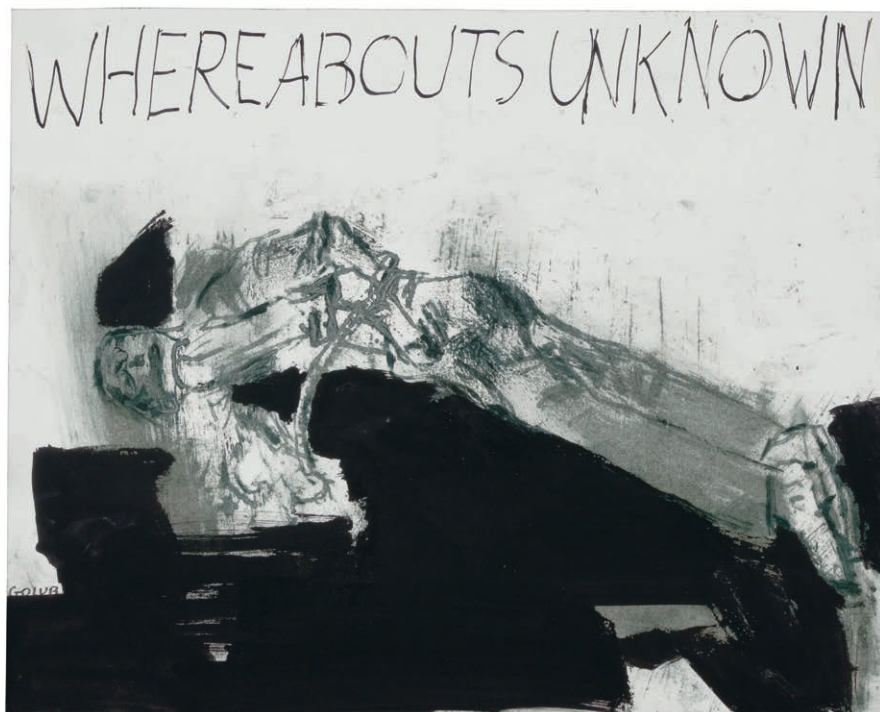
sweetness, and are prickly in their refusal to be merely tasted.”² Beethoven's late works, he explains, remain difficult, challenging, unyielding, and unreconciled: they do not fit into any preconceived scheme or mold, and they cannot be unified or resolved, since their irresolution and fragmentariness “are constitutive, not ornamental or symbolic of something else.”³ Beethoven's late compositions signal the loss of any sense of totality, unity, or “harmonic synthesis,” and this is why they are to be considered catastrophic. Adorno elaborates this point in his later, unfinished monograph on Beethoven. There he writes: “In Beethoven's late style there is altogether something like a tendency towards dissociation, decay, dissolution, but not in the sense of a process of composition which no longer holds things together: the dissociation and disintegration themselves become artistic means.”⁴ What is stressed here is a set of works that are burst asunder, that, coming in the form of dissolution or ruin, unsettle the integrity and intactness of the artwork, and thereby “cast off the illusion of art.” These are works that, bearing the traces of their own finitude, touched by a sense of death and violence, are riven and interrupted by a force of dissociation that belongs to what makes them what they are, to what at the same time prevents them from remaining identical to themselves. This is why, he notes, these works not only appear in the form of “tears and cracks” but also initiate a break from the “heaps of material” already produced by the artist.⁵

If these late works are catastrophic, then, it is because they bear the catastrophe of their own dissolution within them—as the cipher of the violence through which they are formed and deformed in the very movement of their coming into existence, and as the consequence of all the time sealed within them—and because they wreak catastrophe on the artist's earlier works (even when these earlier works already have their own relation to catastrophe). It is also because they bear witness to the catastrophes, atrocities, violence, and ravages of history, which increasingly form the signature of the artist's time, and which have left their traces in these works, and not only there. Whatever Adorno means by the lateness of works, then, is not reducible to the temporal moment within an artist's career in

which these works are produced. It is rather a structural element within the works “themselves”: it names, without naming in a fixed and determinate manner, a belatedness that belongs to the temporal structure of the work, a structure that prevents the work from belonging only to the present. As he suggests in relation to Beethoven, late style is not defined in relation to the rhythms or time of death—whether it is approaching or already has happened—since, in these works, death appears only allegorically. “If the validity of art wanes in the face of death’s reality,” he writes, “it can certainly not enter the work directly as its ‘subject matter.’ Death is imposed only on creatures, not their creations, and has therefore always appeared in art in a broken form: as allegory.”⁶ Nevertheless, he makes clear that this does not mean that lateness is separable from death: it is “touched by death,” and this intimacy between death and the work refers to, among other things, the work’s incapacity to remain simply itself. It is what seals these artworks in their most enigmatic and impenetrable form.

Why begin this way? For at least three reasons. First of all because, while these passages from Adorno may seem discreet, distant, even gnomic, many paths cross there: the relations among an entire network of motifs—subjectivity, agency, art, form, belatedness, death, survival, time, history, and so forth—all of which raise fundamental questions about our relation to what, after Adorno, we still call “late works.” If this beginning imposes itself, then, it is not in order to begin an analysis of Beethoven, or even of Adorno’s analysis of Beethoven—although we already have made some suggestions in this direction—but rather to begin to expose something about how we understand art and its relation to time, memory, history, life, and death, to suggest something, that is, about art’s relation to how we live in the world, something that goes beyond the particularity of these passages and that therefore gives us to our history, and even to our several histories, and not only to just ours. Second, in order to begin to evoke and lay down the terms of what the late works of Leon Golub compel us to think, especially as they simultaneously engage and withdraw from the world of which his work is such an important articulation—a world that bore witness to

several wars, economic oppression and capitalist imperialisms of all kinds, redefinitions of the relations between the sexes, racism and inequality, hunger and poverty, torture and the intensification of violence, the globalization of media and politics, and ethnic and cultural conflicts that defined, and still define, so many instances of suffering and death throughout the world. Golub’s engagement with the changing historical and political relations of this world, with a process of transformation wherein his works seek to respond to the shifting domains of history and politics, and wherein the traces of the historical and the political are inscribed within their surfaces, remains, I think, a model for how we might respond to the demand that we become answerable for our future by, among so many other things, confronting the ways in which the past lives on in the present. Indeed, if the late works represent a more modest (at least in scale), and a more “personal,” reflection on the world in which he lived and died, they never leave behind the concerns that mattered to him most throughout his life. This is legible in several of the works from his so-called late period, but most legible in works such as *Whereabouts Unknown*, *The Black Does Not Interrupt the Killing*, *Reprisal*, *Against the Wire*, *Here’s to You, Pal!*, *Don’t Tread On Me!*, and *No Escape Now* (all from 2002), as well as all the works that incorporate the animals and mythical creatures that also belonged to his earlier signature. Third, in order to respond to a sentence of Adorno that not only finds itself inscribed in one of Golub’s paintings but that also has become publicly associated with his work in general: “In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes.” This line appears in *Bite Your Tongue II* (2001) but also as an epigraph to one of the chapters of Jon Bird’s book *Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real* (2000) and, in truncated form, in the title of Jerry Blumenthal and Gordon Quinn’s documentary film *Golub: Late Works Are the Catastrophes* (2004). It is a line that Golub discusses in the film and that he associates directly with his own late works and, in particular, with the way in which these works shatter the borders and distinctions between life and death, presence and absence, interiority and exteriority, singularity and multiplicity, testimony and its impossibility, men and women, humans and animals, and even among drawing, painting, and photography.



Leon Golub
Whereabouts Unknown, 2002



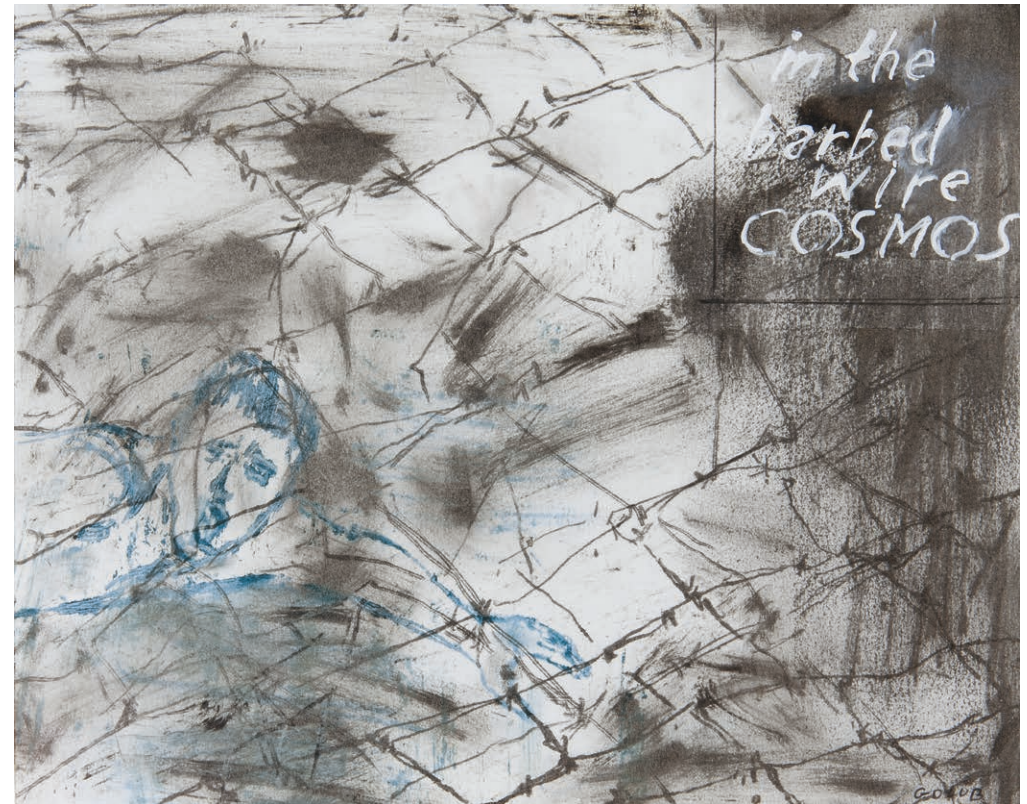
TOP: Leon Golub
No Escape Now, 2002

BOTTOM: Leon Golub
Don't Tread on Me! (Payback Time), 2002

Incorporating a fragment of the past into his painting—a linguistic cipher that becomes a graphic sign the moment it enters the space of the painting—Golub also stages an encounter between the visual and the linguistic that traverses all of his late works. In this way, like Beethoven and Adorno before him, Golub becomes “a figure of lateness itself, an untimely, scandalous, even catastrophic commentator on the present.”⁷

I begin again, this time with Golub’s late works—although, as we will see, I scarcely have been writing about anything else.

The world of Leon Golub’s late works is a world filled with sex and erotic encounters, death and violence, torture and perversions of all kinds, tattoos and graffiti, mythical creatures and animals that bear relations to humans (even as they are wildly different from them), references and allusions to the history of art, and all sorts of borrowings and citations from literature, art, photography, and the media more broadly. What makes these works difficult to engage, what makes it difficult to crack their codes, is that each of these motifs or figures “itself” belongs to a network of visual and linguistic citations that—inscribing this or that motif or figure into a kind of web not unlike the mesh that traverses *In the Barbed Wire Cosmos* (2004), and therefore asserting its relational existence—prevents it from ever remaining simply itself. When we believe we are identifying a particular motif or figure, in other words, this motif or figure is already a kind of archive; it already belongs to a network of unforeseeably mediated relations. This is legible in the way in which figures from his earlier works circulate throughout his corpus, with each of their subsequent appearances carrying the traces of the earlier ones forward. Indeed, it is important to note that Golub’s most frequent pictorial references increasingly were to his own work (even if the images he borrows from his own archive, and to which he repeatedly refers, are themselves drawn from other sources). Many of his later works even rework earlier ones—as happens in *Dogged III* (2003), *Blue Movie II* (2004), *Satyr Love II* (2004), and *Scratch* (2000), which is drawn from his 1999 painting of the same



Leon Golub, *In the Barbed Wire Cosmos*, 2004

title—but we need only recall all the other instances of this practice of revision throughout his career, including, among others, *Gigantomachy II* (1966), *Interrogation II* (1981), and *Bite Your Tongue II* (2001), to register its place within his corpus. This visual form of citation and transformation demonstrates the enduring relations between the past and the present, the fact that we must always pass through what we have inherited in order to invent our future, that the gesture whereby Golub appropriates and displaces what he inherits is a political one.

When we encounter one of the many dogs that populate Golub's paintings and drawings, for example, we are confronted with a figure that, circulating throughout his corpus, signals (as he himself so often suggested) companionship, hunting, premonition, obedience, homelessness, wildness, witnessing, bondage, death, the intersection of earth with the heavens, the relation between the visible and the invisible worlds, a force of aggression and violence, an avatar of the human that is always left behind. This means that, whether we are viewing *Scratch* (2000), *The Sky on Fire!* (2002), *Modernism Is Kaput!* (2002), *Bones* (2002), *Arbitrary Blue Spots with Pink* (2002), *Dogged III* (2003), *A Sentimental Story* (2003), *Alarmed Dog Encountering Pink!* (2004), or any of the other drawings and paintings that include dogs along their surface, in each instance the dog is a figure that, at every moment, bears all of the connotations and associations that throughout Golub's corpus (from the earliest paintings all the way to his late works) have gathered and accumulated within it. Golub's dogs form an archive of everything they have signified, both inside and outside of his surfaces (what he sometimes calls his "skin," and even the "skin of the world"*) and also across time, including, as Nietzsche notes in a sentence that Golub incorporates into *Snake Eyes II* (1995), "pain."⁹ It is because the traces encrypted within these drawn and painted dogs simultaneously include references to the past, the present, and the future that these dogs are never "present" as such. They are not reducible to what is visible on the surface of the drawing, to what could be presented to us as a theme, or recognizable as *this* animal. Instead they are a form of remembrance, a mode of gathering, but one that can never be comprehended or gathered in its entirety, since, with every



TOP: Leon Golub
A Sentimental Story, 2003

BOTTOM: Leon Golub
Scratch, 2000

stroke of the pen or brush, they are divided and fissured across the multiply heterogeneous traits that they bear—traits that, interrupting them, also interrupt any possibility that we might be able to identify them in a determinate fashion.

Golub elaborates the rich composite of connotations that he associates with dogs in his rather remarkable 2004 book *DOG*.¹⁰ A collection of citations from antiquity to the present in which dogs are associated with an entire network of significances, and in which dogs are linked to the violence occurring in contemporary political events, the book references representations of dogs in Greek and Egyptian mythology and folklore, in the works of, among others, Peter Breughel, Heiner Müller, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Rainer Maria Rilke, Bertolt Brecht, George Orwell, and Jean Genet, and, along the way, in articles on the death penalty, on the 1921 massacre of a black community in Tulsa, the Pinochet regime in Chile, the Salvadoran Civil War, CIA guides for assassination, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and innumerable examples of state terrorism around the world. What becomes clear is that a dog in Golub is never simply a dog. It is rather a figure of endlessly shifting figures, each of which bears several histories. This is why, if the dog is another name for the archive, it names an archive that is as large as the history of civilizations. For Golub, however, none of these civilizations have ever had, in the words forming part of a 1996 work of the same title, a *Mission Civilisatrice*. The dog is a witness to this fact.

This is particularly evident in *The Sky on Fire!* (2002), a powerful late work that shows a dog barking and wailing against a red background whose dappled texture seems like so many lines of writing, above the dog's head and neck but also along them. This work was made after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Golub reproduces several fragmented excerpts of articles on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and on the war on terror in general in *DOG*. These articles explicitly reference 9/11 and Al Qaeda, and they confirm that he was thinking about how to represent this event, and how he might account for its occurrence and aftermath in a drawing, even if only telegraphically. Relying on one of his many dogs as a means of gesturing toward all the threads that, for him, are sealed within



Leon Golub
The Sky on Fire, 2002

this event—this dog is based on a photograph he includes in *DOG* and, like 9/11 itself, it simultaneously embodies a kind of premonition, a form of suffering, and even a menacing threat—what is most interesting in *The Sky on Fire!* is that the closer we look at its mottled red background, the more its surface looks like it is covered with small handwriting whose illegibility—owing to both the smallness of what we might call handwriting and the sense that it has been brushed and therefore slightly blurred—could just as easily be traced back to Arabic as to English. While we cannot be certain that Golub intended this trace of multiple languages across his small surface, the horizontal linearity of the marks and dots invites this possibility. If the sky is on fire, it is not simply because of the horrors that humans perpetuate against each other—when they are *least human* and *most human* at the same time—but also because of the clash of languages, a clash whose violence must be announced, even in a *nonhuman* manner, and even in languages we cannot understand. Nevertheless, evoking the history of dogs that spit fire and wars that appear as red animals, Golub’s howling dog tells us that the sky is on fire, and that it is in flames, too. The drawing may even present the decapitated head of a dog who, with its last dying breath, howls out, in the midst of the world’s conflagration and in its own plural language, “the sky on fire!” It is important to note that the excerpts of articles that Golub incorporates into *DOG* repeatedly point to the violence of American imperialism. If the sky is indeed on fire, it is also because of the consequences of American interventions around the globe, most often in relation to Latin America, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

If this dog has to be thought in relation to the humans whose animal-like behavior sets the sky ablaze, its legible but muted howl offers us a chance to think about what it means to stand in the midst of terror and chaos, to become aware of our relatedness to what is presumably different from us, and especially in a moment of danger.¹¹ Even if we say that Golub’s dogs are just images, they may, as Colin Dayan would have it, “tell a story about us that is no longer abstract or distant: how we kill, when we cease to care, and what little remains in this world for us”—and this even as they also exhibit the suffering and anguish that all

witnesses bear.¹² Within such a world—within a world in which we have to confront the relation between humans and animals, life and death, fear and terror, and indeed our utter relatedness in general—it is impossible to say, as George W. Bush so often said in the aftermath of 9/11, that “you are either with us or against us.” In this world, nothing can be absolutely distinguished from everything else. This is why Golub’s dog tells us—if it can tell us anything at all—“I am not a dog,” or rather: “I am a dog who is not a dog.” In this way, the dog tells us what is true of all of Golub’s figures: none of them are ever only themselves. Despite this subjective multiplicity and instability, they nevertheless gesture in the direction of historicopolitical events that are at once singular in their historical references and evocative of broader historical questions, however fugitive they may be. But there is never a moment—even in the midst of this indeterminacy—in which Golub does not take a legible stance.

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The indeterminacy of many of Golub’s late works is intensified by the way in which they incorporate materials from any number of different media, but in particular from photography. From the beginning of his career, Golub began accumulating images drawn from photojournalism, film, and other mass-media sources and, like Francis Bacon, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Gerhard Richter, often would use these images as sources for certain elements in his paintings and drawings.¹³ Following his early interest in classical representations of the body, he gathered images from fashion magazines, and from sports magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, in order to study the body in different positions but also in movement, from *Soldier of Fortune* for figures in conflict and war, including images of torture victims, mercenaries, and professional soldiers, from *National Geographic* for pictures of lions and other animals, from porn magazines for representations of the sexualized body and of different sex acts, from newspapers for images of contemporary events and figures, and from art history textbooks for materials on Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art and for artistic renderings of the body.¹⁴ As he notes in

an interview from 2001, speaking of the relation between painting and photography and even suggesting that he is composed of photographs, that he is a kind of archive of photographs,

In the late 1950s, the potential of activating the images excited me. I looked to Greco-Roman sculpture to evolve anatomical gesture and action. That's how it began, with books on Greek and Roman sculpture. Around 1960, I went to wrestling photographs for the "Burnt Men" images. I became increasingly an image junkie! I have huge files of images and image fragments. I virtually sense myself as made up of photos and imagistic fragments jittering in my head and onto the canvas. . . . I increasingly searched out photo sources. . . . I . . . often used several photos for one image.¹⁵

Like all the modernists from Max Ernst to Warhol, from Rauschenberg to Richter, who sought to overcome modernism's reluctance to embrace mass culture, Golub's reliance on images drawn from popular culture unsettles any possible distinction between high- and lowbrow art, something he announces when he declares that *Modernism Is Kaput!* (2002). Moreover, assembling in this way a kind of database of images, Golub was then able to circulate and recirculate these images within his work, even if, in each instance, the most important element of this process of incorporation was the transformative power of his interventions, and indeed his reinvention of these earlier, found images. The dynamic that emerges between photography and drawing or painting therefore becomes one of revelation and concealment, of seeing and not seeing, of playing one medium against and with the other, and of creating relations between them.

Indeed, the photogrammatic basis of the late work is confirmed not only by the source material that has been made available but also by the fact that so many of these late drawings or paintings appear in an 8 × 10 format, which is a recognizably photographic size.¹⁶ These are drawings and paintings, that is, which present themselves as "photographs" and, in so doing, ask us to rethink the relations among drawing, painting, and photography. Without erasing the distinction between them, these works suggest that these media never appear alone: they inhabit one another at every moment. It is almost as if Golub were saying



Leon Golub
Here's to You, Pal!, 2002

that drawing and painting could not exist without photography or, more precisely, without a certain concept of photography—one that, because of its relation to drawing and painting, could no longer be simply related indexically to its referent. Drawing in tongues, then—joining several media or idioms, none of which is ever just one medium or one idiom—Golub offers us paintings that can be drawings and drawings that can be paintings. He goes even further and suggests that drawings and paintings can also be kinds of photographs. Each work offers a Babelian confusion of different media or, more precisely, a visual form of *glossolalia* that traverses every figure on its surface and that is figured directly, albeit in a somewhat macabre manner, in Golub's *Speaking in Tongues* (2002).¹⁷ If these works are “photographs,” however, it is not because they replicate the photographs on which they are partially based or because they correspond in every detail to their several referents, but rather because, like a photograph, these works also alter and transform whatever is before them, whatever has come to be “inside” them. The interplay between these different media becomes a means for Golub to suggest, however discreetly, that these “photographs,” encrypting several memories and histories at once, can never be read solely in relation to the frame within which they appear.

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That Golub's figures themselves embody different idioms—linguistic, mediatic, species, sexual, and so on—can be registered in the strange bestiary that inhabits his late works, and certainly not only these. From the very beginning of his career, Golub displayed an interest in mythical creatures, hybrid beings, and species composites: from the sphinxes of his earlier work to the she-centaurs and satyrs that are at the heart of so many of his late works. Throughout the trajectory of his work, animal and hybrid figures multiply, increasingly become insistent and visible, but nevertheless constitute something more or less than a bestiary. They make it difficult to distinguish humans from monsters, and indeed the monsters that inhabit and populate his late works descend from the earlier “all-too-human monsters”—mercenaries,

torturers, and oppressors—that he painted from the 1960s to the 1980s.¹⁸ Nevertheless, “[t]hey're not the same kind of monsters,” Golub explained. “They're curiously physically evident, almost in-your-face creatures. They're around and maybe they're luring you; maybe they're not. How are you going to handle them?”¹⁹ If they are “in-your-face” creatures, it is because they are present beside us and, if we have to be asked how we will handle them, it is because they appear as a force of interruption and questioning. Indeed, what is most striking in relation to these figures is that, unsettling our most common ways of viewing things, they can never be reduced to being either an animal or a nonanimal.

However tempting it might be to turn these figures into an anthropomorphic fable about man, about the animality of man, they resist returning to a story about men, and for men. In “*Human Creatures Lack Powers of Ratinocination*” (2003), for example, Golub presents a lion's head in profile with the title of the work inscribed along the top of the drawing-painting. Unlike the other titles of his late works, this one is in quotation marks, which, in this particular instance, suggests that it seeks to evoke the long tradition of philosophical writing that, from Aristotle to Descartes and beyond, has claimed that man is a rational animal, a *zoon logon echon*, able to reason and to use language. Within this tradition, the animal is unable to respond to questions: deprived of language, it lacks the power of real questions. On first glance, then, the interplay between the claim of the title and the lion's head makes it impossible to decide whether the statement is being thought or articulated by the lion—in which case the animal that is presumably without reason or language proves itself capable of both and, in fact, suggests that human creatures are the ones without them—or whether, assuming the title describes what is visible in the work, the lion's head “represents” the nonreasoning human who, without reason or language, must now be depicted in animal form. But this is not simply any animal and, in a chiasmic identification that joins the lion to Golub (we should not forget that he is another “Leon” or lion), the work could refer to Golub's own lack of reason, were it not for the fact that he already appears here as an “other,” even if this other is at the same time his double. In each instance, the animality represented by this lion cannot



Leon Golub
Human Creatures Lack Powers of Ratinocination, 2003



Leon Golub
Hell's Fires Await You!, 2003

be simply opposed to humanity, and, for this reason, the forces of reason and unreason cannot be identified solely with one or the other species (this merging of man and lion already had been presented in Golub's 2002 *Aging Golden Sphinx*, which is scarcely an accident, since the question of the sphinx was that of the identity of man and, in particular, of his mortality and finitude). Considering Golub's own title more closely, however, one notices that the title does not really state that human creatures lack "ratiocination," but rather that they lack "ratinocination." When Golub adds his *n* to the process of reason, he introduces a "no" at its heart, as if what he wishes to say is that human creatures lack the power of what says "no" to reason, of what interrupts reason. This small alteration intensifies the already complex network of suggestion and signification at work within the artwork and, in so doing, helps us understand that what is at stake for Golub is the possibility of our acknowledging and encountering the unreasonable weight and value that human creatures place on reason. Indeed, this work, and the late works in general, are produced in the name of what says "no" to reason—what Golub-the-lion believes is missing from thought and discourse in general (and what is certainly left *unthought* within this same thought and discourse)—since, for Golub, reason is itself a form of ideological mystification. The most unreasonable thing, he might argue, is reason's effort to suppress the "no" that always inhabits it, the force of unreason without which it could not be what it is. This is not to say that Golub is, strictly speaking, *against* reason, but instead that he draws and paints in order to register the various ways in which reason and unreason inhabit each other, and indeed can never exist without the other. It is scarcely surprising that the demonic inscribes itself within this bestiary, as it does in *Hell's Fires Await You!* (2003). There, a human body with a demonic, bestial head and an arm tattooed with a skull gazes at the unreadable Twombly-like graffiti before him.²⁰ This illegible scratching on the surface of the drawing serves as a visual rhyme of the glossolalia that is enacted in every one of Golub's works and that again signals that every figure in his works has to be read in relation to others, with the consequence that it can never remain untouched by the set of works of which it is a part.

If this artistic bestiary exists at the origin of Golub's works, it is because his art seeks to delineate a world in which the categories that would support the distinction between animals and nonanimals, between reason and unreason, are blurred from the very beginning. This catastrophic world ensures a world inhabited by satyrs—as is evident in *Exultant!* (2003), *3 Legged Satyr* (2004), *Club Satyr* (2004), *Satyr Love* (2004), and *Satyr Lib!* (2004)—in which a similar destruction of borders and limits takes place. The moment Golub introduces female satyrs into his work, for example, there is no longer a way of defining this figure as either female or male, since he grafts a female body to the classically male body of the satyr. These female satyrs appropriate the sexuality generally associated with the classical satyr and thereby become linked to the porno-based drawings, which include, among others, *Playtime* (2002), *One Leg Up* (2002), *Expectant* (2003), *Come On!* (2003), *What A Bore!* (2003), *The American Girl* (2004) *Blue Movie* (2004), and *Blue Movie II* (2004). Moreover, it is not coincidental that Golub mobilizes the figure of the satyr to break down particular values and barriers, and often with a bit of playfulness, since the classical satyr play generally followed the end of a series of tragedies in Athenian festivals honoring Dionysus. It would take a more lighthearted glance at the more difficult subject matter of the tragedies and was accompanied by the irreverent, obscene remarks of the satyrs. Golub exploits this dramatic history to present his own scenes from the satyr play that, for him, follows, and indeed comes with, the ongoing tragedies he continues to witness around him. What becomes clear in the visual and conceptual echolalia between these different drawings and paintings, then, is that, in order to encounter this or that particular work, in order to engage it at its most profound depths, we need to put it in relation to the others, since Golub's works often become a lens through which we can view the rest of his corpus.²¹

To be more precise, though, each work in this series of late works is related to the others only through its otherness—an otherness that is emphasized when the work is sometimes multiplied, reversed, displaced, or simply serialized—which means that these works are not "related," at least not in any determinable sense of relation. They are "together," but togetherness here



Leon Golub
Satyr Love II, 2004



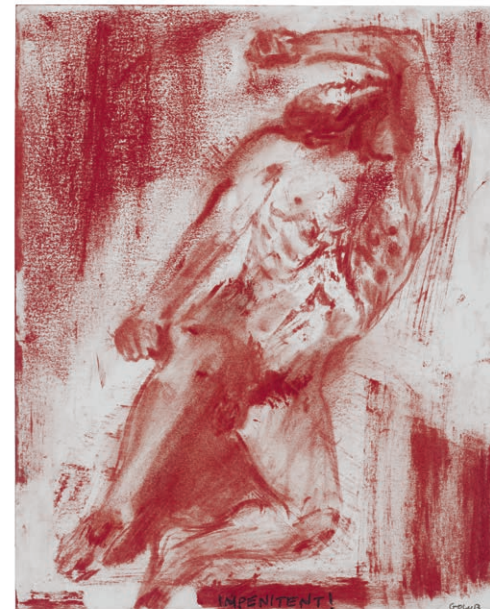
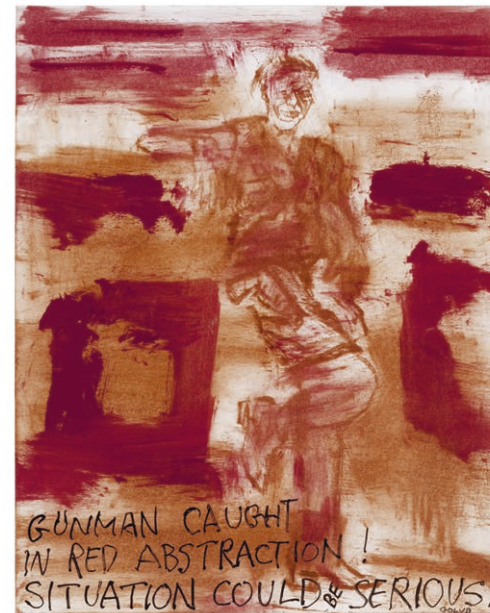
TOP: Leon Golub
One Leg Up, 2002



BOTTOM: Leon Golub
Pseudo Blue Period, 2001

means otherness—it is what moves the image away from itself, what prevents it from existing “on its own,” what ensures it will be transformed and altered in relation to the other works. While each work could be said to take its existence from the series to which it belongs, then, each already bears in itself a kind of open seriality, a multiplicity, an internal fissure or division that prohibits any gathering around itself and that indeed suggests that each “one” is already “more than one.” As Moholy-Nagy put it in his 1932 essay “The New Instrument of Vision,” speaking of photographs in particular (but we already have suggested that these works are kinds of “photographs”): “The series is no longer a ‘picture,’ and none of the canons of pictorial aesthetics can be applied to it. Here the separate picture loses its identity as such and becomes a detail of assembly, an essential structural element of the whole which is the thing itself. In this concatenation of its separate but inseparable parts a photographic series inspired by a definite purpose can become at once the most potent weapon and the tenderest lyric.”²²

Golub’s late works (but also his works in general) have to be understood in relation to the artistic universe that he creates from everything he has inherited and revises. This can be registered in the very self-reflexivity of several of these drawings and paintings, but especially in works such as *The Black Does Not Interrupt the Killing* (2002), *Gunman Caught in Red Abstraction! Situation Could Be Serious!* (2002), *Arbitrary Blue Spots with Pink* (2002), and *Alarmed Dog Encountering Pink!* (2004)—all of which explicitly announce the artistic act and medium—the colors, ink, or paint—that present, filter, frame, and transform the materials at hand. Linking the materiality of the medium to the connotative dimension of this or that color (black, red, blue, or pink), Golub emphasizes the way in which each layer of color or paint creates its own reality: it is a sheet of time, with each stroke separated from the next one by intervals of time that, superimposed one upon another, suggest relations across time and space that remain encrypted within the work’s surface. Each line or stroke is traversed by its history, by entire cultures or histories, by an entire thought of the world, even as it materializes itself in the act of drawing or painting. Each stroke of the pen or brush reinforces, adds, covers



TOP: Leon Golub
Gunman Caught in Red Abstraction! Situation Could Be Serious!, 2002

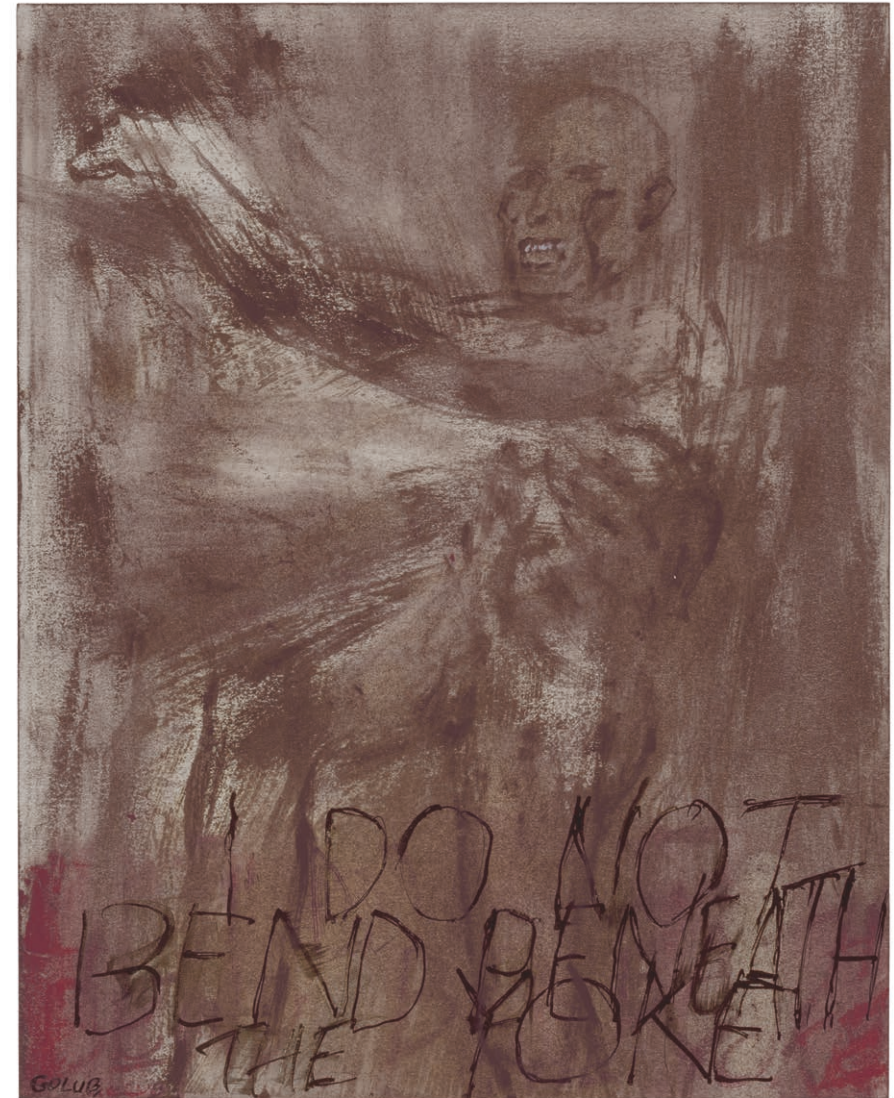
BOTTOM: Leon Golub
Impenitent!, 2002

over, erases, revives, or revises each earlier one and, in this way, proceeds in relation to the histories and mediations that make the act of drawing or painting an act of seeing, an act of perception that is also an act of memory. This act of memory is a blind act that begins in relation to the night—in relation to what Golub can never anticipate, but which he knows will include his death. It is because memory can never be anticipated that the idea of drawing implies the opening—the initiation or gesture—of a form that does not yet have a form. Indeed, drawing can only offer a form or a figure if it is not itself already a given form or figure. In the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, drawing is a means of “being exposed to what comes, to an unexpected occurrence, or to a surprise that no prior formality will have been able to precede or preform.”²³ Whatever forms or figures we might see in Golub’s work—forms and figures that, as I have suggested, are never simply themselves—can only appear through an act of drawing that, tracing a path, marking the contact between pencil or brush and paper, presents these forms or figures in the process of forming themselves.

This process is beautifully described in Jean-Pierre Richard’s *Roland Barthes, dernier paysage*. There, in a passage that asks about “the contact between pencil and paper” in relation to the works of Cy Twombly and, in particular, to Barthes’s reading of Twombly, he writes:

A good mark does not press a hand to the paper; on the contrary, it allows the hand to touch the paper lightly, as if raising into the air in “levitation,” and establishing around the drawn figure “a sort of haze of interpretation.” What exactly is this contact between pencil and paper? An exchange of gentleness, like a caress or a flight. From which we find such a precise and exquisite metaphor: “the wax [from the pencil], soft substance, adheres to the miniscule bumps of the graphic field, and it is the trace of this ‘nimble flight of bees’ which creates the line of Twombly.” The wax (literal) of the pencil that draws, and the honey (figural) to be produced from the gold carried away by bees—the imagination closes the circle of a single nimble animality in on itself.²⁴

Evoking the metaphor through which Barthes likens Twombly’s process of writing and leaving marks behind to the “nimble



Leon Golub
I Do Not Bend Beneath the Yoke, 2002

flight of bees,” Richard here draws a line connecting the wax of the pencil to the honey produced by bees as they move across fields—in this passage, graphic, metaphorical, and even “natural” fields. He suggests the way in which the imagination, capable of crossing and even binding the literal and the figural together, can close the circle on the relation between technology and nature in a celebration of figuration that, in turn, ensures “a sort of haze of interpretation.” What is at stake is a “graphic field” that offers itself to different imprints, that permits the mark to adhere to it without losing its transitory character, its potential to be effaced. This is Barthes’s point when, after suggesting that “everything is played out (in Twombly) in that infinitesimal moment in which the wax of the pencil approaches the grain of the paper,” he not only offers the passage Richard cites but he also states that the singularity of the idea of adherence at work here is that it “contradicts the very idea of adherence.” Nothing remains the same in Twombly, in other words, and especially because of the play between inscription and effacement that defines his particular form of graphism. Indeed, what characterizes Twombly’s work, according to Barthes, is a practice of tracing that traces nothing; or, rather, traces nothing that remains intact or fixed. In Barthes’s metaphor, the pencil leaves its wax behind, but the bees, themselves implicated in the production of wax, could be said to produce, even if in displaced form, the very material that later will become the shifting trace of their figurative flight of writing. If we take this figure for Twombly’s gestural form of writing as a kind of axiom for Golub’s artistic inscriptions, we can understand why so many of the forms or figures in Golub’s works appear unclear, deformed, somewhat blurry, without a fixed outline, not simply in the process of being formed but also in the process of dissolving or being effaced. It is as if the paths that Golub’s oil stick or ink trace efface themselves and take with them any form or figure that was in the process of appearing. If they efface their own path, however, they also leave behind a trace of this effacement “on the miniscule bumps of the graphic field.” This is why the subjects in Golub’s drawings are always a kind of sketch, a draft, of a subject that is exposed, in danger, at risk, and always touched by an imminent death.

This is evident not only in the various works that evoke death explicitly but also in the many pornographic drawings and paintings that, promising the presence of a body, offer nothing more than an image of it and therefore its disappearance. Indeed, transforming the body into an image of the body, Golub stages the body’s departure from itself.²⁵ In each instance, when the body becomes an image, it leaves itself, exceeds itself, and is never fully given, even if it is not entirely absent. As Nancy would have it, “The vision of the naked body is exactly the experience of this presence that always flees into absence, into the impossibility of being an immobile given.”²⁶ It is because the body is never given that Golub’s pornographic works must be seen as sites of displacement and exile. The naked women and men who appear in his watercolored washes are never only presented; displaying the fact of their being presented, they signal that they are not themselves. That this displacement has its counterpart in the viewer of these works can be gleaned from a remarkable poem by Michelangelo. There—speaking of the way in which he receives an other through his eyes, even as this other’s eyes penetrate him, of the way in which the moment he is entered into by the other, he is “scattered,” inhabited by this other, and no longer simply himself—Michelangelo writes: “you entered me through the eyes, and I am scattered, as a cluster of unripe fruit goes into a bottle and, once past the neck, grows where it is wider; so in the same way your image, which outside soaks me, inside grows through the eyes, and I stretch like a skin inside of which the pulp is swelling; entering me by such a narrow route that I can hardly dare to believe that you might ever get out.”²⁷ There would be much to say about this passage, but I would simply like to emphasize two things: first, that the viewer and subject are deconstituted precisely in their relation; and, second, that the act of vision is entirely eroticized: the taking-in of the other’s image or look is figured as a sexual act of penetration and swelling and this eroticization is itself associated with the displacement of the subject, who is also the viewer here. What both Michelangelo and Golub seem to suggest is the way bodies can become a means of exploring a specularly of the gaze that, rather than enabling the constitution of a subject, puts it at risk and even disappears it, and

not only because it can never be “seen.” If Golub’s works encourage our eyes to undergo a kind of training, this is not a training that would lead us to seeing—even when the naked body before us would seem to suggest that we “see” everything—unless this seeing could be said to begin in the dark, in a kind of blindness.

This is why, we could say, Golub’s late works encourage their viewer to look at a death that he or she cannot see past, but which is recalled to us by the many skulls, skeletons, and signals of dissolution that punctuate these works. In the long run, these drawings and paintings, these “photographs,” tell us that there is nothing but loss, death, and transformation, even as they seek to mark the survival that is necessary to bear witness to this death and change. These are works that are traversed by finitude. This is why they are not simply a premonition of death (of the death that comes with every act of representation), but a kind or type of death. In these works, drawing or painting is itself a kind of death, even as this death is what makes these works possible. Everything that follows from this indicates that the experience of loss, the anticipation of death, enables each work to probe the conditions and consequences of perception. Indeed, what can perception be if it is always associated with loss and death? This is the question that is posed by Golub’s late works, and not only these. What it suggests, though, is that the world that Golub depicts is always about to vanish, even at the very moment that his drawing or painting seeks to represent it. What makes these late works so strong may even be their insistence on the transience of persons and things, on the way in which everything we wish to grasp or fix is always in a constant state of change and transformation.

The transience of our existence is signaled in a particularly strong way in Golub’s 2002 drawing and painting *Exhumed*, in which it is associated with the fugacity of the image in general. The work presents a hunched figure, surrounded by different shades of blue (and even almost emerging from blue himself), pulling what, at first glance, seems like a man being drawn up



Leon Golub
Exhumed, 2002

from out of the ground and, at second glance, seems like a large piece of cloth with a man's visage almost floating just beneath the hunched figure's hands, like a secularized, masculinized Veronica's veil. It is unclear whether what is being exhumed is a corpse or the image of a corpse. This association between corpse and image is most elaborately explored in Maurice Blanchot's essay "Two Versions of the Imaginary." There, in a series of passages that suggest the strange resemblance between corpses and images and therefore provide a remarkable lens through which to view Golub's *Exhumed*, he writes:

The image does not, at first glance, resemble the corpse, but the cadaver's strangeness is perhaps also that of the image. What we call mortal remains escapes common categories. Something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all. It is neither the same as the person who was alive, nor is it another person, nor is it anything else. What is there, with the absolute calm of something that has found its place, does not, however, succeed in being convincingly here. Death suspends the relation to place, even though the deceased rests heavily in his spot as if upon the only basis that is left him. To be precise, this basis lacks, the place is missing, the corpse is not in its place. Where is it? It is not here, and yet it is not anywhere else. Nowhere? But then nowhere is here. The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere. . . . The corpse is here, but here in its turn becomes a corpse. . . . The place where someone dies is not some indifferent spot. It seems inappropriate to transport the body from one place to another. The deceased cleaves jealously to his place, joining it profoundly, in such a way that the indifference of this place, the fact that it is after all just a place among others, becomes the profundity of his presence as deceased. . . . The cadaver is its own image. It no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms it entirely into shadow. . . . Man is made in his image: this is what the strangeness of the cadaver's resemblance teaches us. But this formula must first be understood as follows: *man is unmade according to his image*. The image has nothing to do with signification or meaningfulness as they are implied by the world's existence, by effort that aims at truth, by law and the light of day. Not only is the *image* of an object not the *sense* of this object, and not only is it

of no avail in understanding the object, it tends to withdraw the object from understanding by maintaining it in the immobility of a resemblance which has nothing to resemble.²⁸

Blanchot's passage would seem to unfold in accordance with the sequence of our experience of Golub's *Exhumed*, as if it had been written in relation to it. Given the title of Golub's work, we are encouraged to believe we are witnessing a man exhuming a corpse, a body whose materiality, exceeding its representation or image, does not resemble them. Nevertheless, the passage goes on to say, what brings the corpse and image together is their mutual strangeness, their incapacity to remain identical to either themselves or each other. No longer the trace of a living person, but neither the trace of someone else, the corpse cannot be understood within "common categories." Neither simply present nor absent, neither simply here nor somewhere else, it cannot be placed in a determinate moment or place. It leaves itself and, always in a process of decomposition, is never the same from one moment to the next, which is why it can never resemble a single image. At the same time, the passage notes, it seems "inappropriate to transport the body from one place to another." If this transport is impossible, it is because the body, at this point in the passage, cannot be entirely dissociated from its representation; it is no longer simply a body, and certainly not a single, unchanging body. Indeed, "the cadaver is its own image." Like every image, the cadaver is the trace of what is no longer there, and is therefore the image of an image, a shadow that, casting itself across the once living form, transforms it "entirely into shadow." What accounts for this transition—from cadaver to image, from cadaver to shadow—is, among other things, the passage between "here and nowhere" that at the same time cadaverizes both "here" and "nowhere," preventing each from ever being present. This is why, Blanchot tells us, "Death suspends the relation to place," and does so in relation to the force of decontextualization that takes place within any image. It is because the image—the drawing or painting that is itself never just one—tears what it presumably resembles from its context that it can never fully resemble its subject or object and therefore

“has nothing to do with signification or meaningfulness.” Like the corpse, the image appears as a force that “unmakes” what it is supposed to represent, “maintaining it in the immobility of a resemblance which has nothing to resemble.” What is exhumed in this work, then, is not simply a corpse or image, or simply even a *corpse-image*, but also the very process whereby a work of art emerges—is exhumed—only to reveal its incapacity to emerge, its inability to be finished. The work reveals the corpse that it is. In Golub’s world, the work of art is a corpse, but a corpse whose image cannot be dissociated from it, even if this image cannot represent it. The work of art therefore speaks as the trace of what passes into history. As what is never itself and therefore always passing into history, it asks us to think the remains of what cannot come under a present. For Golub, history happens when something becomes present in passing away, when something lives in its death, when something is exhumed that cannot be exhumed.

Golub’s works tell us that everything will pass, and this fugacity remains sealed and enacted in the only unfinished work that he left behind for us: a 2001 chalk and crayon sketch of two lions that seeks to present them in movement. This movement is legible in the way in which the work seems to inscribe multiple, frame-by-frame images of the lions in motion on its surface. This almost cinematic presentation of the lions—as if several pages of a kind of flipbook of the lions in motion were presented at the same time on the same surface—keeps the image from signaling any kind of finality. If the work was forced to remain unfinished because of Golub’s untimely death, it is the case that this unfinished work nevertheless exposes the wound of a fissure or interruption that, as I have suggested, lies hidden in all late works and thereby prevents them from remaining integral, that exposes them to catastrophe. If it is true that there is no pen or brush stroke, no figure or trait, no motif or work, that is not divided by the innumerable mediations that are sealed within its movement, this seems particularly enacted by this late work, since its unfinished state corresponds to the traces of movement and revisions that remain arrested on the work’s surface. It is precisely the unfinished character of the drawing that enables



Leon Golub
Untitled, 2001

it to disorganize the difference between stasis and movement, preservation and erasure, survival and destruction, and life and loss. In this, it tells us what is true of all drawings: what is lost and mourned within any drawing, finished or unfinished, is the drawing itself. This is why this drawing speaks of the death, and even the impossibility, of drawing—of fixing (in ink, paint, or crayon) the always shifting, moving, and transforming world, a world that is sealed within this late work in its cinematic qualities (something that is staged in relation to Golub's other late works, since they can be viewed as a series of film strips that accent film's photogrammatic basis). What Golub's late works tell us is that every drawing or painting is a catastrophe, and partly because it already bears within it not only its own death and interruption—for all the reasons I have discussed here—but also the death and interruption of its author's life. As Roland Barthes notes in *Camera Lucida*, speaking more directly about photography, the "catastrophe . . . has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe."²⁹ If Golub has drawn his own epitaph in this late, unfinished work, he already will have drawn and painted this epitaph in all of his works. Presenting himself in this doubled portrait, in this drawing that depicts two lions, neither one of which is identical to itself, Golub inscribes his divided self—the self of at least the draftsman, painter, and "photographer"—into a drawing whose figures remain a source of identification and resistance, whose "tears and fissures" are the signatures of his final works. As he knew all too well, to read and to engage the world is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat, and, above all, to live and die, like the lion or lions that this Leon was.³⁰

That Golub often identified himself with lions is scarcely debatable and, indeed, can be confirmed by all the lions and sphinxes that punctuate his works from the 1950s onward, several of which—for example, *The Blue Tattoo* (1998), in which a lion is lying down holding a placard that reads "Getting Old Sucks"—explicitly display



Leon Golub
Getting Old Sucks, 2000

an identification between Golub and lions. These identifications tell us that Golub never views himself as simply Golub, or lions as simply lions, and these identifications are even more complicated because Golub often figures himself as a female lion (as in *The Blue Tattoo*) and his sphinxes are most often male and not female.³¹ His works time and again stage the deconstitution or destabilization of gender and even species identities, and indeed of identity in general. In what follows, I wish to trace the ways in which Golub's identity and work get dispersed not only across other names and figures but also across other works, and not only his. This dispersal effect—of identities, works, and media—corresponds to what I have called “drawing in tongues,” and I wish to delineate a rather extraordinary instance of this intense nexus of relations by considering Golub's 2002 drawing and painting *The Hierophant*. I want to suggest that, as one of his late works, it bears witness to nearly everything that has come before; it appears as a kind of archive not only of many of his interests but, in particular, of the more than fifty-year life collaboration he had with Nancy Spero. Indeed, in many respects the work's lateness permits it to embody much of the history of their relation, to encrypt references to many of their shared interests, and to register on its wildly palimpsestic surface the collaborative character of art in general.

The work presents a female figure, standing on her tiptoes, with her back arched and chest pressed forward, with her head tilted slightly upward, her mouth open as if trying to say something, and her arms stretched out horizontally behind her. This female hierophant is washed over in red, as are so many of Golub's drawings and paintings. It is as if, at the very moment she seeks to speak, makes an effort to speak, to interpret sacred mysteries or bring secrets to light, another force pushes her backward, nearly off her feet. What is most legible is the exertion she makes as she tries to speak, as she tries to say something in the midst of the red that washes all over her. The force against which she seems to make this exertion is legible in what could be a whitish gust of wind that, moving across the surface of the drawing from right to left at shoulder height, almost appears in the left half of the drawing in the form of wings that could belong to the hierophant's arms.



Leon Golub
The Hierophant, 2002

If Golub often bases his works on other works, repeatedly cannibalizes his own earlier paintings and drawings, frequently reanimates other works by other artists, or again and again takes images and materials from different contexts and recontextualizes them within his own works, we might imagine that *The Hierophant*, too, references several different sources.³² Indeed, the moment he gives his work this title, he evokes an entire constellation of earlier hierophants—beginning with the Greek *hierophantes*, but also including the Tarot hierophant—and also at least three more secret references that I will discuss in a moment, even as he also transforms and translates these figures into “his” hierophant. This is why Golub’s hierophant must be viewed as a kind of archive of all sorts of literary, religious, political, historical, and artistic traces that, together, delineate, without being fully able to delineate, this figure that is not just one and that stands against a force that presses on her in order to evoke mysteries that surpass our capacity to describe them, that pushes her to see what we do not want to see, and to bear witness to the catastrophes, ruins, violence, and even terrors of history. As messenger and message, this hierophant is a figure for media in general, but one that, like all media, can be reduced neither to a determinable content nor to a single medium.

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“Hierophant” is an ancient Greek word that combines *ta hiera*, “the holy,” and *phainein*, “to show,” “to bring to light.” The chief priest and interpreter of the Eleusinian mysteries, the hierophant was a holy figure who would present sacred symbols during the celebration of the mysteries and whose teachings were linked to the initiations held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone. These were the most famous of the secret religious rites of ancient Greece, and the mysteries represented the myth of Hades’ abduction of Persephone from her mother Demeter and the secrets of birth, sexuality, death, regeneration, and love that were at the heart of this myth. The myth seals within it lessons about the relation between life and death, the divine and the human, men and women, and mourning and rebirth;

Persephone’s is a story about a mourning that is never entirely overcome, even if it is seasonally interrupted, and even if the return of the seasons implies a certain kind of immortality.³³ Like the Greek hierophant, Golub’s presumably bears witness to these same relations and to this history of mourning and survival and, indeed, to this survival as a history of mourning. As a female, however, Golub’s hierophant departs from the traditionally male figure and, for this reason, could even be said to be a hierophant against hierophants, a hierophant whose distance from earlier hierophants reveals a kind of fissure within the hierophant’s identity. We might even say that Golub’s hierophant is a hierophant that mourns, among so many other things, the hierophant’s identity and name, since Golub transforms his figure into a kind of avenging angel that would, in the words that Nancy Spero takes from Hélène Cixous and uses as the title of one of her works in 1984, “let the priests tremble.”³⁴ The multiplicity of the hierophant’s identity is reinforced when we recall not simply its Greek origins but also the Tarot, where, depending on the deck in question, the hierophant—often depicted as the Oracle at Delphi, a pagan high priest, or a village elder—appears under several names, including the Pope, Jupiter, Bacchus, Odin, St. Peter, and Chiron. Generally surrounded by rams, elephants, wolves, and ravens, the Tarot hierophant is a figure for relation in general. Interpreting the mysteries of the cards, his book is always open and never fully determinate. Crowned by a magnificent triple crown that represents dominion over the three kingdoms—animal, vegetable, and mineral—his sign is Taurus and his element is fire, which is referenced in the red wash and billows of wind and smoke in Golub’s drawing. Spero had been interested in the Tarot already in the late 1950s; in 1958, she made a series of paintings based on Tarot themes, including *The Hanged Man*, *La Luna*, *Il Mondo*, and *The Lovers*.³⁵ What seems to have appealed most to her was the Tarot’s relation to the divinatory arts, to an unforeseen future that keeps its relation to the past and the present, and to the fact that, among other things, it brought together allegorical illustrations drawn from the late medieval period and ancient Egyptian iconography. Bringing together the past, the present, and the future, and across several different cultural contexts, the



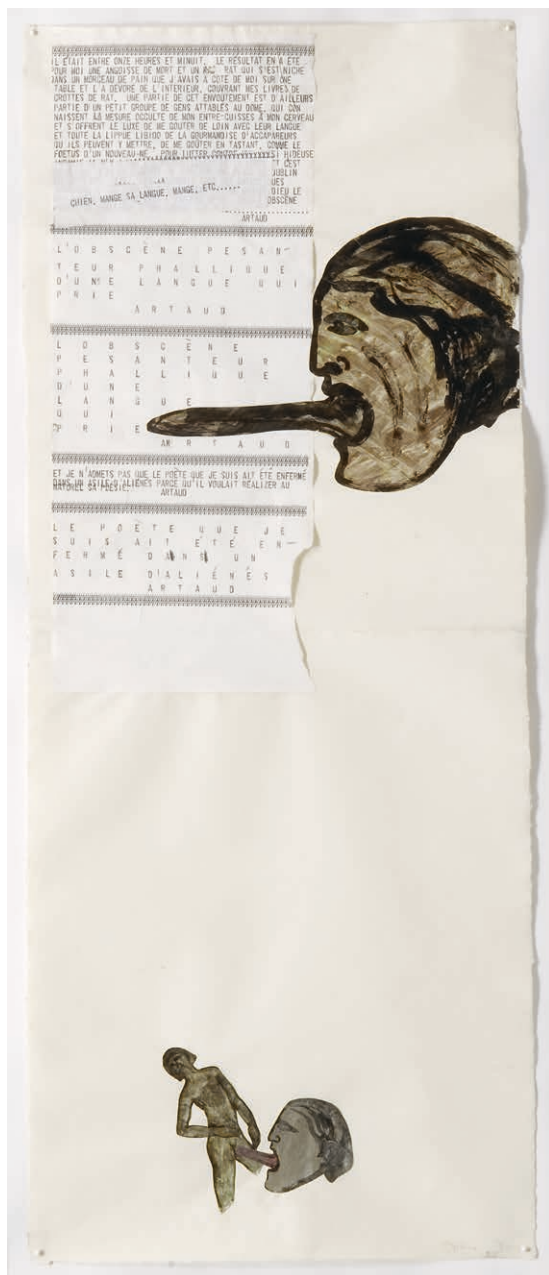
Nancy Spero
Let the Priests Tremble, 1984 (detail)

Tarot becomes a resource for Spero when, like the hierophant, she herself wishes to communicate the mysteries of life and death, love and sorrow, the relations among humans, animals, and the divine, and art's capacity to make evident, in however discreet a manner, precisely the force and consequences of such relations.

If the hierophant can never be just himself—or, in Golub's version, never just herself—it should not be surprising to suggest that there are several hidden figures encrypted in Golub's red, female hierophant. The first becomes legible when we insist on the difference that Golub introduces when he makes his hierophant a female figure. Rewriting history from the perspective of a woman is the gesture that Spero so famously repeated throughout her work, a gesture to which she especially commits herself after her four-year engagement with the work of Antonin Artaud (1969–1972)—in which she already had appropriated Artaud's voice and language in order to express herself—and, in particular, after finishing her 1974 works *Hours of the Night* and *Torture in Chile*. She decides at this point that she will only incorporate female figures into her art. But “I don't just use images of women,” she explains, “many times I find images of men but then transform them into their female counterparts.” Or as she puts it elsewhere, “I decided to view women and men by representing women, not just to reverse conventional history, but to see what it means to view the world through the depiction of women.” If, until now, the term “man” had been used to designate men and women, Spero decides “to represent women and men using only women.”³⁶

The first figure encrypted within Golub's hierophant is thus Spero herself. In particular, Golub references her by reenacting her decision to rewrite and even repaint history from the point of view of women rather than that of men, to, in the words of Cixous—but here we should follow Spero's transformation of Cixous's “écriture féminine” into her own *peinture féminine* and replace the writer's insistence on writing with the artist's insistence on painting—“write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies,” to “put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.”³⁷ For both Cixous and

Spero, women have been silenced throughout history and, as a result, “Those who have turned their tongues 10,000 times seven times before not speaking are either dead from it or more familiar with their tongues and their mouths than anyone else.” This is why it is essential for women to reverse the trajectory of history, or at least to insist on the perspective of women rather than that of men and to do so by seizing the language of men and, committing a kind of violence against it, reorienting it around women. As Cixous goes on to say, “woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier, which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds,” and, because of this, “it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.”³⁸ Instead of biting her tongue—instead of allowing herself to be silenced as she has always been, instead of diminishing or stifling her voice and desires—she should take the discourse of men, “bite” it, and turn it against itself from “within.” In many respects, this is what Spero already had done with the language and tongue of Artaud, and not least because Artaud's language is itself full of tongues, as is Spero's entire corpus, beginning from as early as her 1958 *Homage to New York* and her 1960 *Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You*, and continuing to her 1966–1970 *War Series*, her 1971–1972 *Codex Artaud*, and beyond even to her last major work, her 2007 *Maypole: Take No Prisoners*. Indeed, tongues are everywhere in Spero and, as Mignon Nixon has noted, over the course of her lifetime the artist produced a veritable “book of tongues plied in protest against their own quelling.”³⁹ Although these tongues can be found throughout her corpus, they are particularly evident in the works that engage Artaud's writings, and she already had appropriated his own “mange ta langue” (“bite your tongue”) as the title of one of her 1970 *Artaud Paintings*. Here, six decapitated heads all stick out their tongues in different directions. This gesture becomes a means of protest and resistance, even though the target of the command—“mange ta langue”—remains ambiguous, capable of referring either to whoever is



Nancy Spero
Codex Artaud, XVII, 1972 (detail)



Nancy Spero
Artaud Painting—Mange ta langue, 1970

the tongue's addressee or to the heads themselves. What is clear, however, is that there is never just one tongue, that the tongue can either speak or be muted, and at times can even speak, can even scream in its muteness. As Cixous would put it in her essay on Spero, "Spero's Dissidances": "This is why she starts (to) paint, in order to scream 'I do not.' One had to scream, not to make oneself heard but to hear oneself. She screams. In painting. She paintscreams. Signs the screams in painting. The explosions, the blows, the deaths, the prisons, she screams them out."⁴⁰ We might even say that Spero literalizes and enriches what I have been referring to as "drawing in tongues," and this because the language of her paintings is so traversed by the tongues and language of others, by all the history and violence she seals and reveals within them. As she states in her contribution to the 1992 forum "Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie," "I was literally sticking my tongue out at the world—a woman silenced, victimized, and brutalized, hysterical, talking 'in tongues.'"⁴¹

Ventriloquizing Artaud—identifying with Artaud's "sense of victimage" and "using his language to exemplify [her] loss of tongue,"⁴² using his voice to externalize her own suppressed and silenced voice, presenting herself through the mediation of a male other in order to overcome all traces of his masculinity, even if, at the same time, this act can only alienate herself from herself, can only permit herself to discover herself in this alienation—Spero produced nearly sixty *Artaud Paintings* and thirty-four scrolls that comprised the *Codex Artaud*. Everywhere in this work she demonstrates that her voice is never just hers. This is why, Christopher Lyon explains, "the key metaphor that Spero borrows from Artaud to describe their relationship in the work is of braids of tongues: the quotation containing this figure appears in *Codex Artaud VIII* and again in *Codex XVI*: 'This flux, this nausea, these straps—it is in these that fire begins, the fire of tongues. Fire twisted into braids of tongues.'"⁴³ If she uses Artaud's language, however, she insists on breaking up the lines and passages, interrupting them with images, and making her own "speroglyphs" with them.⁴⁴ As she puts it, "I fragmented these quotes with images I had painted—disembodied heads, defiant phallic tongues, . . . victims in strait-jackets."⁴⁵ Multiplying



Nancy Spero and Irene Sosa at the American Center in Paris in 1994

the sources of her language and her brush strokes—often citing Artaud’s own citations—Spero paints in tongues, since her paintings bear witness to the innumerable voices and traces that she incorporates into her works, not only from Artaud but also from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the history of hieroglyphic writing, various medieval manuscripts, twentieth-century concrete poetry, and different typographical traditions.⁴⁶ Even as she cites Artaud extensively, she disperses his voice across many others and, together, these voices form a kind of medium from which her own shattered voice emerges. But it is precisely this shattered plurality that she seeks and that Golub himself seals within his hierophant, a hierophant that, as I am suggesting, he associates with Spero herself.

Indeed, the moment Golub presents his female hierophant he reenacts Spero’s signature gesture and, in so doing, brings at least a trace of her into his work, if he does not enact an identification with her. This introduction of Spero into the world of *The Hierophant*, this inscription of her into a work of art, becomes even more legible, and even more intensely striking and compelling, as the face of Golub’s hierophant resembles no one more than Spero herself. There are several photographs of Spero that could have been the source of the hierophant’s face. A photograph of Spero, for example, taken in 1994 with the filmmaker Irene Sosa at the American Center in Paris is at least one likely candidate. Like the hierophant that Golub draws, Spero’s head is slanted upward, her mouth slightly open, her short hair a visual echo of the hierophant’s hair, looking into the distance, into the past, as she so often did, and even into the future. In either case, she seems to be looking into the distance, somewhere else, even beside herself.⁴⁷ If Golub identifies Spero with his hierophant—if he bases his hierophant on her (and, as he does in so many other contexts, on a photograph, this time of her)—it is certainly to pay homage to her most essential gesture, but it is also to suggest that she was always *his* hierophant, *his* guide to the secrets of life and death, to the secrets of pleasure and pain, and to the relations among sex, love, and mourning. Interestingly, she is most “his” when, giving himself over to her mode of working, to her insistence on transforming male figures into female ones, he is

most “hers.” These identifications are even more complicated, however, if we recall the innumerable female figures in Spero’s work that, like Golub’s hierophant, have their arms stretched behind them, from the women in *Notes in Time* (1979) to those in *The First Language* (1981), *To the Revolution* (1981), and *Let the Priests Tremble* (1984). Circulating throughout these works, and indeed throughout several works that Spero made in the last three decades of her life, these female figures belong to what she called her “stock company”: over 400 images drawn from the history of art, from the Egyptians to the Greeks, from aboriginal drawings to magazines, prehistoric figures to newspapers, paintings to photographs, that she would use and reuse, serially and in different contexts.⁴⁸ Many of these women are based on photographs that she gathered from various print sources. In *Notes in Time*, for example, the women with their arms stretched behind them are figures drawn from a photograph of a woman exercising with a jump rope and, in *Let the Priests Tremble*, they are based on a media photograph of a black athlete at the Olympics.⁴⁹

Identifying Spero with his hierophant—a figure that also carries references to her own repertoire of images—Golub inscribes her within a lineage of women who, as she insists in a 1987 interview, are *protagonists* within history, active agents in their personal, public, and political lives.⁵⁰ Joining her personal history with the history of innumerable other women, with different national and world histories—this entanglement with other histories is largely why Spero will claim that she is “not interested in individual physiognomies or personifications”⁵¹—Golub points to a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another. As Cixous would note in the essay that remained a constant reference for both Golub and Spero, the moment woman becomes a “subject for history,” she “always occurs simultaneously in several places” and, in this way, brings about a transformation in “human relations, in thought, in all praxis.”⁵² Golub here pays tribute to Spero by referencing the subjectivity and agency she wished to attribute to women—a subjectivity and agency that are both hers and not hers at the same, something she confirms by signaling the ways in which she strives to give herself a voice by associating it with the voice

of others, to express her life experience by appropriating words and images she finds elsewhere. If her identity comes to be linked to the many figures with which she here becomes associated, it is simultaneously dispersed and scattered across them, and not only them. Cixous again offers us language to describe the scene staged by Golub and played by Spero. In her words, Spero “lets the other language speak—the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death . . . the wonder of being several—she doesn’t defend herself against these unknown women whom she’s surprised at becoming, but derives pleasure from this gift of alterability.”⁵³

This alterability is visible in an even more pronounced way—and more pronounced precisely because it is more discreet—as Golub’s hierophant associates Spero with another hidden but nevertheless legible figure. In the midst of this play among different figures, in this crisscrossing of multiple identifications—minimally, among the hierophant, Spero, and even Golub, all of whom are inscribed in this work—another figure is evoked. This figure appears less through any visual echolalia—although I will suggest this is there, too—and more in terms of the text in which this figure appears and that Golub and Spero knew, a text that resonates profoundly with Golub’s hierophant. It takes its point of departure from a multimedia drawing with which they were also very well acquainted. I am referring here to the ninth thesis of Walter Benjamin’s late essay “On the Concept of History” and, in particular, to his famous “angel of history,” a figure that Benjamin reads into Paul Klee’s 1920 *Angelus Novus*.⁵⁴ Indeed, if we recall Benjamin’s passage on Klee’s work, and substitute female pronouns for his male ones, we are quickly invited to think about the relation between Klee’s monoprint and Golub’s drawing and painting:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something [she] stares at. [Her] eyes are wide, [her] mouth is open, [her] wings are spread.



Paul Klee
Angelus Novus, 1920

This is how the angel of history must look. [Her] face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, [*she*] sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at [her] feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in [her] wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives [her] irresistibly into the future to which [her] back is turned, while the pile of debris before [her] grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.⁵⁵

The relation between Benjamin's angel and Golub's hierophant is more than uncanny, and Golub's priestess would seem to be a deliberate visual translation of Benjamin's well-known figure, one that seeks to make even more visible what Benjamin imagines in Klee's work. Indeed, Benjamin's words would seem a more apt description of Golub's drawing than of Klee's painting. However, Golub knows that, if we register his reference to Benjamin's passage, we will return to Klee's work with a different eye, one now inflected by Golub's rather remarkable evocation of the passage that made Klee's image so famous.⁵⁶ This evocation not only turns the angel of history into a woman but also turns her sideways so that we can more easily see the winds and even storm that would seem to hold her in place, even as she stands up against them. But it is only when we return to the Klee image that we can discover the final, secret reference in the archive that Golub's hierophant is. Indeed, if we look at the *Angelus Novus* with Golub in mind, the first thing we notice—and here we notice something that, to my knowledge, has never been noticed before—is that the face of the angel is nothing else than the face of a lion, something that is not only confirmed by its nose and nostrils but also by the Torah-like scrolls that can now be seen as the lion's mane. In other words, what we recognize in the angel—and this is the true wonder of what takes place here in this vertiginous play of names and faces—is the most familiar visual trope through which Golub figures himself within his corpus: that of a lion. What we see in the angel—itsself a strange hybrid figure with the facial features of a lion and the body of a bird—is an encrypted visual trace of *Leon*. This identification between

the angel and Golub, between lion and bird, is confirmed by the fact that, in Slavic languages—Golub was the son of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine and Lithuania—and, in particular, in both Ukrainian and Russian, *golub* means “pigeon.”⁵⁷ With this rather striking identification—in which humans become non-human, lions and birds and even angels, in which women turn into men or men into women, and more than one sex or species comes to inhabit one body—Golub's hierophant reveals the secrets of identity: its multiplicity, its plurality, its incapacity to be circumscribed within a single figure or name. It also reveals the mysteries of artistic representation: that every act of drawing or painting, every act of writing or inscription, is itself an archive of an entire network of relations, all of which work together to both constitute and deconstitute the figure or body represented. The threaded knot to which these relations belong becomes a means of reflecting on the disjunctive techniques and media of representation in general. This point is wonderfully illustrated by Klee's angel. In David Wills's words:

such disjunction is certainly explicit once the angel is a figure drawn on the painted surface, once it is clearly no longer some ineffable spiritual emanation, some spirit or sprite. An angel embodied in ink, chalk, and brown wash is an angel fallen not just into incarnation but into technology; it has become artifact. The future it recedes into is a technological future that nevertheless occurs behind and in its back because it was always there, originarily, from the beginning. At the outside, one can say that the angel never was without technology, that a nontechnological angel has never been seen. Where anything resembling human corporeality begins, there technology begins also. If the angel doesn't see that, it is because it *is* that. In becoming history, in blasting itself dialectically out of the continuum, it has become the point at which, the flashpoint by means of which, as we see in the image, some technoanthropic form comes to be. Indeed, it does not look like what we would normally call an angel; rather, a bodily form emerges from, and defines itself against, a nebulous background, simultaneously revealing itself as a rudimentary mechanicity—intersecting lines, triangles, tubes, and scrolls—a prosthesis of proteiform organicity and marionette, animation and automation.⁵⁸

Like Klee's angel, Golub's hierophant tells us that identity and artistic representation can never coincide with one another, since both can only be what they are by never remaining the same from one moment to another. Neither Klee's nor Golub's "angel" looks like an angel. In each instance, the figure is not an angel but, instead, a figure for a process of technological reproducibility that, beginning in different forms of citation and repetition, in different modes of reference and encryption, asks us to reconceptualize what a figure or subject can be—especially as each figure is always on the way to becoming another one, and indeed many other ones.

Nevertheless, the difficulty here is that merely registering the possibility of this inscription of Golub, or at least of a figure of Golub, within Klee's *Angelus Novus*, however suggestive it may be, does not by itself illuminate the wild and far-reaching consequences of Golub's own drawing and, indeed, of all the figures sealed within it. What does it really mean for Golub to encrypt at least three very different names within *The Hierophant*: one, that of his wife, Nancy Spero, another a reference to one of Benjamin's most famous figures, the angel of history, itself based on the writer's interpretation of Klee's *Angelus Novus*, and another a series of hidden references to himself? In what way is the female hierophant with whom he has lived for most of his life like Benjamin's angel of history—or like Golub's own angel of history—and in what way is she also, via the relay between her and him established by the mediating figure of this more than doubled angel, a kind of double of him? The answer to these questions cannot be sought in this drawing alone, but rather in other drawings, texts, and artworks, all of which must be read in relation to it. I have begun to point to some of these materials, but this is what Benjamin already had invited us to do in his remarkable commentary on Klee's *Angelus Novus* and in the two different versions of his 1933 text entitled "Agesilaus Santander," in which the *Angelus Novus* appears not only as a double of Benjamin himself but as an angel that appears with feminine features, even if she is not entirely human.

In these two texts, written in two consecutive days while in Ibiza and sharing the same title, Benjamin tells the story of

the secret names his parents gave him—because they believed he might one day become a writer and because they believed it would be "a good idea if people did not immediately notice [he] was a Jew." He keeps these names a secret and he claims that they cannot "remain the same and untransformed," even as they bind together "all the forces of life." Neither of these secret names signals an "enrichment" of the person it would designate. "On the contrary," he writes, "much of his image falls away when the name is heard. He loses, above all, the gift of appearing human." Benjamin then goes on to describe a scene in which, referring to "himself" in the third person, he is doubled by an image of the *Angelus Novus*, a new angel that appears to be feminine and that encrypts a relation between male and female traits:

In the room I occupied in Berlin, even before that person had emerged fully armored and accoutered from my name, he had fixed his image to the wall: New Angel. The Kabbalah relates that, at every moment, God creates a whole host of angels, whose only task before they return to the void is to appear before His throne for a moment and sing his praises. The new angel presented himself as such before naming himself. . . . By taking advantage of the fact that I was born under the sign of Saturn—the slowest revolving planet, the heavenly body of hesitation and delay—he sent his feminine figure to follow the masculine one in the picture, and did so by way of the most circuitous, most ominous detour, even though the two had once (while remaining unknown to each other) been such close neighbors.⁵⁹

I want to recall this brief text here because it would seem to anticipate, to even provide a kind of allegory for, what we have begun to register in Golub's hierophant and, in particular, the many secret names sealed within its surface. If Benjamin suggests that names, secret or not—and every name bears within it several secret names and is therefore never just a single name—are always metamorphosing (they can never "remain the same and untransformed"), the identity of the person to whom they would refer is also constantly changing, undergoing a displacement, and becoming something else. Indeed, in the text, Benjamin seems to be inscribed within a series of allegorical transformations that

prevent any simple or univocal identification between him and a determinate name. What is even more remarkable is that, in the text, a new angel seems to appear from out of Benjamin's name and, after pinning its image on the wall, confronts Benjamin with his inhuman double (we are told in the second version of the text that Benjamin's secret name deprives him of "the gift of appearing human" and, in the text's first version, that the angel's "features had nothing human about them"⁶⁰). Benjamin's identity would seem to split, with his name almost stepping out from Benjamin himself in the form of a new angel and then putting up its picture, which turns out to be nothing other than Klee's *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin is transformed not into another person, but into a watercolor painting, whose new name or title is "New Angel." It is almost as if this image, not related to anything human, is what Benjamin becomes when, no longer who he was before he gave himself over to his secret name, he is a figure for transformation. But, as Samuel Weber has noted, "Just as he cannot hope to stay the same by virtue of his secret names, so this picture does not remain a simple picture but rather splits, doubles itself and sends out its emissary, its angel—who is no longer simply a picture hanging on a wall—down to earth in pursuit of the narrator."⁶¹ This is to say that we have a Benjamin who is no longer simply Benjamin and a picture that is no longer simply a picture and, in both instances, what mediates between them is an angel that is itself not just one since it begins as a masculine figure and ends as a feminine one.⁶² The narrator himself soon undergoes another transformation and takes on the characteristics of the angel, with its wings and claws: as he notes, "he, too, has claws and pointed, razor-sharp pinions."⁶³

Like the Benjamin who, revealing that he has secret names, undergoes a series of transformations, Golub's hierophant bears within it the secret names of at least Nancy Spero, Benjamin's angel of history, Klee's *Angelus Novus*, and even Leon Golub, not to mention the names of all the other figures, animals, and texts whose traces can be found in this hierophantic archive. That Golub's hierophant could be his own angel of history becomes even more plausible in view of the role played by angels throughout Spero's work, beginning with her early 1960 *Les Anges, Merde,*



Nancy Spero
La Renommée (2000)

Fuck You and continuing to her 1966 *Les Anges—La Bombe*, and all the way to her obsession with the winged goddess “Fama” in the several works she devoted to Pierre Biard’s 1597 *La Renommée*, a goddess who—while not, strictly speaking, an angel—is, like an angel, a mediatic figure, a winged messenger. In *Airborne from Exit 8* (1998), *Renommée* (2000), and *Renommée II* (2001–2005), Spero produces collaged images that take their point of departure from Biard’s work. His sculpture, depicting Fame blowing a trumpet, had been commissioned for the funerary monument of Jean-Louis de la Vallette, Duke of Épernon and Governor of Gascony, and his wife Marguerite de Foix-Candale in the church of Saint-Blaise de Cadillac in the Gironde. It was installed on top of the canopied funeral monument, which was inspired by the great royal tombs at Saint-Denis. Flanked by the praying figures of the deceased couple, the bronze statue of Fame blew the trumpet of good repute while holding the trumpet of ill repute. As was the custom in Renaissance France, the tomb was a rich polychromy of materials: white marble statues, red marble columns, capitals, and the statue of Fame in bronze.⁶⁴

Pheme, Fama, Fame—it is not an accident that she appears under several names—was the personification of fame and renown. She expressed her favor by granting fame and notoriety and her wrath by circulating scandalous rumors. The daughter of Elpis (Hope), she is a principle of mediatic communication. She is usually depicted with wings and a trumpet. In Roman mythology, Fama (“rumor”) was described by Virgil and other authors as having multiple tongues, eyes, ears, and feathers. A force of repetition and reproduction, she repeated whatever she heard, first in a whisper to just a few, then louder and louder until she communicated it to all heaven and earth. In Spero’s *Renommée II*, the angelic goddess is doubled, and these two flying figures seem to twist and fly through a dark vortex. Biard’s sculpture originally held a trumpet in its outstretched arm, but in Spero’s composition the figure comes to life as a leaping, striving winged female, grasping at something as it hurtles through space and, in so doing, echoing so many of her female figures (in *Airborne from Exit 8*, *La Renommée* even leads one of Spero’s leaping females, one of the women in her “stock company,” by the hand and in the air).



Nancy Spero in her studio, 1999

We could even say that Spero liberates Fame from the funereal monument on which she had been perched, permitting her to fly, in the company of other women, and to appear as a new allegory of her own newly gained freedom, as a new kind of angel. This transformation is already inscribed within *La Renommée's* name, since, referring to the one who is "Renamed," it literally refers to a process of "renaming." *La Renommée* names this process of endless renaming, a process whereby goddesses can become angels and whereby goddesses and angels can belong to a series of women, all of whom wish to inaugurate a new kind of history. Spero's own association with this process—a process that is always behind her work and that inscribes her within the lineage of all of her beloved women—is legible in a photograph of her in her studio, with one of her leaping women and the *Renommée* on the wall behind her. In Cixous's words, Spero's women always "rush forward, recede, from terror, do not come to rest, do not rest . . . are alone, but take turns like powerful musical notes. So strong, running champions, solitary stars, surviving goddesses, leapers over the abyss." "From their beauty, their air of victory, their arms raised like wings, their steps eager to dance," she suggests, "they are the daughters of the dream of freedom of a female being tossed into the invisible prisons by the old history. They are the emanations of an indignant soul."⁶⁵

The desire to rename is the motivating force within Golub's own hierophant as "she" transforms into—gets renamed as—Nancy Spero, Benjamin's angel of history, Klee's *Angelus Novus*, Leon Golub, and all the other secret names that are also encrypted within the surface of the drawing. It would seem that Golub's hierophant is revealed precisely when it embodies this process of endless becoming, when it does not remain what it is from one moment to the next. It assumes its proper "self" most fully at the very moment in which it becomes something else, another face, another identity, but a face and identity that themselves can never remain the same. This process of transformation and renaming *is* the proper self of the hierophant, which is simply a way of saying that the hierophant has no proper self, no determinate or fixed identity. Its "truth," as it is staged on the scene of its face and in relation to all the ways in which it is renamed, often



TOP: Leon Golub,
Winged Sphinx I, 1972

BOTTOM: Leon Golub
Aging Golden Sphinx, 2002

secretly, is that it is always in advance traversed by its others, by its innumerable others, each of which is “itself” always becoming an other, or several others.

Confirming what Georg Simmel called “the incredible and monstrous mobility of the face,”⁶⁶ Golub’s hierophant—archiving the innumerable relations that exist between Golub and Spero, either directly or indirectly—can neither be reduced to a single sex nor to just being human. Indeed, inscribing Golub and Spero into an entire host of human and nonhuman figures, it also shares a relation to the other figure that, throughout the history of their relation, marks the collaboration that defined their relation together, even if at times from a great distance: the sphinx. If, near the end of his life, Golub offers Spero “his” hierophant—and, as I have suggested, she is most “his” when he is most “hers,” and this because their relation never had anything to do with possession—as a modest but wildly rich expression of his love for her and for everything that she *is*, as a means of marking their entanglement with one another, he already had signaled this entanglement in all the sphinxes that traverse his corpus, and there are several, including *Judith Sphinx* (1954), *Siamese Sphinx* (1954), *The Ischian Sphinx* (1956), *Wounded Sphinx* (1965), *The Orange Sphinx* (1965), *Running Sphinx* (1965), *The Winged Sphinx I* (1972), *Yellow Sphinx* (1988), and, in the same year that he produced *The Hierophant*, the *Aging Golden Sphinx* (2002). Although the majority of Golub’s sphinxes are male—in this he draws mostly from Egyptian representations of sphinxes, in which, with very few exceptions, the sphinx bears the visage of a pharaoh or some royal male figure or deity—the playfulness of Golub’s own identifications with lions and sphinxes not only emphasizes their simultaneous force and vulnerability but also crosses every gender distinction possible. While most of the lions with which he is identified in his work are male—like most of his figures in general, since one of his primary targets throughout his life was the toxic consequences of masculinist power, violence, and war—there are significant moments in his corpus in which he associates himself with lionesses, his 1998 *The Blue Tattoo* being just one example. In general, the sphinx—with its human head and animal body—becomes a transgressive figure that cannot be

determined, and this indeterminacy proves to have great force. If most of his sphinxes are male, it is also because he identifies with this monster, and with the monstrosity of being human, since, as his work so often suggests, humans are not simply capable of great monstrosities but are also a monstrous hybrid of innumerable animals and elements.⁶⁷ Within the world of Golub, what would seem to make us most human is that we are never just human, and much of Golub and Spero’s creativity is oriented around making this fact visible. In regard to the role and place of Golub’s sphinxes, we would need to read all of them syntactically in relation to one another and to trace the circumstances and moments in which they were produced in order to think about how Golub mobilizes this figure to think about what it means to be both human and nonhuman and to explore his entanglement with Spero. Here I simply wish to refer to his 1972 *Winged Sphinx*, since it is one of the rare sphinxes in his corpus with a female face and, as such, belongs to the wild human and nonhuman bestiary that I have been tracing.

Bringing together a winged monster with the face of a woman—a figure that anticipates his angelic hierophant—and the body of a lion, the winged sphinx becomes for Golub one more emblem of the life that he, Leon the lion, shared with Spero. It is a sign, if not of a “new angel,” then of a new name for the coming together of the two archives that each of these two remarkable artists were, a coming together that prevents either one from remaining themselves, even as their collaboration seeks to open a new way of telling history.⁶⁸ This new history would begin with women and not men, or with a woman/man that cannot be reduced to a single gender, or even a single species. Benjamin seemed to have understood this gesture when, in a 1927 review of Fyodor Gladkov’s novel *Cement*, he writes that “the true features of the emancipation of women are gradually taking shape. . . . If the forces of command and domination really become feminine, this will bring about change in those forces, in the age, and even in the Feminine itself. Moreover, it does not mean a change into a vague humanity in general, but will present us with a new, more mysterious countenance, a political enigma, if you like, a sphinx-like expression.”⁶⁹

In returning to historico-mythological figures such as the hierophant and the sphinx—figures that surfaced for both Golub and Spero in relation to their long interest in ancient civilizations and mythologies, from Assyrian to Egyptian to Greco-Roman materials, and even beyond—the two artists draw resources from the past in order to address the present, but also to delineate the contours of an alternate history that would begin in a refusal of determined relations between the sexes. This refusal would itself require, as Benjamin suggests, a reconceptualization of politics in general. If confronting the sphinx has always meant confronting an enigma or riddle, it is the enigma or riddle of what collaboration might look like: the collaboration that can take place across bodies, communities, species, sexes, texts, materials, media, and artists who are never just one. It is the enigma or riddle of what it might mean to live a life “drawing in tongues,” even if, in the end, this activity can only be registered in its performance rather than in any narrative that would wish to trace it in a linear fashion. That Golub and Spero were aware of the endless exchanges that were the signature of their life together is made clear in an interview that Golub gives in 2001. There, he notes:

The day that Nancy became acutely aware of gender issues or violence against women, and came to terms with how she could engage these issues in her art, that gave her work an edge. It gave her work a thrust that goes directly into the external reality. It's still done through all the means of art. But the art points to the situation in the world. Or it's a metaphor for it. Or it's a direct transcription of it! We have gone on in our separate ways, but always observing the other. I've observed how she approaches these subjects. She observes how I approach it. And so actually, we've had a huge interchange over the years. Influences and cross influences. How different her delicate figures are against my brutes! My monsters, in a certain sense; they're monsters but human! At the same time, there's always been an interchange, you see. So her delicate figures have some curious interaction with my figures and mine with hers. And it's not just being in the same space. It's that in a way we're watching each other, observing.⁷⁰

What Golub suggests here, and what I have wanted to trace in this reading of his hierophant, is what it might mean to create

work *with* others, which is the only work worthy of the name “work.” Indeed, there is no other kind of work: work is always *working-with*. What Golub's *The Hierophant* confirms is not simply the collaborative character of art in general—its incorporation of a plurality of voices, materials, histories, and media—but also a moment when, near the end of his life, he writes, within the media of drawing and painting, and not only these, a kind of love letter to his beloved Spero. He makes a gesture in her direction, gives himself over to her and her work as he marks the mutualism that defined the ways in which they always told their stories together, even when these stories diverged. It is not an accident that he draws his *Aging Golden Sphinx* within months of producing his hierophant. Evoking his finitude, his growing sense of the death that will soon befall him, he paints one more sphinx, a sphinx whose face and paws share the colors of Klee's *Angelus Novus*. What this constellation of figures—including, at the very least, the hierophant, Benjamin's angel of history, Klee's *Angelus Novus*, and the sphinx—points to, in the wildest and most layered way possible, is the knot of relations, the “braid of tongues,” from which all art emerges. If its “first” name—but there can be no “firsts” here—is *The Hierophant*, this name bears reference to an entire network of secret names. These names name nothing else—but this is everything—than the ways in which Golub was interrupted by Spero, by the “hope” encrypted within her name and gesturing toward a future that would not be simply a repetition of the past. Because of its different “starting point,” because of its emphasis on women as protagonists, this future would inaugurate a different history, a history that could be countersigned by both her and Golub, that would begin with her trace “in him.”

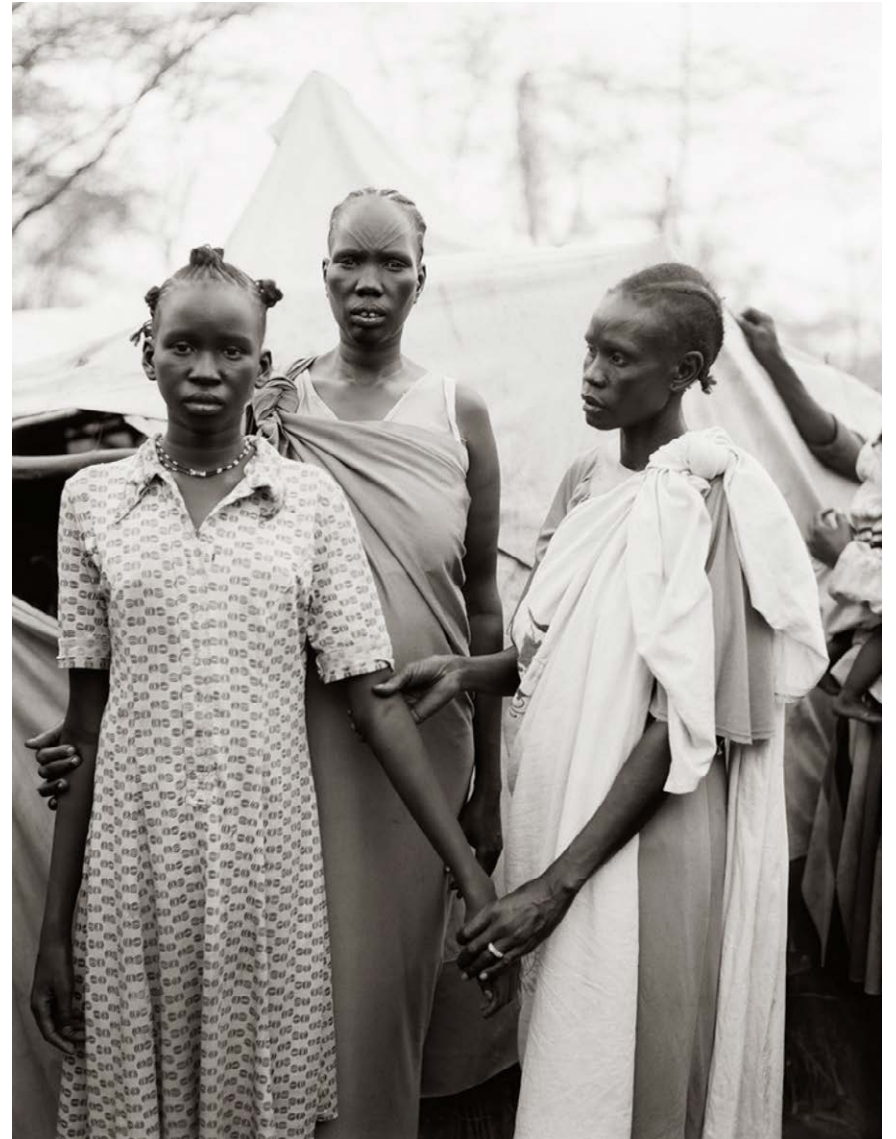
If Golub's hierophant is both an homage and a departure, it is also the possibility of a beginning in which he acknowledges that he is only who he is—and who he is not—because of his relation with Spero. What his work wants to tell her, at least as I imagine it, is that *he begins with her*, that *he draws with her*: “I begin, I begin in relation to you, my dearest hierophant, my red-washed angel of history, my other self, my self as always other. I begin in relation to the beginning that you are for me, in relation to your

drawings and paintings of women and history, of wondrous and miraculous beings, of goddesses of the earth and the sky, of all the violence we should resist and renounce, of so many different forms and colors and histories. I begin with this archive, these traces of you, this community of figures that you have offered me and that has always kept me from being just me, all the worlds you so generously opened for me and which, because they suggest everything I am saying here, already imply my correspondence with you, my being with you, with all the others that you are. This is why, I might say, I begin only on the condition that I am not alone, that I see through the eyes of another, that I have no self but the self that disappears in its relation to an other, in this instance, but always in this instance, 'you,' my *Spero*, my *hope*. May 'we'—but who are 'we'?—always draw together, in tongues, today, and always."



Nancy Spero
Lovers IX, 1965

Trees, Hands, Stars, and Veils



Fazal Sheikh

Akuot Nyibol, pregnant at center, with Riak Warabek and her daughter Athok Duom, who is recovering from malaria, Sudanese refugee camp, Lokichoggio, Kenya, 1992

The role of the portrait is to *look out for* the image in the absence of the person, regardless of whether this absence results from distance or from death. It is the presence of what is absent, a presence *in absentia* that is charged thus not only with the reproduction of characteristics but with presenting presence insofar as it is absent; with evoking it (invoking it, even) and with exposing it, with manifesting the retreat in which this presence is maintained. The portrait recalls presence in both senses of the word: it brings back from absence, and it remembers in absence. As such, then, the portrait immortalizes; it renders immortal in death.

—Jean-Luc Nancy
“Look of the Portrait”

It gradually becomes clear that a portrait does not resemble because it looks like a face; rather, the resemblance begins and exists only with the portrait and in it alone; resemblance is the work of the portrait, its glory or its disgrace; resemblance is tied to the condition of a work, expressing the fact that the face is not there, that it is absent, that it appears only from the absence that is precisely the resemblance, and this absence is also the form that time seizes upon when the world moves away and when there remains of it only this interval and this distance.

—Maurice Blanchot
“The Museum, Art, and Time”

We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precariousness and cannot, therefore, be killed; this is the face that we are nevertheless asked to kill, as if ridding the world of this face would return us to the human rather than consummate our inhumanity. One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake. . . . We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense.

—Judith Butler
*Precarious Life*¹

THERE IS PERHAPS NO MORE pressing issue in political and ethical life than the issue of human rights. We might even say that human life itself requires human rights. This is why, from their very beginnings, human rights have always been—with and beyond all the praxes that seek to secure them—a way to think about what it means to be human, and what it means to have the right to be human. If the challenge of human rights seems to be infinite, however, it is because we have yet to enact a politics that can ensure absolute justice and dignity throughout the world. Indeed, it would be impossible to name all the places in which the bloody conflicts of economic wars, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, wars of culture and religion, and the proliferation of racisms and xenophobias have threatened human rights, but also in which these wars and conflicts, for good or ill, have helped shape and define the shifting grounds both of rights and of what it means to be human. What is clear, however—and this is one of the many lessons that Fazal Sheikh’s remarkable photographs convey to us—is that the world is not a place where humanity or rights are shared, and this despite their respective claims to universality. Instead, it is a place of inequality and injustice, a place of loss and death, a place where every day there are more refugees, more people who are displaced and dispossessed, who starve, who are mutilated and raped, who are exiled and marginalized, and who live without the full exercise of political and civic rights. It is a place where, because of the inequality and injustice often written into the very formulations and definitions of humanity and rights, the task of defining and realizing human rights is infinite, and therefore permanently urgent and necessary.

Taking her point of departure from this urgency and necessity, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt famously discusses the paradoxical and aporetic character of human rights. In a chapter entitled “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” she presents a genealogy of the modern mass phenomenon of the refugee, of the numerous “stateless” populations that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War, and with the rise of imperialism and totalitarianism—in a short period, 1.5 million Russians, seven hundred thousand Armenians, five hundred thousand Bulgarians, a million Greeks, and hundreds

of thousands of Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians left their countries. Exiled or deported, deprived of all civil and civic rights, excluded from any form of political participation, the refugee, in Arendt's formulation, introduces a kind of breakdown into the contemporary understanding of human rights. "The conception of human rights," she explains, "based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human."² The crisis within human rights arises from the fact that, with the appearance of the refugee, the presumably sacred and inalienable rights of man are shown to be entirely alienable, to lack any protection or reality at the very moment in which they can no longer be understood as rights belonging to citizens of a state, or to members of a particular political community. In other words, it is precisely when the noncitizen appears, when the human is divorced from citizenship (even if it is citizenship itself that often defines the human) or forced to move from the place that grants him or her citizenship, that rights are lost.³

The consequences of this loss suggest that human rights do not precede political ones; instead, political rights—without which there could be no concept or confirmation of citizenship—are what determine the recognition and definition of "human rights," even beginning with the most elementary ones: those of survival, or of what Giorgio Agamben, following Walter Benjamin, has called "bare life."⁴ At the very moment when the continuity between the human and the citizen is broken down, refugees—citizens of nowhere in the world—can no longer be "recognized or treated as humans," and this even when, as Arendt notes, the refugee can only keep a relation to his or her very human body, when he or she is "still human." As Étienne Balibar explains, "when the positive institutional rights of the citizen are destroyed—when, for example, in a given historical context where citizenship and nationhood are closely associated, individuals and groups are chased out of their national belonging or simply put in the situation of an oppressed national 'minority'—the basic rights that are supposed to be 'natural' or

'universally human' [also] are threatened and destroyed."⁵ The refugee, then—trembling at the edge of the distinction between the human and the nonhuman—becomes human, merely human (or, as Nietzsche would have it, "all too human"), only when, no longer treated as human, he or she is no longer capable of having rights. This is why, in Arendt's words, "the paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general—without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself."⁶ A person becomes human, that is, when he or she can no longer identify himself or herself. This reversal of the priority of human rights over political rights therefore belies the contradictions at the heart of the rights of man: if they are supposed to be inalienable and universal—free from the determinations of any particular nation or state—they also are dependent on the sovereignty of that nation or state for their definition, protection, and realization. As Werner Hamacher reminds us, it is this "fundamental and unresolvable paradox" that "allows Arendt to speak of 'the perplexities of human rights.'"⁷

Since the early nineties, Fazal Sheikh has oriented his camera toward some of the most vulnerable people in the world. He has done so in order to call attention to the necessity of human rights and their accompanying discourses, even as his photographs argue for a vigilant interrogation of the terms of these discourses and, indeed, of the concepts at work within them: life, death, humanity, subjectivity, relation, alterity, ethics, violence, and displacement in general. His photographs are a testament to what he has sought to present to us in his ongoing effort—in the aftermath of the continued decline and dissolution of the nation-state and its sovereignty, and of the general erosion of traditional political-juridical categories (such as the citizen, rights, and nationality)—to document and record the resulting mass phenomena of the refugee: in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, but also in India, Mexico, Brazil, and beyond. They seek to portray what Benjamin famously referred to as the "tradition of the oppressed"⁸—a tradition composed of, among so many other things, the silence of the displaced and

marginalized, and the inexpressibility of the traumas of the dispossessed. Like Benjamin, Sheikh seeks to enable those whom violence has deprived of expression to articulate their claim to justice.

In presenting us the traces of violence, deprivation, oppression, and effacement in relation to which his subjects exist—in relation to which they live and die, and even live as if they already were dead—Sheikh’s photographs seek to present the life and dignity of these men, women, and children, to attest to the necessity and responsibility of producing photographs that might facilitate this life and dignity, that may even speak and be heard. What is at stake, then, is not only the possibility of casting a light on those whom history has sought to reduce to silence, whom history has deprived of a voice and a face—and history here refers to the specific historical actors and communities who have sought to enforce this silence and deprivation—but also the chance that the traumas they have experienced can be given expression. What is implied here is that a photograph can never be thought of solely in terms of what is printed on photographic paper: it always bears the traces of a photographic event, and, if we are obliged to reconstruct this event, this act of reconstruction requires more than simply identifying what is exhibited in the photograph. It requires an act of engagement, an act of interpretation, which also responds to the several histories that, together, form the contexts within which the photograph was produced. This is especially the case when—because we may be viewing a person who has suffered some form of injury, a person who, because of this injury, now lives as if, even in life, he or she were already dead—the relation between what is visible and what is invisible is no longer certain. We know, for example, that numerous visual and textual expressions might be able to testify to a person’s injuries, even while still enabling the most visible signs of the trauma to remain unseen: in the world of the photograph, what is visible always threatens to become invisible and what is presently invisible is what needs to be read.⁹ To read a photograph therefore would mean to give an account of the several histories and contexts sealed within it, to seek to reconstruct the circumstances in which it was produced, or better, of those it

encrypts, displaces, or dates on its surface—circumstances that would include the trauma of violence and loss, of dispossession and death. But precisely because the circumstances or contexts in which a photograph is produced can never be fully given (since they are interwoven within an entire network of historical and social relations, what Fredric Jameson has called “a whole world in itself”¹⁰), how is it that we can respond to what can never be seen directly within the image? That this question is raised by a desire to read historically is confirmed in a passage from the drafts to Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History.” “The past has deposited in it images,” he tells us, “which one could compare to those captured by a light-sensitive plate. ‘Only the future has developers at its disposal that are strong enough to allow the image to come to light in all its detail. Many a page in Marivaux or Rousseau reveals a secret sense, which the contemporary reader cannot have deciphered completely.’ The historical method is a philological one, whose foundation is the book of life. ‘To read what was never written,’ says Hofmannsthal. The reader to be thought of here is the true historian.”¹¹ If the structure of an image is defined in relation to what remains unseen or unwritten in it, this withholding structure prevents us from experiencing the image in its entirety and tells us, if it can tell us anything at all, that it is in relation to this invisibility, to this departure from sense and understanding, that our capacity to bear witness may indeed begin to take place. What is at stake in the encounter with Sheikh’s photographs is not simply the possibility of seeing and understanding what cannot be seen directly within them but also the necessity of bearing witness to what has been silenced or concealed (but which nevertheless has left its traces on their surfaces), to what, arising from the days and nights of memory that are inscribed within them, haunts us, and encourages us to think about the loss and dispossession for which we remain, still today, responsible.

The photographs that appear in the collection of Sheikh’s portraits published by Steidl in 2011—simply entitled *Fazal Sheikh: Portraits*¹²—are drawn from the entire trajectory of his career and include images from his early work in African refugee camps in Kenya, Tanzania, and Malawi, where he sought to capture

the aftermath of conflicts in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, and Rwanda; his project along the Afghanistan and Pakistan borders from 1996 to 1998, *The Victor Weeps*, in which he sought to portray Afghan men, women, and children who, living for decades as refugees in northern Pakistan, offer us a lens through which we might view the history, future, and consequences of the wars in Afghanistan; his work from 1992 to 2000 focusing on Somali women refugees in northeastern Kenya and published under the title *A Camel for the Son*; his portrait of Seynab Azir Wardeere, a Somalian refugee who, after enduring intense trauma during the Somali civil war, tries to remain faithful to the rites and meaning of Ramadan while under threat of eviction from an asylum-seekers' center in the Netherlands, published in 2001 under the title *Ramadan Moon*; his project *Moksha*, which centered around the displacement and dispossession experienced by widows in India who, experiencing a kind of social death, go to the holy city of Vrindavan to devote themselves to Krishna and to find *moksha*—heaven or salvation; his work on the devastating effects of traditional social mores on women in India, focusing on a wide range of female experiences, from infancy to old age, that emphasize a life full of inequities, and published under the title *Ladli* (“beloved daughter” in Hindi); and his work on migrant workers in Brazil’s Grande Sertão, on immigrants who cross the border between Mexico and the United States, often at great risk, and on the ways in which the rituals of Santería, an important Afro-Cuban religion, provide resources for the Cuban people as they increasingly face an uncertain future.¹³

While the portraits included in *Fazal Sheikh: Portraits* initially were produced in relation to the projects listed above, they are presented in the book in a way that is neither chronological nor referenced and situated only in relation to the particular project to which they first belonged. The effects of this presentation are various, but perhaps the most significant is that it helps put the different projects (and the portraits and photographs that comprise them) into relation with one another, into a kind of series—as if they were all of a piece, and as if they were an invitation for us to follow a red thread that is legible throughout the entirety of Sheikh’s corpus.¹⁴ I wish to stress this point since I

believe it has its analogue in the subjects of Sheikh’s portraits. Like the portraits that, however singular they may be, nevertheless lose some of their singularity by being put into a series, the persons in the portraits also are both singular and never simply themselves. As we will see, this means that what we have before us are a series of portraits that are never simply the portrait of a single person, even if there is only one person in the image, but rather a kind of archive, or set of archives, of all the experiences, histories, and relations that have made “him” or “her” who he or she is. These are portraits, in other words, that ask us to rethink what a portrait is or may be, and do so by suggesting all the different ways in which we are always, in advance, related to others, even when the distance between us and these others may seem impossibly vast.¹⁵ This lesson is legible at every step of Sheikh’s photographic trajectory.

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Among Sheikh’s earliest photographs are the images he took from 1992 to 1995 in the African refugee camps of Kenya, Tanzania, and Malawi, which were established in the aftermath of conflicts throughout the Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, and Rwanda. The number of people displaced by civil wars, ethnic and religious conflicts, and forced migration is astonishing: hundreds of thousands who left the Sudan in the late 1980s to escape a harrowing civil war, some 500,000 Somalis who by 1992 had settled in camps in Kenya to avoid tribal and clan-based violence, and 1.7 million Mozambicans who sought refuge in six neighboring countries in the course of a fifteen-year civil war. The photographs he took were included in his first book, *A Sense of Common Ground*, and the method of work that he established in the project—which included living in the communities and learning about their experiences, collaborating with them in the creation of formal portraits and landscapes, using his subjects’ names in the titles of his images and thereby challenging the anonymity that so often attends media representations of refugees, and including texts written by him and his subjects, a practice that he would develop later, when he began to include fragments

of his conversations and interviews with the refugees—set the tone and stage for all of his future projects, even when these later projects emphasize or elaborate one or more of these elements more than others. In each instance—either in this early project, or in his later ones—Sheikh presents a series of portraits that become not only portrayals of the refugees (of this or that particular refugee, or this or that particular group of refugees) but also allegorical meditations on the nature of photography in general, on the possibility of offering a portrait, and, in particular, on what makes a portrait a portrait in the first place. These are portraits that are not reducible to the representation of a singular and autonomous person; instead, they ask us to think about what we mean when we say “person” (individual, subject, “someone,” or whatever name we might choose). These are portraits, in other words, which engage and enact an entire philosophy of the subject.

In the first image of *A Sense of Common Ground*, for example, we are confronted with a double portrait—a portrait of two Sudanese women, Ajoh Achot and Achol Manyen, taken in Lokichoggio, Kenya. The women are standing in front of the trunk of a tree, with other trees faintly visible in the background and with the blurred and almost ghostly images of at least three other refugees behind them and to both sides of the tree. While it is clear that these two women are the central figures in the image, it is also clear that neither woman appears alone. This double portrait suggests that the identity of either of these women cannot be thought of without considering the relation they have with one another, or with the figures and landscape behind them. The identification between the women and the tree behind them, for instance, is legible in the ritual scars that flare across the two women’s foreheads. These scars are echoed in the splayed fingers that Achol presses to her plain dress, even as these scars and fingers rhyme with the figure of the tree itself. Indeed, the sets of superimposed V’s that have been inscribed onto the women’s foreheads—patterns that are common in Sudanese rituals of scarification—evoke the growth of vegetation and refer not simply to fertility and reproduction but also to the branches of trees. It is as if the branches that are missing from the tree in the



Fazal Sheikh
*Ajoh Achot and Achol Manyen, Sudanese refugee camp,
Lokichoggio, Kenya, 1992*

photograph appear on the foreheads as a signal of what has been severed—as if the severed branches, that is, working as a kind of identifying insignia, suggest the way in which these two women have also been torn from their homes and identity—and this even though, within African communal life, such intricate lines are often the signs of a person's humanness or identity, a person's tie or bond to a particular community. Like the photograph, scarification is a mode of inscription, a means of leaving and preserving traces, and indeed a trace of the impression left by one person on another. This is why, if these faces are like trees, it is because they are not simply faces, but rather archives of traces.

This association between inscriptions and trees helps us register something else about these early photographs. In nearly every photograph that Sheikh takes in these camps, there is some kind of vegetation or tree in the background: from the trees and bushes in the backgrounds of the portraits taken in the Sudan to those in the images from Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, and Rwanda. In each instance, there is a relation established between the landscape and the person or persons situated and photographed in these often desolate and difficult terrains. This is particularly the case in the very beautiful image of Agai Miriam Adeng, an unaccompanied minor in the Kakuma refugee camp, sitting in the middle of a tree with a multiply divided trunk, and with a small figure in the distance on the left of the image, beside another tree and seemingly haunting the young Agai. A somewhat related but more intensified image, from a different and later project in Bhutan in 1996, is the remarkable image of Bahadur's eighty-fifth birthday, taken in a Bhutanese refugee camp in East Nepal. In the image, Bahadur is seated in front of a large, somewhat gnarled tree trunk, flanked by children sitting on the tree's roots, which are partially above ground, and by children who are peeping through branches or standing beside the tree. The image is, among so many other things, a signal of the relationality that is always encrypted within the figure of the tree.

But what is a tree, and what is it especially when it appears in a photograph? Can there be a photography of trees, or even a philosophy of trees? If a photography or philosophy of trees were possible, it would have to start with the trace or archive, with

a thought of the relation between life and death, survival and destruction, and remembrance and forgetfulness. That this is the case is legible in all the cases in which the photograph before us includes a tree or trees whose branches are intertwined with one another, as if they formed a kind of lacework or set of graphic tracings (not unlike the complicated relations exposed and encrypted in the correspondences among details in the photographs: as in the relays that exist among the scars, the fingers, and the tree in the image of Ajoh and Achol, or in the interplay between the limbs of bodies and the limbs of trees that takes place in so many of these images), through which the play of light and shadows is legible and hidden at the same time. In the double portrait with which we have begun, the branches of the tree behind the two women are not visible, as if to suggest the lost or severed relations that inform the image's historical background—the losses or deaths experienced by the two women—as well as the decontextualization that takes place within any photograph. Like the severed branches, in other words, the moment in the image appears suspended and torn from any particular historical moment. Pointing to the deracinating force of the photograph (and of all photographs), these photographs not only tell us something about the moment in which they were taken—and about the several histories that are sealed within that moment—but also about the structure and character of photography itself. But if the invisible branches and foliage of trees in these images are often figures for the histories and cultures that have been truncated all across the African landscape, these histories and cultures live on in the trunks and limbs of the bodies before us.

This is why, as a figure of life and genealogy, of nature and relation, the tree is also a kind of archival image, an image of the archive, an image of the state of the archive, and even of the archive that this set of images is. We might even say that the tree is a photograph of these relations, or another instance or version of them. Like the innumerable trees that permeate the poetry of Paul Valéry, the trees in these images bear the traces of an entire history and therefore always have more than “two trees” within them. Internally divided, and cut off from any simple or single source, each tree appears as a singular plural whose multiple



Fazal Sheikh
*Agai Miriam Adeng, Unaccompanied Minors' section,
Sudanese refugee camp, Kakuma, Kenya, 1993*



Fazal Sheikh
*Babadur's eighty-fifth birthday, Bhutanese refugee village,
Goldap, Nepal, 1996*

branches become figures for the innumerable threads and relations within which each of these photographs is produced and circulated. Indeed, the tree that naturally would cite both nature and genealogies, that would bring together the past, the present, and the future, at least if it were given an iconic aura—as it seems to be given in many of the images here—is more than ghosted or spectral. The shades of black and white cite the origins of photography (as I will suggest in a moment, trees belong to the earliest beginnings of photography), while the entangled and interlaced branches in so many of the African images suggest the knot of relations in which we live. A kind of exfoliating network of markers and references, the tree of life or genealogies is a spectral tree that touches or contaminates (even as it is touched by) vast archival networks, and not only within these images. It therefore becomes a figure for the history that is sealed within each image. This is most legible in terms of the aura that surrounds the baobab tree (a tree that has fascinated Sheikh for some time now and that forms part of a future project).¹⁶ A living monument, the baobab tree is the most ancient living thing in Africa. Since there is no living thing that is closer to being permanent than the baobab, it is not surprising that it has inspired notions of animism or religion and has been viewed as a secret meeting place for ancestors, as a refuge for spirits or gods. A solitary tree—baobabs do not form part of any woodlands—the baobab also forms a kind of forest in itself, since, wherever it grows, it bears its own communities of plants and animals. It is therefore a figure of a self that is multiple and therefore not simply “itself.”

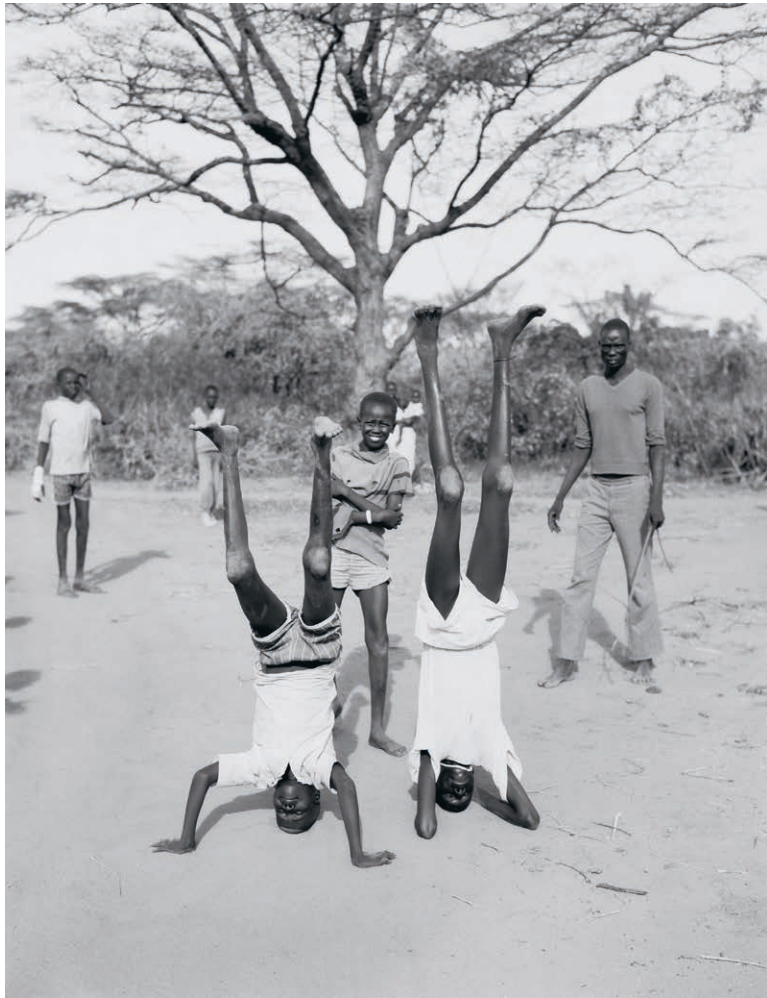
In myths about the baobab’s origins, the tree is seen to be standing on its head, with its roots in the air—an uprootedness that seems particularly fitting in the context of Sheikh’s refugees (and one that may even be mimed in his image of two “unaccompanied minors” standing on their heads with their legs and feet in the air, in front of a tree and before a group of onlookers)—and its famously wrinkled skin evokes the several histories that seem to have left their traces on its surfaces. The baobab tree also hovers over the intermingling of different clans or groups and therefore embodies the traces of the complicated history of their relations and conflicts. All along the East African coast, for

example, the spiritual beliefs of Africa’s indigenous people have become interwoven with those of Arab immigrants. As Rupert Watson has noted,

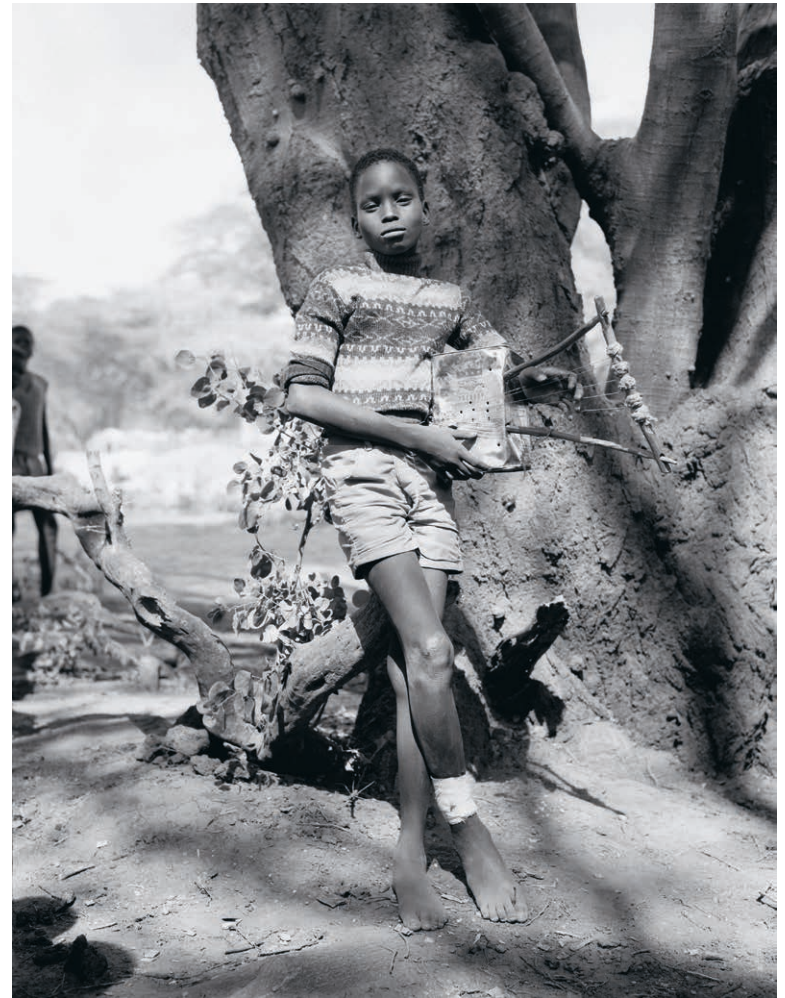
Old mosques and tombs may be relics of the Islamic tradition, but the power of their past is strong enough to attract people of any religious or animist persuasion. They, and the trees that surround them, create a vital link between the living and the dead. While Muslims once worshipped at the mosques, the trees overshadowing their ruins may now house the spirits of the ancestors of African animists, who still come to commune with these spirits. Nowhere are the edges between the animist spirituality of indigenous Africans and the Islamic beliefs of Arabs better blurred than in a grove of baobabs round an old Islamic town.¹⁷

This is why the baobab, like all the other trees that populate Sheikh’s images, is also a figure of relations in general and, like all genealogical or family trees, a figure of inheritances and legacies (and this is why, given the relation between hands and the issue of inheritance and transmission that traverses Sheikh’s entire body of work, so many of the portraits that include trees here also emphasize hands—hands that are placed on chests, that hold up heads, that clasp the hands of others or are placed on shoulders or heads, that are holding objects or images, that are holding a loved one, that reach down tree trunks or reach across the front of trees in order to clasp something else or even simply to touch the ground).

Like photography, the tree exists in relation to the play between light and darkness, between the light of the sky that enables it to synthesize the nourishment it receives from the depths of the earth and the darkness of these depths. Rooted in a kind of communication between the sky and the earth, it becomes a figure for photography itself and—as is evident in images such as that of Miriam Mac and Agot Anyang playing “bao” underneath the shade of a tree, that of Kai Chop Deng, a young boy who, also traversed and surrounded by shadows, has lost his family and stands in front of a tree holding a handmade lyre (made from an American relief aid oil can, sticks, and wire), or that of Wezemana, who, in a Rwandan refugee camp in Tanzania, is



Fazal Sheikh
*Unaccompanied Minors, Sudanese refugee camp,
Lokichoggio, Kenya, 1992*



Fazal Sheikh
*Kai Chop Deng, Unaccompanied Minors' section,
Sudanese refugee camp, Kakuma, Kenya, 1993*

seated in the shadows of a large tree with her brother Mitonze asleep in a sling around her back, also with a series of ghostly figures in the background—like the camera, it is also a medium for producing images. By casting shadows across itself, the surface of the earth, and the bodies or objects nearby, the tree works like a photographic apparatus and, in its collaboration with the light of the sun, recalls the earliest photographic experiments—not only those of William Henry Fox Talbot or Anna Atkins, whose “photogenic drawings” were among the first efforts to produce images without a camera, but also those of Aristotle himself. In his *Problemata*, Aristotle tells us how, sitting under a tree during a partial eclipse of the sun, he witnessed the sun cast multiple crescent-shaped images of itself on the ground before him. As the leaves of the tree moved, the changing spaces between them worked as pinholes, allowing the sun’s rays to pass through and cast images on the ground, framed by the tree’s shadows. Following this observation, Aristotle built his own device, which consisted of a dark chamber with a single small hole to allow for sunlight to enter. He noted that no matter what shape the hole was, it would still display the sun correctly as a round object. His description of this device in the *Problemata* is the earliest known written evidence of a camera obscura, and the shadows produced by the trees in Sheikh’s photographs are descendants of this early mode of inscription and reproduction.¹⁸

Sheikh reinforces this link between production and reproduction in the exquisite series of portraits of Somali women and their children, of sisters and brothers, and of activist women and women’s groups in his project *A Camel for the Son*, which also reproduces images from his earlier African project, and which focuses on a series of Somali refugee camps in Kenya. He introduces the book with an account of the history of warfare and violence that led to the Somali exodus into Kenya in the early nineties. Incorporating first-person accounts of the women who, fleeing conflict and drought in Somalia and experiencing extreme trauma in this flight, nevertheless raised their children in exile, amidst ongoing abuse, sexual assaults, displacement, and privation, and worked to hold on to friends and relations, their religion, and a way of living that was constantly threatened



Fazal Sheikh
*Abshiro Aden Mohammed, Women's Leader, Somali
refugee camp, Dagahaley, Kenya, 2000*

or touched by death, Sheikh's moving series of portraits and texts again emphasize the interrelatedness that underlies the everyday life of the refugees.¹⁹ Indeed, most of the images in this series have more than one person in them, and, even when they include only one person, the narratives placed alongside them help us understand the history and relations, the traumas and suffering, the impoverishment and loss that are sealed within the image before us—in the body, the posture, the face, the eyes or hands of the person or persons within it.²⁰ This point is manifested in a rather remarkable way in the portrait of Abshiro Aden Mohammed, since what we see in her eyes is the image of Sheikh taking her picture.

This inscription of the other within a self is reinforced in the images of mothers and children, most of which were taken in the feeding center in a Somali refugee camp in Mandera—and not only because they offer moving portraits of female refugees and their sons or daughters but also because they again provide us with a kind of allegory of photography in general. Beyond the fact that these Madonna-like portraits depict a relation between mother and child that is touched by fragility, vulnerability, and even death, they become associated with photography itself, since, as I have argued elsewhere, the figure of the mother within the history of photography has always been another name for photography. In accordance with this history, the mother's body is viewed as the condition of possibility for a process of reproduction that gives something to be seen. As we can see in the images in question, neither the mother nor the child can remain an independent self because, bearing the trace of the other, each can be identified with the other. In experiencing the mother's alterity, in experiencing alterity in the mother, the child's singularity is displaced and even delimited. This is why, from the moment of his or her birth, the child already experiences a kind of death in relation to the maternal body—a body whose material residue lives on in his or her body and therefore retrospectively confirms not only his or her body's passage through the mother's body but also his or her capacity to retain a relation to the mother's body, even after her death. It is no accident that Sheikh published his first book, *A Sense of Common Ground*, under the sign of his mother.



Fazal Sheikh
*Abdia Abdi Khalil and her son Hameed, Médecins Sans Frontières
feeding center, Somali refugee camp, Mandera, Kenya, 1993*

As he tells us in the book's dedication, affirming her death and presence throughout his work, her relation to his photographic project: "This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother Nini who died in 1987 but whose spirit is present in all of my work."²¹ Like the mother, the photograph exists between life and death, the past and the present, interiority and exteriority, body and image, and subject and image. It opens onto a future whose lineaments are not yet known, even if what can be known enables us to delineate the contours of the horizon and limit of death. This is why, within the history of photographic discourse and, in particular, within the framework offered by Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, the mother (not simply the mothers in these images but all mothers) is also—beyond everything else that she is in relation to the child's life or death—nothing more nor less than a figure for the birth and death of photography. This is evident in all of the maternal images of this series (and there is even a maternal character to the images in which sisters hold brothers as well), and it is even more forceful when the mother is absent but nevertheless strongly present, as is the case in the photograph of Hadija and her father Badel Addan Gadel—a photograph that circulates throughout Sheikh's corpus. Indeed, the mother is so present in her absence that we are told that Hadija had fallen silent and mute ever since her mother disappeared (something that also is figured in the fact that Hadija's father is half-absent from the image: what we see instead is his arm extended toward her and his right hand on her shoulder. This sign of filial care is divided in the image between the father and her absent mother).²²

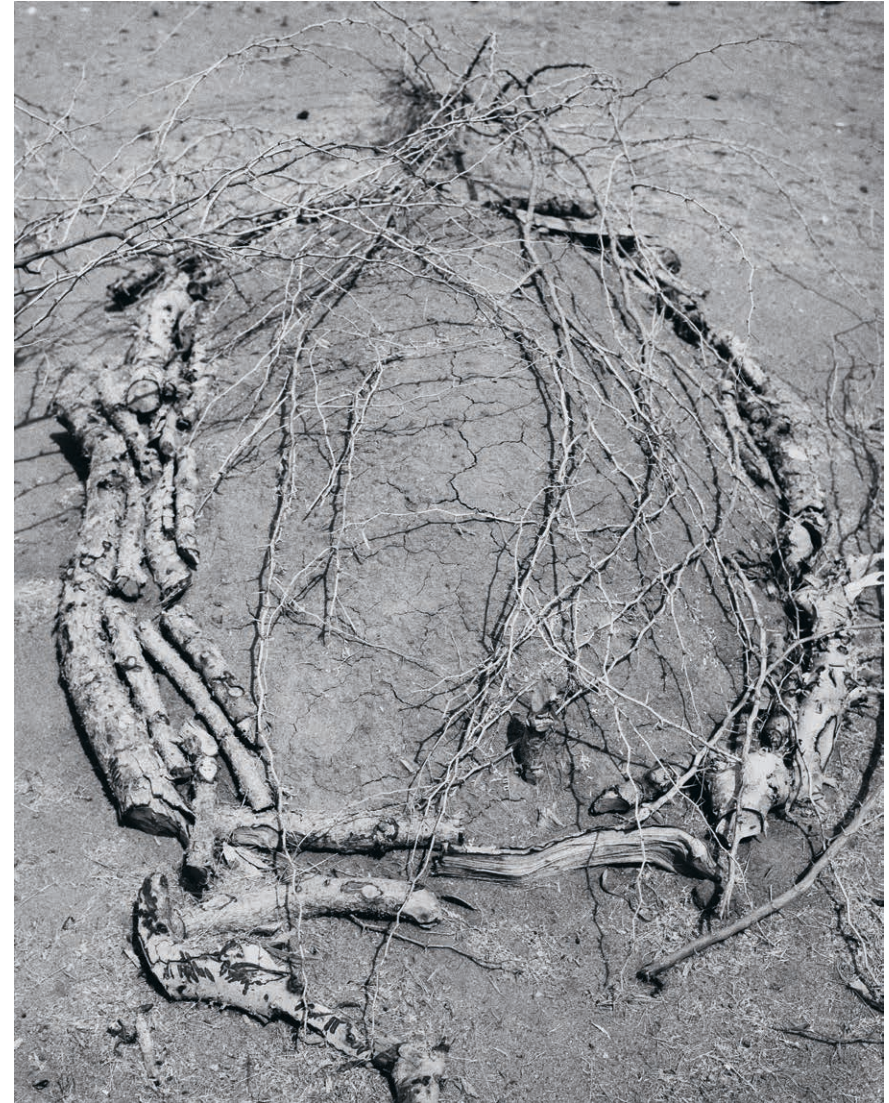
This is why none of Sheikh's African images can be reduced to a portrait of a single person or even a group of persons, since each one opens onto an entire history that includes not only the history of cruel wars and ethnic and religious conflicts, the history of loss, death, destruction, and displacement that permeates the lives of these refugees, the history of the cultural and religious myths in relation to which the refugees live and die, the relations between the refugees and a landscape that itself bears the traces of these bloody histories, of drought and famine, but also of endurance and strength, and the history of their relation to their families, friends, and communities. Each portrait, in other



Fazal Sheikh
*Hadija and her father, Badel Addan Gadel, Médecins Sans Frontières
feeding center, Somali refugee camp, Mandera, Kenya, 1993*

words, opens onto a world: it tells us that, if we wish to see this or that refugee, to understand his or her plight, we can only begin to “see” him or her by understanding his or her relation to an entire network of intensely mediated relations. This is why, in viewing these portraits, we simultaneously experience the absence of the subject as well as the fact of its “having-been-there,” the relation between life and death, between testimony and its impossibility, between the self and an other (and even several others), and among the past, the present, and the future. This “active” transformation of a “self” into a kind of archive acknowledges the multiplicity that *inhabits* “him” or “her.” If the self does not exist before its representation, there is also never a single, homogeneous self that—even before it is placed in front of the camera—coincides with itself, since it is always inscribed within an infinitely vast web of relations. We could even say that photography names the process whereby something stops being what it “is” in order to transform itself into “something else.” This transformation therefore implies a kind of death, since what existed *before* the transformation is no longer present, and it is no accident that Sheikh intersperses, among his images of Somali refugees, a series of photographs of graves (the significance of these photographs is signaled again when, some years later, Sheikh reproduces them at the end of his *A Camel of the Son*)—each of which could be said to be a “portrait,” but a portrait that tells us what is true of all portraits: a portrait is always less “the immortalization of a person than the presentation of (immortal) death in (a) person.”²³

If each detail in these portraits has its force and logic, what are we to do with the hands that appear throughout Sheikh’s work, and not only within his early African portraits, where hands are, among so many other things, a means of holding and keeping in a context in which everything is unstable, fragile, and fleeting? What are we to do, for example, with the hands in the portraits of Akuot Nyibol with Riak Warabek and Akuot’s daughter, Athok Duom, of Halima Abdullai Hassan and her grandson



Fazal Sheikh
*Gravesite east of the abandoned Somali refugee camps
of Kenya on route to Somalia, 2000*

Mohammed, and of Shamsa Moka Abdi and her sister Shahil, to give only three examples? How are we to understand the play of hands in Sheikh's portraits of the hands of Gumercindo Lisboa, or of the hands of Eves Gongora Loreng holding a sunflower in honor of Saint Lazarus in Cuba? What about the hands that seem to take on special significance in his *Moksha* and *Ladli* projects, where again they become a means of transmission or comfort—with widows holding books or teenage girls clasping their hands together? Or the many hands that appear in *The Victor Weeps*? There, in Sheikh's record of Afghan refugees along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the winter of 1997, we find several portraits of hands—some portraying just hands, holding small photographs of lost fathers, sons, and brothers, and others of women holding photographs of lost husbands and sons—as in the portrait of Qurban Gul holding a photograph of her son, Mula Awaz. In each instance, whether the hands are holding something, whether they are holding each other or someone else, or simply resting on this or that part of a body, they imply an effort to keep and to hold, to carry and hand over, to hand down, like a kind of legacy or inheritance, a fragment of the past.

That this is the case can be seen in the portrait of Haji Qiamuddin holding a photograph of his dead brother Asamuddin and of Abdullah holding a photograph of his nephew, who died in a Soviet bombardment. These two photographs were taken after the Taliban's capture of Kabul in 1996 and after the series of prohibitions it proclaimed against images, pictures, and portraits in December of that year. They were taken in refugee camps, among the Northern Alliance, in the secrecy of night and under the light of a small lamp, and they are meant to remember and memorialize the deaths of loved ones, and indeed to remember and memorialize an earlier act of remembrance and memorialization: they are, after all, and among other things, photographs of photographs. They are meant to remind us of the violent history that led to these deaths—a history that includes the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; the efforts by the CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) to support Afghan resistance to the Soviets and expand it into a holy war; the devastation of Afghanistan during the ten years before the Soviet Union's

withdrawal in 1989; the fact that, by 1990, almost half of the Afghan population—6.2 million—had fled the country; the civil wars and the eventual emergence of the Taliban's reign of terror in the early to mid-1990s; and, by the winter of 1997, with 2.7 million Afghans still living in exile and nearly two million Afghans dead in the period after the Soviet invasion, the reduction of a country to a landscape traversed by the traces of dispossession, destruction, and death.²⁴ The images also are meant to evoke, in however encrypted a manner, the long history of invasion, colonization, and violence that has defined, shaped, and divided Afghanistan for several centuries and the deaths that this history has produced in the past, but also, as we know all too well, in the present and in the future. They also call forth important questions about the relation between Islam and the long history of the prohibition of images, the relation between Islam and photography, technology, and modernization, the relations among the practice of palm reading, the Islamic belief in the evil eye, and the importance of the hand and its five fingers within the Koran but also as a prophylactic against this evil eye.²⁵

Like Sheikh's earlier African images, these images, however simple and straightforward they may seem to be, also evoke a history of crisis and loss—and one that is delineated in the essay that Sheikh writes for the project, which offers a summary of the conflicts that have punctuated Afghanistan's history for at least the last two centuries, as well as in the fragments of testimony offered by the refugees and transcribed for the volume. Again, Sheikh seems to suggest that, if these are portraits, they can only be portraits if they are situated in relation to a history that remains both visible and invisible within the image, and whose effects are there to be read. This is why, like the trees of which I already have spoken, these hands are archives that bear the traces of a life, and indeed of several lives (in this way they are like the many faces of elder Afghan men and women, whose lines and wrinkles are like those to which Benjamin refers in his essay on Proust, pointing to the exilic condition that has become the signature of our era: "The wrinkles and creases in our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not at home"²⁶). But, if these portraits



Fazal Sheikh
Gumercindo Lisboa, Grande Sertão Veredas, Brazil, 2001



Fazal Sheikh
*Haji Qiamuddin holding a photograph of his brother Asamuddin,
Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1997*

of hands holding photographs are indeed portraits—we are given the names of both the person holding the image and the person in it—they suggest that a portrait never gives you the person as such, but always only a fragment or aspect of that person. At the same time, the play between the portrait and its title seems to tell us that this hand, this hand holding a photograph, indeed this portrait itself *is* this person holding the image, a suggestion that points to the photographic character of the portrait's subject or subjects, and even before they were in front of the camera. As Benjamin writes in his artwork essay, “the human being withdraws from the photograph.”²⁷ This means that there can be no photograph without the withdrawal of what is photographed. This is why these images cannot be said to represent the act of a comprehension that begins by taking hold of something, by laying one's hands on something. Instead, the hands in these images barely seem to hold the small photographs that lie in their palms. The image of the dead child seems to be almost floating, suspended like the hand that holds it, barely supporting the image with two of its five fingers, each of which points in a different direction, as if to suggest, however discreetly, the mobility of reference that structures every photograph. The entire photograph is touched by a kind of fragility and vulnerability, by a sense of surrender and evanescence. All of these are also legible in the photograph of the brother's hand holding the image of his dead sibling and especially in the hand's disappearing, withdrawing fingers. In both instances, the thought of the hand offered here is one of a hand that gives, that offers, that holds, if this is possible, “without taking hold of anything.”²⁸ If these two photographs therefore suggest the fragility, uncertainty, and indeterminateness from which any act of understanding emerges, they also inscribe, within the limits and contours of their permeable frames, an allegory of photography: an allegory that seeks to tell us something not only about the nature of photography but also about the possibility of reading photographs in general. The hands that extend themselves, that seek to hold or hand over, to hand down, these hands tell us what a photograph desires: it, too, wishes to offer, to keep, to convey and hand over a fragment of our memory. Like the hand, it comes to us as a



Fazal Sheikh

Abdallah holding a photograph of his nephew who died in a Soviet bombardment, Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1997

mode of transmission—but a mode of transmission that asks us to think about what it means to transmit or communicate, to bequeath something, to leave behind a legacy or inheritance through which a future might become possible. The photographs are about, among so many other things, what it means to pass something down, to hand something over—a memory, a death, a past, present, or future—and not only because they confirm, in however interrupted a manner, a story of inheritance and lineage, a story of the relations among fathers, sons and brothers. Emphasizing the singularity of a single death—and we should never forget that what is ineffaceable about death is that, no matter how many thousands, even millions of deaths there may be, these deaths are always singular deaths—they also suggest that, like photography itself, inheritance is a matter both of singularity and repetition, a matter of the singularity of a memory and of the repetition without which there could be neither memory nor inheritance. This association between inheritance and photography also suggests that what these hands surrender to us is what is given to us by every photograph: an image. We can never remind ourselves enough that the photograph gives us an image rather than what is photographed. We could even say that every photograph turns the photographed into a kind of refugee, tearing it from of its context and displacing it into another place and moment. In these two photographs, what is torn from its context is not simply the hand that offers the photograph of a dead son or a dead brother, the act of memory and memorialization itself, but also the innumerable other deaths evoked by these singular ones. That the small photographs evoke the son's and brother's absence tells us that the photographs—the ones before us but also the ones held in the father's and brother's hands—come to us, as all photographs do, in the mode of bereavement.

Moreover, we know that once the other dies, once the friend, the lover, the relation is no longer alive, the dead one can only survive “in us” as an image. At the same time—and this is part of the force of these two photographs, and especially that of the dead child, since both of them could be said to “exteriorize” the process of an internal memory—when we look at the dead who have been incorporated as images “in us,” we are looked at by

them (and we are even transformed into them, that is, into images). This means, in the wording of Derrida, that “it would be from death, from what might be called the *point of view of death*, or more precisely, of the dead . . . or more precisely still, from the point of view of the *face* of the dead in their portraiture, that an image would give seeing, that is, not only would give *itself* to be seen but would give insofar as it sees, as if it were seeing as much as seen.”²⁹ Or, as Benjamin puts it in his book on the German mourning play, in a passage that brings together the face and death: “History, in everything untimely, sorrowful, and mis-carried that belongs to it from the beginning, is inscribed in a face—no, in a death's head.”³⁰

We need only look again at the two images before us: the dead child looks directly at us, and even the half-blind dead brother still looks at us with his remaining eye.³¹ This inversion of the relations between subject and object evokes one of the features of the stilled life but also of the genre of still life painting, wherein images and things often seem to be endowed with life and often assume a kind of agency. Offered to our gaze like the two photographs before us, the still life returns this gaze and, in the wording of Hal Foster, thereby threatens “to dispossess us of our sight.”³² This characteristic of the still life—the becoming-animate of the inanimate that, for example, happens so often in Dutch still lifes—works to transvalue the ancient term for still life, *rhopography*, the depiction of insignificant things. If this work of transvaluation suggests a kind of contradiction at the heart of still life, it also forms part of the power of Sheikh's photographs. Like the still life that depicts insignificant things at the same time that it seeks to bestow significance on them, these photographs seek to remind us of the value of lives and deaths that largely have been overlooked or considered less significant than others. They ask us to think about our relation to the lives and deaths they evoke and portray, and about the status of life and death in general. They confront us with a series of questions—questions that, today, are more urgent than ever—questions about the value of Muslim lives in relation to other lives, about whether or not Afghan refugees are considered to be human within United States foreign policy, and about the consequences

of a failure to consider Muslim and Arab lives as lives. Like the still life that, as Norman Bryson suggests, asks us to look at what has been overlooked, these photographs ask us to regard the destroyed lives and devastated peoples that, for Sheikh, have remained unnoticed and uncounted³³—that, in Benjamin’s word, have remained “expressionless.” That the photographs therefore ask us to think simultaneously of the relations among the past, the present, and the future is confirmed by the deadly fact that we can no longer view these two images without also being asked to think about the death and devastation that has been visited on Afghanistan and its peoples since 9/11 but also for the past several decades, and that will no doubt continue into the future. This is why, we might say, these photographs of hands that bear images of the dead in their palms offer us traces of the past from which we also may read the future. They tell us that all reading is a kind of palm reading—but a palm reading that, like the reading of these two palms and of the small images that cover part of the palms to which they now belong, reveals an encounter with the death that defines the horizon of the future, and not only ours.

This is why, if the history and events sealed within these two photographs call out for memory—and for a memory of the violence and trauma they evoke—this memory could never be a memory that recovers or memorializes. If the past is lost and ruined, it cannot be recovered. Nevertheless, we must still imagine a means of remembering what still demands to be held and preserved, even if within a history that eludes us. As Benjamin would have it, we can only learn to read the irretrievable images of the past by finding ourselves in them. That we should indeed recognize ourselves in these portraits is what Sheikh asks us to understand, since it is only by registering our relation to them that victors can begin to weep, and this history of conflict and violence might be softened and even diminished.

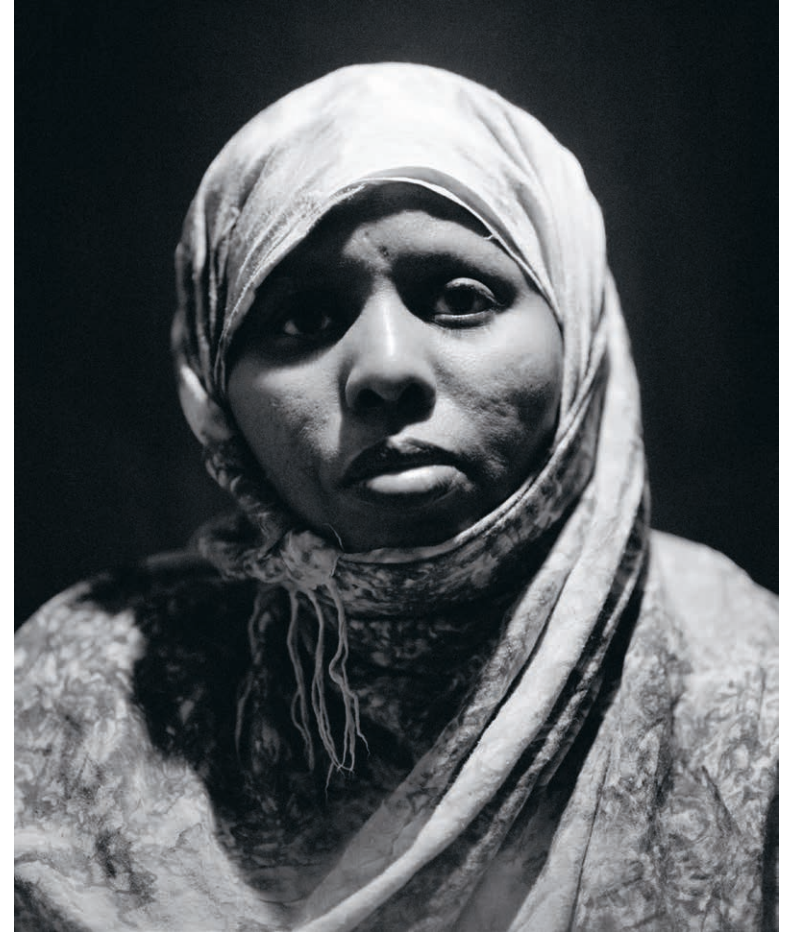
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Among the many portraits that compose Sheikh’s oeuvre, the most extended one is his portrait of Seynab Azir Wardeere, a Somali refugee who, after leaving her home with her family to

escape the violence and fighting in Mogadishu, eventually witnesses her father’s murder at the hands of four armed men, who then attack and rape her in front of her children. She and her husband trade their home for passage to Europe, but, because “there is only sufficient money for two people,” she leaves for the Netherlands with her son, Mohammed, and “her husband and two daughters travel to his family in Baidoa.”³⁴ The book that offers Seynab’s portrait, *Ramadan Moon*, includes eight portraits of her face and the upper one-third of her body, and the images present her from different angles and under different light. As the images move from one to the other, it is as if her round face, changing in relation to the light and shadows that reveal and conceal it, undergoes the phases of the moon, something that inscribes her identity in relation to the moon, which circulates in the book as a figure of her relation to home—she tell us that “in Mogadishu, the moon and the stars were always with us”³⁵—and of the moon that gives the book its title and inaugurates this most holy of months in the Islamic calendar. The book also includes an account, in Seynab’s own words, of the traumatic series of events that she and her family experienced, of the difficulties she and her son encountered in the Netherlands, and ends in her stated uncertainty, during the month of Ramadan in 2001, about whether or not she will be permitted to remain in the Asylum Center in which she and her son are living. It also closes with a timeline that traces the history of the Somali flight from Somalia to the Netherlands—which began in 1984, but which intensified in 1991 after the outbreak of civil war—and moves forward to April 2001, when the new Aliens Act in the Netherlands took effect, “limiting the asylum seeking process and confining the rights of appeal.”³⁶ I mention all of this to suggest that, if this book is a portrait, it would seem that portraits can only be portraits if they include a great deal of history and indeed a set of contexts in which to situate the portrait and therefore understand it as one—a point that again emphasizes the fact that, for Sheikh, a portrait cannot even begin to convey the “identity” of this or that person without providing at least a glimpse into the world in which this person has lived, lives, and may live. What is also significant is that, if this portrait is



Fazal Sheikh
*Seynab Azir Wardeere, Asylum Seekers' Center, Osdorp,
the Netherlands, 2000*



Fazal Sheikh
*Seynab Azir Wardeere, Asylum Seekers' Center, Osdorp,
the Netherlands, 2000*

really meant to be a portrait of Seynab, the book that is to be her portrait begins, not with images of her, but with a series of blurry images of trees, barely visible against the night sky, but upside-down because they are reflected in water. Similar images are subsequently interspersed between the different portraits of Seynab. They include trees and leaves that are again mirrored in water, but in a way that keeps the images unfocused. Indeed, this water will appear later in the form of condensation on window panes that makes it difficult to see through what otherwise would have been transparent. While the water and the blurred images appear as figures for the mobility, instability, and even dissolution of perception itself, it is perhaps more accurate to say that they work against everything that resists alteration or change. Indeed, if water is a force of dissolution and transformation, survival and destruction, life and death, what it initiates also leaves something or someone behind. Within the world of *Ramadan Moon*, water is the very principle of leaving, which is why Sheikh's beginning is also a departure.³⁷ This departure is legible in the process of disappearance that he stages in this sequence of images—images that initiate his presentation of Seynab, even as they suggest the disappearance of landscape that introduces her to us. Evoking a play between light and darkness, day and night, and presence and absence, these images help transform the water from a reflective surface to an area of projection, but one which also evokes the traces of the tears that blur Seynab's vision. To put it differently, these blurry images offer us a lens through which we might see the world as Seynab sees it, through her tears.

But, beyond the shadowy images of trees and leaves, light and shadows, the book also includes passages from the Koran—the first of these is placed after the initial set of blurry images and before the first image of Seynab, as if to suggest that, in order to approach her, we first need to pass through these images and the Koran. Most of the Koranic passages in the book refer directly to Allah, and all of them evoke an entire network of figures that, circulating through the Koran, can also be associated with photography: light and darkness, the sun and the moon, dawn and sunset, past and present, life and death, memory and



Fazal Sheikh
Night of Ramadan, the Netherlands, 2000

forgetting, knowledge and representation. Indeed, Allah himself seems to participate in a photographic landscape. As the Koran puts it, in a passage cited in the book:

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth.

His light is as if there were a niche and within it a lamp.

The lamp is in a glass, like a brilliant star lit from a blessed olive tree.

The tree is neither of the east—getting its rays of the sun only in the morning, nor of the west—getting its rays of the sun only in the afternoon, but exposed to the sun all day long, its oil glowing forth, though no fire has touched it.³⁸

It is as if the Koran were itself a kind of manual for photography, or at least for its language. One of the primary figures here is that of the star, which, captured by Sheikh's camera with a long exposure time, leaves streaks of light in the sky, as if it were writing in light. These lines of light actually seal several temporal moments onto the surface of the photograph, making the photograph itself a kind of archive of the passing of time. As Benjamin would put it, referring to the time that is inscribed in every image: "Every present is determined by those images that are synchronic with it: every Now is the Now of a specific recognizability [*Erkennbarkeit*]. In it, truth is loaded to the bursting point with time. . . . It is not that the past casts its light on the present or that the present casts its light on the past; rather, an image is that in which the Then [*das Gewesene*] and the Now [*das Jetzt*] come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning."³⁹ If we are to believe Benjamin, the history of photography in fact begins with an interpretation of the stars. If Benjamin associates ideas with constellations, it is because the movement from star to constellation is also a matter of representation. In particular, this movement belongs to a representation that, bringing the past and the present together, suddenly emerges, as he puts it, "into a constellation like a flash of lightning." This similarity that emerges only in order to vanish, this oscillation between appearance and disappearance, can be read in the light of a star. This light, which in a flash travels across thousands of light-years, figures an illumination in which the present bears within it the most distant past and where the distant past suddenly traverses the present

moment. This emergence of the past within the present, of what is most distant in what is closest at hand, suggests that, like the flash of similarity, starlight appears only in its withdrawal. It also suggests that the star constellation is another name for the experience of aura. Like the photograph that presents what is no longer there, starlight names the trace of a celestial body that has long since vanished. The star is always a kind of ruin. That its light is never identical to itself, is never revealed as such, means that it always is inhabited by a certain distance or darkness.

This is why there is no star, no stellar system, that is not a name or figure for photography, for what Benjamin elsewhere calls *Sternphotographie*, star photography.⁴⁰ These figures of light form a kind of light-writing whose fugitive inscriptions are traced and illuminated eternally across the heavens. All stars are always in the process of vanishing and fading away. They are always already dying, and most of them already have died. Like a photograph, the diminishing light of the stars is a commemorative sign of what is no longer there. The sky and its stars tell us that living means living with loss and ruin. Nevertheless, in the face of loss and ruin, Seynab still gathers the strength to project her desire for eternity onto the skies in the form of an image: that of the star constellation, and of the moon itself. As we know, it is the first appearance of the crescent moon that signals the beginning of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and the holiest of its four holy months, since this is the month in which the Koran was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. If Sheikh places so many passages from the Koran in between the portraits of Seynab, as a kind of frame for the images, it is because he wishes to suggest that her identity is indissociable from this religious holiday (and indeed from her religion in general), and also, as I have tried to indicate, to evoke the photographic resonance of the Koranic figures themselves. If this latter point points to the photographic dimension of this sacred text, it is because this text exists and proceeds in relation to a constellation of figures that belong to the language of photography.

Sheikh's book further delineates and reinforces his sense of what makes a portrait a portrait—it must include an entire

network of relations that, both visible and invisible within the portrait's surface, points to an identity, even if, inscribing this identity within a broader set of relations and circumstances, it also unsettles it. As in all of his work, the portrait is less a portrait of a single person than it is a set of archives without which we could never even hope to enter the world he or she inhabits. This withdrawal from the portrait in the name of a different kind of portrait does not result from Seynab's disappearance or effacement, but, on the contrary, from the multiplication and proliferation of the archival traces that simultaneously constitute and deconstitute her face, and her self. As Emmanuel Levinas puts it in his essay "Peace and Proximity," referring to the face as more than simply a face, "the face is not exclusively a human face." It is instead an archival surface that suggests "the extreme precariousness of the other."⁴¹

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The portraits drawn from Sheikh's *Moksha* project were taken in the first few months of 2004 in the city of Vrindavan, also known as the "city of widows." They therefore must be read in relation to the history of the city (and, in particular, the sacred history of the city, a history that includes its being the childhood playground of Krishna), but also in relation to the way in which, "as more temples and shrines were built in Krishna's name, the city became the holy place of refuge for India's thousands of dispossessed widows," who, worshipping Krishna, "meditate on his name at the end of their lives in the hope of achieving *moksha*, and joining him forever."⁴² Abandoning what was left of their lives after the death of their husbands, they have come to this holy city in order to overcome the cycle of reincarnation, to be converted into brides of Krishna, and, in this way, to achieve *moksha* and salvation. But our encounter with the widows of Vrindavan is delayed not only by the iconographic images of Krishna that open the book, but also because Sheikh emphasizes the entry into the city. To enter *moksha*, he seems to suggest, is to enter the imaginary that sustains the city, to enter the city and the stories and legends that belong to its very representation.

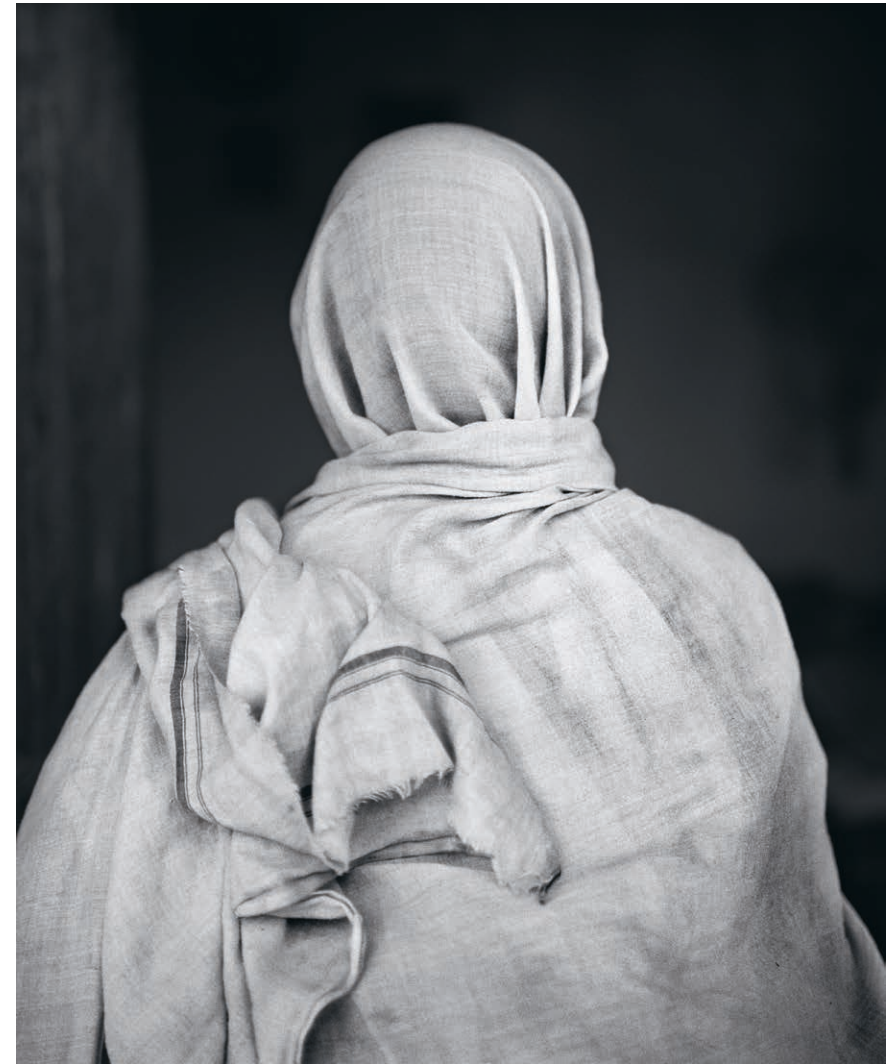
Indeed, it is not possible to view the widows without passing through a series of mediations: we must look at them with eyes that bear the iconography of Krishna, the images of utopia, or the religious beliefs that promise happiness and Heaven, and that view the city in which they now live. We must look at them knowing that we are not only looking at a particular subject, a woman, an Indian woman, a Hindu woman who has been left a widow. To view the other is nearly impossible, Sheikh seems to suggest, since we always must look at her through something else, through the images that precede her, through the stories that justify her presence here, and even at the very moment in which the photograph is taken.

After the images of Krishna, after the images that tell us why these women have made their journey into this holy city, we enter the city, but without being able to see anything clearly. Unlike his other images, these images are blurry, unclear, and uncertain. They are dominated by obscurity. At moments it would seem that it is a question of a river, and that we are perhaps crossing the waters that will carry us, too, to *moksha*; at other moments it would seem that we can make out a flight of steps, perhaps a door, perhaps a column. We are confronted with an urban landscape, with an entry into a city that is deliberately like a river, like the waters that separate the sorrow and darkness of the world in order to transport us into light. After crossing this river that is also a city, after looking at a city that is also a river, we can look at Sheikh's widows. And yet, the first illumined image, the first high-definition image, as it were, the first portrait in this book of portraits, is the image of a woman whose identity is occluded since we can only see her from behind, hidden by a shawl that covers her body, and that seems to bind her, to hold her tightly, to keep her in place. We will return to this later—to the many widows who remain unseen by us—but let us stay a little longer in this passage, in this suspended moment created by Sheikh, in this very delay, in this ensemble of images that we should see before seeing this entirely covered subject. In order to see, he suggests, we must pass through darkness, to see an image we must open our eyes, but, much more importantly, we must keep them closed first. It is not so much that darkness is a condition of light,

but rather that the shadow, the blurred and uncertain vision, is a condition of vision. Sheikh reinforces this in his description of his initial entry into Vrindavan:

our journey had been slowed by intermittent bands of mist and as we approached the town a dense pall of fog reduced our visibility to only a few feet. . . . Though it was only a few hours since we had left Delhi, it felt as if we had descended through time to another era. Late that night, walking through the town still shrouded in fog. . . . I stumbled along the passageways. . . . Next morning I woke very early to be out on the streets at what Hindus refer to as one of the 'threshold' times—the moments after sunset and just before dawn. In this mysterious twilight the streets of Vrindavan are like an empty stage, from which the boy-god Krishna and his gopis have only just retired.⁴³

Within this uncertain twilight zone, what is to be seen cannot be seen, unless we can begin to see that this uncertainty and indeterminacy is precisely the point. Just as we cannot see the city clearly and directly, we can never see the widows directly, since they must be seen through eyes touched by at least the history of Krishna, the history of Vrindavan as a sacred city and refuge for widows, and through the apparatus of infinite mediation that we call "photography." This is why Sheikh's work is, before anything else, a reflection on the conditions of possibility of the gaze in general and on the conditions of possibility of the gaze of the camera in particular. Indeed, the delay that he inserts into the beginning of his book—into the space and time between the moment in which we open it and the moment in which we first can view the widows—becomes not only an allegorical meditation on the delay built into every photograph but also a first suggestion that sight can only take place through a series of mediations, that our eye requires these mediations in order to see, even if they also prevent us from ever seeing what is before us directly and in all its immediacy.⁴⁴ Indeed, the vertigo of this series signals an endless self-reflexivity. Sheikh's photographs are often traversed by different mirror effects: from the images cast on reflective surfaces to the mirrors in which objects and persons are reflected to the several images that cite or replicate other images, even if at times



Fazal Sheikh
Yamuna Dasi ('Servant of the Yamuna'), Widows' asbram,
Vrindavan, India, 2005

in displaced forms, to the various modes of representation represented within the images (writing, photographs, statues, stones with inscriptions, buildings, posters, portraits within various kinds of frames, signs on windows or walls, dioramas, and coins with writing and images on them). These reflections operate in his photographs as a means of photographing photography itself. These are photographs, in other words, that tell us something about photography and not only because, within a photograph, *everything is representation*.

When Sheikh's preliminary photographs lure us into their world, when they invite us to pass through the threshold of his book in order to display their capacity to preserve the broken pieces of the past, they also suggest the ways in which these memories are held in reserve, sometimes put away and forgotten until, one day, we happen upon them, and view them under the light of our own eyes—or, to be more precise, amidst the shadows and recesses of our memory's eye. Drawing us into their space, these photographs tell us that, in order to see them from the outside, we must already—or still—be in them. In order to bring the truth about the photograph to light, we must be ready to bring it into the light of the photograph. To say this, however, is to say that we can only speak about the photograph from its threshold. And the photograph is itself nothing other than a threshold—like the camera's shutter, an opening and a closing—and this is why the photographs that compose *Moksha* are so often traversed by thresholds and passages, doors and windows, streets and alleys, but also by cloth of different kinds that serves as the threshold between what we can see and what we cannot.

This interplay between visibility and invisibility is legible in Pankaj Butalia's 1993 documentary on the widows of Vrindavan, also entitled simply *Moksha*. Throughout the film, we hear the voice of an unseen woman recite the lines of a poem that, written by Butalia himself and fragmented across the length of the film, punctuates it at various key moments. The first fragment we hear is recited during the film's opening scene, as we watch a woman going downriver on a boat, alone and in white, and seated with her back facing the viewer. As we watch the woman crossing the waters, we hear the unseen woman say: "Conjure up

time / mirror the ancient story / for the past is here / searching / the streets mingled with dust / concentrated ash and sorrow in by-lanes strewn / spewed / like bones from marrow." She later adds the command and question: "Inscribe, O Mother / with the ink of poverty / this story of yours etched so long ago. / What could you write that was not for you written?" The film opens with an evocation of the journey "across the waters of sorrow to the farthest shore from darkness" and then, like Sheikh, suggests that, in order to understand the widows of Vrindavan, we should link the city and its dispossessed inhabitants to the "ancient story" of Krishna, which survives not only in the lives of the widows—inscribed as they are within it—but also in the streets and by-lanes of the city itself. Suggesting that the widows are following a script they have inherited, the disembodied voice asks us to read the relation between this ancient script and the lives of these impoverished and dispossessed women.⁴⁵

While there are innumerable versions of the Krishna story, circulated in sacred poems as well as in folkloric traditions, one of the most important sources for the history of Krishna is the *Bhagavata-Purana*, a collection of narratives, genealogies, epic stories, prayers, and hymns of praise. The celebrated Sanskrit work, probably produced in South India between the seventh and tenth centuries, was central to medieval devotional theism and to Krishnaism in particular. What is singular about the work, and something that is entirely pertinent to the reading I wish to pursue here, is that it is composed of a series of narratives that are told to someone who is about to die.⁴⁶ Having been told he will die in seven days, King Pariksit spends his last days listening to the sage Suka tell him what a person on the point of death should hear and remember: Krishna's names, form, and stories. Organized around a meditation on death and dying, then, the *Bhagavata* seeks to think about how we should regard death, and about the relations among death, loss, and love.

The composition of the *Bhagavata* is itself framed by death, since it takes its point of departure from the death of Krishna, and therefore begins with the passing of an era. This background of death is essentially linked to the myth of the text's composition, and to how the *Bhagavata* views itself in relationship to

dying and to its own narrative movement. It is a narrative organized around death, composed of death, and of a death that begins with birth, that is inseparable from birth. The portrayal of death in the *Purana* is so pervasive that nothing or no one is untouched by it. Beyond its many scenes of literal death, the *Bhagavata* is filled with figurative deaths, all of which confirm separation as an essential component of Indian literature and religion. These instances of separation emphasize the anguish that comes from being apart from one's beloved or from one's own nature. This separation often is described as more anguishing than "mere death," and it includes the distance between the human and the divine as well as the separation from loved ones. As E. H. Rick Jarow has noted, "[f]athers are constantly losing sons, wives lose husbands, parents lose children, and lovers lose their beloved. The entire *Purana* may be read as a sustained meditation on loss, and this perhaps is its force."⁴⁷ Rather than avoiding loss, the *Bhagavata* not only celebrates it but also transforms it into an agent of change. This is most clearly legible in the climactic story of Krishna and the cowherd women whom he seduces along the river, the *gopis* in relation to which the poem explores the relations between love and loss, and the human and the divine. In the story, the *gopis* had prayed to the goddess Katyayani that Krishna would become their husband, and their prayers were answered when, after stealing their clothes while they were bathing in the river, Krishna asks them to come out of the river and approach him if they want their garments returned. Seeing the *gopis* without clothes, he is said to have become their husband. All of this takes place within a scene which exceeds ordinary conceptions of time and space, since it suggests that, within this particular night, there already are many nights. That the story of Krishna and the *gopis* leads to darkness (we can recall here that "Krishna" literally means "dark" or "black") brings us back to the story of Krishna's birth, a story that is entirely a photographic one.

As we learn in an earlier *Bhagavata* narrative, Krishna's birth is predicted by a star,⁴⁸ and, as I already have suggested, the history of photography (from Baudelaire to Valéry to Proust to Benjamin to Kracauer and to Barthes) can be said to begin in the interpretation of stars.⁴⁹ Within this photographic context,



Fazal Sheikh
*Bengali widow's painting of Krishna stealing the garments
of the gopis as they bathe in the Yamuna River, Vrindavan*

then, Krishna is born on a moonless night at midnight in the Mathura prison and under the threat of execution.⁵⁰ He is born in a photographic space, in other words, in a dark room, in a kind of camera obscura in which, appearing in his majestic four-armed form, he is begged by the only mortal who witnesses his birth to assume a more usual appearance and, in a flash, the blinding light of divinity both strikes and blackens Krishna, who now appears as an infant. This link between Krishna and the realm of photography is suggested by Sheikh in this remarkable image of an imagistic altar to the little Krishna. Surrounded by darkness, inserted into and emerging from out of this photographic space, his representation seems situated within the aperture of a camera, but also within a kind of womblike environment. The association between mothers and photography suggests that the little Krishna, this little offspring of a principle of reproduction, will himself become a principle of reproduction, something that is confirmed when he is presented as a force of multiplication when he multiplies himself to be available with equal intimacy to every *gopi* he summons.⁵¹ A force of reproduction, he also becomes a mechanism for the production of distance and separation when he leaves the *gopis* behind. Like the photograph, which is always organized around the absence of the photographed, Krishna is another name for mourning, if not for photography itself. Indeed, it is no accident that the widows whom Sheikh photographs believe, as he tells us in the text that accompanies *Moksha*, that his photographs will be an offering to Krishna.⁵²

Returning to the story of Krishna and the *gopis*, the next verse begins with the first of many references to the moon. Setting up the theme of separation and return, the rising moon is compared to the long-awaited sight of a beloved one. As Krishna tells the *gopis*: “Love for me comes from hearing me . . . meditating on me, and reciting my glories, not by physical proximity. Therefore, please return to your homes.”⁵³ Suggesting that the strongest experience of the absolute occurs through separation, Krishna disappears, and, in doing so, inaugurates the great separation. Of all the words that could have been used for this disappearance, the *Bhagavata* uses a word that also suggests “merging into” or, more literally, to “place within”: *antar-dha*.⁵⁴ In other



Fazal Sheikh

Krishna icon in Tupasi's room, Widows' asbram, Vrindavan, 2005

words, Krishna does not really go anywhere, since he inhabits everything and everyone. The experience of loss instead inaugurates a transformation. The sudden disappearance of Krishna overwhelms the *gopis*. They begin to exhibit various symptoms in relation to his absence, the first being that, desiring to conjure him back, they imitate several of his gestures and activities. They become so absorbed and identified with him that they finally declare, “I am He.” The verses read as follows: “When *Bhagavan* suddenly vanished, the women . . . were filled with remorse at his disappearance. . . . / Intoxicated by the pleasing gestures, playfulness and words, as well as by the quivering glances, smiles of love and movements of Krishna . . . their minds were overwhelmed. They acted out each of those behaviors, their hearts [dedicated] to him. / Those beloved women were so bewildered by Krishna’s pastimes that their bodies imitated their beloved in the way they moved, smiled, glanced, spoke, and so forth. With their hearts [dedicated] to him, the women declared ‘I am He.’”⁵⁵ We will return to this assertion of an identity that finds itself in another, but, for now, I simply wish to stress that Krishna orchestrates his separation in order to induce the *gopis* to follow him. He explains that, even as he has remained hidden, he actually has been reciprocating. As some critics have reasonably argued, such “reciprocity” appears to be “rather sadistic at times, and that going to the extreme of denying all of one’s relations and even destroying one’s life to love God is not love at all, but an exaggerated form of divinely-masked servitude or slavery (with slavery to a husband and a social order being displaced by slavery to God).”⁵⁶ But the *Bhagavata Purana* is not bound by reason.

In the *Bhagavata*’s version of the story, Krishna never returns to Vrindavan, and the *gopis* are obliged to spend the rest of their mortal lives remembering and mourning him. Indeed, the distancing effect of loss transforms emotion into a mode of remembrance. We might even say that Krishna is another name for this distancing effect. While Krishna never returns to Vrindavan, however, he does encounter the *gopis* once more at the pilgrimage site of Kuruksetra. The encounter takes place during a total eclipse of the sun—another moment of sheer darkness—that augurs the world’s dissolution. Sorrow turns into verse, poetic utterance

again begins in loss, and the songs of the *gopis* are throughout touched by separation and longing. If Krishna is born under the sign of photography—if his story is a tale of stars and moons, light and darkness, distance and separation, correspondence and withdrawal, and life and death—the *gopis* complain of their own photographic plight: they suggest that the creator of their eyes has erred, since blinking eyelids hinder their contemplation of Krishna’s face: “When you, Lord, go to the forest during the day, a moment becomes an eternity for those who do not see you. He who created eyelids is dull-witted, from the perspective of those beholding your beautiful face, with its curled locks of hair.”⁵⁷ Within the *Bhagavata*, it is left to the philosopher-king Nimi—who, after giving up his body, speaks from beyond the grave to resist the transmigration of his self into another body, to say that he does not wish to reenter his body (because, he claims, he dislikes birth as much as he does death)—to express his desire to inhabit the photographic blink. Responding to his request, the gods offer him the chance to live without a body by enabling him to live in the bodies of all beings through the opening and closing of their eyelids, through, that is, the opening and closing of the body’s own camera shutter.⁵⁸ That the sacred story of Krishna can become a tale about photography, can become a resource for thinking about and even expanding the lexicon of photography, points to Sheikh’s attraction to it.

In his book *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies “a certain will to witness and document suffering for the interest of a general reading public,” and claims that “this will has embedded itself in modern Bengali life.” “Both this will and the archive it has built up over the last hundred years,” he goes on to say,

are part of a modernity that British colonial rule inaugurated in nineteenth-century India. What underlay this will to document was an image of the Bengali widow of upper-caste Hindu families as a general figure of suffering. . . . It is not that every Bengali upper-caste widow has suffered in the same way or to the same

extent throughout history or that there have been no historical changes in widows' conditions. Many widows earned unquestionable familial authority by willingly subjecting themselves to the prescribed regimes and rituals of widowhood. Many also have resisted the social injunctions meant to control their lives. Besides, factors such as women's education, their entry into public life, the subsequent decline in the number of child brides, and the overall increase in life expectancies have helped reduce the widows' vulnerability.⁵⁹

This is why the historically prescribed rituals of widowhood may help us understand why widowhood is regarded as a state of inauspiciousness. The rituals take the form of extreme and lifelong atonement on the part of the widow: celibacy, dietary restrictions, unadorned bodies that carry familiar, defining marks—a lack of jewelry or other decorative accoutrements, a shaved head or cropped hair, white saris that signal both a relation to death and an absence of desire, white ash on their forehead—aim not only to make widows unattractive and to set them apart from others but also to control their sexuality. Stories recounted since the nineteenth century reveal the torture, oppression, and cruelty that often, if not always, accompanied the experience of widowhood. As Uma Chakravarti has noted, among the upper castes, widowhood is a state of sexual and social death.⁶⁰ If Sheikh seeks to bear witness to the plight of dispossessed widows, his work avoids a colonialist gaze by including and multiplying the many perspectives of the women he photographs, and also by contextualizing their lives in relation to, among others, the story of Krishna and the history of Vrindavan. Moreover, his insistence on the mediatory character of vision in general suggests that, however much his work may wish to present the widows to us, to expose their vulnerability and distress so that these might be ameliorated by enforcing legislation and collective action, it never can capture or expose its subjects fully, since to do so would require its being able to incorporate the entirety of the network of mediations through which we must view the widows. In other words, by producing a series of photographs that, because of the order in which they are presented to us (an order that emphasizes the network of mediations through which we must pass

even to begin to approach the widows), points to the widows, even as it indicates that they can never be revealed to us transparently or immediately, Sheikh seeks to remain faithful to the widows' simultaneous appearance and disappearance, life and death, presence and absence, and subjecthood and objecthood. This relation between the widow as object and the widow as subject replicates the internal division of the widow's subjectivity, a subjectivity that, as it seeks its own form of agency, nevertheless remains linked to a script in which she must follow her husband, even in death, like the body its shadow. It is to this complicated and contradictory subjectivity that I now wish to turn, in order to delineate the widow's paradoxical and permanent exile from herself, even before her widowhood.

What we register as we read the texts that accompany Sheikh's images is that the widows increasingly seem to experience less and less, and especially because, being widows, they are no longer who they were before their husband's death. But if these women have lost their identity, can we say that they are dead or alive? What is the relation between the women they were before and the women they are now? If identity is the condition of possibility for mourning, how then can those who have lost their identity mourn? If identity is the condition of possibility for memory, how can those who do not have a determinate identity memorialize anything? What kind of temporality constitutes their strange, nonsubjective lives, what is the past of the life that does not belong to any fixed identity? Or, to put all these questions differently—by understanding that the women lose one identity but enter into another one, even if this "new" one is largely scripted by the earlier one—by what life do those who have lost themselves still live? Can they bear witness to that loss even though they themselves are no more, or are different? Is it possible for a witness to witness his or her death while dead, while alive but dead? And, finally, is it by chance that all such questions are most profoundly and precisely addressed in the medium of photography?

What is exposed in Sheikh's photographs is the paradox of a face that is not a face, a face that can never be seen directly as the face of the woman at whom we are looking.⁶¹ This is a

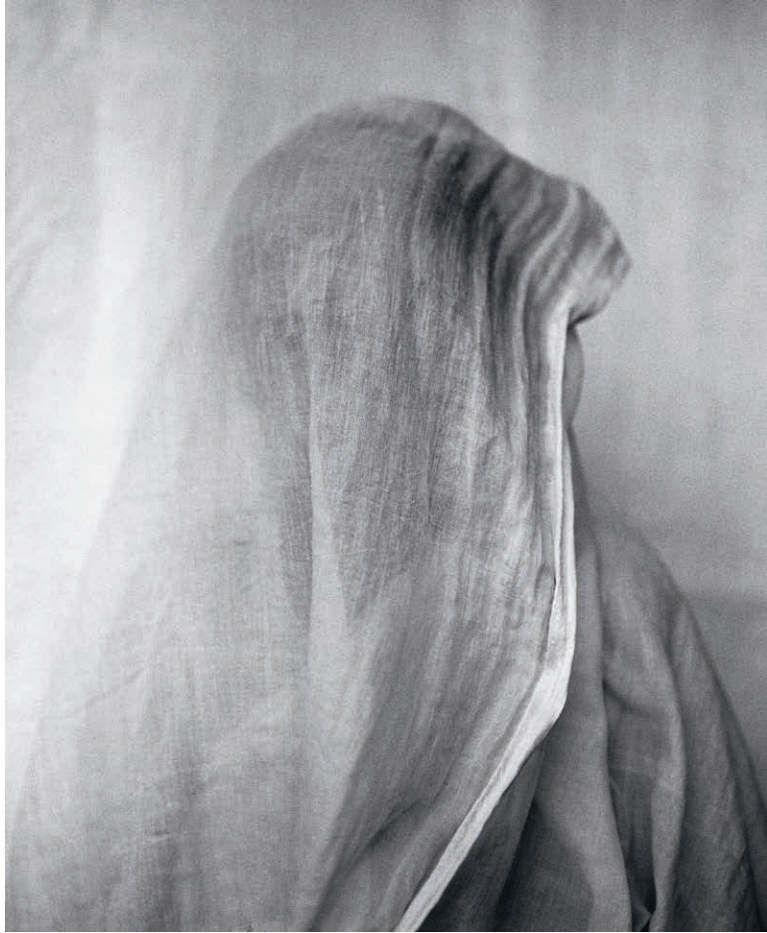
face that exists, in the wording of Branka Arsić, as “the negative of the face: it is the face that is not, it is the visibility of the effacement in the moment of its effacement.”⁶² This is why, paradoxically, since Sheikh was not present at the moment of the widow’s “death,” at the moment of the death that makes her who she now is, who she now is not or no longer, he can witness only what he did not witness by allowing the other, the one who died but remains “alive,” to speak through him. He desubjectivizes himself, and thus becomes—through his work, through his photographs, through his texts, and through his effort to listen to and see this or that woman who is no longer, or at least no longer the woman she was—the survival of the other who did not survive. Testimony to the desubjectivation of the victim is thus a labor of the desubjectivation of the witness. In the wording of Giorgio Agamben, “Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking . . . enter into a zone of indistinction. . . . This also can be expressed by saying that the subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectivation.”⁶³ This means that a witness always witnesses a desubjectivation of the other, but also of himself. This series of photographs, however, attempts the impossible: to produce the witness who would testify to her own nonsurvival. This is the paradox of a testimony that would bear witness to the moment of a death and to the testimony of this death, which is to say to a moment in which life is at the same time dead and alive. This is why the photographs bear witness to a different temporality of witnessing, a temporality in which the past is contemporaneous with its present, and in which the widow is therefore always in a moment of exile.

Indeed, the widow is a subject only when she does not have a self. This is why we can say that the “I” of devotion identifies with itself (with the other) through the process of identification, or, as we might say, by giving itself to another. The passionate passivity that characterizes so many of Sheikh’s widows defines a life of the wound, the living wound, the body that lives off of wounds so wounding that they exhaust all life and turn the life of this

passive existence into perpetual dying, neither life nor death but a life that is lived by dying. Indeed, whether or not the widow is already dead, literally dead, she already will have experienced (a kind of) death. This point is confirmed—less abstractly, but not at all less rigorously—when Neela Dey, one of the widows whom Sheikh photographs, tells us that “in Vrindavan we are so determined in our devotion that everything else in the world is dead to us. We ourselves are dead and living with Krishna.”⁶⁴

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Like the widows who live between life and death, the young girls and women portrayed in Sheikh’s *Ladli* project—a project he considers a kind of companion piece to *Moksha*—provide further evidence of the devastating gender politics that, despite the many advances that have been made, still permeates Indian society. The portraits that compose *Ladli* were taken in orphanages, homeless shelters, resettlement centers, women’s centers, squatter settlements, homes for girls, and the streets of Delhi, and are accompanied by stories of abortions of female fetuses, infanticide of baby girls, the abduction and rape of young girls who are forced into prostitution, the exploitation of child labor, and the murder of young women who do not meet the expectations of their husbands or their husbands’ families. In presenting these young girls, Sheikh offers a picture of India that not only has relays with the stories included in *Moksha*—and this even though the contexts are at times very different—but also displays the extent to which these girls remain unprotected and unprovided for. The power of some of the images has to do with the directness with which the young girls seem to look at us. While the eyes of Minu, Manita, Malikh, and Gulafshah seem to pierce us, we know that there is no equality between the interplay of gazes that takes place here, which is why what is at stake in viewing these images is also our responsibility toward them. In looking at us, the young girls ask us to remain answerable for them, to keep them *safe* not simply from the violence and exploitation they experience but also from the history that will continue to seek to erase and efface them from its movement.



Fazal Sheikh
Neela Dey ('Sapphire'), Widows' asbram, Vrindavan, India, 2005



Fazal Sheikh
Manita, Hindu boarding school, Ahmedabad, India, 2008

Sheikh understands that this history of effacement and erasure is often reinforced by the photographic act itself, since the act that would capture a particular subject also risks ensuring its disappearance. That he is aware of this difficulty is legible in the fact that so many of the images in *Ladli* (and indeed throughout his work) represent subjects whose eyes bear the imprint of the moment in which he takes their photograph. If the eyes of the young girls I have just mentioned, for example, include Sheikh's image within them, it is because every photograph bears the traces of the encounter between a subject and a photographer, neither one of whom can, by himself or herself, determine how this encounter will be inscribed in the image that is taken. What intensifies this scene—in which Sheikh's portraits include a kind of optogram of the photographic act, a retinal trace of him taking the photograph—is the fact that, within the history of photography, this moment has been associated with the moment of death and, in particular, with the idea that the eye retains the very last moment of life. As an anonymous writer summarized this belief in 1883: "Every object seen with the natural eye is only seen because it is photographed on the retina. In life, the impression is transitory; it is only when death is at hand that it remains permanently fixed on the retina. Thus we are secure in asserting that no witness ever swore to a thing seen by him, without swearing from a photograph. What we call sight is but the impression made on the mind through the retina of the eye, which is nature's camera. Science has discovered that a perfect photograph of an object, reflected in the eye of the dying, remains fixed on the retina after death."⁶⁵ When "death is at hand," we are in the photographic realm. As Benjamin explains, "what we know that we will soon no longer have before us—this is what becomes an image."⁶⁶ In photographing these girls, Sheikh knows that the photograph may survive them—it begins, even during their life, to circulate without them, figuring and anticipating their death each time it is looked at. What is most striking here is that this strange situation permits us to speak of their death *before* their death. The portrait already announces their absence, even as it seeks to present them.



Fazal Sheikh
Rekha, Women's shelter, Anand, India, 2007

This is why the images in *Ladli* of young girls with their backs turned to the camera—a strategy meant to protect them by hiding their identity—are miniaturized allegories of what Sheikh believes a portrait can and cannot do. Like the dispossessed widows whose veils and shawls prevent us from seeing them directly, the position of these young girls keeps us from being able to identify them, even when we are told their names: as with Rekha and Rani, for example. Here the portrait is a kind of catachresis, since the “face” in these images is not a face, but instead a back and a head. In replacing the face with other parts of the body, these portraits reconfirm that a face is not always a face. In either case, though—whether we are seeing a face or not (and I would say we are not)—we are being asked to remain attentive to what is vulnerable or precarious in another life. The bodies before us imply mortality and finitude and, insofar as they bear the traces of history, trauma, oppression, or relations in general, they are both singular and related to others. They are bodies that simultaneously belong and do not belong to the girls Sheikh portrays.

This is why any photograph that would present itself as a portrait of a single person is not simply *not a portrait*, but an *anti-portrait*.⁶⁷ This is one of the most remarkable dimensions of Sheikh’s portraits, especially given their relation to the issues and discourses of human rights. While it is critical for Sheikh to make the plight of the young girls portrayed in *Ladli* visible to us—something he wishes to accomplish for all of his subjects—he simultaneously suggests that this or that young girl can never be represented by her face, or by her portrait (this is why he takes such pains to supplement his portraits with historical accounts, documents, fragments from interviews, and so forth). Instead, it is as if he wishes to tell us that, for representation to portray this or that person, it must not only fail to do so, but it should also *exhibit* this failure.⁶⁸ However much these portraits move us, however much they introduce us to the traumatic stories of so many of the world’s displaced and dispossessed populations, they always point beyond themselves to a life and precariousness that, in the end, they cannot exhibit directly. Like all of Sheikh’s portraits, they seek to remain faithful to subjects that simultaneously appear and disappear, and it is precisely this fidelity to the

possibility and impossibility of the portrait that constitutes the ethical signature of these portraits. These portraits exist in order to resist the erasure and effacement of the women, men, and children they portray—and they do so even though Sheikh knows he can never fully present them to us, since, among other things, they always will exceed our understanding of them.

As Sheikh notes in *Ladli*, reinforcing this resistance:

in India’s main cities, every six hours, a young married woman is burned to death, beaten to death, or driven to suicide by emotional abuse from her husband. According to the United Nations Population Fund, two-thirds of Indian women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine have been beaten, raped, or forced to provide sex. . . . The fact remains that Indian society traditionally subordinates women and its treatment of them amounts to a cultural prejudice as ingrained as any racial or religious divide. . . . What India suffers from is apathy—it is clearly not for lack of legislation that women and children are still abused, but because of the unwillingness of the police, the courts and the government to enforce the laws made to protect them.⁶⁹

That India can evoke the universalism of human rights at the same time that it continues to contribute to the regime it condemns (and here it is no different from every other nation, including the United States) is only one indication that what it means to be “human” by no means always counts with the same force—in invocations of human rights, but also in their absence. This is why the question of human rights for Sheikh is a question that remains at the heart of any politics or ethics that concerns itself not only with who we are but also with what it means to live in a world in which the call for human rights and humanitarian intervention is not always made in the name of preventing the dispossession of rights that so often defines the conditions of our human existence. This is also why the photographs that comprise Sheikh’s photographic corpus make their claim for another means of achieving human rights, a mode of proceeding that, as I have tried to suggest, questions the terms of human rights discourse in general. If Benjamin were alive today, he might remind us that there is no document of humanitarianism that

is not at the same time a document of inhumanity, inequality, and violence, and that the human rights activist should therefore dissociate himself or herself from it as much as possible. If the projects and discourses of human rights do not wish to neglect this counsel, they will have to define themselves continuously against the inhumanity, inequality, and violence that threaten them from within as well as from without. Always and at once motivated by humanitarianism and democracy—but a humanitarianism and democracy that would correspond to other and more just forms of humanitarianism and democracy than those we have with us today—they would begin in an aporetic praxis, one that would take its point of departure from the “perplexities” of human rights. They would seek to inaugurate a world in which displacements, racisms, nationalisms, class ideologies, sexism, and economic oppressions of all kinds would no longer exist, and would ask us to imagine what the world has never offered us: absolute freedom, justice, equality, and rights. As I have wanted to suggest, if this world can ever be inaugurated, if there can ever be a future that would be different from the past, it may well be enabled by work like that of Fazal Sheikh.

Learning to See



Susan Meiselas
*Alphabetization campaign in Eduardo Contreras
Market, Managua, Nicaragua, 1980*

Dearest Susan,

I have wanted to write to you for a long time now, to tell you what your work has meant to me, and what it continues to mean to me, to tell you of the strength I receive because of your existence and friendship, to tell you that I thank you for everything that you are.

It is because I have always cherished our conversations, and particularly our conversations about photography—which means our conversations about the world at large—that I have decided to take this opportunity to begin this long-deferred letter now, even as I promise to write an even longer one to you soon. I am hoping that the epistolary form will offer me the chance of imagining that I am simply talking with you, that I am simply continuing our conversations here, with my words circulating in this different context as your photographs so often do in so many other ones. I also trust that this form will permit me to think *with* you and your work, instead of simply *about* you and this work.

What this means is that this letter also comes from you, dear Susan. I have always believed that every letter is sent from its destination and that it indeed could not be sent without this relation to its destination. I would never be able to write to you, in other words, if I had not already received something from you. I trust this letter can be a tribute to the gifts I already have received, even before writing a single sentence here, and this because whatever I write here does not simply come from me, can never be said to be just mine. You will perhaps recognize this claim, since you have always insisted that no image that you have ever produced is just yours. I have always thought that this sense of things is simply part of the grace and generosity with which you exist in the world, but it is also linked to your appreciation of the relations that help make us who we are.

I begin, my dear, but “I” with “you.”

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I was particularly glad when you sent me the link to your recent participation in the Desert Island Pics series at the Photo London Screening Room in May 2017. I loved the idea of your being

asked to think about what eight images you would most want to have with you if you were stranded on a desert island, and this especially because I often have recourse to a similar scenario whenever I imagine myself writing on a body of photographic work. I like to imagine I am on a desert island and that all I have with me is the body of work that I have before me and, on the basis of this corpus, I am being asked to invent a theory of photography, memory, perception, and history, to see what this work permits me to say. I love the idea of being stranded on an island with nothing but your work, Susan. I imagine that it would be possible, on the basis of your work, for me to say anything I could ever imagine wanting to say—*about anything*—and this because there is scarcely anything that your work has not touched in one way or another, even if only tangentially.

Indeed, for more than four decades your work has provided us with what are among the widest, richest, most probing and profound lenses through which to see and engage some of the most urgent and pressing issues of our time, and not only ours: the politics of sexual difference, the human costs of economic oppression, of inequality and poverty, the intensification of violence on both domestic and international fronts, war, nationalism, colonialism, ethnic, religious, and cultural conflict, human rights, genocide, the plight of refugees and migrations across all sorts of borders, the role of the media within the production of history and politics, the difficulty of adjudicating between justice and injustice, and the devastating effects of capitalist imperialisms of all kinds. I also would say that, although you would not rush to consider your work theoretical, I have always found it to be a powerful resource for thinking not only about some of the most essential philosophical questions about photography and the technical media but also about the relations between memory and perception, language and vision, remembrance and forgetting, images and history, representation and reproduction, movement and stillness, bodies and archives, survival and destruction, and life and death. And about so much more.

As you know, dear Susan, the photographs in this retrospective exhibition represent the full arc of your career, and include images from, among other projects, your early portraits on

Irving and Prince streets, your work on carnival strippers and on private S&M clubs in New York, your work in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and your monumental work on Kurdistan. That we encounter the different projects together demands that we experience them in relation to one another and that we therefore seek to imagine what threads might bind them together.

In particular, I was very glad to hear that the exhibition would take its title, “Mediations,” from the exhibition that first accompanied your Nicaragua book. I like that the curators understood how impossible it is to view your work in the present without an understanding of how this work is mediated by everything that came before, and how it even takes mediation as one of its primary traits and sites of exploration. Indeed, it is precisely your sense of the mediated character of experience that allows you to explore the relation between images and history. You will remember that you even signal the way in which our perception is always mediated by our history—the way in which our eyes can mostly only see through the histories and relations that have helped compose them—when you speak of how inevitable it is that we carry our history wherever we go. Speaking of the moment in which you move from Latin America to Kurdistan, and of the relations between what you see in both places, you explain: “I carry these themes with me without even recognizing it, and I’m attracted like a magnet to the mass graves, destroyed villages, the missing, the themes and issues I’ve been involved with for the last twelve years. I had gotten to the point where there was context and continuity in my Latin American work, and I knew the history of the places I was in, and suddenly I was pulling myself out of that and landing in a place I knew absolutely nothing about, but I brought that other history with me.” What you suggest, in fine Bergsonian fashion, is that, like each of your photographs, perception is always full of memories. I agree that much of your work is touched by the themes you mention here, even those projects that we do not usually associate with them, and I will return to your attraction to death, ruins, and disappearance later, an attraction that I associate with your love of photography in general. Now, I would simply like to agree that we would in fact be entirely unable to encounter anything without our memories,

even if it is precisely these memories that often make it impossible for us to see what is before us in all its singularity.

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While these histories and mediations are multiple and heterogeneous, I want to recall one of your earliest projects, a project you put together in 1974, in between your time at 44 Irving Street in the early 1970s and your 1976 book *Carnival Strippers*. I am thinking of your wildly interesting project *Learn to See*, because I want to suggest that its mediatory presence within your work has been mostly, and I think unjustly, neglected. I believe that, if read properly, it can serve as a key to unraveling many of the traits that are so legible throughout all of your works. Indeed, I believe that the series of photographic projects that comprise it delineate a network of strategies and protocols that have persisted, even if in different forms, throughout your career, right down to the present day. My instinct, in other words—an instinct that has been confirmed by returning to this early project—is that, in offering a series of 101 different experiments and exercises that use photography both inside and outside the classroom in order to encourage us to see things differently, to see things we might not otherwise have seen, and even to see more profoundly and deeply, *Learn to See* is a kind of training manual on how to see in general. I like that you yourself experimented with different photographic strategies mostly with elementary-aged children, since this suggests that you have always viewed your work as having a relation not only to questions of memory and documentation but also to the transformative possibilities of the future. What I wish to suggest is that this early project tells us what is true of all of your books and projects, Susan: each of them, including *Carnival Strippers*, *Pandora’s Box*, *Nicaragua*, *El Salvador*, and *Kurdistan*, but also all the others, are themselves training manuals on how to see, on how to read images, and—especially in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Kurdistan—on how to read images historically, and particularly in moments of danger.

But, as you explain, if *Learn to See* is a training manual, it is “not a how-to-do-it book,” it is “not just a handy recipe book.”

It instead presents several different experimental projects that, rather than provide general rules that can simply be followed in every instance, seek to invent strategies that—taking their point of departure from the specificity of different contexts, from a conviction of the intimate relation between images and history, and from a belief that visual literacy is now needed more than ever—can produce singular ways of engaging the world. As you yourself put it, these experiments sought to encourage “basic reading, while developing ideas of visual literacy.” Bringing together the images the students produced and the stories they would tell about them, these exercises taught students how to relate to the world through photography. They enabled them to find “a reason to be in the world,” a reason to be curious about it. The experience, as you noted then, taught them, and even you, “a way to engage.” What I like about this is that the practices you put into place identify reading and visual literacy with a kind of activism, as if the better readers we become, the more able we are to engage the world, the more responsibly we can live in it.

I am reminded of a citation that I’ve always loved—as you may remember, I have argued elsewhere that citation is another name for photography—from Odysseus Elytis’s *Axion Esti*, not only because it recalls the biblical *fiat lux*—which I always have considered a photographic event—but also because, bringing together the past and the present, evoking the light and sun without which photography could never exist, it demands that we engage the world and that we identify reading with activism. Elytis writes: “IN THE BEGINNING the light And the first hour. . . . It was the sun, its axis in me / many-rayed, whole, that was calling And / the One I really was, the One of many centuries ago / the One still verdant in the midst of fire, the One still tied to heaven / I could feel coming to bend / over my cradle / And his voice, like memory become the present, / assumed the voice of the trees, of the waves: / ‘Your commandment,’ he said, ‘is this world / and it is written in your entrails / Read and strive / and fight,’ he said / ‘Each to his own weapons.’” If László Moholy-Nagy predicts, already in 1927, that “the illiteracy of the future will be ignorance not of reading or writing,



Susan Meiselas
cover of *Learn to See: A sourcebook of photography
projects by teachers and students*
Polaroid Foundation, 1974

but of photography,” *Learn to See* can be said to have been created to fight against this illiteracy in the name of a more activist and engaged citizenry, in which everyone would “Read and strive / and fight. Each to his own weapons.” I like thinking that this project makes possible a different kind of armed resistance, one born from the force of visual literacy.

It is impossible for me to retrace the richness of this project—the many resources it provides us, the many ways in which it anticipates so much of what you will later create, even if in vastly different contexts, and in more elaborated, more politically charged ways—but I want to at least suggest some of this richness by focusing on a few of the experiments in it, and especially on the ones you yourself contributed to the project. What I wish to do is simply draw out, even if only telegraphically, some of the threads that I will then try to trace in your later work. I am less interested in one-to-one correspondences between this project and your other ones—although there will be many—than I am in delineating the contours of a series of encounters between this early work and your later ones, even if these encounters are at times displaced or even encrypted.

I have always liked that you think of the photograph as the record of an encounter—between, among other things, a photographer and a subject, a subject and a context, a camera and an object, a viewer and an image, the image and history, the past and the present, and stillness and movement. To introduce a small twist into this point, it has occurred to me that one of the most significant and meaningful things staged by photography is in fact what Paul Celan once called “the secret of encounter” (*Geheimnis der Begegnung*), and especially because, in each photograph, what remains hidden in it is what also names its conditions, what made it possible. Every photograph has to be read in relation to its secrets, to all the histories that are sealed within it, even if, and perhaps especially when, they remain invisible in the image itself. I would even say that there can be no encounter without secrets, without a relation to the night of knowledge in which they begin, and this is why, as you demonstrate time and time again, the meaning of a photograph is never present, never given to us directly, always related to something both earlier and

later that remains hidden, always related to an entire network of historical relations.

This is why we always need to learn to read what is not visible within the image, but has nevertheless left its traces in it. As one of the contributors to *Learn to See*, David Powell, notes: “we have to make visible in our environment what is invisible to us. . . . We are unaware of all of the kinds of processes and decisions that underlie the objects in our world.” As you tell us in so many different ways, dear Susan, the image is always insufficient by itself. It never appears alone. This is why it requires so much excavation of everything that underlies it, and why you have often felt compelled to supplement it with interviews and conversations, sound recordings and films, letters, poems, statistics, excerpts from diaries, newspaper articles, and documents of all kinds. The image always demands a labor of exploration and this because, as our dear friend Allan Sekula once put it, “an image is not worth a thousand words; it is worth a thousand questions.” I have always thought that this is why, despite your pedagogical drive, you repeatedly have suggested that your own curiosity “precedes the urge to inform or educate people”: it is not possible to know in advance what we will see or learn. As you have said so beautifully, “I go to a region having read some background material but not knowing what I will find, or much about who the people really are, or what stories they will tell. That sense of the unknown roots me in the process, and the result is always beyond whatever I can imagine.” If, as you say elsewhere, “each image is a mysterious part of something not yet revealed,” learning to see means learning to read what is not visible, what remains unknown and unperceived, what can emerge only by reading creatively and historically at the same time.

But I now want to return to my desert island, dear Susan, not with eight of your photographs, but with five of the projects from *Learn to See*—“Alphabetography,” “Before and After,” “Photo Swap,” “Doorways,” and “Traces”—each of which I hope will permit me to evoke many more than just eight of your photographs, and each of which, as we will see, is always more than one.

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Alphabetography. I wish to begin with the first project in *Learn to See*, especially since I believe it says so much about what will follow it. I like that you asked your students to find “lines and forms” that resemble each letter of the alphabet, and that they could find these letters anywhere in the world (even in shadows) or help create them through the camera’s ability to cut and frame a fragment of this world. I also like that you begin with a neologism—“Alphabetography”—that brings together language and photography, even if discreetly and almost secretly. Although “alphabetography” literally refers to the “writing of the alphabet,” the fact that this writing becomes legible through photography, that this project is essentially bound to photography, allows us to hear “photography” in this word, as if we were listening to a secret, but a secret you did not feel obliged to reference because, for you, the light, the *phos*, that is the signature of the photographic image is always assumed. Alphabetography therefore joins letters and words to images, and this because, from the very beginning, you have never dissociated your images from the language without which we could never approach them.

What I like about your particular invention here is that you associate photography with the alphabet, with the ABCs, with the first step in literacy training, as if there could be no alphabet without images, as if every alphabet was itself photographic and every photograph already its own kind of alphabet. And, indeed, the alphabet has traditionally always been presented visually, and this because learning to read means, in the first instance, learning how to look. As Erasmus reminds us, Horace advocated baking letter-shaped cookies to help children learn the letters of the alphabet and Quintillian suggested using letters made of ivory as toys so that, at an early age, children could learn to play with language. Like the later invention of alphabet blocks and alphabet posters, these devices convey the graphic aspect of letters. As in your project, this material alphabet functions as a visual and tactile prompt to the act of recognizing and naming individual letters, even if we would not be able to recognize or name them if we did not already “know” them. But the fact that we can find them everywhere means that letters are ubiquitous and that, like photographs, they are able to circulate throughout



the world. Like photography, the alphabet is a technology that structures subjectivity, that facilitates the formation of both persons and texts.

Within the context of *Learn to See*, “Alphabetography”—a constellation of activities and practices that not only surround the learning and teaching of the alphabet but also move back and forth between texts and images—is associated with a cluster of other experiments, all of which have to do with the relation between linguistic and visual elements. These exercises would include “Any Old Alphabet,” “Making Compound Words,” “Picture-Letter Flash Card,” “Cross-Pix,” “Object-Adjective Description,” “Picture-Word Puzzle,” “Kirshner Body Alphabet,” “Universal Basic Forms,” and several of the projects that require students to tell stories about the photographs they take. In each instance, the emphasis is on a visually based method of instruction that begins in the conviction that images cannot appear without language, without stories, and even without bearing the traces of their inscription within an alphabet that you identify with elements of the world. This can be seen throughout your work, and indeed, as always, the more closely we look the more we are able to find. If I had time, for example, I would invite you to follow me as I trace, among so many others, the “T”s of all the crosses that mark the sites of death and mourning that so often punctuate your images, the “V”s that appear in the flexed arms that carry weapons in Nicaragua and El Salvador, the “Y” that, almost like a kind of wishbone, corresponds to your famous “Cuesta del Plomo” torso, the “P”s that are formed by arms that bend in order to place their hands on hips (from your early strippers to silhouetted figures on firing range targets to mourning women in Iraqi Kurdistan), the “M”s that one finds in the arms and upper bodies of several figures in your images (from the “Molotov Man” to the male clients in *Pandora’s Box*), the “W”s formed by the raised arms of searched bus passengers in Nicaragua or readable in the raised and stretched arms in S&M practices, the “X”s that appear in hands wringing in anguish and despair, the “O”s formed by fingers holding photographs of dead relatives and friends, or the “C”s and “S”s that are legible in the curved remains of corpses and skeletons in El Salvador and Iraqi Kurdistan.

If we follow the directives of “Alphabetography”—but we can only do so if we register that, unlike other directives, these directives demand an act of creative interpretation rather than a strict and determinate obedience (we can only follow them, that is, if we are willing to exceed them, to take them in unexpected directions)—we can begin to see letters everywhere. That we can find letters everywhere loosens their tie to an alphabetic context, or rather helps redefine and even extend what an alphabetic context might be. Indeed, if we can find letters in bodies and gestures, in objects and landscapes, in forms and shapes of all kinds, then perhaps we do not yet know what a letter is, or, alternately, what bodies, gestures, objects, landscapes, forms, or shapes are. What we can say, however, is that, if this exercise generalizes the alphabetic context to the point of suggesting that every person, object, or event becomes legible only in relation to its own singular alphabet, however encrypted it might be, or however much it might share with other ones, it also suggests that language has left its imprint on everything, and even before it can signify anything in particular. This is an important claim and one that cannot be neglected.

If the process of alphabetization implies a set of social and institutional practices that encourage its internalization, if it seeks to produce the subject’s inscription into a system of learning, it must be viewed as a force of subjectivization that forms the conditions of subjecthood and takes them away through various means of subjugation. As just one element within a larger set of educational practices, it constrains us even as it gives us the resources for resisting these constraints. Indeed, if “Alphabetography” moves us to find letters in the world, it is not because these letters appear there naturally. It is because it wants us to understand the indissociable relation between language and the world we perceive, a world we should learn to perceive more closely. In other words, if the world appears to have a semiotic dimension—and this even though the examples I have registered in your work, appearing as just letters, do not yet have a morphological function—it is a way of sensitizing us to the various ways in which the world, inscribed within a representational system that often works to produce violence and conflict, becomes

the surface or template on which history is written. This would already suggest, then, that any effort to read this or that detail in the world must also reconstruct the history that is encrypted within it. Reading never involves just reading what is before us, unless we understand that what is before us already includes references to what came before and what is still to come.

To associate bodies with letters, for example, evokes the fragments of language that might help us explain how this or that body came to appear when, where, and as it did. We could even say that, in this context, we are encouraged to view bodies as texts through which history and its differential structures of power can be read. That we can see a “Y” in the half-eaten “Cuesta del Plomo” torso is less important than the fact that, once we see this “y,” it alerts us—indirectly and directly at the same time—to the language that is needed to begin to understand the violence of disappearances before and during the Nicaraguan revolution, to the language—the orders, the commands, the discreet legislations of death, the arguments put forward to justify these deaths—without which this body might not have been disappeared in the first place, and whose traces we need to follow if we are to understand anything at all about this particular body. This link between bodies and the violence of legal, and even extralegal, inscriptions, is most famously delineated in Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony.” Returning to this story and viewing it through the lens of “Alphabetography” might permit us to understand the relations and differences between literary and photographic representations of the body’s subjugation to letters and writing, of the death that can come from letters. What difference would it have made if Kafka had sought to convey the same story through the lens of a camera instead of through literature? I suspect his having done so might help us understand more clearly the difference that photography makes within this arena—as a resource but also as a means of transformation—especially in its desire to train us to read differently.

If this early project suggests to us the capacity of literacy training to limit our freedom—in his 1929 essay “Children’s Literature,” Walter Benjamin, speaking of the child’s relationship with the ABCs, refers to the way in which each sign

presents itself as “a yoke under which hand and tongue have to humble themselves”—it also signals the force of liberation that can appear as a consequence of our increased understanding not simply of letters but of the way in which they can shape the world and everything in it. This understanding helps us see that, in order to begin to read an image, we have to understand that the image itself can never appear alone: it requires language to begin to give us a context through which we can start to situate the image in relation to the several traces that are sealed within it, like a kind of archive, like an alphabet that still needs to be read. What is so strong about this particular project, though, is that it makes clear that language here is embodied, carried by different forms of materiality, and therefore inextricable from them. It lets us know that what is needed is a mode of reading that would permit us to engage the materiality of language itself—not simply what bears language on its surface, even if in displaced ways, but also an alphabet that cannot be reduced to just language and that is best thought in relation to photography, since photography always works at the intersection of inscriptions and materiality.

By encouraging us to read forms and shapes, to see letters that by themselves do not yet say anything, this first experiment enables us to see, through these visual rhymes, relations between different times and places that we otherwise would not be able to imagine. Indeed, reading these shapes syntactically in relation to one another (something you suggest we do in your “Visual Dominoes” exercise)—which means not only reading these shapes and forms in relation to one another but also in relation to the entire network of historical relations they bear within them—permits us to begin to register the theater of embodied signs within which we live and mourn and die. When you bring us to this insight, dear Susan, you help us act not only in relation to a set of grammatical and morphological rules—with grammar and morphology here existing within the sphere of what we can see—but also in relation to a new set of lenses that enable us to register the power of language, the force of inscription and the photographic imprint, the process of signification as it leaves its traces on the entirety of the world, and as it gets transformed by

this world. Armed with these new lenses, we can begin the work of imagining a more critical form of literacy than the one we learn when we are asked to learn the alphabet only, a form of literacy that can take its point of departure from what you call here “Alphabetography.” With you, we can perhaps imagine another alphabet, one that, coming under the sign of “Alphabetography,” allows us to view the world differently, to take what we inherit—alphabets, writing, photography, and all the elements of the world—and to recontextualize, even rematerialize, this inheritance in a way that opens the world for us, rather than closing it.

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Before and After. I would like to turn now to another project in *Learn to See*. You will remember it, I know. Entitled “Before and After,” it is intimately linked to several other related classroom experiments, including “Goin’ Back,” “Then and Now,” “Seasonal Changes,” and “Three Generations.” In each instance, these experiments ask the students to think about the relations among the past, the present, and the future, about departures and returns, differences and displacements, and change and the passage of time. Together, they cast a long and productive shadow across your work, and this because there is scarcely anything in the entirety of your corpus that is not structured around a *before* and an *after*, even if, in the end, your work interrupts our capacity to distinguish between these presumably different moments in a clear and definitive way. This *before and after* structure is legible in every one of your photographs, and not only yours, and this not only because every photograph takes place in the transit between past and present but also because it has its place on a contact sheet, with images both before and after it, or finds itself in a series, again with images that precede and follow it. That images can never appear by themselves already suggests their seriality, already inscribes them within this structure, a structure that also appears in the relation between the photographed and the photograph, no matter how instantaneous the click of the camera might seem, in the time that marks the distance between the moment when you take a photograph and the moment when it



Susan Meiselas
Re-Framing History, Nicaragua mural project installation
based on original photographs taken in 1978 of the popular
insurrection against Somoza, Managua, Nicaragua, July 2004

is circulated or shared with your subjects, and especially in the various returns that have so often defined your photographic practice, and that you enact every time you return to give your subjects an opportunity to respond to the photographs you have taken. This is why, we might say, it sometimes takes years for the significance of your work to manifest itself. The constant movement and circulation of your photographs ensures that they experience multiple lives; indeed, what we come to understand in registering this is that the image—even before it passes from one hand to another, even before it moves across any number of limits or borders—already has multiple lives and histories sealed within it. That you always feel compelled to trace these lives and histories is why, for you, dear Susan, taking photographs is never an end in itself, but always only a beginning, a beginning that is itself traversed by before and afters. This is why you are consistently driven to reconstruct the histories and stories sealed within your photographs.

As we encounter your work, however, time and time again we encounter an *after* that is inseparable from a *before*, and a *before* that appears as an *after*. We would generally assume, for example, that your work in Nicaragua comes “before” your work in El Salvador or Chile—and it does—but, when you return to Nicaragua ten years afterward to look for the people you had photographed earlier in order to see how they are and to hear their stories about what they were doing when you first photographed them, and then again twenty-five years afterward to install murals of the photographs you had taken earlier in the very sites in which they had originally been shot, you prevent us from declaring that your work in Nicaragua comes, strictly speaking, *before* your later work, since it also appears *after* it, even if in different iterations and forms. I understand that you might wish to suggest that these returns belong to different stages of your interest in Nicaragua—and this is true—but they also suggest the ways in which the past is carried over into the present and future, like a kind of mediating ghost, and to such an extent that it becomes impossible to extricate it from either the present or the future, or to distinguish any of these temporal moments from one another.

That this is the case suggests that your work is never closed or finished, and this fact unsettles any sense we might have about the linearity of time, about the stability of the distinction between a before and an after. In other words, your work presents repetitions that do not repeat but instead transform the past, returns that do not return to a past that has remained simply the past, an after that remains attached to what came before and departs from it in ever-new directions. This means that what is at stake is a consideration of what coming after can mean. Can what comes “after” ever fully free itself from what comes “before,” or does it always remain indebted to this “before”? If every encounter with an object or thought must be read in terms of what it once was but is no longer and in relation to what it is not yet, this is because there can be no after without indebtedness, without an ongoing relation to the past, or a spectral network of mediations. Indeed, within the world of your photographs, nothing that comes to an end can be exhausted by its presumed finality, and this because every end always can become a possible beginning. In all your many returns—to your Irving Street neighbors, to your Prince Street girls, to your carnival strippers, to Nicaragua and Kurdistan, to El Salvador and Chile—it is impossible for you to part with whatever you photograph, with whatever you gather under the name of photography.

I have always loved this phrase “to part with,” and I would even say that it names the structure of your photographic trajectory very beautifully. As my friend Sam Weber has noted about the phrase, “the ‘with’ suggests that parting entails a departure, not simply as the dissolving of a relationship, but rather as a singular way of (re)constituting one.” I would even say that *to remain in relation with precisely by departing* becomes one of the central features of the many arrivals and departures of your photographic corpus. If *to part with* suggests that what is left behind is also carried forward, if what is cast aside is at the same time *brought along* with us, then parting with something also references the structure of a *before and after* whose characteristics still remain to be delineated more fully. Indeed, the figure of a “before and after,” of a “then and now,” of a “goin’ back”—at least as you practice it—requires that we rethink our usual way of understanding beginnings and

ends. It is as if what is behind us, what we have presumably left behind, what follows or pursues us (this is another connotation of “coming after”), belongs to what is still to come, to what remains unfinished, and ensures that nothing is what it seems—which is why it still demands to be read. If your repeated returns suggest arrivals that have already taken place, it is because they are also always a matter of remembrance and memorialization. This is why your returns come to us as an obligation to think before and after, then and now, beginnings and ends, arrivals and departures, as inseparable couples that work to insist on the non-linear, discontinuous (Benjamin would say “non-homogeneous”) experience of photographic time, a time that tells us about time in general. It tells us that the past is never over, that, as William Faulkner would have it, “the past is never dead.”

This is why this *before and after* structure is legible in the photograph’s capacity to move from one context to another, and in what your photographic practice confirms repeatedly: that a photograph can never remain in a single location. What makes a photograph a photograph is perhaps its capacity to migrate, to travel, and often in relation to different media. Indeed, in order to understand what a photograph is may require that we understand this frenzy of circulation. As it travels around the globe, the photograph constantly redefines itself whenever it is recontextualized and reread. What happens, for example, when the photograph you take of a Nicaraguan rebel as he is about to throw a Molotov cocktail during the Sandinista uprising against Somoza’s rule in 1978–1979 is later appropriated and recirculated by different artists and political groups across different modes of reproduction—in murals, posters, t-shirts, and even matchbox covers commemorating the first anniversary of the Sandinista revolution—sometimes for an opposing agenda? What makes the responses to the circulation of “Molotov Man” possible—from your initial acceptance of some of the image’s uses to your eventual filing of a cease and desist order on the basis of your copyright and of your wish that the image not be decontextualized, to the increased reproduction and distribution of the image across the Internet in response to your filing? What happens when you return to Nicaragua twenty-five years after

taking the photograph and, in a kind of repatriation, reinstall it as a mural-size image in the same place in which it was taken? What spatial and temporal dynamics are at play when the photographic archive moves, in different forms, to the streets or the countryside, and becomes exposed to the public beyond the walls of the institutional archive, the art gallery, and the museum? This process becomes a means of thinking about the relation between the past and the present and, in particular, a means of registering the changes that have occurred since the photograph was first taken. As is confirmed throughout your 2004 *Reframing History* project, the act of reintroducing the event or referent of the initial photograph into the context in which it was taken, even if decades later, functions as a kind of window onto both the past and the present, and onto a photograph’s relation to the context in which it was produced. It is the photograph’s capacity to be reproduced, in other words, that enables it to be distributed and exhibited across the globe, and its significance is simultaneously altered and preserved in this movement. If, on the one hand, it is the photograph’s universally (yet variably) perceived “self-evidentiality” that contributes to its potency as a language of suasion across national and linguistic barriers—this is part of the reason that your photographs of the Nicaraguan revolution were so powerful as they made their way around the globe—its portability (its capacity to be reproduced and distributed in relatively affordable ways) also means that it can easily appear in contexts very different from the one in which it first was taken.

To say that the photograph can circulate, that it raises questions about the relation between the past and the present, is not enough, however, and this is where we might register the real force of your *Reframing History* project. What is necessary is to trace the effects of installing this particular image in this particular site at this particular moment—and this even though, as I have suggested, a photograph can never have a fixed relation to either its provenance or its later iterations. If you will permit me, I will return to your “Cuesta del Plomo” image once again, and not for the last time. The force of reinserting this particular image on the hillside in which you had found this half-eaten torso twenty-five years earlier—a well-known site of

many assassinations near Managua that were carried out by the National Guard before and during the insurrection—has to do with the force of recalling a body in a landscape that no longer seems to remember it, and at a time when the government and the people also have forgotten much of what took place on this site so many years ago. If the National Guard disposed of the body here, it was because it wanted it to be seen, as a warning and deterrent to other rebels. Taking the photograph in that context—in order to expose the violence of the government by recontextualizing the image within a counternarrative—is very different from displaying it at another moment and in another historico-political context, but, in both instances, the aim is to keep this remnant of a body from being forgotten, to keep this singular death and everything it represents from being lost to history. If this reproduction of a lifeless torso is to speak, though, if it is to bear witness to the atrocities it underwent and that also served as part of the context that led to its destruction, if we are to begin to understand “everything it represents,” we need to reconstruct the history that is sealed within it, and that is invisible within the frame of the image. This is why, as Benjamin explains in his 1931 “Little History of Photography,” in the long run it is the inscription or caption of a photograph that becomes its most important feature, since it is what helps us tell this history, since it can become the shifting register of the always-changing significance of an image across time and space. In this regard, I have always loved that, in a small text in which you discuss this image, you tell us that the image was never published in a magazine and that, instead, you felt as if you “had to make a book to hold this particular image as one of 71 photographs”; that—and this is the line I love—“the whole book was made to contextualize that one image.” Among so many other things, this suggests that we can only read an image by putting it in relation to other images, by surrounding it with other materials that, together, form part of the image’s caption, part of the context within which it can be read. We can only read an image, that is, by reading it historically, but without ever imagining that we can fully saturate the contexts without which we could never even approach it, and this because the image can never be entirely illuminated by its several

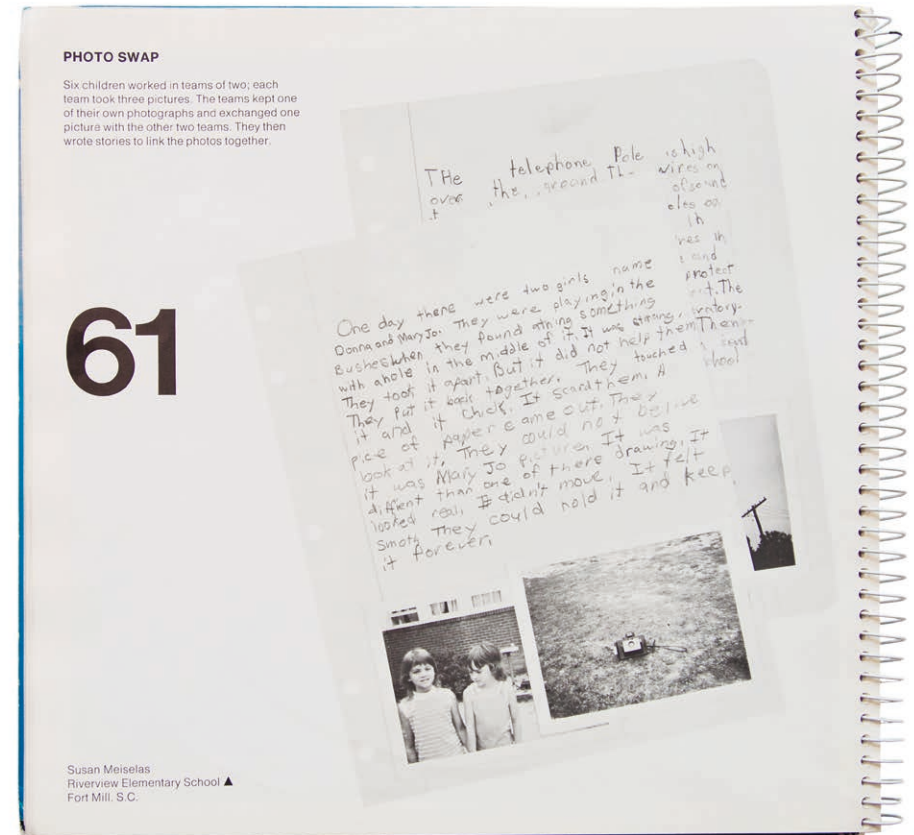
contexts because it simultaneously transforms them. Every image in *Reframing History* makes this indelibly clear and, I would add, this is why it is in photography—rather than in painting or other modes of representation—that the most fundamental questions in the last few decades about the limits of representation and the limits of the critique of representation have been raised. In order to press this point differently, and at the very limits of what can be represented, we could even say that it is this half-eaten body that is the real caption of your photograph, that becomes the secret alphabet that has to be read and given language, that has to be transformed into words and sentences.

I want to stress this point because I think that these are the questions that are always at the heart of your projects, since, in each instance, you begin in the awareness that, despite the photograph’s force of decontextualization, it can never be read outside a context, and indeed outside innumerable contexts. This is why you are so concerned with the issue of framing. As you have said before (and no doubt, again, afterward), “the authority of the frame is very problematic because you work very hard to make a frame around something with any assurance. Then you come back understanding how limited it is. . . . Photography generalizes what are very specific experiences. . . . There’s always that tension in still photography between what is inside and outside the frame.” What is inside and outside the frame includes what is *before and after* the moment in which the photograph was taken and, as I am suggesting, this before and after can never be isolated from the image. This means that, in order to read a photograph, we must reconstruct the several histories that are sealed and encrypted within it, that remain invisible to the eye, even if these histories can never be fully resurrected. As you know so well, if the image always bears the traces of what cannot be seen within it, we can never grasp the entirety of the image. This is why the image always remains open, and why we have to learn how to read what is invisible to us, but what has nevertheless left its traces on the photograph’s surface. The photograph tells us that it is in relation to this invisibility, to what exceeds our sense and understanding, that our capacity to bear witness may begin to come into play. To put it another way: it is perhaps

our encounter with what is unseen in an image, what is unknown in it, that gives us the right to read it, that compels us to engage it in all its depths and secrets.

In reviewing the history of photography, the only thing we can say with any kind of clarity is that a photograph has never been a single thing, has never had a consistent form, has never remained identical to itself. Instead it has continually been altered, transformed, and circulated and is by definition itinerant. We might even say that the photographic image comes into being only as a consequence of reproduction, displacement, and itinerancy. Whatever transparency or *fidelity to things themselves* photographs may suggest, they must be understood as surfaces that bear the traces of an entire network of historical relations, of a complex history of production and reproduction, that gives them a depth that always takes them elsewhere, always links them to other times and places.

Photo Swap. I want to return to the seriality of photographs, to the fact that every photograph belongs in a series and that it is even fissured from within by its own seriality—by its ties to other images, relations, and histories—but a seriality that must be understood in terms of interruption rather than succession. This seriality will return us to the question of the distance and proximity between “befores” and “afters,” and what will mediate this return is the exercise you developed with your students entitled “Photo Swap.” Linked to other experiments in *Learn to See*—including “Building Block Stories,” “Pictures to Poems,” and “Tabletop—Sandbox”—this exercise is also very much about the stories we tell or invent in relation to the images before us. What is at stake in this exercise is the possibility of creating a narrative that can account for the link between two photographs taken at different times and in different places—one after another, but sometimes with an *after* that, not surprisingly, is already associated with a *before*—and, in so doing, allows us to say something particular about these two images and something about photography more generally.



Susan Meiselas
“Photo Swap,” in *Learn to See: A sourcebook of photography projects by teachers and students*
Polaroid Foundation, 1974

I first thought of this particular exercise in relation to one of the eight photographs you said you would most wish to take to your desert island, a diptych that you drew from a contact sheet from one of the rolls of film that you shot in 1989. As you will remember, this diptych belongs to a series composed entirely of diptychs and that you have considered together under the title “From Home to the Field.” I did not know this project, nor did I know any of the images in it, because it has curiously remained somewhat dormant within your corpus, even though I believe it has strong resonance with some of the most important questions raised by your work. Indeed, it is not an accident that you have held it in reserve, since this is something we often do with the things that are closest to us.

I love the formal, organizing principle of the series. From what you have told me, you decided that you would interrupt a roll of film wherever you were in it and you would not take another picture until you had traveled somewhere else. In this new place, you would take an image and then you would form a diptych composed of the last image you took in the last place you had been and the first image you took in your new context. Then, like the students in your “Photo Swap” class, you would try to think about what might link the two images—taken at different times and in different places—about what words might account for how these two images came to be alongside one another. If we can come to understand the visual and historical dynamics between these two images, we can begin to understand the way in which all images interact with one another whenever they are put next to one another, the way in which, never appearing alone, all images demand that we read them in relation to other images, and across the distance on the basis of which all relations are established. I want to turn to “From Home to the Field,” and to two of the “photo swaps” that compose it, in order to draw some lessons from it about the activity of reading photographs in general, and of reading them historically in particular.

The diptych in question—as I said, one of the eight images you would take with you to your desert island—is composed, first, of an image of your family in upstate New York in the summer of 1989, and, second, of the image you take on first arriving in



Susan Meiselas
Contact sheet, Diptych I, Upstate New York and “Cuesta del Plomo,”
Nicaragua, from the series From Home to the Field, 1989

Nicaragua some weeks later to work on *Pictures from a Revolution*, an image of a cross marking the very site on which you had eleven years earlier found the “Cuesta del Plomo” torso.

How is it that we can put these two images, these two worlds, into proximity with one another? The most direct answer would be to simply say: *through photography*. But to say this is just the beginning of a mystery, since the real question is what it is in photography that permits us to put these so seemingly distant images alongside one another and, indeed, what happens when they find themselves next to one another. While there is perhaps something accidental about this juxtaposition, it is the result of a deliberate experiment and therefore something closer to a planned “accident.” This is why we are invited to imagine the motivations behind this pairing, even if some of these motivations remain unconscious.

What is first worth noting is that, almost immediately after your arrival in Nicaragua, you return to this entirely overdetermined site—at least in relation to your psychological, emotional, historical, and political investments. This can scarcely be an accident, since, as you have said, you are drawn “like a magnet” to sites of disappearance. That this “second” image evokes the photograph you took of the half-eaten torso of a rebel fighter on this same site in 1978 suggests that this diptych is at least a triptych—if we consider the fact that you took two shots of the torso in 1978, one in black and white and another in color, we could even consider it a quadriptych—a triptych that “begins” with this mutilated body on the hillside and therefore again unsettles the linearity that we would generally expect to exist between a before and an after. The “first” image of your family is taken *before* the “second” image in the diptych, but *after* your first encounter with this particular execution site in Nicaragua.

This means that the three images form a kind of ensemble—which would include many other related images and, minimally, all the images you published in your book on Nicaragua and that you have stated form the context for your earlier image (in this case, the diptych could be considered more precisely a polyp-tych)—and therefore have to be read in relation to one another. What is at stake each time is a story about what the eye can see



Susan Meiselas

“Cuesta del Plomo,” hillside outside Managua, a well-known site of many assassinations carried out by the National Guard, Managua, Nicaragua, 1978

and what it cannot—about what the camera can capture and what eludes it. To say this, however, is simply to say that our experience of the diptychs that compose “From Home to the Field” is always an experience of the eye—of an eye that seeks to see where it does not see, where it no longer sees, or where it does not yet see. But what is it that we see and cannot see in these images?

If we follow the protocols laid out in “Alphabetography” and in the exercises from *Learn to See* that teach us to look for visual rhymes across different shapes and forms and even tones and colors, we can begin to invent a story that might help us account for the relations between these images. We might start with the fact that the female figure, with her arms outstretched, about to step into the pond, here serves as a kind of mediating form between the different photographs you took on the Cuesta del Plomo, the first ones in 1978 and the later one in 1989. In the movement from the “Y” of the torso to the “T” of the cross, the female body appears as both a “Y” and a “T” and therefore marks the transition between this earlier and this later photograph, a transition that is signaled in the fact that she is about to step into water, which, as a force of dissolution and transformation, anticipates, and even facilitates, her disappearance into the cross in the next image.

There are several other formal elements to which we can pay attention as well, but I will only mention three here: first, there is a kind of visual echolalia between the shape of Lake Managua in the distance in the image on the right of the diptych and the shapes of the rippled circles around the two water spouts that emerge from the pond (there is even a second circular shape in the plain below the cross in the Nicaragua image). Second, the lighter-toned landscape in the area closest to the cross and extending into the plain and the darker color of the hills in the upper left part of the photograph are a visual rhyme of the lighter color of the water closest to the woman and the darker tones of the water as it moves away from her and especially in the upper left part of the photograph. Third, the frame of the diptych’s first image includes a cut-off torso, on its right edge, behind the standing woman, which references—at least in the context of my suggestion that this image is haunted by

its relation to the image that is to come, and to the one that precedes the diptych altogether, even if only obliquely and in a displaced fashion—the torso and arm in your earlier image, a torso and arm that get reattached in the cross that simultaneously marks their absence. As a result of these relays, there are several exchanges or swaps that take place between the photographs: water is exchanged for a landscape, a female figure is swapped for a cross, a cross has appeared in exchange for a body that is no longer present, a living fragment of a body appears as a substitute for a half-eaten torso, circular bodies of water seem to cross the borders of a picture’s frame, and, given that rebels were disappeared on the hillside as well as along the shores of Lake Managua, a commemorative marker shares its work with a body of water that is both a grave and an always-shifting activity of remembrance and forgetting. In addition, an image that presumably is more closely associated with a sense of home for you—since it includes a number of your family members—is exchanged for an image that is more distant from whatever you might call your “home.” But, as a result of the exchanges that take place here, the presumed familiarity of this proximity to your family is interrupted by the intervention of the image that follows it and that introduces a darkness and death into the earlier image’s more idyllic setting, in the same way that the torso you find more than a decade earlier introduced death and disappearance into the beauty of the Nicaraguan landscape.

This play between life and death, between tranquility and devastation, inhabits each of the images we are considering and, in so doing, undoes the stability of the “home” referenced in the title of your project and therefore makes it impossible for “home” to refer to a single, unambiguous site, something that is reinforced by all the other “homes” that are the starting points of your other diptychs. Indeed, the multiplicity of these several other “homes” not only suggests the mobility of your sense of home—which could indicate that you either do not have a fixed sense of home or that you are able to find a home nearly everywhere—but also, as a counter to this, the way in which the one constant in every one of these diptychs, the one thing that remains in each of them, is your relation to photography, as if you have found a

sense of home in relation to your camera, and even in *its* itinerancy. This would suggest that the trajectory “from home to the field” is not really a qualitative shift, since the field has become a kind of “home” for you, as much as all the different homes from which you begin in this series suggest that your home is never simply your home but always something else, something always in the process of being made, like love.

To begin to formalize the “lessons” that can be drawn from this rather remarkable diptych, I would like to say that the fact that every detail here can potentially become exchanged for another one, and even more than one other one (for example, the female figure can become a cross and then, by association, the missing body to which the cross refers), suggests the substitutions and displacements that give way to the subject, even if, because of these substitutions and displacements, the subject can never appear as “itself.” The intermingling of these disfigurements makes it impossible to isolate the images from each other. Where everything can become something else, nothing is ever just itself. Inhabited by the traces of other figures, each figure is itself and not itself at the same time. This fact tells us something about photography “itself,” since the “subject” is always affirmed and lost within the photograph—a double gesture that is achieved in every one of your photographs, dear Susan, whether consciously or not.

Indeed, that the two images that form this diptych belong together is confirmed for me not simply by the reading I have offered here, but also by a very beautiful series of sentences in which you discuss the moment in which you are making *Pictures of the Revolution*, the moment when you make the second image of this diptych. In these sentences, you not only step into a body of water, just like the woman who steps into the water in the diptych’s first image, but you also register the power of history to move you in directions you perhaps did not expect, to proceed without you, and, because of this, to introduce a sense of loss that leads you inevitably back to the site where so many years earlier you had taken the image of the Cuesta del Plomo torso, since this site is linked to a history that you can clearly never leave behind and that will always include you. In these sentences, you say:

Embarking on the kind of journey I did through Nicaragua and El Salvador is a bit like stepping into a body of water, the depth of which is unknown until you take the plunge. There’s the tension between how deep the water is and how far you’re willing to explore. You can be overpowered by a current and lose your balance. I know there were times when I allowed myself to experience that. The pull of history is powerful. But, at some point, one has to rebalance, recalibrate, get to the other side of the river. *Pictures from a Revolution* is the point where I pull myself out of the river, I’m on the bank at the other side. I’m looking at the end of the story, at least my part in it. It’s going on without me. And there’s a lot of sadness.

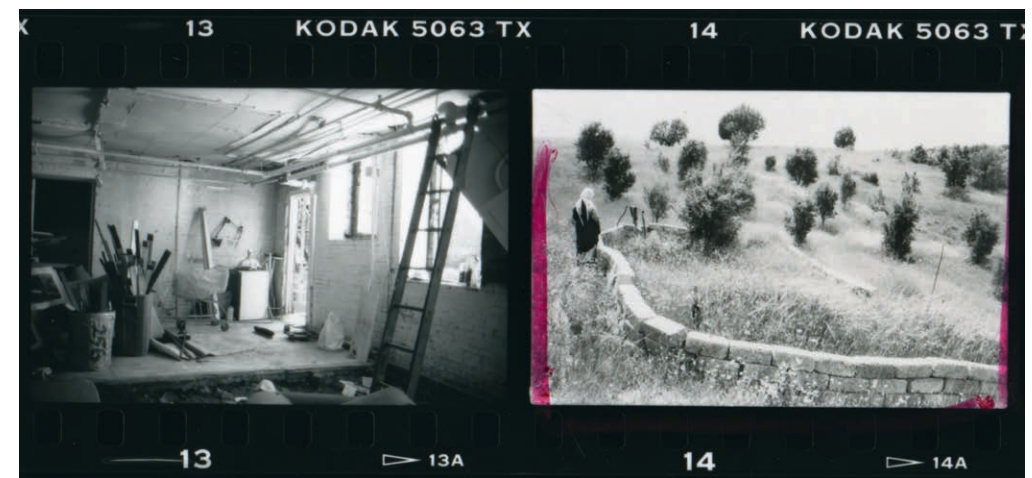
What this diptych-triptych tells us is that reading images historically involves reading them in relation to other images and histories, tracing in the one image the disfigured and transformed traces of the others. Each of these photographs becomes an event in the other ones, repeats itself in them, even as its repetitions are only the return, the virtually infinite return, of what is never the same. It is in the possibility of our being able to read these relations and differences that we can begin to register what we might mean by the historical dimension of images. This is why we must read an image in relation to what precedes and follows it, and why the task of reading historically demands that we not only trace the manner in which a photograph shares some of its elements with other photographs (how it is situated within a particular or general historical context, how it is inscribed in a series of images and relations) but also what remains idiomatic in the image (how it confirms this context even as it betrays it, even betrays it—distances itself from it—in order to respect it). I will only note again that this diptych—this diptych that is always more than just a diptych—unsettles the trajectory of your project, insofar as the project claims to move “From Home to the Field.”

This displacement is reinforced by the second diptych you shared with me, a diptych that offers a different starting point, a different “home”—this time your photographic studio—but one that again leads us to a gravesite. This next diptych is composed, first, of an image of the moment in which, in 1992, you

begin to build your studio—the image shows your studio in the midst of its construction, with materials strewn everywhere in the space—and, second, of an image taken a few weeks later in June 1992 in northern Iraqi Kurdistan. This image presents a series of concrete blocks that, forming a kind of circle, mark a mass grave of 27 inhabitants of the Kurdish village Koreme, just before its exhumation and just before your documentation of the atrocities sealed within it—atrocities committed during Saddam Hussein’s 1988 Anfal campaign against the Kurds, a campaign that included large-scale murders, disappearances, forced relocations, and an intentional effort to destroy and eradicate Iraq’s Kurdish population.

What I wish to note first—I will be much more telegraphic here—is that, in this different journey “from home to the field,” while you offer another site as a possible home (your photographic studio), as in the first diptych this “home,” even this *different* home, is associated with a site of death and violence, with a site of burial and commemoration. This relation between the photography studio and death—between photography and an entire network of figures of death, including mourning, the cemetery, the grave, petrification, and arrest—is, within the history of photographic discourse, a longstanding and even pervasive one. In his memoir, Nadar goes so far as to suggest that his photographic studio is a kind of mortuary chamber in which his subjects are frozen and mortified. You may even remember that he stages this identification in a very famous self-portrait, with him sitting in the Parisian catacombs that he photographed in 1861, fixed and arrested by his image, and surrounded not only by skulls and bones but also by his chemicals and other photographic materials.

Situating his studio in an ossuary, in a cemetery, Nadar anticipates the association that your diptych seals here—as your studio gets exchanged or swapped for a mass grave. What deepens and intensifies this relation in this instance is the relay between the excavation you undertook to build your studio in Manhattan and the forensic excavation that would soon unearth the bones and traces of the dead buried in this particular site in Koreme. This moment in which you inaugurate a new phase in your life—by



Susan Meiselas

Contact sheet, Diptych II, Mott Street studio and Koreme mass grave, northern Iraq, from the series From Home to the Field, 1992

building your photographic studio—becomes associated with the beginning of a historical, and almost archaeological, journey that will occupy you for six years. Again, though, what would be required to read the relation between these two images would be a reconstruction of the several contexts that each of them bears within its surface and that could potentially help us establish relations across the distance that seems to separate them. As you yourself put it as you imagine a relation between excavating and taking pictures and, in particular, as you explain what might permit us to begin to make sense of these presumably different activities, “[i]n the same way that a collection of unearthed bones can reveal concealed events, these photographs cannot be denied. But like scattered bones, these images would have remained disconnected from the narrative skeleton without knowledge of the people and place from which they’ve come.”

What your diptychs tell us, especially when viewed through the lens of “Photo Swap” and all its related visual exercises, is that what enables us to read images is our capacity to invent a story, a skeletal narrative—not a thin outline, however, but a deeply archival, material, and embodied account of how these images are articulated—that can bring together histories that are at least as invisible as they are visible and that can join images taken at different times and in different places in ways that can open up their historical and material secrets. If we follow these protocols—understanding that, in each instance, they have to be reinvented in relation to the specific contexts within which we are working—we can begin to read images across your corpus in new, unexpected, and, I believe, wildly rich and productive ways.

For example, reading the visual rhymes between different forms and shapes permits us to think about the relations between another pair of images. As you know, the image on the left was taken outside of Managua, Nicaragua in 1978 and documents the government’s insistence on searching everyone traveling by bus, truck, or foot to see if any link could be established between the travelers and the Sandinista rebels. The image on the right was taken in El Salvador in 1980 and again documents a moment in which bus passengers are being searched and interrogated by the National Guard, this time along the Northern Highway. As in



Nadar [Gaspard-Félix Tournachon]
Catacombs of Paris. Bones of the ancient cemetery of the Magdalene, 1861



Susan Meiselas
*Searching everyone traveling by car, truck, bus or foot,
Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua, 1981*



Susan Meiselas
*Soldiers search bus passengers along the Northern Highway,
El Salvador, 1978*

the earlier image, the soldiers are looking for evidence of any alliance or sympathy between the passengers and, in this instance, the FMLN guerrilla movement. If in the one you photograph the passengers directly, however, in the other you photograph them indirectly by looking not at them but at their shadows (at what, following another title from *Learn to See*, we might call “Portraits in Disguise”). This exchange of bodies for shadows is significant and speaks to the difficulty of looking directly at the brutality that was so evident in El Salvador at this time, and that, as you once said, was much more difficult to look at than anything you ever saw in Nicaragua, including the “Cuesta del Plomo” torso. The shadows are at the same time threshold figures that, casting their outlines on the wall, imprint a play between presence and absence that would become the signature of the military dictatorship’s forced disappearances.

In the move from passengers to shadows, the shadows announce the potential disappearance of the bodies—the bodies seen in the first image and the ones referenced indirectly in the second one—and point to the fear and precariousness that defined the everyday experience of the people who found themselves under the right-wing military regimes that governed most of Latin America throughout the 1970s and 1980s. A means of eliminating opposition and terrorizing the population at large, disappearances erased a person from both life and death—even denying relatives a body over which to grieve. Without dead bodies, the governments could deny knowledge of people’s whereabouts and any accusations that they had been killed. As Argentinian dictator General Jorge Rafael Videla stated in a now-infamous press conference, “They are neither dead nor alive, they are disappeared.” If the juxtaposition of these two images permits us to think about the kidnappings, the torture, the murder and disappearance of tens of thousands of people all across Latin America, they also permit us to think more precisely about the relations and differences between the way in which these different forms of violence manifested themselves in Nicaragua and El Salvador during this same period. It is also the case that your second image might never have been produced if you had not already taken the first one. This is to say that the image you took



Susan Meiselas
*Firing range used by the Atlacatl Battalion,
San Miguel, El Salvador, 1983*



Susan Meiselas
*Graves of those killed during the 1988 chemical bombing
of the village of Goktapa, northern Iraq, 1992*



Susan Meiselas
*Children's graves in village cemetery of
Jeznikam-Bebarke, northern Iraq, 1992*

in El Salvador is haunted and mediated by the image taken in Nicaragua. It would not have been possible for you to take the second image without having the first one in mind, either directly or indirectly, and this again reinforces the sense of how we always carry our history with us, of how our eyes are composed of everything we have seen, and of how it is only through these mediations that we can begin to see at all.

While this pairing is more easily legible—since both images tell a story of bus passengers being searched, even if one does so more indirectly—this attention to formal, visual rhymes also permits us to see relations between images that do not immediately share this kind of thematic proximity, as I already have suggested in relation to the two diptychs from your “From Home to the Field” project. It becomes possible, for example, to begin to read relations between images such as another three drawn from your work in El Salvador and Kurdistan.

The first image depicts a firing range in Usulután, El Salvador, which was used by the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion. Taken in 1983, the photograph presents a series of rows of silhouetted figures in a landscape, with every silhouette a representation of a person who can be targeted and killed. The second image, taken in June 1992, presents the new cemetery of Gohtapa, where villagers from mass graves were reburied, and the third image, also taken in 1992, presents a field in northern Iraq, dotted with anonymous graves of children killed in the Anfal campaign. I want to put these images alongside one another not only because of the formal relays between them—the exchanges that are legible between the silhouetted targets and the grave markers, for example, with an increased disorder in the latter’s placement as we move from left to right—but also as a preliminary way of answering a question you once asked me. You may remember that, in a discussion about the relation between your different projects, you asked “what is it that remains the same” as you move from continent to continent, from El Salvador to Kurdistan. In many respects, my discussion of your “Photo Swap” exercise and of the way in which it permits us to think about how we might read the relations between images taken at different times and in different places has been a way of beginning to respond to this

question. Now, by placing these images from El Salvador and Kurdistan next to one another, I can be more precise, at least in regard to these images: one thing that remains the same in this particular shift from El Salvador to Kurdistan is, not surprisingly, your attraction—or, minimally, your camera’s attraction—to documenting violence and exterminations, disappearances and mass graves. If the image of the firing range points to a moment of preparation, a moment of the anticipation of targeting killings, the two images of gravesites mark the moment after different murders and disappearances, and embody more sober moments of remembrance and commemoration. There is a kind of silence and serenity to the three images, despite the references to the violence and killing that take place either before or after the moments in which the photographs are taken. What also remain the same, then, are not only your insistence that many of the most important things about a photograph are invisible in it, are outside of its frame, even if they have nevertheless left their traces in it, but also the very real commitment on your part to exposing the traces of injustice wherever it occurs, whether in Latin America or in Kurdistan, or really anywhere. As I have wanted to suggest, this commitment corresponds to the political promise of a mode of reading that begins in the exchange of images and histories from different times and places in order to help us imagine ties and relations where we might never have imagined they existed.

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Doorways. I now want to turn to doorways, Susan—not only because “Doorways” is the title of another experiment in *Learn to See*, and one that views doorways as signs to be read—as signs of class and history, of entries and exits, of relations and interdictions—but also because doors and doorways can be found everywhere in your work. There are the doorways that separate the residents at 44 Irving Street and that we find at the end of hallways, the doorways that mark the border between the interior of a house and its porch, the more porous entryways that permit access to the interior of the carnival strippers’ tents, the doorways

from which people in Nicaragua view the revolution as it is happening in the streets, the doors and passageways that punctuate your work in El Salvador and that are often the vantage points from which people can view the traces of violence and bloodshed, and doors that are nearly always the signature of *Pandora's Box*. In each instance, these doors—and a host of other related threshold figures, including windows, mirrors, passageways, shadows, liminal spaces of all kinds—become a means of exploring the relations between what we can see and what we cannot, between interiors and exteriors, revelations and secrets, life and death, memory and forgetting, presence and absence, light and darkness, and destruction and survival. As Ralph Waldo Emerson would have it, “every wall is a door.” If he suggests that every barrier or obstacle can become an opening, that something that we do not consider a door can still be a door, then it becomes possible to say that nearly everything can be a door. If doors are ubiquitous in your work, it is also because they can become another name for photography. Like doors, every one of your photographs has the capacity to reveal and conceal. It opens up several worlds to us, even as it holds details and histories in reserve, away from sight, asking that we imagine what we cannot see directly, what is beyond its frame. Every door, then—whether it is open or closed, or even open and closed at the same time (however impossible this may seem, after Marcel Duchamp’s *porte paradoxale* we know this, too, is possible)—is an invitation to think about what it means to see or to look, as are all of your photographs.

Indeed, many of your photographs include details that frame other elements in them, as if they were doorways, or even photographs of photographs. And the photograph is itself perhaps nothing other than a door. Like the camera’s shutter, like the doors that punctuate so many of your images, it is simultaneously an opening and a closing.

This framing effect can be found in an image taken in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral in El Salvador in 1979, depicting a man collecting contributions for families of the “disappeared.” The image presents several framing effects; in this instance, the bus door windows (the windows that effectively enable the bus door to remain “open” and “closed” at the same time), the



Susan Meiselas

“Mano blanca,” signature of the death squads left on the door of a slain peasant organizer, Arcatao, Chalatenango province, El Salvador, 1980

windshield, the side- and rear-view mirrors, and even the sunglasses on the man who is visible under the bus driver's head, all become frames, as if the image were composed of a series of photographs, suggesting that all subjects are framed and captured in this manner, as if we always exist only to become images, for others and ourselves.

This becoming-image is evident in several of your photographs, but I want to recall two images here, one from your *Carnival Strippers* project and another from your work in El Salvador. The first is the now famous image of a young stripper, Lena, on the bally box, that you took in Essex Junction, Vermont, at the back of the state fairgrounds in the summer of 1973. Standing on a pedestal and wearing a bikini, she seems to be, as you have said, on an auction block, with several men around—one with a microphone encouraging men to come see the show, two talking, two looking on, and the ticket collector who is guarding the entrance to the tent in which the show will take soon place. What I find so striking about the image is that everyone is looking somewhere else, with the only one who is looking directly at you and the camera being the man who is guarding the entryway—the doorway that, presumably marking the passage from desire to more desire, invites us to witness the melancholy and sadness that touches so many of the strippers, even when they claim to be instrumentalizing their performances to their benefit. Including silhouettes of girls on the temporary walls—as if to suggest the floating, fleeting, and shadowy images the women have become in the imaginations of the men who come to see them—the image seems to be governed by a play of gazes, hands, and shadows. Looking like a statue or mannequin, looking like a representation of herself, that is, Lena looks off into the distance, as if she were not present, as if she had no relation either to what was happening at the moment—this moment of objectification, of becoming an image for others—or to what was about to happen in the tent. Lena herself admits that she can only perform if she withdraws from herself, if she “disappears” herself: “I had to get stoned the other night. I have to be totally withdrawn from that place to go there. . . . I very seldom get that stoned. But *I had to*, so I didn’t have to understand myself, what I was doing, so I



Susan Meiselas

Collecting contributions for families of the “disappeared” in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1979

didn't have to relate myself to anything." Transforming herself into an image of herself and therefore anticipating not only what her audiences will do with her but also what the photograph will do, she—and the photograph that presents her—touches on questions of photographic representation in general.

It is not surprising that you have said that this image is the one that encouraged you to want to become a photographer, to want to devote your life to telling stories through photography. This is not only because one of your primary motivations is to tell the stories and histories of the people and events whose traces you present to us but also because you have always wanted to tell the story of photography itself. *Carnival Strippers* is indeed one of the great meditations on what it means to see. It is a project about looking itself—about the ways in which looking is traversed by the politics of sexual difference, by issues of class and economics, by our histories as well as the histories and relations of the society in which we live, and by what Abigail Solomon-Godeau has called the “mechanisms of objectification, fetishism, and projection.” Beyond the striptease itself—and beyond the question of whether the girls can ever be seen in their singularity, in all their nakedness, without their becoming an image—there is scarcely a photograph in *Carnival Strippers* that does not represent the act of looking itself. When they are not beyond the frame of an image, the performers are viewed along with the spectators, and at other times they can be partially viewed within images that focus instead on the spectators and their gaze. They observe the spectators from behind the curtain, the makeshift doorway that creates the distinction between what is “on stage” and what is not. While the spectators' views often replace yours, Solomon-Godeau rightly suggests that your photographs come to represent our views. Because of this, each of the images in this project becomes a kind of doorway into thinking about what it means to look in general, and especially when what we can see is influenced by the histories and mediations that both enable and interrupt this act of looking.

Following the logic of “Photo Swap,” this act of looking permits us to associate this image of Lena on the bally box with a 1979 image of a demonstrator in El Salvador. What I like about



Susan Meiselas
Lena on the Bally Box, Essex Junction, Vermont, 1973

this image is not simply the fact that, again, doors with windows become frames that would seem to include images within them—this time, the doors of a parked van—but also the visual rhyme between Lena on the bally box and the man and woman standing above the wall. As in the image of Lena, everyone in the picture—frozen and arrested in the process of becoming-image—is looking in another direction, staging, that is, another play of gazes. This self-reflexivity—the way in which your photographs often reflect on the act of looking that is also the most characteristic feature of the photographic act—is especially pervasive in your work in El Salvador, and it can be seen again in a set of four images. The first of these, taken in San Salvador in 1981, shows a young boy and girl peering into an alleyway that leads, behind a house, to the area in which several youths were found massacred. Although the children cannot see the strongest traces of the massacre from their vantage point, it is clear that we are witnessing an act of witnessing that knows, without seeing directly, what has taken place, even beyond their sight. It is almost as if we are asked to witness the bloodstains for them, or that we are asked to come to know what they already know. They are also looking at you, which is to say that, in turn, they are witnessing your act of bearing witness, and this act of reciprocal witnessing is intensified by the fact that, through your photograph, it is witnessed by everyone who sees your image. The multiple acts of witnessing that are sealed within this image are supplemented by a door behind the children, slightly ajar and framed within the open entryway leading into the back alley, and a barred window behind the house that permits even one more view of the bloody traces.

The second photograph, taken in 1982, presents a private security guard in the Colonia Escalon neighborhood of San Salvador, with two young women looking out behind a half-opened door. It is not entirely clear if their eyes are directed at: (1) the guard who, in front of a set of barred, wrought iron doors, is holding a semi-automatic rifle in his right arm; (2) the guard who, with the exception of the butt of his rifle and his left hand, both of which can be viewed in the lower right corner of the image, is not visible in the image; or (3) you. Whatever the case, what is clear is that the geometric shape of the wrought iron gate and



Susan Meiselas
Demonstrator, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1979



TOP: Susan Meiselas
Student massacre, Back Alley, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1979

BOTTOM: Susan Meiselas
Private security guard, Colonia Escalon neighborhood, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1982

TOP: Susan Meiselas
Coffins of youth killed by the National Guard after a theater performance critical of the government, Rosario Church, San Salvador, El Salvador, October 1979

BOTTOM: Susan Meiselas
Blood of student slain while banding out political leaflets, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1979

door forms a series of vertical, rectangular frames that cut the image into a series of snapshots, one of which perfectly frames these two women peering out from inside the building. Staging a series of looks, the image and its multiple frames help us understand that we can never view the entirety of a photograph—all of its details—at the same time. Our eye has to be trained to look at details in relation to one another, as if every image were composed of a series of framed elements (what our eye can see at any given moment) that have to be read, as I have already noted, syntactically in relation to each other, even across distances. In his 1909 essay “Bridge and Door,” Georg Simmel tells us that the door represents, in the most decisive manner, “how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act.” This is why, he goes on to say, “the door speaks.”

The image of the crowd looking through another series of cuts, another series of vertical, rectangular frames formed by the wrought iron fence separating them from the coffins lined up along the pavement in front of them, magnifies what we have just seen by multiplying the views of the traces of death before them. Taken at the Rosario Church in San Salvador in October 1979, it depicts the coffins of youth who were killed by the National Guard after a theater performance that was critical of the government. Each rectangular frame of the fence forms a miniaturized doorway or window through which, viewing the coffins within the gates of the church, the spectators—sometimes with hands, arms, and legs making their way through the openings in the fence, exceeding the frame that would contain them—see the death that could soon hit them, and that already has, even if indirectly through the death of a family member, lover, friend, or even someone unknown to them. The image prompts a reflection on the fear and death that touched all the inhabitants of San Salvador: even if they are not presently looking through the railings, it is impossible for anyone not to witness the signs of death that surround them everywhere.

The fourth image, taken in 1979, depicts a group of young boys and girls sharing their gazes between you and the blood of a young student who had been killed while handing out political leaflets. Like the two children peering into the back alley, the

two children in this image looking at you and your camera—and, through your camera, at us—ask us to think about our relation to the death whose traces we have before us. If we are looked at by these children, however, there is no symmetry between the interplay of gazes that takes place here, which is why what is at stake in viewing these images is also our responsibility toward them. In looking at us, the children in this image ask us to remain answerable for the dead, to think of our relation to what brought death to them—to keep them safe not simply from the violent history that led to their death but also from the history that will continue to seek to erase and efface them from its movement. It also asks us to think about our relation to the dangers that threaten these still-living children. It therefore asks us to think simultaneously of the relations among the past, the present, and the future.

Each of these four photographs ask us to take responsibility for what we see before us. This is one of the greatest powers of photography and this power is demonstrably visible in the image I have put at the head of this section: your 1980 image of the Mano Blanca, the white hand that was the signature of the Salvadorian death squads and that, in this instance, was left on the door of a peasant organizer, Ernesto Anjivar, in Arcateo, in the Chalatenango Province of El Salvador. The calling card of the death squads during the Civil War, the Mano Blanca (a hand dipped in white paint) was, as in this case, left on the door of someone they wished to threaten (Ernesto was later killed in his home) or on the door of someone whom they already had seized and “disappeared.” During the 1970s and 1980s, death squads in El Salvador kidnapped, tortured, and killed thousands of students, teachers, trade unionists, and leftist leaders and activists, as part of the anti-Communist campaign led by Roberto d’Aubuisson, the founder of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), and supported by the United States. Mano Blanca, working in tandem with the National Police and National Guard, emerged from the rural paramilitary and intelligence network, ORDEN, which used terror to crush even the slightest hint of dissidence.

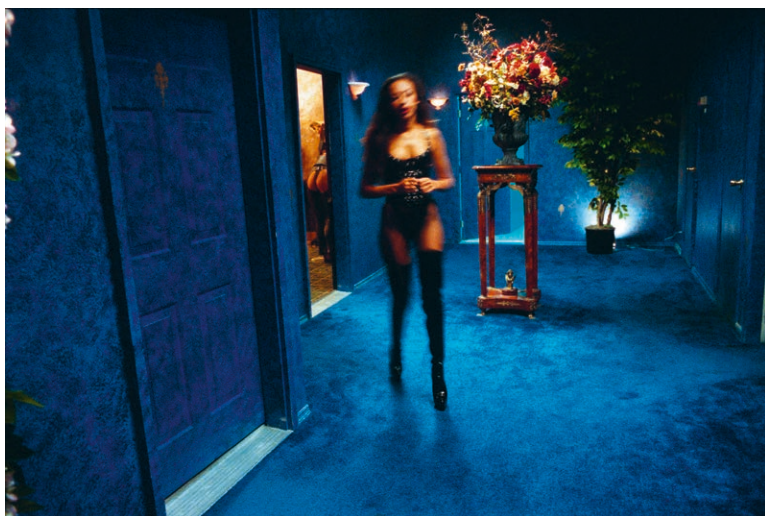
Your image is perhaps the only image we have of this signature trace of the Mano Blanca—if we set aside, that is, all the

corpses, bloodstains, and coffins that also suggest their murderous and destructive work. In the image, the two top hands are framed within the door's panels, with the third, lower hand less legible and even exceeding the panel's frame. Given that the image of the hands is produced by placing a hand in white paint and then placing it on the door, the imprint of each hand is clearly different from the others (the imprint is not the result of a template or stamp) and, indeed, no matter how many deaths there may be, each one is singular and its singularity is represented by this or that singular hand, even if this hand also transmits a warning to everyone else, letting them know that they, too, can suffer a similar fate. Upright, with its open palm, the hand is, like a photograph, both a greeting and a sign of arrest, a hello and a farewell. Indeed, the hands make clear that the doors on which they are placed are closed, that they have been closed on the victim's life. If the law is always revealed through doors and gates, through limits and interdictions, here the hands belong to a symbolic order that—established by means of the distinction between an inside and an outside of the law, however rogue, violent, and even extralegal this law may be (we should remember that, although the Mano Blanca are a paramilitary group, they nevertheless act as an arm of the Police and National Guard and therefore in accordance with the law's presumed representatives)—shatters the law's topography. In the words of Jacques Lacan, the door is never something fully real. On the contrary, “[in] its nature, the door belongs to the symbolic order. . . . The door is a real symbol, the symbol *par excellence*, the symbol in which man's passing, through the cross it sketches, intersecting access and closure, can always be recognized.”

Among so many other things, this door, and the white hands that are imprinted on it, symbolize all the disappearances, killings, violence, and torture that took place during the Salvadorian conflict, and whose traces and effect you so patiently sought to document. Although it was taken after some of your other images from El Salvador, in other words, it is an image that “precedes” all the others, since it references the forces behind the disappearance and deaths without which your other images might not ever have been necessary.

If this door evokes all sorts of torture, scenes of punishment, instances of secrecy and clandestine activity, the relations between sovereignty and cruelty, and the various relays that make it impossible to declare what is inside and outside the law, it anticipates—albeit in a different register and with different political valences—the doors that circulate throughout your project on the New York S&M club, *Pandora's Box*. There is scarcely an image in this project that does not include a door, at least a door of some kind, that is, at least one or more threshold figures that function like doors. These doors tell us that the moment we step through a door we subject ourselves to the law of a symbolic order. Indeed, the world of *Pandora's Box* is a world full of symbols, figures, and representations, all of which exist within a network of doors that reveal and conceal the secrets around which this presumably private club is organized—and all of which are imprinted on bodies which, in turn, are inseparable from the material effects of these different modes of physical and psychic inscription, these different registers of pain and pleasure.

That doors are an essential element in the club can be seen in these four images, all taken in 1995. Depicting a man sitting in a client lounge, Mistress Brigitte between clients, the club's Dungeon, and a client exiting a room and closing a door behind him, in each instance the doors are not simply a formal feature of the image but also a means of reflecting on the role of doors in the operation and *raison d'être* of the club itself. Indeed, doors within these images become a figure for all the thresholds that characterize the S&M experience—the thresholds between pain and pleasure, dominance and submission, torture and enjoyment, secrecy and exposure, and all the thresholds of the body (experienced in the opening and closing of the body's orifices), each one a kind of door that exists at the border between what is inside the body and what is not. This network of thresholds, this speculative game of reflections, mirrors, and all sorts of representations, invites a reflexivity that permeates the entire space and architecture of *Pandora's Box*. This can be seen in the image of the man half-hidden behind the open door leading into the club's client lounge. The open door is mirrored in the open door of the media cabinet, a door that, bearing a trace of the glow of



TOP: Susan Meiselas
Pandora's Box, Client lounge, New York City, 1995
BOTTOM: Susan Meiselas
Pandora's Box, Mistress Brigitte between clients, 1995

TOP: Susan Meiselas
Pandora's Box, The Dungeon, New York City, 1995
BOTTOM: Susan Meiselas
Pandora's Box, Security TV IV, New York City, 1995

the television screen, becomes a kind of mirror, as does the red wall that also bears another reflection of the screen on its surface, even if a more faded and dispersed one. The framed television screen is doubled in the two framed paintings—one above the television and another on the wall—and the door knob, seemingly at the height of the man's level of vision, seems like a miniature, prosthetic telescope directed at the television screen. The vertigo of this series of reflections is repeated in the other images, each of which has multiple doors in it, and even, as in the case of the image of the Dungeon, doors framed within doors, some that are open, some that are closed, and others that are slightly ajar. This play of doors is intensified in the scene of Mistress Brigitte as she is captured surrounded by doors, moving from one to another, and in the image of the man whose relation to the door of the room from which he is exiting is captured by the monitor of the video surveillance camera, as if we were looking at him through a framed window, or even a window in yet another door.

These different mirror effects are at the heart of the lure of *Pandora's Box*, as if it knew, and wished to exploit, our attraction to repetition, to citation, to our desire to come and go, to always see ourselves somewhere else, to pass through a door that will permit us to become someone other than “who we are.” These effects are legible everywhere, from the images cast on reflective surfaces to the mirrors in which members and objects are reflected to the several images that cite or replicate other images, even if at times in displaced forms, and to the various modes of representation represented within the images—doorways, mirrors, frames, paintings, statues, figurines, mannequins, plastic reproductions of body parts, replicas and reproductions of all kinds, tapestries, television screens, surveillance cameras, film and theater posters, glass windows, neon drawings, globes, clocks, books, tattoos, various forms of role-playing, with all of its accoutrements (masks, leather, gloves, boots, military hats, spikes and chains, each of which is its own form of citation), and even a blackboard with mathematical equations referencing domination and submission (we find the formula “ $D/S = dy/cs \text{ cosxy}$,” for example, on its surface). And this does not yet include all the doors that populate your images here: whether they are

open or closed, open and closed, with men and women either entering or exiting them, or slightly visible behind them, perhaps hiding or preparing to emerge, whether they are glass doors in examination rooms, arched passageways, small doors of hidden cabinets, or doors for various closets. All these doors operate in these photographs as a means of reflecting on photography itself, as if each door was itself a photograph of photography. We might even say that, within a photograph, *everything is a door*.

As we have seen in regard to your work in Nicaragua and El Salvador, however, doors and representations can be associated with cruelty and violence, and this is perhaps why you were able to move from these projects—and from your work in Kurdistan—to *Pandora's Box*. Indeed, all the tropes, figures, and experiences that we associate with the discourse of war and conflict—pain, suffering, subjugation, dominance, torture, enslavement, power, cruelty, possession, spectacle and theater, the authoritarianism that unleashes libidinal impulses, aggressive and violent drives—are also part of the lexicon that governs the activities and experiences in *Pandora's Box*. There would be much to say about the relays between the world of this private sex club, in which these activities and experiences are undergone *for the pleasure of it*, and a world in which they are experienced differently by those who do not have a choice in undergoing them. Within the world of *Pandora's Box*, we witness a theater of pain and pleasure that mirrors, even if in a distorted form, the sadomasochism of international conflicts and civil wars. We might even say that it is through the network of doors that define the space and activities of the club that we can have a glimpse—and even a salutary glimpse—of the dangers and limit experiences that are perhaps the most secret and powerful engines of the world's political tensions. With regard to the political, historical, and ethical realms, are there consequences or at least lessons to be drawn from the hypothesis of an irreducible drive for power, or even of a death drive that we inevitably seem to find so compelling?

I might suggest here that even the lid of the jar that had been given to Pandora and that, on opening, released greed, envy, hatred, suffering, pain, disease, hunger, poverty, torture, war, evil, death, and all of life's miseries, is a kind of door (as

Joan Fontcuberta reminds us, the reference to Pandora's "box" instead of "jar" or "urn" is a Renaissance distortion). The moment Pandora realizes what is being let loose, she slams the lid back down in time to keep hope inside the jar—or, rather, as Hesiod puts it, the lid of the jar, moved by "the will of Aegis-holding Zeus who gathers the clouds," keeps hope from escaping. I like imagining that you have spent your photographic career documenting everything that was released from Pandora's jar, but in the hope that, in doing so, you can help us learn how to see, and therefore to engage, the most pressing issues of our day—critically and urgently, and in a way that allows us to follow Emerson's charge that we always "be openers of doors," which means, among so many other things, that we always be readers of doors—and of everything they have sealed within them, of everything that is before and behind them.

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Traces. I have thought for a while now that I wanted to close this letter to you with an exploration of the experiment proposed by Tom Dooley for your *Learn to See* project. Entitled simply "Traces," this experiment views the question of the trace as a question of the archive, of the history that is sealed within a trace. Because of the archival quality of the trace, he views the trace as a kind of monument, a sign that keeps a relation to the past, even in the present and in the future, a sign that exposes the passing of time and that could even be said to be dedicated to time. If we must register the way in which the past survives in the present in order to look toward the future, it is because every now already bears within it the traces of what is not now, every now already brings along with it the possibility of its own myriad archives, its own set of traces. This is why the present has to be thought in relation to what is not present, and the life of every subject has to be considered in relation to a death that is promised and to the possibility of its living on. Indeed, the photograph always announces a death, even as it persistently delays it.

If I have returned to the issue of the trace, though, it is also because I want to suggest your love of the trace, your devotion

to it—a love and devotion that are intensified because you know it can never be captured, or ever be made present. It is always linked to a loss, to something that has passed and is no longer present, to what can never coincide with its presumed referent. In fact, the existence of the trace confirms the absence of whatever left it behind. It is because of your passion for the trace that you are drawn "like a magnet" to "mass graves, destroyed villages, the missing," and, in this last section, I hope to keep the promise I made very early on to link this passion to your love of photography—and this because to love the trace is, indeed, to love photography, since the very practice of photography begins in its relation to the trace, to what is now absent. Arresting the photographed and sealing it within its surface, the photograph becomes a kind of cemetery. It buries its subjects and keeps them alive at the same time. This is why the affirmation of life cannot occur without the thought of death, without the most vigilant, responsible, and even obsessive attention to this end, but, in saying this, it is important to emphasize that the thought of death and mourning is what enables us to affirm life. To put it differently, life is increasingly precious because it always is touched and inhabited by death. Your attraction to mass graves and death, then, is nothing more nor less than a sign of your love of photography, since these figures form an essential part of photography's lexicon—to be attracted to these sites and figures and to everything that haunts them is to be attracted to experiences that are at the heart of the photographic experience—but this love is at the same time indissociable from your intense appreciation of life, and from your activism against anything that would diminish this life, in any context, and in any way.

In these final pages, I want to recall four of your images, Susan, one from Nicaragua, one from El Salvador, and two from Kurdistan. The first three I wish to discuss form a kind of triptych, since each one references the relations among death, mourning, traces, and activities of witnessing, even as it also reflects on the capacities and incapacities of photography itself. As I wish to suggest, you are drawn to these scenes of death and mourning not only because of your compassion for life and your commitment to exposing injustice but also because these photographs

are also photographs of what makes photography what it is, and what it is not. The first image, taken in Nicaragua in 1979, shows a father collecting the remains of his assassinated son, who has been identified by a shoe lying nearby. The remains of the son form another “Y,” with their outline left on the ground beside it, a kind of ghostly trace of the burnt cadaver the father has so lovingly tried to retrieve. The remains can scarcely remain together or intact, however, and are in a state of continuous deterioration (already part of the son’s remains have been left behind on the ground). The remains that are meant to reference and memorialize the body of the dead son, in other words, are in the process of disintegrating even further and cannot any longer refer to the son’s body, if they ever did. They are remains that do not remain. This is why, as Maurice Blanchot noted so movingly in his 1951 essay “Two Versions of the Imaginary,” in which he famously identifies the image with the cadaver, “what we call mortal remains escapes common categories. Something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all. It is neither the same as the person who was alive, nor is it another person, nor is it anything else.” If we view your photograph through the lens of this passage, we can conclude that the son’s remains are neither present nor absent. They testify without testifying because, among so many other things, they testify to the destruction of memory itself. This is why, we might say, these remains can never correspond to that of which they are supposed to be the trace. I would even go so far as to say that, in every trace, and even in every experience, there is this destruction, this experience of destruction which is experience itself. And I would say the same for the photograph, since it, too, can never correspond with what is before the camera—there is always so much more in a photograph than what we can see on its surface and, at the same time, never enough—which is why you always feel compelled to supplement the image by surrounding it with other images, and by trying to reconstruct all the histories that are encrypted within it. The photograph itself is never enough, since, by itself, it can never match what is “inside” it, and this because of everything that—“outside” it and beyond its frame—has left its traces on its surface.



Susan Meiselas
*Father collecting remains of assassinated son, identified by
a shoe lying nearby, Managua, Nicaragua, 1979*



Susan Meiselas
Victims of the Mozote massacre, Morazan, El Salvador
January, 1982



Susan Meiselas
Widow at mass grave found in Koreme, northern Iraq
June, 1992

In this instance, too, the dead son, having become an image, even if a material one—the ashes to which the son has been reduced are themselves a trace, an “image” of him, just as the photograph you took is still an image of “him,” at least of “him” as he is now, or as *he is not* now—has become something that cannot be grasped. As Blanchot would put it, speaking of the cadaver “itself”—and of the cadaver as the “thing” to which the one who was once alive has been transformed—“it is not the same thing at a distance but the thing as distance, present in its absence, graspable because ungraspable, appearing as disappeared. It is the return of what does not come back.” “He who just died is at first extremely close to the condition of a thing,” he goes on to say, “a familiar thing, which we approach and handle, which does not hold us at a distance. . . . But now, he is dead. From behind there will no longer be an inanimate thing, but Someone: the unbearable image and figure of the unique becoming nothing in particular. . . . It is striking that, at this very moment, when the cadaverous presence is the presence of the unknown before us, the mourned deceased begins to *resemble himself*.”

There would be a great deal to say about these passages and I hope we can one day talk about them together, but what I wish to emphasize here is that, like the remains of a cadaver, every photograph is also “the return of what does not come back.” It is the trace, the visual repetition, of something that, even at the very moment in which the photograph was taken, is already in the process of becoming something else. What Blanchot suggests is that we do not have to wait until we encounter a cadaver to know that we are always becoming someone or something else, but, once we do encounter a cadaver, this truth becomes ineluctable. This is why, he suggests, we come to ourselves, we come to understand something about ourselves—as the ones who are never just ourselves, or at least not the same “ourselves” from one moment to the next—when we encounter a cadaver, since it is there, in this encounter, that we come closest to the mortality that we not only share but that makes us who we are. It is in this encounter with death that we come to *resemble ourselves*, as mortal and finite beings. It is because we are defined by our mortality and finitude that we are both made and unmade

by our images—by the images we are but also by the images we create.

This is why, photography tells us, we can always only love ruins: because we can always only love what is mortal. In this instance, this photograph of ruin—minimally, the record of an incineration, of a dead son, and of the body of the dead son—points to the ruin of the image’s capacity to refer in general. As I have noted elsewhere, “what makes the image an image is its capacity to bear the traces of what it cannot show, to go on, in the face of this loss and ruin, to suggest and gesture toward its potential for speaking.” I would link this statement to your own insistence that “a photograph is a document that resists erasure.” Even as the trace of the son’s body continues to deteriorate, even when we take a lesson from it about our own finitude, it still remains as a vanishing trace. Indeed, even when an image tells us it can no longer show anything, when it reaches the limit of what it can show, it nevertheless still strives to show and bear witness to what history has sought to silence. This is particularly true, it seems to me, of the second image here, which presents victims of the Mozote massacre in El Salvador, which took place on December 11, 1981, just a few weeks before you took your picture in January 1982.

Rather than pursuing a reading of this image that would rhyme with the one I have just offered, though—in this image, too, the corpses are images of victims who are no longer present, who have been transformed into something in between a person and a thing, who cannot coincide with the image at which we are looking—I here wish to emphasize the ways in which the images you took of rotting bodies and burnt homes in the Morazán area of El Salvador circulated and eventually became part of the evidence of the massacre, evidence that could be used against the various denials of both the Salvadorian government and the US State Department. Although the guerrillas had announced the massacre soon after it happened, the US State Department claimed that it sent its own investigative team into the area and found no evidence of a massacre. Prompted by this denial—and by the continued assertions by the guerrillas and survivors of the incident—you went to the

area with the journalist Raymond Bonner to document what you could see (which included the charred skulls and bones of men, women, and children), and what you could learn from survivors of the massacre. Published alongside accounts of the slaughter by Bonner and Alma Guillermoprieto in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, respectively, in January 1982 (Guillermoprieto had entered Mozote a few days after you and Bonner did, and she also reported seeing the remains of bodies and body parts and also cited the same survivors), your images were presented as documentation of the atrocities that had taken place during the massacre. Despite these documented accounts of army troops, including members of the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion, destroying the town of El Mozote and killing hundreds of men, women, and children, both governments continued to deny the massacre, and it was not until 1993 that the UN Truth Commission authorized an investigation of the incident. Pressing the Salvadorian government to excavate the ruins of El Mozote's sacristy—where a forensic team found the skulls of 143 individuals, most of them children—the UN and its report concluded, given the limited information it had at that point, that over 200 people had been killed in the incident (even though survivors of the massacre claim that as many as 1,000 villagers were killed). Much of this was documented in Mark Danner's 1993 *New Yorker* essay "The Truth of El Mozote," and in his meticulously documented and expanded book *The Massacre at El Mozote*, which was published the following year, but the exhumations and investigation of the massacre have continued to this day and, as you know, your photographs are still essential parts of the evidence being put forward to confirm the scope of the slaughter.

I have wanted to recall this sequence of events simply to emphasize that what gets exposed in this process is not only the evidentiary force of a photograph but also its incapacity to stand alone—not because the Salvadorian government and the Reagan administration denied what the photograph shows (these denials are scarcely surprising at all), but because its force can only be intensified and clarified when it is inscribed within a narrative, a fact that has circulated in my letter like a red thread, and

that is confirmed on so many fronts by your own insistence on this point. If the photograph would seem to have to be inscribed into a narrative in order to consolidate its evidentiary status, I wish to insist that it was already evidence the moment you captured the scene within the lens of your camera. In this context, this means at least two things: (1) that the evidence provided by the photograph can never be understood solely in terms of its relation to the reality to which it presumably refers, since, however referential we may think the photograph is, it can never be decisive or definitive on its own; and (2) that the evidentiary character of the photograph can never be entirely erased. It remains. These bodies were killed and left to rot. Documenting this is an irreplaceable and invaluable act, regardless of whether or not what is shown is denied, independently of whether or not people act on what is shown directly and decisively. If we say that a body is killed, however, the question that remains is what it means to say that a body is killed, or, rather, what is killed when a body is killed. This would include all the relations and histories that had left their traces in this body, and that enabled it to always be more than a body, and less than one. This is why the image you produced has to be considered in terms of the broader context or narrative into which its testimony is situated, and in relation to how it is presented and by whom. This means, as Tom Keenan has argued in an essay on Allan Sekula's writings on the ambiguous documentary character of photography, that, by "itself," "the imprint of the trace decides nothing, settles nothing, determines nothing, forces no conclusions. Conclusions, decisions, happen in an altogether different realm and depend on 'differing presentational circumstances' and conditions of use. This 'indeterminacy' of meaning does not hold in spite of the indexicality of the image but because of it: because there is a trace, an imprint, there is the possibility of interpretation, the opportunity for meaning, fiction, and hence the 'battleground of fictions.' Because there is a trace, there is a battle. Around the image, a debate can begin—we decide what it says; it does not, it cannot." If the first image in this triptych suggests the incapacity of the photograph to coincide with the photographed, this second one similarly points to the inability

of the photograph to remain on the side of evidence all by itself (this is not to say that the photograph is not from the very beginning evidence, but simply to insist that we always need to state what it is evidence of). In both instances, the referential character of the photographic trace is unsettled, even if for different but related reasons, and can only be restored by an interpretive struggle that itself has to be reinforced by, among other things, documents, interviews, testimonies, other photographs, and, as in this instance, by forensic work.

The importance of forensic work to your photographic practice becomes clearer in relation to the third image, which shows a widow peering into a mass grave that was excavated in Koreme in northern Iraq in June 1992. This is the same site that appears in the diptych that also includes an image of your studio, but this photograph was taken after the excavation, which, as you know, took place a few weeks after your earlier photograph of the site had been taken. The widow seems to be almost numb, in a state of disbelief, as she looks into the remains that have surfaced in the site, like a kind of ancient frieze whose shattered figures have, in addition to the violence of the battle exhibited in the frieze, experienced the ravages of time—as if they had not simply deteriorated and suffered different kinds of fragmentation and tearing apart but had also transformed in time, withered away, as mortals would. We see twisted bodies, with their disarticulated skulls and limbs, and with the traces of their clothes still partially wrapping whatever is left of them. This tangle of corpses, these remains that are so disorganized that it becomes difficult to identify the body parts that belong to this or that body, appear as so many images, torn and fragmented images, of bodies that are no longer alive and present, even if they remain referenced in this encrypted way.

After Hussein's Anfal campaign, reports had begun to circulate that mass graves had been uncovered, and what I find most interesting is that, when you agreed to participate in a Human Rights Watch mission to investigate the reports, you collaborated with Clyde Snow, the forensic anthropologist who already had exhumed mass graves in Argentina and Chile. As you have described your work there:

My task was to photograph the sites of evidence—scars on survivors, unmarked graves, the clothes that had once wrapped bodies now buried anonymously, the bullet holes in skulls—the visible remains. . . . Working with a small group of Kurds, we excavated where the gravediggers remembered burying the dead. . . . These were not the first mass graves I had documented. This time, however, I was coming in at the end of the story. I had no connection to the Kurds and even less sense of why these killings had occurred. I felt strange—photographing the present while understanding so little about the past. Now I realize that the unearthing of these graves led me to years of further digging.

Focusing on traces of violence and death—scars, graves, clothes left behind by missing bodies, bullet holes, all the “visible remains” of the work of annihilation—you suggest that these traces need to be read, to be connected to the acts and histories that led to their present state and that are sealed within them, as if each trace were itself the bearer of innumerable and various archives that have to be excavated, sometimes for years. I like that you identify the process of forensic reading with what seemed most important for you in your photographic work. In your words,

Forensics is very meticulous work. It paralleled where I was at the time. I was ready for that type of careful examination and I became absorbed in the minutiae of the process—how to track the bones, what the bones tell us. That photograph of Clyde Snow holding up the skull illustrates what I'm talking about: A blindfold is still attached to the skull, it survived because it's synthetic material. Snow is examining the size of the bullet hole in the back of the skull to determine the caliber of the weapon used and the distance from which the victim was shot. The process is fascinating.

I also like that your description of the reading of bones resonates with the way I have been describing the reading of photographs, and this because forensics is nothing more nor less than an art of seeing and reading. Clyde Snow called the work he did in order to identify human remains *osteobiography*, the biography of bones. He worked in the conviction that bones were a kind

of archive of the entire history of a life and that this history was encrypted in the very morphology and texture of the bones and could only be pieced together through an active and creative labor of reading and interpretation. In their book *Mengele's Skull*, Tom Keenan and Eyal Weizman also suggest that bones and photographs bear the traces of a network of relations, experiences, and histories that has to be read, however difficult and complicated this work of reading may be. As they put it: "To the untrained eye, bones look similar—skulls are devoid of the expression and the gestures of a human face. But the bones of a skeleton are exposed to life in a similar way that photographic film is exposed to light. A life, understood as an extended set of exposures to a myriad of forces (labor, location, nutrition, violence, and so on), is projected onto a mutating, growing, and contracting negative, which is the body in life. Like a palimpsest or a photograph with multiple exposures, bones can be quite complicated to interpret." This is why I have insisted—as have you—that photographs are never isolated phenomena. Like the forensic object, the photograph has to be situated in relation to all "the chains of associations that emanate from it" and that put it in relation to an unsaturable series of contexts—a series of contexts that help us reconstruct the network of relations that have left their traces on the photograph's surface and that have to be recalled if we are to approach its significance. This labor requires a creative act of reading. Indeed, what Emerson says about the act of reading a book applies just as well to the act of reading a photograph, a set of bones or, really, anything: "One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, 'He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies.' There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world." If we read a photograph properly, in other words, it can become as broad as the world, as broad as the worlds that made it possible. I would suggest that your monumental project on Kurdistan would never have happened if you did not share this insight—this conviction



Susan Meiselas
*Family members wear the photographs of Peshmerga martyrs,
Saiwan Hill Cemetery, Arbil, Northern Iraq, December 1991*

of the worlds that are sealed within photographs. This is what drives you to unearth the larger histories that exceed whatever your own photographs could do on their own, and this process of “unearthing” takes the form of a massive project of collecting, gathering, and curating a visual and textual history of the Kurdish people. As you put it yourself:

I experienced the photographs as a way to tell me the story, their stories about what has happened to them over the last hundred years. I was already focused on the past through the exhumations. And these photographs signaled the past. Why have people been killed? What’s behind the ethnic cleansing, the genocide? In an attempt to understand that, I looked to what might be there as evidence through photographs of what had happened before. . . . Partly I wanted to repatriate what I found, to bring them back so people could see them, and partly because that’s where the storytelling begins, around the photographs. The isolated photograph isn’t interesting enough. I’m not looking at it for its aesthetic composition. I’m interested in its historical value.

This is an extraordinary project, Susan, and I believe it is a kind of watershed moment in the history of photography. But this rather monumental gesture of making history with photographs begins in a very modest way: in the recognition of the capacity of a photograph to serve as a kind of memorial for the disappeared. There is a beautiful series of images in your Kurdistan project in which photographs of the disappeared are worn in their memory. One of the most beautiful of these is an image of family members wearing the photographs of Peshmerga martyrs in the Saiwan Hill cemetery in Arbil in northern Iraq. There is something very simple but very moving in this image and I simply wish to leave it here, suspended, like a kind of pendant that rhymes with the images pinned, but floating, on the clothing of these mourning women. I would dare to say that everything I have suggested in this letter to you is sealed and encrypted in this image, waiting for you and me to one day sit around it and unpack its several worlds together. Everything is here, which is to say that everything is also not here, beyond its frame, even as we are invited, once again, to read all its present but invisible

traces—traces that would reference, without referencing in a fixed and final way, all the worlds sealed within it, and all the worlds, all the unforeseeably mediated relations, sealed within you and your itinerant eyes.

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In his 1960 “Epilogue” to *Dreamtigers*, Jorge Luis Borges writes of a man who “sets out to draw the world.” “Over the years,” he tells us, the man peopled “a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face.” Borges imagines a man who spends his life creating and collecting images and who, near the end of his life, comes to understand that the various trajectories of his life trace the image, the lines and the outline, of his face, offering, in a sense, a kind of self-portrait, but a portrait that, as a composite of everything he has seen and experienced, is never simply a portrait of just himself, but also of all the relations that have helped make him who he is—as the one who is never simply just himself. I want to close with this reference, dear Susan, because I believe that among the many things your photographs have given us is a portrait of everything you are—someone who understands the relations that both constitute and deconstitute our sense of self, someone who understands that, however difficult and even impossible it may seem to insist on memory, we must still learn to remember what remains without being able to be fully recovered, what, even if it is destroyed and ruined, even if it is in transit or passing before us, still needs to be kept, in the way we keep what is always about to vanish. This obligation delineates the stakes of all your photographic projects, Susan, and it also tells us why you believe that we must learn to read the past, historically, and with the urgency of what might happen if we do not meet this obligation. What remains from your gestures in this direction are the remarkable gifts you have given us in all your photographs, each one of which hopes to open at least a door, if not many doors, so that we can learn to see a little better each day. It is because of your passion

for justice, because of your courage to show what others often dare not show, that we remain indebted to you, to everything that your work has given us to think, and to everything you continue to give us. It is because of the grace and kindness with which you inhabit the world that we also can bear to inhabit it, that we also can find the strength to continue to try, as Emerson once said, “to set one stone aright every day,” as you always do, my dear Susan.

Thank you for this opportunity to spend this time in my imagined desert island with your images and, through them, with you. It has been a great honor to live with them, to think with them, and to let them transform me, once again.

With love to you,
Eduardo



Susan Meiselas
Self-Portrait, 44 Irving St., Cambridge, MA, 1971

Postscript:
Lessons of the Hour

When we consider the innumerable corpses with which partly the ravages of the plague and partly the weapons of war have filled not only our Germany but almost the whole of Europe, then we must acknowledge that our roses have been transformed into thorns, our lilies into nettles, our paradises into graveyards, and indeed our whole being into an image of death. Therefore, I hope it will not be taken amiss if, upon this universal stage of death, I venture in turn to open my paper graveyard.

—Johann Christian Hallman
Funeral Orations (1682)

IN 1928, WALTER BENJAMIN HARNESSSED the sentiments expressed in this passage from Johann Christian Hallman's mourning work in support of his effort to delineate the landscape against which he believed he was writing. This landscape still bore the traces of death resulting from the ravages of the 1918 influenza pandemic and the First World War, which, beginning in 1914, had already devastated Germany and all of Europe for four years and ended only nine months after the pandemic's emergence. It is not surprising that Benjamin looks backward in order to think about his present—that he draws resources from a past that, in his hands, becomes a kind of lens through which he can view his particular historical moment—since one of his most fundamental axioms is that every moment is already full of time; it can only be thought by considering the past, the present, and the future all at once. The aftereffect of everything that has preceded it, it appears as a knot of historical relations and events that can neither be unraveled nor reconstructed in a linear and causal fashion. This is why it is inconceivable to think of an event solely in relation to the temporal situation in which it occurs. It has to be thought in relation to all the history it has sealed within it.

What Benjamin suggests here is the absolute impossibility and necessity of addressing the present in the hope that, in taking up this incalculable chance, we might help inaugurate a future that will not simply repeat the past. What is required is a capacity to read historically, and the task of this collection of essays has been to provide a series of examples of how such a capacity can be developed and nurtured—through the close reading of texts and

materials that, in every instance, ask us to read what is not visible on their surface but has nevertheless left its traces there.

On my end, I have increasingly registered the resonances among Hallman's passage, Benjamin's use of it, and the moment in which I myself am now writing. Although I had chosen the title for this collection of essays several years ago—and although I already had registered the resonance between the passage and these last years, marked as they have been by several different pandemics and wars—this title has only intensified its resonance in recent months. As I write this postscript in January 2021, just days after the attempted coup incited by Donald J. Trump and his allies and in the midst of the worst months yet of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have felt the force and pertinence of this passage even more strongly. It has seemed impossible to put together a collection of essays entitled *Paper Graveyards* without acknowledging that it was finalized, produced, and published under the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic—under the shadow of the ravages and deaths we have all experienced because of this outbreak and that have transformed nearly everything into an element of this “universal stage of death”—and all the concomitant disasters that have appeared with it, that have accompanied it, and that are indissociable from it. Pandemics are not random events. They appear as a wild, living, and always metamorphosing archive of all the history that has made them possible and that sustains them as they mutate and transform in time. They emerge and gather their strength because we have created the contexts for them but also for our vulnerabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic belongs not only to the global history of capitalism and its destructiveness—with its exploitation of resources and land, its destruction of the world's climates and biodiversity, which facilitates ever more precarious forms of contact between humans and wildlife and their potentially zoonotic pathogens, its projects of mining and mineral extraction, deforestation, unsustainable agricultural production, rapid urbanization, pollution and toxic waste, the intensification of travel and trade, forced displacements and migrations, unemployment, poverty, famines, and other forms of social and moral decomposition, its reliance on what it considers disposable

populations, its incitement of wars that are at once economic, cultural, national, and even religious, and the violent and colonial forms of racism and xenophobia that so often remain at its heart and that have been registered most recently in the disproportionate afflictions of COVID-19 suffered by communities of color and in the ongoing police brutality and anti-black violence that have led to so many African American deaths—but also to the history of biological life, especially when we act as carriers of a virus whose host reservoir could include birds or mammals that have been incubating its development for millions of years. If it is impossible to reconstruct the entirety of the history that has led to this virus or even to fully track its circulation around the globe, it is because we do not yet have a language or model to match the scale and speed of its globalization—its expansive force. Every day it exceeds all expectations, taking on new forms and crossing different thresholds with increased acceleration. It resists conceptualization; it eludes determinate origins, even if we can point to the complex network of historical events that have made its emergence possible. It resists being dated, being limited or constrained within borders, and not only because it is impossible to articulate the meaning of an ongoing process, especially when its structure is one of transference and transmission, and even when there is a “punctual” event—in this instance, the mutation of a virus at the interface between humans and animals in a market in Wuhan, in a global economy where feudality persists even in the most technologized societies.

Nevertheless, COVID-19’s appearance—like that of a medium or technology, or even a kind of photograph—could be said to document, transport, and transmit the vast archive of historical acts and relations that have enabled its spread around the globe and, indeed, to trace and enact their aftereffects. Like the technical media, the virus operates through always-shifting modes of replication, reproduction, and displacement. A kind of viral magnifying glass or photographic enlarger that makes the traits of our lived contradictions all the more legible, it is a reality principle whose spatial and temporal dimensions, whose structures of relays and delays, remind us that we are mortal and finite and that, at this particular moment, each of us can potentially bear

the death of the other within our bodies and even our breath. This is why the worldwide spread of the virus—a mechanism for the production of trauma that is at once immemorial and novel—is a historical knot of relations that is singularly devastating, despite its precedents. To represent or imagine the virus, to *read* it, we need to approach it as the enormous archive that it is, to read, in each of its manifestations, in each body it affects, an unsaturable genealogy that weaves together other bodies and other histories that cannot be traced—these entanglements exceed all efforts at what is now called “contact tracing”—but which must be recognized and even memorialized. In other words—and I register how daring it may be to say this—we must approach it as I have suggested we read photographs, drawings, paintings, and texts, without ever reducing the very real materiality of the many bodies that have succumbed to this disease which presently has no legible horizon, and without ever assuming that we can remove ourselves from the very things we read.

In order to point to what we might call “pandemic reading,” a mode of reading that can at least suggest the innumerable sinuous paths we would need to follow to even begin to approach the present pandemic, I want to move somewhat telegraphically through three photographs, each of which is drawn from the last two decades and each of which asks us to think about the present through the lens of the past and does so in order to offer a kind of letter to the future. The photographs are Joan Fontcuberta’s 2005 *Googlegram 9/11*, Isaac Julien’s 2019 *J. P. Ball Studio, 1867, Douglass (Lessons of the Hour)*, and Carrie Mae Weems’s 2008 *A Class Ponders the Future*.¹ Each of them begins in the conviction that things can be transformed—which they will be now by force of the pandemic—and that lessons can be learned, even if not by everyone and even if these lessons will come at a great and terrible cost.

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In an interview with Giovanna Borradori—entitled “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides” and given within weeks of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center—Jacques Derrida describes terrorism as an

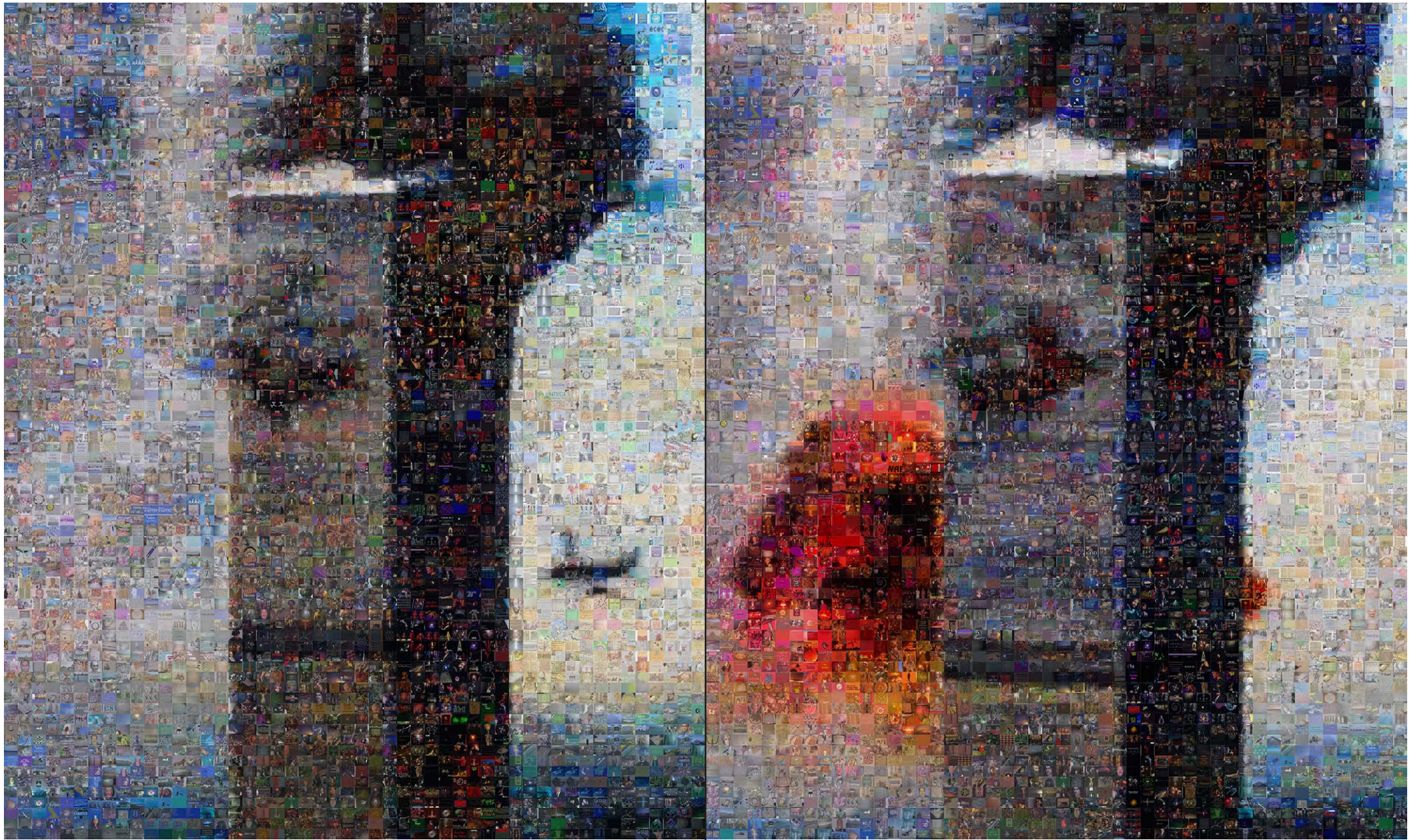
autoimmune disorder. Diagnosing the attacks as “a distant effect of the Cold War” that has evolved in an “autoimmunitary process,” he asks that we view them as an aftereffect of “that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity.”² The attacks, he suggests, are an instance of the “American” body attacking itself: the aggression that the United States experienced came, as it were, from inside its “own” body, and as a consequence of its own activities. He points to the facts that: (1) The United States, having trained people like Bin Laden, created “the politico-military circumstances that would favor their emergence and their shifts in allegiance.” (2) The 9/11 hijackers had immigrated, trained, and were “prepared for their act in the United States by the United States”; instrumentalizing American planes, they gained their force as enemies from the United States itself. (3) The “war on terrorism” reproduces the causes of the violence it seeks to eradicate by encouraging reprisals or subsequent acts of counterterrorism.³

If terrorism often is described in biological terms—as a plague, virus, epidemic, or, as here, an autoimmune disorder—in order to refer to its deleterious effects on a social or political body, it also has been associated with the uncontrolled circulation of images. As W. J. T. Mitchell has noted, bringing these two threads together:

The era of the War on Terror . . . will also be remembered as a time when the accelerated production and circulation of images in a host of new media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) ushered a “pictorial turn” into public consciousness. Images have always played a key role in politics, warfare, and collective perceptions about the shape of history, but there is something new in the emergence of public imagery in the period from 2001. . . . This is partly a matter of quantity. The development of new media, especially the combination of digital imaging and the spread of the Internet has meant that the number of images has increased exponentially along with the speed of their circulation. But it is also a matter of quality. Images have always possessed a certain infectious, viral character, a vitality that makes them difficult to contain or quarantine. If images are like viruses or bacteria, this has been a period of breakout, a global plague of images. And like any infectious disease, it has bred a host of antibodies in the form of counterimages. Our

time has witnessed, not simply more images, but a war of images in which the real-world stakes could not be higher. This war has been fought on behalf of radically different images of possible futures; it has been waged against images (thus acts of iconoclasm or image destruction have been critical to it); and it has been fought by means of images deployed to shock and traumatize the enemy, images meant to appall and demoralize, images designed to replicate themselves endlessly and to infect the collective imaginary of global populations. The onset of the war of images was the spectacular destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.⁴

I have returned to 9/11 in order: (1) to recall not only the explosions that took down the Twin Towers but also the explosion of images that was the primary means of our encounter with this devastating event and that, subsequently and increasingly, has been one of the most defining signatures of the last two decades; (2) to remember the various ways in which the discourses surrounding terrorism are associated with the unconstrained proliferation of viruses and images, and with various disorders of the body, political or otherwise; (3) to suggest that 9/11 is a kind of miniaturized prologue to the trauma of the present pandemic, without neglecting the significant differences between them: besides the unprecedented scale and reach of the pandemic, 9/11 is also wired along different lines and images of the Twin Tower attacks have been endlessly circulated, whereas even in a world entirely saturated by images the pandemic remains mostly invisible and unrepresentable except in its effects; (4) to note that 9/11 was a hypermediatized event—an event that comes to us via different technologically produced images that are nevertheless inseparable from the very material deaths and devastation wrought by the attacks, an event that makes legible all the technologies and technical media without which it would never have taken place; and (5) to suggest that, as a force of destruction and inscription, 9/11 binds trauma to different forms of mass media—including television, video, and photography—and permits us to think about the politics of images within a context, at once particular and global, that, linked to a particular moment, at the same time appears as an archive of a vast network of different and often very long histories. As Marc



Joan Fontcuberta
Googlegram 9/11 NY, 2005

Redfield has noted in relation to this last point, “the socio-geographical space inhabited by the World Trade Center was . . . so heavily mediatized, so utterly penetrated by representational technologies of global reach, and so symbolically at the heart of the world’s various political, financial, and semiotic webs of power that the destruction of the towers could not help being at once the ultimate media event and . . . a haunting image of the deracinating force of communicational technology at work, disseminating images of disaster from the symbolic center of technological, capitalist, and national power.”⁵ The Twin Tower attacks become a kind of lens through which we can trace the plural archive of wildly diverse histories and conflicts that led to them, stretching back centuries and across different geographical, religious, and political contexts. The attacks easily could have been countersigned by the ghosts of the victims of older wars in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan but also by the millions who were killed because of the United States’s support and training of terrorists and dictators in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, Somalia, Yugoslavia, and elsewhere.

But I also have returned to 9/11 because the present collection will be published in September 2021, the month of the twentieth anniversary of 9/11; and the earliest essay in it, “The Image in Ruins,” was published in its first iteration in 2001, the same year as the Twin Tower attacks. This essay already offered a proleptic reading of the event “itself”—already gave us a language with which we might begin approaching it—since the most iconic images of 9/11 involve images of the ruined Twin Towers that show nothing less than the ruin of the symbolic image the towers already were. The twenty-year span between 2001 and 2021 therefore marks the time since 9/11 and the time sealed within this collection of essays. This is why I have wanted to turn to Joan Fontcuberta’s *Googlegram: 9/11*. It references 9/11—it presents a mosaic-like diptych that ostensibly displays, in the movement from one image to the next, the moments just before and just after the second attack on the Twin Towers. At the same time, composed as it is of an archive of images that belong to innumerable historical moments, its time stamp, as it

were, cannot be reduced to the date after which it is named, just as it cannot be confined—because the images that compose it reference innumerable geographical locations—to the site of the attacks itself. The logic of the diptych encrypts a before and after, a here and now, only in order to shatter and disassemble them. It can neither index a single historical moment or event nor can it represent the traces of the explosions it recalls—without at the same time exploding or bursting its own surface, its own capacity to represent.

Like Fontcuberta’s other *Googlegrams*, *Googlegram 9/11* is created by an algorithmic search on Google that retrieves thousands of images through specific keywords entered into the engine platform. In this instance, he searched the names “God,” “Yahve,” and “Allah.” He retrieved 8,000 images and then transferred them through photomosaic freeware that, transforming the images into smaller tiles, maps them onto stock photographs of the Twin Tower attacks according to density, color, and tone. The left side of the diptych is based on a photograph of the attacked north tower in which the second plane that is about to crash into the south tower is visible. The right side of the diptych is based on a photograph that registers the fiery explosion resulting from the second plane hitting the south tower, which, because of the angle of the photograph, is blocked from view by the north tower.⁶ That the diptych is composed of thousands of small images suggests that every image is always an archive of other images—it is fissured by all the traces it bears within it—and also identifies 9/11 with the retrieval and production of images, images that include pictorial elements but also textual ones. The image is created, even engineered, to offer a hypothesis of reading, but one that, because it has to confront an image that is entirely disarticulated and in the process of even further collapse, can have no bearings. *The limits, the borders, and the distinctions that would guarantee our understanding of the image have been shattered by an explosion from which no determination can be sheltered.* What we witness is the burning and dissolution of a kind of Babelian tower of images that, built from a visual and textual archive in transition and entirely decontextualized, figures the destruction of the image in general, its *faux* historicity.

Exposing 9/11's mediatic character—the way in which images not only mediated our experience of the event but also the fact that it was implemented in order to be recorded and transmitted through the technical media and especially through images of all kinds—*Googlegram 9/11* points to a world entirely saturated by images, none of which can ever be just one. It reminds us that the terrorist act was entirely devoted to the camera: to the reproduction of an illusion of representation, to the proliferation of different forms of racism, nationalism, and xenophobia that, in turn, would take even more lives. The attack was directed to a site so inscribed within our global imaginary and so subject to constant camera coverage that we even have video footage and photographs of the first plane crashing into the north face of the north tower at 8:46 am. CNN had its live feed set up just three minutes later and therefore was in place to record the second strike on the south face of the south tower at 9:03 am. As has been noted often, the delay between the first and second strikes was planned to ensure maximum media coverage. Fontcuberta's diptych displays precisely this fact. In a world in which, in Walter Benjamin's words, "the space of political action" corresponds to "the one hundred percent image space,"⁷ any clear distinction between an event and its representation is effaced.

But Fontcuberta's *9/11* also bears the imprint of the names of God, Yahve, and Allah, or at least of the 8,000 images that are retrieved by these three names, as if the names are themselves mediums of reproduction and reproducibility. If God, Yahve, and Allah cannot be represented, except in these intensely heterogeneous and displaced pell-mell forms and images, none of which can be said to be referential in a determinate way, they nevertheless seem to name the intense circulation and recontextualization of images across time and space. In Fontcuberta's photographic cyberspace world, God, Yahve, and Allah are names for the technical reproducibility of images. This is why his *9/11* references new wars of religions that, acting in the name of these three names, belong to the globalized mediatization of religion today and even to the phenomenon of televisual, technologized globalization. There can be no religion that does not rely on images and telecommunications, on forms of iteration and reproducibility,

even when it presumes to prohibit them.⁸ Identifying religion with teletechnical mediation, *Googlegram 9/11* stages the structures of iterability and technological reproducibility without which the iterable names of God, Yahve, and Allah, the structures of faith and belief that make religious conflict inevitable, would not exist.

Weaving terror, technical and biological forms of replication and reproduction, and the circulation and proliferation of viruses and images into a knot that remains to be read, *9/11* is just one unconscious stepping-stone whose readerly wires can begin to approach the pandemic, even if, as Fontcuberta's diptych permits us to imagine, it is wildly different from a single monument that can be taken down.

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As the COVID-19 pandemic's death march continues to raze the globe, wave after wave and with increased intensity, we have been forced to confront a related but even more enduring pandemic: the pandemic of racism. Racism is our most untreated preexisting condition, and this last year we have witnessed the widespread, lethal effects of systemic racism, ranging from the disproportionate number of deaths and hardships experienced by people of color because of the pandemic to the numerous incidents of police brutality and anti-black violence across the United States. But we also have witnessed the protests and demonstrations that have spread around the globe since the deaths of, among so many others, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and Rayshard Brooks, calling attention to the relation between these twin pandemics—one just over a year old and the other more than 400 years old.⁹ Both are contagious and deadly, and even as COVID-19 is said to be indiscriminate—it crosses all limits and borders and can reach anyone—it lays bare the discrimination that has always structured the relations between races and classes and that is legible in the comorbidities it has produced: poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, unequal access to education, unhealthy living conditions, lack of health care, all of which affect our most vulnerable communities—indigenous

and minority populations, the poor and the disenfranchised, the elderly, those with chronic illnesses, the incarcerated, the undocumented and homeless. As we know, discrimination and racism have been built into the heart of the American experiment from its very beginning like the right ventricle.

In a brief text he published in *The North Star* on May 25, 1849, “Colorphobia in New York!,” Frederick Douglass already likened racism to an epidemic. Drawing his language from the epidemics of cholera, tuberculosis, yellow fever, and hydrophobia that swept numerous American cities in the 1830s and 1840s, he expresses his sympathy for the unfortunate white victims of “colorphobia,” a disease affecting perception that, originating in racial prejudice, he describes as a “strange plague,” an “epidemic.”¹⁰ He reinforces this identification in a speech he delivered in Rochester, New York on December 8, 1850 entitled “The Inhumanity of Slavery.” There he associates slavery and racism with the plague, referring to them as a “dreadful scourge” with “pestiferous breath.”¹¹ If “colorphobia” and racism are diseases of perception—of perspective, of how things are viewed or seen (as Douglass writes in his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, “early I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance”)¹²—then the “cure” would seem to be a transformation and “correction” of this perception.

While Douglass’s entire body of writings and speeches targets both slavery and racism, working to alter the way in which blacks are viewed in order to overcome these two plagues, he delivers a series of lectures during the Civil War in which he insists on the particularly transformative, and even abolitionist, power of photography. The most photographed American in the nineteenth century, Douglass not only used photographic images of himself to change the way in which blacks were seen but also formulated a theory of photography’s capacity to counter the large repository of racist images and stereotypes that had challenged claims made on behalf of black humanity, rights, citizenship, and freedom. Pictures, he argued, could contribute more to American progress—to the possibility that America could finally fulfill the promises of equality and representation on which it was founded—than even war. Identifying the force of the photograph



Isaac Julien
J. P. Ball Studio, 1867 Douglass (Lessons of the Hour), 2019

with that of the ballot, placing the image at the center of the black struggle for representation, he states that it might take over 150 years for a scholar to emerge who might understand what he is suggesting and formulate it more clearly.¹³ Within the context of the current political divisions in the United States—the growing signs of another civil war, or rather of the fact that the Civil War has never really ended—this is perhaps the moment Douglass imagined, one in which, a century and a half later, readers who truly understand the importance of visual literacy as a means of combating the pandemic of racism are needed more than ever.

One such reader may be the British filmmaker and artist Isaac Julien, who in 2019 premiered his 28-minute, ten-screen installation *Lessons of the Hour: Frederick Douglass* at the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester. Taking his title from Douglass's 1894 speech on lynching and the contagion of racism, "Lessons of the Hour," Julien brings together materials from Douglass's autobiographies, lectures, and letters in order to trace the ways in which this towering figure from the nineteenth century remains a resource for the struggle for human rights today but also mobilizes his reflections on visibility, photographic technologies, and "picture making" in an antiracist direction. Like Douglass, who emphasized the role and place of perspective—and the need to align it with an increasingly democratic project—Julien focuses on different modes of seeing. This is most clearly legible in the temporal, spatial, and architectural elements of his multiscreen presentation, since these permit him to stage the way in which everything changes in accordance with a viewer's position or point of view. The shifting images and narratives moving across the screens at any given moment require that we read each one of them syntactically in relation to the others. Each screen also inscribes within it several different kinds of archives (from the film's opening references to the history of lynching and to Oscar Michaux's 1920 *Within Our Gates* to the final sequence's references to the killing of Freddie Gray and to Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*). Its capacity to dramatize different episodes in Douglass's life all at once, its complex interweaving of Douglass's language with scenes from different moments in history, not all of them in linear, historical

sequence, its wildly citational character—it references the history of photography, film, reproductive technologies, and all sorts of texts and visual traditions that have emphasized the relations between racism and different modes of perception—suggest that, like Douglass, Julien wants to train our eyes to see differently. He understands—as Douglass did when, in his 1861 "Lecture on Pictures," he wrote that "the picture plays an important part in our politics"¹⁴—the ethico-political dimension of the way images are constructed. This is why throughout *Lessons of the Hour* he painstakingly attends to all the ways in which Douglass sought to present himself, most often in collaboration with others, including his first and second wives, Anna Murray Douglass (who often made the clothes he wore when he spoke or was photographed) and Helen Pitts (who created the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association), but also the photographers who took his photographs, not the least of whom was the abolitionist and prominent African American photographer J. P. Ball.

In the film, Julien recreates Ball's photographic salon and studio as we hear parts of Douglass's "Lecture on Pictures." In one scene we see Royal Shakespeare Company actor Ray Fearon, who plays Douglass throughout the film, sitting for a portrait in Ball's studio in 1867, surrounded by different props: drapery with landscapes, an easel with a canvas, and, one imagines, a camera just beyond its frame. This critical moment emphasizes the central role that photography played in Douglass's efforts at self-presentation. Staging this portrait within Ball's studio, Julien reinforces the difference that Douglass believed photography could make in his fight against racism. The medium promised to correct racist visual representations—within art, archaeology, ethnology, the racial sciences, and political illustrations and cartoons—that made black people seem less than human, or lesser humans.¹⁵ If he associated pictures with progress—for the black as well as for the nation—if he chose to be photographed as often as he did (and in as determined a way as he did), it was because, in the wording of Laura Wexler, he wished "to insert himself into the gallery as a living image of that progress." Each time he had his photograph taken, he "gathered himself up from social death" and "projected his vision of a more perfect likeness of the nation."¹⁶

What is even more radical than this already powerful gesture is Douglass's suggestion—referring to “the rapidity and universality” with which Daguerre's invention had been taken up—that “by the simple but all-abounding sunlight” the photographer had “converted the planet into a picture gallery.” “[T]he God of day,” he adds, “not only decks the earth with rich fruits and beautiful flowers, but studs the world with pictures”: “Daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, photographs and electrotypes” can be found everywhere.¹⁷ This claim is registered very beautifully and capaciously in Julien's work not simply because everything in it appears within frames of moving images—the entire work is engaged with different modes of technical reproducibility, none of which are ever distant from the issues of racial and representational justice that Douglass so fervently sought—but also because it so often emphasizes the various media forms (including painting, drawing, sculpture, the daguerreotype, the stereoscope, the panorama, cinema, and even postcinematic forms) that correspond to changes in the way we perceive the world. But Douglass and Julien go one step further: there are images inside us as well; indeed, we exist in the world as images, however material we may be, and however inescapable our bodies are. In Douglass's words, “Rightly viewed, the whole soul of man is a sort of picture gallery, a grand panorama, in which all the great facts of the universe, in tracing things of time and things of eternity are painted.”¹⁸ If the entirety of the world has to be thought in visual terms, so do we—as the archives of everything in the world that has left its imprint in us. Julien renders this identification between Douglass and his images cinematically when, at a moment in which Douglass discusses the democratizing force of the daguerreotype, we see his face gradually becoming an image inside an emulsion bath. But the images that compose Douglass's identity are not restricted to images that belong to either just him or his time. Instead, as Kass Banning and Warren Crichlow have noted, the images of Douglass's time include images from both the past and the future. Joining passages from his 1845 autobiography with passages from his speech on the meaning of the Fourth of July to the slave and other speeches, his voice gathers force and, in Banning and Crichlow's words,

archival images stagger across the ten screens: fireworks exploding in a night sky, dark harbor waters, negative aerial surveillance footage, an ominous spotlight that sweeps the urban streets. As he narrates his bondage in Baltimore, images of a full-masted schooner migrate slowly across the ten screens from right to left while he recalls his younger self gazing at slave ships anchored in Chesapeake Bay. Scenes of a July 4 parade circa the 1960s then appear, showing a young black child wearing a cowboy outfit at the margins of a moving throng, with a melancholy visage in sharp contrast to his fellow celebrants. These bodies in turn collide with FBI aerial drone surveillance from 2017, shown in negative reversal, detailing barely discernable protesters advancing in defiance of the “zero conviction” of Baltimore police officers for the death of Freddie Gray. Douglass's fiery crescendo projects across centuries, his hand loudly pounding the podium, condemning “bombast, deception, impiety and hypocrisy. . . . There is not a nation on this earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody, than are the people in these United States, in this very hour.”¹⁹

The film ends soon afterward with all ten screens becoming black from right to left until the last glimpse of Douglass, in the last screen, also vanishes into darkness. Near the end of their essay on Julien's work, Banning and Crichlow note, quite beautifully and movingly: “It's as if Douglass is staring into the coming gloom of Jim Crow and the ever more visceral forms of violence that the ensuing decades will bring. Yet Douglass's willful attempts to expand ‘perspective,’ displayed so visually and compellingly in Julien's lush ‘grand panorama,’ endure as a consummate referent for ongoing struggles to oppose the racial hierarchies that delimit citizenship and constrict conceptions of the human up to the inconsolable present.”²⁰

And the present is indeed inconsolable, something that Douglass already predicted in his “Lessons of the Hour” speech. Referring to “The Epidemic of Mob Law,” he again points to the contagion of racism that has led to the failure of Reconstruction and to so many lynchings and so much anti-black violence. I wish to close this section with the following passage from this speech, placing it in relation to the pandemic of racism we are still enduring today and whose effects we have just witnessed in

the January 6, 2021 assault on the Capitol by a mob of Trump supporters—many of whom were fascists, white supremacists, and antigovernment militia. Erecting a scaffolding with a rope ready to lynch senators and the vice president for moving to accept the Electoral College votes that had been assigned to Joe Biden, they confirm the endurance of Douglass's concerns and also why, like him, we need to continue to combat all the images that, still today, enable racism to flourish:

The contagion is spreading, extending and over-leaping geographical lines and state boundaries, and if permitted to go on it threatens to destroy all respect for law and order not only in the South, but in all parts of our country—North as well as South. For certain it is, that crime allowed to go on unresisted and unarrested will breed crime. When the poison of anarchy is once in the air, like the pestilence that walketh in the darkness, the winds of heaven will take it up and favor its diffusion.²¹

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Carrie Mae Weems's *A Class Ponders the Future* was made in 2008, when Weems was a visiting faculty member at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Atlanta. It belongs to a series of twenty-one photographs that she created with students about the political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s and that, along with an accompanying twenty-four-minute video, she entitled *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*. Evoking the activism around the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and the history of protests against all forms of racism, the full project is composed of historical photographs, stills from the video, and the photographs she made with her students. The photographs resulting from her collaboration are all photographs of reenactments of historical photographs. Several of these photographs recreate the deaths of activists and leaders within the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers. Others recreate scenes related to global events—the tragedy of Hiroshima and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, for example—and still others are more ethereal but also evoke a sense of loss and mourning.

It would seem that the act of constructing a history is necessarily an elegiac one, a kind of requiem. This is why it has to be a photographic history, or at least a history that is constructed on the basis of photographs, none of which document an event or incident as it happened. This is why the “requiem to mark the moment” can never refer to a single moment, but instead refers to several moments and histories at once, all of which are inscribed in the surface of each photograph: the moment in the past that is being recalled and restaged (itself never a single moment, since it always belongs to a longer historical context), the present moment of the reenactment, the moment in which the photograph of the reenactment is taken, and the future to which it is bequeathed.

Since many of the reenactments are photographed within the same classroom space we see created in *A Class Ponders the Future*, the project appears as a kind of history lesson, with each photograph a part of the curriculum, and with each restaged event leaving its traces in this space, so that, when we view this classroom photograph, it already bears the lessons and experiences sealed within the other photographs.²² It presents a space in which lessons already have been experienced or are still to come and, in each instance, the students are asked to think about these lessons in relation to the future. In the classroom photograph, we see twelve figures, all of them with their backs to the camera. Ten of them are seated, looking to the front of the classroom, and two of them standing, looking out what seem to be windows but could simply be projected light. At the front of the classroom are a desk with books and three globes on it, two hung anatomical studies beside the windows, a clock on the wall between them that presumably marks the moment in which the photograph was taken, and, at the left edge of the image, evidence that what we have before us is a film set, reminding us that we are viewing a reconstructed image of an earlier historical scene.

In this instance, the image is based on a photograph taken by Stephen Shames in 1971 of a classroom at the Black Panther Intercommunal Youth Institute in Oakland, California.²³ The photograph shows twelve young students, standing, wearing black trousers and light-colored short-sleeved shirts and black berets. Unlike in Weems's photograph, here we see the faces of all

the children. The walls have an enlarged poster of Huey Newton, a poster of Bobby Seale with the word “Kidnapped” on it, an image of a black male holding a rifle and a black woman holding a small child, and a poster with a child holding a flyer reading “All Power to the People.” There is a television set alongside a set of windows and the students are looking forward, even if some of them are looking slightly to the side. Although Weems’s photograph references this earlier photograph, it also transforms it and in doing so suggests, discreetly but with a quiet insistence, that photographs can always only point to the instability of their referent, especially when the referent is itself never just one thing.²⁴

Indeed, as in the Weems photograph, the scene of instruction in Shames’s photograph is entirely mediated—by other images, different forms of technological reproducibility, an entire network of far-reaching histories—just as the historical moment it evokes was a moment that, within Weems’s own history, was itself already mediated for her by images, often televisual—and not just from the 1960s and 1970s. The act of constructing history always begins in the context of innumerable mediated relations, which is why what makes Weems’s project different is that the past is reenacted in a present that—because it seeks to project itself into another moment, because it confirms the survival of this past in the present, even if in fragmentary and displaced forms—can never be present even to its own moment, which is why it also is the object of its own requiem. Like all moments, this one, too, brings together the past, the present, and the future. “This is a story within a story,” Weems tell us in the narration for the video: “How to enter this history. What to show, what to say, what to feel. It was a creation myth. How things came to be as they are. In this constructed place, our classroom, we revisit the past. The students examine the facts and will participate in the construction of history. A history that has been told to them by others. But now, with their own bodies, they engage their own dark dream, their own winter” (5:16+). As Shawn Michelle Smith notes, *Constructing History* “is a story about the making of history, and also about the teaching and transfer of generational knowledge, about how to tell a story.” As an earlier witness, as teacher and storyteller, “Weems notes the divide that separates

her from the students, as she wonders how to communicate and explain the events that shaped the world of her youth to a new generation. . . . Through photographic reenactment she endeavors to help them ‘remember’ the history of the 1960s and 1970s, and to physically embody ‘a history that has been told to them by others.’ *Constructing History* asks, on the one hand, how does what one has lived through, what one is living through, become history? And conversely, how can one understand a past through which one has not lived?”²⁵

Weems asks her students to think about these questions in 2008, in the context of Barack Obama’s and Hillary Clinton’s campaigns for the Democratic Presidential nomination. She encourages them to think about the way in which the present can be illuminated by the past, but a past that, never just the past, already inhabits the present and points to a future. But Weems also asks them to “ponder the future,” which is to say: to imagine it, to consider not simply what it might be but whether it even exists. In this classroom context, pondering the future also means studying the past, inhabiting it, embodying it, and the three globes tell us that this past belongs to a global history that is plural and multiple. But it is not clear that the classroom sees anything through the windows that, seemingly composed of light, blind us to the future. This is scarcely surprising, since what makes the future the future is our inability to see it, to program or predict it. It is what cannot be seen. Within the logic of *Constructing History*, especially as we encounter it “now,” our usual understanding of time is displaced: *what was future may now be past, what was past may be present, what was present may be another present or other than the present*. This is to say that the future is without term or determination. It is, in the wording of Werner Hamacher, “*ana-categorical*.”²⁶ But if the future remains beyond conceptualization, we know it will at least be a sedimented time: coming from the past, even if not in a straight line, even if along a plurality of interwoven lines (none of which are ever one), it will bear traces of the long present in which we find ourselves. This “now,” bursting with time, is the now in which we are asked to ponder the future. This future already was inscribed within the histories sealed within Weems’s and Shames’s photographs,

and even earlier, but without the intensification and acceleration we are witnessing today. It is permeated by the continuation of racist legacies on all fronts and in every context, the long history of gender violence, the history of global market capitalism and its ghostly but also more direct destructive aftereffects, the emergence of old and new fascisms and authoritarianisms, the mass displacement of people and other species, all sorts of ecocatastrophic logics, including collapsing marine life, mass extinction events, and mutations of the biosphere, neofeudal global orders that contribute to the growing inequalities that are increasingly becoming the signature of the world, interethnic wars, resource and land wars, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed all these threads at once and which remains to be read. But there has never been anything else to read than the knot of all these various pandemics; and we cannot ponder the future without acts of reading that begin in relation to their limits or impossibilities, especially when the indeterminate form of the future is alteration itself.

In an essay from April 2020, Arundhati Roy notes that, historically, “pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew.” “This one is no different,” she goes on to say, “[i]t is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”²⁷

I hope that it will not be taken amiss if, in the midst of all the death and devastation that we have witnessed this last year and that will continue for the foreseeable future, I dare to open my paper graveyards. May this gesture contribute to the fight Roy calls us to, now and in the future, however uncertain and full of danger that future may be. As Odysseus Elytis would have it, our commandment “is this world,” which is why we must “Read and strive / and fight . . . / Each to his own weapons.”²⁸ Mine have been these essays, these paper graveyards.

Princeton–New York, January 2021



Carrie Mae Weems
A Class Ponders the Future, 2008

de France (1977–1978), trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 52 and 58.

48 Barthes, “The Romantic Song,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 290.

49 Barthes, “Loving Schumann,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 293–294. While we might wonder if the maternal unity of the Mother to whom he refers here can be identified with his mother, especially since he makes such an effort in *Camera Lucida* to distinguish his mother from the figure of the Mother—“what I have lost,” he tells us, “is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being but a quality (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable. I could live without the Mother (as we all do sooner or later); but what life remained would be absolutely and entirely *unqualifiable* (without quality)” (CL, 75 / CC, 118)—it is clear that his insistence on the singularity of his mother does not contradict the generality of the Mother. In the same way that the *studium* and *punctum* coexist with one another, even compose together, there could be no mother without the Mother, and no Mother without innumerable mothers. What is at stake in the couple mother/Mother is again the relation between singularity and repetition, the particular and the universal, that Barthes identifies with the photograph in general. This is why, as we have suggested, the mother (mother or Mother) must be thought in relation to the photograph.

50 André Malraux, *La condition humaine* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1946), 334. Although Barthes rarely evokes China and its revolutionary history, he addresses both of these in a brief but rich text from 1975 entitled *Alors la Chine?* Suggesting that China resists our understanding because the “disorganization” of its semantic field “undoes the constitution of concepts, themes, names” and, in doing so, silently declares Western ideological objects “im-pertinent,” he goes on to say that, as a country and a concept, it only exhibits its “political Text.” In a two-page coda—written in response to the negative reactions his text elicited—he suggests that, “hallucinating” China as an object, he would like to read it as the “feminine (maternal?) infinite of the object itself.” This hallucination is not “gratuitous,” he explains, and it is meant to go against the popular Western hallucination of China’s “directly political” and dogmatic discourse. At this moment, he makes a remarkable statement that, like Malraux, links the thought of

China to music. Claiming that the intellectual or writer always moves by indirection, he notes that the aim of his little text was to offer a discourse that would be *just* (and “musically” so) in relation to the indirectness of Chinese politics. Claiming that only a certain musicality can be “just” to the indecipherability of Chinese politics, he explains that “it is necessary to love music,” and “the Chinese also.” In this instance, then—and in keeping with what he suggests in *Camera Lucida*—music and love are on the side of indirection, on the side of what escapes our comprehension, and perhaps even on the side of what he dares to evoke, even if in the mode of a question, as the “maternal.” See Barthes, *Alors la Chine?* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1975), 8 and 13–14.

51 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe makes this point in his reading of Adorno’s writings on music. See *Musica Ficta (Figures of Wagner)*, trans. Felicia Mc Carren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 144.

52 Stéphane Mallarmé, *La musique et les lettres*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 644.

53 Ibid., 645.

54 See, for example, Barthes’s 1974 essay “Why I Love Benveniste” (in which he explicitly situates Benveniste within the context of a discussion of the relation between love and music). There he writes that “Benveniste’s writing thus presents that subtle mixture of expenditure and reserve which founds the text or, better still, music. Benveniste writes silently (is not music an art of intelligent silence?), the way the greatest musicians play. . . . We read other linguists (and indeed we must), but we love Benveniste.” See “Why I Love Benveniste,” in Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 167.

55 Émile Benveniste, “La notion de ‘rythme’ dans son expression linguistique,” in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 330.

56 See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Echo of the Subject,” trans. Barbara Harlow, in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 196–203. In many respects, our reading of Benveniste’s essay—and of the notion of “rhythm” in general—is a miniaturized photograph of Lacoue-Labarthe’s argument, an argument he repeats somewhat telegraphically in *Musica Ficta*, especially on pages 77–83. We would suggest here that, although Barthes

refers to Lacoue-Labarthe’s essay “Caesura of the Speculative” in *Camera Lucida* (see CC, 141), it is perhaps this essay, “The Echo of the Subject,” that has the most resonance with his book. A reading of Theodor Reik’s *The Haunting Melody*, the latter essay is, among other things, a meditation on the relations among music, mourning, and autobiography.

57 Benveniste, “La notion de ‘rythme’ dans son expression linguistique,” 333.

58 See Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Echo of the Subject,” 202.

59 Lacoue-Labarthe makes this identical point in *ibid.*, 202.

60 Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 191.

61 Barthes, “Loving Schumann,” 295.

62 Barthes, “Listening,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 248.

63 Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 199.

64 Barthes, “Music, Voice, and Language,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 284.

65 Marie-Louise Mallet, *La musique en respect* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2002), 11.

66 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 143.

67 Barthes, “Loving Schumann,” 298.

68 Ibid.

69 Jacques Derrida, *Échographies de la télévision. Entretiens filmés* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996), 131.

iv. Drawing in Tongues

This essay began as a short text commissioned by Brett Littman for an exhibition on Leon Golub’s late works at the Drawing Center in New York in the spring and summer of 2010. It appeared in *Leon Golub: Live & Die Like a Lion?*, ed. Brett Littman (New York: Drawing Center, 2010), 54–91. I want to thank Brett and the Drawing Center for their kind permission to incorporate these early pages into the present essay, and Samm Kuncze, Christopher Lyon, Jon Bird, and Irene Sosa for their wisdom and advice on all things Golub and Spero. It has been wonderful to return to Golub during the last two years, but to view him this time through the lens of his relation with Spero, the love and hierophant of his life. I was also glad to see the exhibition of Spero’s work at MoMA PS1 in June 2019 as I was finishing the essay. I have viewed this as a kind of sign.

1 Theodor W. Adorno, “Beethoven’s Late Style,” trans. Wieland Hoban, in *Night Music: Essays on Music 1928–1961*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 16 and 18; Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings, 1962–1993*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, trans. David Britt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 73; and *Leon Golub: Live & Die Like a Lion?*, ed. Brett Littman (New York: Drawing Center, 2010), 27.

2 Adorno, “Beethoven’s Late Style,” 11.

3 On this point, see Edward W. Said’s *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 12.

4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 189.

5 Adorno, “Beethoven’s Late Style,” 16.

6 Ibid., 15.

7 Said uses this phrase to describe Adorno in *On Late Style*, 14. In response to an interview question asking him directly about the significance of Adorno’s line for him, Golub responds:

In the history of art late works are the catastrophes: He’s saying that when you’re older you can do whatever the hell you want. Well, you can always do that, but you can do it with a special sense that nobody can interfere with you. In a way, you’re on your own and it’s all there, the extremity of it. The catastrophes are the extreme experiences. When you deal with end experiences, perhaps you’re taking your work to an extreme that you’ve never taken it before. Pushing boundaries that you don’t even know about. Contradicting yourself. Taking off the stops. Often when you work, there are doubts; this is wrong, that’s wrong, and so on. You can ignore all of those warning signs. You can take it where you will. It’s a catastrophe. It doesn’t work and yet it does. Facing whatever the hell there is to face. Which generally means death, of course. As you get older, that’s the thing you’re going to meet! So before you meet it, you know, how are you going to face into it? Take the thing and shove it! // I’m reinterpreting Adorno, of course. I found the essay in the “Raritan Review.” The only thing is you never are as free and bold as you think you are anyway. You’re always constrained by your history, your techniques, your whole developmental attitude, and the boundaries of your ego and nature, so you’re never totally open to it the way I’m indicating. But you go as far as you can.

“Interview with Leon Golub,” *New York Arts Magazine* 6, no. 7 (Summer 2001), 31.

8 Cited in Littman, *Leon Golub: Live & Die Like a Lion?*, 22.

9 Golub cites this sentence from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* in *Dog*: "My Dog.—I have given a name to my pain and call it 'dog.'" *Dog* is unpaginated, but, as Golub notes, the sentence can be found in *The Gay Science*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 249.

10 See Golub, *DOG* (Paris: Onestar Press, 2004).

11 I am indebted on this point to Colin Dayan's beautiful meditation on various ways in which dogs prompt us to reconsider our ethical life. In her words, "It is with dogs beside us and before us that we are prompted to reconsider the ethical life: the conscience it demands, the liabilities it incurs. For those of us who believe that the sharp distinction between human and nonhuman animals is unsustainable, this book offers ways of thinking through the making and unmaking of life on this earth." See Colin Dayan, *With Dogs at the Edge of Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 11.

12 *Ibid.*, 66.

13 For wonderful discussions about the place of photography in the work of Francis Bacon and Gerhard Richter, see Martin Harrison's *In Camera—Francis Bacon: Photography, Film, and the Practice of Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), and chapter 4, "Gerhard Richter, or the Photogenic Image," of Hal Foster's *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 172–209.

14 Littman has described the relation between these late works and Golub's source material. As he explains, "The folders from the studio archive contained Xeroxes from books on Egyptian and Roman art; photos of lions running and studies of paws; women posing in fashion magazines, cut-outs from porno magazines of women masturbating and couples having sex; photos of men wrestling, skateboarders, soccer players, baseball players celebrating a win; images of torture victims and soldiers; and images of white-trash Americans drinking beer and slothfully lounging around. Golub used these images in the way a classical artist would use a sketchbook. Rather than redraw these images, he would create categories for them, such as 'Man with right arm behind back,' 'Man lying on the ground,' or 'Torture victims,' and then refer back to them later as generative ideas for his work. In these late drawings there is a total conflation between the source-material-as-drawing and

the drawings themselves; in terms of scale, they are completely interchangeable." See Littman, *Leon Golub: Live & Die Like a Lion?*, 40.

15 "Where the Camera Cannot Go: A Conversation with Leon Golub on Painting and Photography," in David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2004), 142. As we will see, Golub's admission that he "often used several photos for one image" will be absolutely essential to our reading of his images as archives of other images, as encrypted memorials to different network of images or photographs.

16 I continue to refer to both media, since Golub himself claimed that these works could never be identified as either drawings or paintings alone, since they take place at the intersection of these two media.

17 I love that Golub made a work entitled *Speaking in Tongues*, since it confirms that his works, in all their muteness, still say something, even if this "something" is always plural and transient and even if it nearly always returns to the conditions of drawing and painting. In this instance, a skull faces the right edge of the work, with the words "EAT," "FUCK," "SCRATCH," and "DIE" inscribed on the cranium in red and green letters and the phrase "PLAY THE GAME" appearing in black letters between the upper and lower jaws, along the mandible, just below the teeth. The words would seem to express the most primal commands that drive us in our everyday lives as we "play the game," as we permit ourselves to be ventriloquized by others. Speaking in a language that always comes from elsewhere and is never just ours prevents us from speaking in a single tongue and thereby destines us to always speak in tongues. There is no other game. But this is why in Golub's babelian world to speak in tongues is to draw in tongues.

18 Littman makes this point in his essay "Leon Golub: Live and Die Like a Lion?," in *Leon Golub: Live & Die Like a Lion?*, 32.

19 *Ibid.*

20 I am indebted here to Meeka Walsh's remarks on this drawing's relation to Twombly in her essay "Animal Stories," which appeared in *Leon Golub Don't Tread on Me Drawings: 1947–2004* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts / Griffin Contemporary / Anthony Reynolds Gallery, 2004), 11.

21 That Golub's works depend on his earlier ones is especially legible in *Bite Your Tongue II*, the painting in which he inscribes the sentence

from Adorno's essay on Beethoven's late style. The painting is, among other things, a painting of paintings and drawings, since it reproduces in acrylic several of the sketches on which he had based some of his earlier works—it presents works, that is, that already belong to others; and the largest painting within its surface is the one in the lower right quarter of the canvas, which is the one that includes Adorno's claim that, "in the history of art, late works are the catastrophes." This relationality is reinforced by the fact that this work is a revision of his earlier 2001 painting *Bite Your Tongue*, but also by the "X" that seems to remain underneath Adorno's line and which resonates with the painting's title, *Bite Your Tongue II*, since it seals a kind of prohibition against speaking that is nevertheless exposed by the painting itself. I mention this in order to emphasize the way in which these works have to be read in relation to one another, but also to suggest that each detail of any given work also has to be read syntactically in relation to its other details, none of which are ever entirely *present*, since they also bear the traces of earlier works and histories. The title of Golub's work, *Bite Your Tongue*, references a line from Hélène Cixous that Nancy Spero liked and to which I will return later.

22 László Moholy-Nagy, "The New Instrument of Vision," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 95.

23 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 3.

24 Jean-Pierre Richard, *Roland Barthes, dernier paysage* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2006), 19. The internal quote is from Barthes's 1979 essay "Cy Twombly ou 'Non multa sed multum,'" in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 5: *Livres, textes, entretiens, 1977–1980* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 712.

25 The situation is even more complicated and self-reflexive, since most of Golub's pornographic drawings and paintings are based on pornographic photographs. In other words, if his drawings and paintings transform bodies into images, these bodies were already images, so these late works therefore present images of images of bodies and not bodies themselves. In the long run, Golub will insist on this identification between bodies and images.

26 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Nude: The Skin of Images*, trans. Anne O'Byrne and Carlie Anglemire (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 75.

27 *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated*

Translation, trans. James M. Saslow (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 144 (translation modified).

28 Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary," trans. Ann Smock, in *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 255, 257, and 259.

29 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 96.

30 There would be much to say about the drawing-painting that gave its title to the Drawing Center's exhibition of Golub's late works, "Live & Die Like a Lion?" (2002). Beyond the echolalia between Lion and Leon that makes this work a question about his life and death, the colors that traverse the work's surface—its reds, whites, and blues—also suggest an association between the lion before us and an America that defines itself as a kind of lion, with all its force, strength, and violence. That the title of the piece remains a question may very well refer to Golub's ambivalence and uncertainty about his own relation to American force. While he spent his entire career exposing, diagnosing, and working to overcome the violence implied by this force, it increasingly became clear to him that there was no safety zone from which an artist might analyze a structure of power and force without being touched by it. The potentiality, and even inevitability, of such complicity is what forms the dangerous background against which he drew and painted, but from which he never withdrew. As I have wanted to suggest, Golub sought to minimize the chance that his work might be appropriated by the very forces he wished to resist, and he believed that the best means for achieving this was to draw in a plurality of tongues.

31 These lions appear as early as the 1950s in the hybrid forms by which Golub was so fascinated, and which included the many sphinxes that circulated throughout his corpus for nearly fifty years. That these lions are never just lions is evident throughout, but perhaps in a striking and important way in his 1995 *Laughing Lions*. While this work does include two laughing lions—a red-maned lion in the upper middle part of the painting, and another blue and rust-colored lion standing on its hind legs on the right side of the painting, the rest of the painting is populated by laughing dogs, a female figure in an acrobatic pose, looking downward with one of her legs arched back toward the sky, a man in the upper left corner with his arms stretched forward and

his mouth open wide, presumably laughing, and an inscription in the painting that reads “Laughing Lions Must Come.” Although the title of the work could refer only to the two laughing lions, the painting asks us to think about the relation between these two lions and the other figures in it. In other words, the title also transforms every other figure into a laughing lion and therefore confirms that lions in Golub are never just lions, but also that nearly every other figure in his work can potentially be a lion.

³² Like Golub, Nancy Spero is also known for “cannibalizing” not only her own work but also everything she felt able to “ransack from art history and photographic sources.” See *Nancy Spero: Paper Mirror*, ed. Julie Ault (Mexico City: Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, 2019), 157. She recirculates many of her own images, retouching and resizing them, but also reworks and recontextualizes found images that she gathers from newspapers, books, and other media. She also admitted that Leon himself often would pass photographic images along to her. In many respects, the rest of this essay will focus on this process of appropriation and exchange in the work of both Golub and Spero.

³³ Demeter was intimately associated with the seasons. Her daughter Persephone was abducted by Hades to be his wife in the underworld as she was picking flowers: roses, crocus, violets, iris, hyacinth, and narcissus. In her anger at her daughter’s loss, Demeter laid a curse on the world that caused plants to wither and die, and the land to become desolate. Zeus, alarmed for the barren earth, sought for Persephone’s return. However, because she had eaten while in the underworld, Hades had a claim on her. Therefore, it was decreed that Persephone would spend four months each year in the underworld. During these months, Demeter would grieve for her daughter’s absence, withdrawing her gifts from the world, creating winter. Her return would bring the spring.

³⁴ Cixous’s phrase can be found in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976), 885. That Golub’s hierophant can be said to mourn the identity and name of the hierophant only intensifies the loss of identity that traditionally attended the transformation of a male figure into a hierophant: on becoming a hierophant, he would symbolically cast his former name into the sea and from then on would be called simply “hierophantes.”

³⁵ On Spero’s interest in the Tarot, see Christopher Lyon, *Nancy Spero: The Work* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2010), 39–40.

³⁶ Cited in Mignon Nixon, “Book of Tongues,” in *Nancy Spero: Dissidences* (Barcelona: MACBA / Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2008), 32 and 43.

³⁷ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 875.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 886–887. The insistence on biting tongues circulates throughout Golub’s work, too. He titles several of his works *Bite Your Tongue* and, in recognition of the importance of this phrase within his corpus, there was a posthumous traveling exhibition of his work in 2015, beginning at the Serpentine Gallery in London and moving to the Tamayo Museum in Mexico City, that took this phrase as its title. There would be much to say about the relays and exchanges between Golub and Spero in relation to this phrase—both of them knew of its occurrence in Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” but they also already knew a variant from Artaud, whose “mange ta langue” Spero already had used in 1970 (five years before the publication of Cixous’s essay) in one of her *Artaud Paintings*. Here, though, I simply wish to refer to Golub’s 2001 *Bite Your Tongue*, which includes a male figure with his hand over his mouth. The fact that, in this work, it is a male figure whose voice is silenced and muffled implies a complicity between Golub and Spero around the need to begin to diminish the dominance and power of male voices. What is at stake in this complicity is again the possibility of registering the closeness between Golub and Spero and the innumerable ways in which their collaboration joins their identities to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them, even if we can begin to understand how they reinforced each other.

³⁹ Nixon, “Book of Tongues,” 23. See also Pamela Wye, “Nancy Spero: Speaking in Tongues,” in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Susan Bee and Mira Schor (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 405–417.

⁴⁰ Hélène Cixous, “Spero’s Dissidences,” trans. Laurent Milesi, in *Poetry in Painting: Writings on Contemporary Arts and Aesthetics*, ed. Marta Segarra and Joana Masó (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 24.

⁴¹ Nancy Spero, “Creation and Pro-creation,” in Bee and Schor, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, 298.

⁴² The words here are from Spero’s comments on a panel at Cooper Union in New York in October 1989, quoted in Nixon, “Book of Tongues,” 55.

⁴³ Lyon, *Nancy Spero: The Work*, 113.

⁴⁴ The term “speroglyphs” comes from Cixous. Speaking of Spero, she writes that “she picks up Artaud, his debris and waste, and makes *speroglyphs* out of them. As if she, SP, were a PS of Artaud’s. His postscript, his *après coup*.” See Cixous, “Spero’s Dissidences,” 26.

⁴⁵ Spero, “Creation and Pro-creation,” 298.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Buchloh has noted several of the “other” traditions that Spero sought to introduce into the landscape of modernism, especially those of myth, literature, poetry, and historical and cultural memory. See his essay “Spero’s Other Traditions,” in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 429–442.

⁴⁷ Sosa’s 1994 documentary on the Golub and Spero retrospective at the American Center in Paris, entitled *War and Memory*, includes many moments in which this identification between Spero and Golub’s *Hierophant* is reinforced. See especially 4:12, 4:53, 10:27, and 24:32–38, since these shots further confirm the resemblance between the shape of Spero’s head, face, and hair and those of Golub’s figure.

⁴⁸ As Lyon explains, “a major change in Spero’s working process occurred from the late 1970s to the early 1980s as she moved from hand-painted, collaged figures on paper with bulletin-type letters to the use of zinc or magnesium letter-press plates to handprint figures directly on paper. She drew from her own imagery and from published sources to make photoengraved matrices from which she could handprint multiple impressions. From about 1981, she worked closely with the artist and photographer David Reynolds to make the plates. He had recently graduated from Rutgers University, where he had been a student of Leon Golub. Reynolds saw that arthritis was restricting her ability to draw, and thinks her adoption of hand-printing with letter-press plates was in part a response to her increasing difficulty in using her hands. In a passage that describes what are for her the virtues of this shift in her practice of producing images—a passage that emphasizes the processes of reproduction and repetition that are at the heart of this turn—Spero tells us:

In recent years I have cut down (but not eliminated) the collaging of painted figures on these extended linear panels. I generally prefer printed images. In using zinc letter press plates (made from my drawings and appropriations),

a hand printing process rather than a printing press, I am able to get many variations of imprint. Depending on the pressure of the hand, the angling of the plate, the amount of ink rolled onto the raised image etc., I can repeat and differentiate an image, emphasizing the staccato of the mechanical, varying hand printing directly on the paper itself with collaged hand printed images. Extremes: the collaged figures can be colorful, bold, celebratory, carnivalesque—or greyed and diffused with an unhealthy look of disintegration, outlines of iridescent color—figures printed to resemble x-rayed human forms—as in the moment the bomb blasts. All manner of processions, conflicts, interruptions, and disruptions. Gravity and ground plane are referenced or inferred and continuously contravened.

Bringing together the singularity of her images and the reproduction that is inevitably involved in their production, Spero calls attention to the modes of repetition, appropriation, and recontextualization that I am suggesting are at work within Golub’s production of *The Hierophant*. See Lyon, *Nancy Spero: The Work*, 241.

⁴⁹ The book *Codex Spero* concludes with a kind of catalogue of all of the printed visual motifs that Spero began using in the late 1970s entitled “Spero’s Alphabet of Hieroglyphs.” This catalogue includes several of the female figures that have their arms reaching back behind them and which are circulated and recirculated through several of her works. See *Codex Spero: Nancy Spero—Selected Writings and Interviews 1950–2008*, ed. Roel Arkesteijn (Amsterdam: Roma Publications, 2008), 170, and especially figures 3, 12, and 13. As Christopher Lyon notes, in a passage that again confirms that several of Spero’s figures have their origin in photographs, “questioned at one point about the source of a running figure with arms flung back who makes her debut in *Notes in Time*, Spero said the figure came from a photograph of a woman exercising with a jump rope. The source of the figure, she noted, was less important to her than how it functioned in the work. In this case, the woman in the original image was putting herself forward ‘breast first,’ leading with her sex, as it were, caught in midair, momentarily defying gravity. Spero used her as a running figure hieroglyph, which we might translate as ‘active-woman-freedom.’” See Lyon, *Nancy Spero: The Work*, 211.

⁵⁰ See Jeanne Siegel, “Nancy Spero: Woman as Protagonist,” *Arts* (September 1987), cited in Jon Bird, Jo Anna Isaak, and Sylvère Lotringer, *Nancy Spero* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 134.

51 See Jon Bird et al., *Nancy Spero* (London: ICA, 1987), 157. The full quotation is: "I am not interested in individual physiognomies or personifications. The figure becomes generic in a somewhat similar way to, for example, the stylization of Australian aboriginal art, early Greek vase painting, European prehistoric art, etc. I represent in one piece figures derived from various cultures whose extremely diverse and often disproportionate body sizes also co-exist in simultaneous time."

52 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 882.

53 *Ibid.*, 889.

54 Golub and Spero most likely knew this passage directly from Benjamin's text, but they also certainly knew it from Carolyn Forché's book *The Angel of History*, which they owned. The epigraph to Forché's book is in fact this particular passage. I want to thank Samm Kuncze for so kindly providing me with photographs of Golub and Spero's entire library.

55 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 392.

56 While Klee's *Angelus Novus* is his most famous angel, angels appear throughout his artistic career. On his persistent return to angelic figures, see Michael Baumgartner et al., *Paul Klee: The Angels* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2013), and Boris Friedewald, *The Angels of Paul Klee* (London: Arcadia Books, 2019).

57 I am grateful to both Branka Arsić and Sumeja Tulic for alerting me to this connection. In Serbian, men are even referred to as *golub*, or pigeon. As we know, in relation to Benjamin's own birdlike hybrid angel, birds are often thought of as messengers from another realm. Angels often appear in the form of birds and are, as in this instance, depicted with birds' wings. What is remarkable here is that Golub's first and last names so beautifully account for the almost grotesque but wildly interesting hybrid that Klee's figure is.

58 David Wills, "Naming the Mechanical Angel: Benjamin," in *Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 166. That Klee's and Benjamin's angel—and this angel is not the same for both of them—emerges from a "nebulous background," even as it "recedes" into a "technological future that nevertheless occurs behind and in its back because it was always there, originarily, from

the beginning," is confirmed by the recent rather remarkable discovery by the artist R. H. Quaytman. As she was preparing for an exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum, she visited the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and was granted a special viewing of Klee's *Angelus Novus* (one of the most prized possessions of the Israel Museum). She noticed something that had never been registered before—that Klee had purposefully glued the *Angelus Novus* mono-print directly onto an old copper engraving. The edge of the engraving, discernible around all four sides of Klee's work, suggested a portrait of a single figure in a black robe made by someone with—these details are legible on the engraving just below the Klee image—the initials LC in the 1520s. She thought this fact was important to Klee's gesture of defacement—a defacement that is at the same time, in the materiality of its support, dependent on the very trace it obscures—but also to Benjamin's well-known description of the work, which situates the temporal past in front of the angel, not behind it.

Working with the paper conservation department at the Israel Museum, Quaytman spent two years trying to uncover the identity of this hidden figure. Scientific imaging techniques such as X-ray and thermography failed to uncover it. On returning to her studio, however, Quaytman continued to search websites and databases from libraries and museum collections and, in early June 2015, she serendipitously found the engraving in a site from the regional government of Lombardy. The engraving was made by a relatively unknown engraver named Christian Friedrich von Müller in 1838 and, more interestingly, it was based on a 1521 portrait by Lucas Cranach of Martin Luther. Quaytman offers a moving account of her discovery in the essay she wrote for the catalogue that accompanied her exhibition (see R. H. Quaytman, "Engrave," in *Chapter 29: Haqaaq* [Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2015], 51–61), and Müller's engraving of Cranach's painting can be viewed on the site in which Quaytman found the image: <http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/stampe/schede/3y010-00352/?view=ricerca&offset=1132>.

There would be much to say about this rather extraordinary discovery (I plan to write an extended essay about it in the near future). Minimally, we would want to think about: (1) Luther's relation to his friend Cranach and

their collaborations in the making of several of Luther's texts; (2) Luther's iconoclasm, which, because of his incorporation of images in his texts, cannot be said to be against images in general, and which should be read as part of a pedagogical project on how to read images; (3) the relations or differences between Luther's several references to angels and Klee's new angel, since Klee may have purposefully sought to displace Luther's angels with his; (4) the role of Luther in Benjamin's conception of the Baroque period; and (5) the relation between Luther's famous theses and Benjamin's preferred mode of thetic presentation—but here I simply wish to emphasize the way in which the materiality of Klee's work asks us to rethink Benjamin's famous description of it, and in a way that reinforces what I have suggested about Golub's own revision of Klee's and Benjamin's angel.

If we take Benjamin at his word, the angel's body faces the past—while Benjamin states that the angel's face is turned toward the past, the eyes of Klee's *Angelus* are clearly looking to the side, toward the margins of the work, perhaps even inviting us to register the edges of the engraving behind him—even as he is being driven "irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned." What is so beautiful about Quaytman's discovery is that it helps us read the relation between Klee's image and the engraving behind it as a dialectical image in the strict Benjaminian sense: as an image, that is, "wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural" (see Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999], 463). It also suggests that, in order to move into an unseen future, we must pass through what we inherit, and what we inherit, and what we must think, are the histories of different modes of reproduction. In other words, what the materiality of Klee's drawing tells us is that we can only move into the future through a reflection on the various processes of reproduction that, one on top of the other, delineate the mediatic strata through which we encounter our relation to the past and the future—and to the ruined world in front of us. The future can only

emerge through an engagement with a past whose multiple traces are before and behind us at the same time.

As Annie Bourneuf notes, "Benjamin does not treat Klee's work as a representation of the angel of history," but, instead, "he writes that the angel of history 'must look like' Klee's *Angelus*" (see Bourneuf, "The Margins of the *Angelus Novus*," in R. H. Quaytman, *Chapter 29: Haqaaq*, 36). In other words, Klee's *Angelus* tells us that, if there is an angel of history, this angel *must* be a figure of different media, a hybrid figure that—neither simply human nor nonhuman, neither simply a body nor a series of texts—appears as a kind of knot of various relations. In his essay on Karl Kraus, Benjamin calls Klee's *Angelus Novus* "a monster," a messenger in "old engravings" (see Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, and Gary Smith [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999], 457). Klee's messenger, appearing atop an old engraving, which in turn cites a sixteenth-century painting, is a monstrous emblem of the wonder of Golub's own hybrid angel—an angel that takes the face and body of a hierophant, the face and body of Nancy Spero, the head of a lion and the feet of a bird and therefore the figural face and body of Golub himself, and all the other figures encrypted within these already multiple figures. Every angel—Golub's, Klee's, and Benjamin's, to name only the three in which I have been most interested—names the destruction of a nonhybrid, human subject, something I have wanted to demonstrate in my reading of Golub's "angel," in particular. As Tom Cohen would have it:

if the *angel* is linked, etymologically, to a messenger and message itself, a figure of media, he comes to supplant any individual content or message. . . . This Potemkin angel is also the prototype for the bewildered destruction of a self-anthropomorphized "subject," the *artifice of a subjectivity* at all. . . . At a certain point the figure of the angel's planned obsolescence—as messenger, sign, promise—dissolves back into the matter it was intended to exceed. The phrase "materialist spirit" drifts back toward the non-human broadly, where personification is withheld and from where the construct of the human is as if viewed inversely as thing.

Tom Cohen, "The Angel and the Storm: 'Material Spirit' in the Era of Climate Change," in *Material Spirit: Religion and Literature Intranscendent*, ed. Gregory C. Stallings et al.

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 137–138.

59 Benjamin, “Agesilaus Santander (Second Version),” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 714–715 (translation modified).

60 Ibid., 714 and 712–713.

61 Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 223. Weber’s reading of Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander” is exacting and thorough and I am indebted to it throughout my own engagement with this text.

62 In his essay “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” Gershom Scholem suggests that Benjamin’s perception of his *Angelus Novus* as both male and female—Benjamin had purchased the work in 1921—was largely mediated by his infatuation for Julia Cohn and the identification he made between the angel and his beloved Julia. As Benjamin suggests in the texts he wrote in Ibiza, this identification was presumably dictated by the angel “himself” and meant to ensure that Benjamin’s love would remain unfulfilled. Scholem writes that, in destining Benjamin to eternal frustration, the angel wished to “square his account with Benjamin” in response to the fact that, having detained him in his room, Benjamin had prevented him from singing his hymns. See Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 219–223. Like Benjamin, Golub associates his hierophant / angel with his beloved, even as he also comes to view the angel as his plural double.

63 Benjamin, “Agesilaus Santander (Second Version),” 715.

64 On the history of the *Renommée* statue, see Charles Braquehaye’s *Les artistes du duc d’Épernon* (London: Forgotten Books, 2019).

65 Cixous, “Spero’s Dissidances,” 28.

66 Simmel, “The Aesthetic Significance of the Face,” in *Georg Simmel, 1858–1918: A Collection of Essays with Translations and a Bibliography*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959), 144.

67 On this point, see Donald Burton Kuspit, *Golub: Existential/Activist Painter* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 68. In conversation with Gerald Marzorati, Golub describes cyborgs as a contemporary version of sphinxes: “A cyborg is a creature. Part human, part machine, part computer intelligence. Beyond human, in a sense. Real, but simulated. Powerful—more powerful than you or me. Yet vulnerable, too, but not exactly in the way we

are vulnerable. The sphinxes were the cyborgs of their age. I mean, what I’m saying—what interests me—is that throughout Western civilization, there has always been this notion of crossings of this kind, extraordinary mixes of man and animal.” See Gerald Marzorati, *A Painter of Darkness: Leon Golub and Our Times* (New York: Viking Press, 1990), 203.

68 There is another fabulous prolepsis and even confirmation of this fusing of Golub and Spero in the figure of the sphinx in Golub’s *Double Winged Sphinx*, a work he produced the same year he made his *Winged Sphinx*. It depicts a two-headed sphinx—with the two faces turned toward one another—that shares its wings and limbs. More than thirty years earlier than his *Hierophant*, Golub already had marked his almost Siamese-twin connection to Spero, even if in this encrypted way, by presenting the heads of two “sphinxes” but with “one” body. Unfortunately, I was unable to secure a high-resolution image of this work, but it can be viewed at <http://www.artnet.com/artists/leon-golub/double-winged-sphinx-PL8UP7CJauEZCT6lHfZQ2>.

69 Walter Benjamin, “Review of Gladkov’s *Cement*,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 48.

70 “Interview with Leon Golub,” *New York Arts Magazine* 6, no. 7 (Summer 2001), 31.

v. Trees, Hands, Stars, and Veils

This essay appeared in an earlier version in *Fazal Sheikh: Portraits* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), 4–43. I thank Fazal Sheikh for his eternal kindness and generosity. I have remained very grateful for the opportunity to continue to work on his photographs, and for the gift of what, in every instance, they are able to teach me.

I also wish to say that, in the same way that Sheikh circulates and recirculates his images from one project to another, I have drawn, here and there, from my earlier work on his *The Victor Weeps* and *Moksha* projects, and from the work that I have done with Ian Balfour on human rights. In the places where I have done this, it is also to suggest that what we see is always mediated, an insight that is critical to what I have to say about Sheikh’s work. As I have said before, reading always begins elsewhere.

1 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Look of the Portrait,” trans. Simon Sparks, in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 235; Maurice Blanchot, “The Museum, Art, and Time,” trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, in *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 32, translation modified slightly; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Memory and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 150.

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian, 1958), 297.

3 A crucial part of Arendt’s argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* also concerns the internal exile, and forced deprivation of Black subjects within colonial states. Depending heavily on Cornelius de Kiewiet’s *A History of South Africa Social and Economic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941) for her account of South Africa, this figure plays a salient role in her discussion of superfluity and should be mentioned along with her discussion of European refugees. There would be significant relays here between Arendt’s discussion of internal exiles and Étienne Balibar’s discussion of citizenship and internal strangers. See, for example, “Can We Say: After the Subject Comes the Stranger?” (a lecture delivered at the “Thinking with Balibar” conference at Columbia University, November 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACaXH-WW6Fo>. See also his book *Citizenship* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), especially chapter 5, “Citizenship and Exclusion.”

4 See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Following Arendt, Agamben discusses the problem of the refugee as a challenge to the thinking of human rights in his essay “Beyond Human Rights,” in *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 15–28.

5 Étienne Balibar, “Outline of a Topography of Cruelty: Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence,” in *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 119. For an exemplary analysis of what is at stake in this articulation or disarticulation between “man” and “citizen” see Balibar’s “‘Rights of Man’ and ‘Rights of the Citizen’: The Modern Dialectic of Equality and Freedom,” in his *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), 39–59.

6 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 297.

7 Werner Hamacher, “The Right to Have Rights: Four-and-a-Half Remarks,” trans. Kirk Wetters, in “And Justice for All? The Claims of Human Rights,” a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, nos. 2–3, ed. Ian Balfour and Eduardo Cadava (Spring/Summer 2004), 350.

8 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

9 I am indebted on this point to Ariella Azoulay’s delineation of what she calls “the civil contract of photography,” a contract that, for her, would take into account all of the participants in a photographic act, “camera, photographer, photographed subject, and spectator,” and would approach “the photograph (and its meaning) as an unintentional effect of the encounter between all of these.” “None of these,” she adds, “have the capacity to seal off this effect and determine its sole meaning.” See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 23.

10 Fredric Jameson, *The Benjamin Files* (London: Verso, 2020), 7.

11 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–1989), 1:1238. The internal quotes within Benjamin’s passage are from André Monglond’s 1930 *Le préromantisme français* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 2000), xii; and Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Der Tor und der Tod* (1894), in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Herbert Steiner (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1952), vol. III, 220.

12 *Fazal Sheikh: Portraits* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011).

13 I do not include Sheikh’s two most recent projects here since they appeared after the 2011 collection of his portraits I have been considering and since I have engaged them in different contexts. I am finishing a small book entitled *Erasures* that takes its point of departure from Sheikh’s monumental three-volume photographic project on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *The Erasure Trilogy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015), and I also am collaborating with him on a multiyear project, *Exposures*, on the ruination of the Utah landscape by uranium mining and oil and gas drilling, and the consequences of this ruination on native communities.

14 Although I wish to emphasize the difference that presenting the portraits in this way makes for how we experience them in their relation to one another, I will organize my remarks mostly in relation to the specific projects from which these portraits are drawn. In doing so, however, I will try to make clear what I think links the projects together. In other words, I hope that this double gesture will permit me to respond to the specificity of each project, even while accenting the thread that binds them together.

15 There would be a great deal to say about the relation between Sheikh's conception of portraiture and that of the Soviet avant-garde, since both enact a theory of the portrait that works against what Benjamin Buchloh has called "the traditional principles of pictorial isolation and singularization" (Buchloh, "Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture," in *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art*, ed. Melissa Feldman [Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art and the University of Pennsylvania, 1991], 56). As Osip Brik would argue:

Differentiating individual objects so as to make a pictorial record of them is not only a technical but also an ideological phenomenon. In the pre-Revolutionary (feudal and bourgeois) period, both painting and literature set themselves the aim of differentiating individual people and events from their general context and concentrating attention on them. . . . To the contemporary consciousness, an individual person can be understood and assessed only in connection with all the other people. . . . To take a snapshot, a photographer does not have to differentiate the individual. Photography can capture him together with the total environment and in such a manner that his dependence on the environment is clear and obvious.

See Brik, "From Painting to Photograph," in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art / Aperture, 1989), 231–232. As Rodchenko would put it, "It should be stated firmly that, with the appearance of photographs, there can be no question of a single immutable portrait. Moreover, a man is not just one sum total; he is many, and sometimes they are opposed" (Rodchenko, "Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot," in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, 238–242).

16 There are numerous books on the baobab, but Thomas Pakenham's *The Remarkable Baobab* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004) and Rupert

Watson's *The African Baobab* (Cape Town: Skuit Publishers, 2007) are useful introductions to the myths and superstitions that surround these rather majestic and enigmatic trees.

17 Watson, *The African Baobab*, 198. Although I have relied on Watson here, I want to make a clarification based on a note I received from Rosalind Morris. She correctly explains that "the category of the indigenous as counterpoint to the Arab/Indian Ocean coastal peoples is generally unsatisfactory and not often used in Africa, as the category is reserved for specific groups of Bantu-speakers, and does not include all non-Arabs/Indian Ocean-originating people. The history of expansive black African states prior to European colonization includes the subordination and often forced movement of specific groups. For example, in South Africa, Zulu and isiXhosa speakers do not claim indigeneity, whereas Khoekhoen people do." This point does not counter the way in which I am reading the baobab tree, but it does help specify the complex histories that are archived in relation to it.

18 In Aristotle's words,

Why is it that during eclipses of the sun, if one views them through a sieve or a leaf—for example, that of a plane-tree or any other broad-leaved tree—or through the two hands with the fingers interlaced, the rays are crescent-shaped in the direction of the earth? Is it because, just as, when the light shines through an aperture with regular angles, the result is a round figure, namely a cone (the reason being that two cones are formed, one between the sun and the aperture and the other between the aperture and the ground, and their apexes meet), so, when under these conditions part is cut off from the orb in the sky, there will be a crescent on the other side of the aperture from the illuminant, that is, in the direction of the earth (for the rays proceed from that part of the circumference which is a crescent)? Now as it were small apertures are formed between the fingers and in a sieve, and so the phenomenon can be more clearly demonstrated than when the rays pass through wide apertures. Such crescents are not formed by the moon, whether in eclipse or waxing or waning, because the rays from its extremities are not clear-cut, but it sheds its light from the middle, and the middle portion of the crescent is but small.

See *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1419 (912 B11–27).

19 For a concise but intelligent account of the Somali refugee crisis, see Rakiya Omaar and

Alex de Waal, "The Nightmare Continues . . . Abuses against Somali Refugees in Kenya," *African Rights* (September 1993), 12–45. For a broad review of the literature on Somali refugees, see Sidney Waldron and Naima A. Hasci, *Somali Refugees in the Horn of Africa: State of the Art Literature Review* (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1995).

20 Many of the portraits in this series are of paired figures: mostly exhibiting familial relations (mothers and children, brothers and sisters, and so forth), but also affective, intimate, and social relationships. In this regard, some—for example, the portrait of the sisters Sima and Shahima, dressed in identical clothes—have relays to the African tradition of producing images of twins and doubles. For a discussion of the figure of twins and doubles in African portraiture, see C. Angelo Nicheli, "Doubles and Twins: A New Approach to Contemporary Studio Photography in West Africa," *African Arts* (Spring 2008), 66–85. See also Stephen F. Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," in *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 240–260. For an excellent discussion and survey of contemporary African photography in general, see Okwui Enwezor, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), esp. 11–45.

21 Fazal Sheikh, *A Sense of Common Ground* (Zurich: Scalo, 1996), 3.

22 In his book *Infant Figures*, Christopher Fynsk explores the relation between speaking and the death of a child. As he writes: "if we accept that the opening of language is indissociable from an experience of a kind of death, there must be in our speaking, if only as a trace, the death of a child . . . the figure of the dying child insists in psychic life and in language; as though the interminable, immemorial dying in question must have a temporal figuration. No one can say fully, intelligibly, what the death of this child is, for all saying proceeds from such a death. But all saying is also haunted by it." See Fynsk, *Infant Figures: The Death of the Infans and Other Scenes of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 50. There would be much to say, I think, about the relations between life and death, between muteness and speech, between relationality and the loss of self in this portrait of Hadija and her father, but here I can only gesture in this direction.

23 Nancy, "The Look of the Portrait," 235.

24 On the history of Afghanistan, see, among many others, Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Abdul Ghani, *A Brief Political History of Afghanistan* (Lahore: Najaf Publishers, 1989); Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan, from Holy War to Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1995); and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban, Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

25 Since Sheikh's work engages Islamic spaces in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East and insofar as the Islamic doctrine in one context can be considered heterodox in another—especially in regard to the prohibition of images—it is important to at least note the distinction between doctrine and practice, with practice markedly shaped by local traditions.

26 Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 244–245.

27 Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility [Third Version]," trans. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 258. If Benjamin claims that "the human being withdraws from the photograph," he also suggests in his "Little History of Photography" that "to do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations" (see "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 518). The interplay between these two statements articulates the primal and doubled scene in which Sheikh's own reflections on the subject's relation to the photography take place.

28 This phrase is drawn from Derrida's essay "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand" (trans. John P. Leavy), in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 173.

29 See Derrida's eulogy for Louis Marin, "By Force of Mourning," in *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 147–148.

30 Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 174.

31 Benjamin suggests that childhood already has a particular relation to death when he writes:

"For childhood, having no preconceived opinions, has none about life. It is as dearly attached . . . to the realm of the dead, where it juts into that of the living, as to life itself." See "A Berlin Chronicle," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 613.

³² Hal Foster, "The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 265.

³³ See especially Bryson's chapter on rhopography in *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 60–95.

³⁴ Fazal Sheikh, *Ramadan Moon* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2000), 51.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁷ I have been moved to think about the implications of water by Branka Arsić's reflections on water in her "Introduction: In the Mode of Water," in *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–18.

³⁸ Sheikh, *Ramadan Moon*, 15.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 462–463.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (New York: Verso Books, 1997), 242.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Peace and Proximity," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 167. As Judith Butler explains in her book *Precarious Life*, in a passage that has great resonance with Sheikh's own sense of the possibility and impossibility of representing a person: "For Levinas, then, the human is not represented by the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure." See Butler, *Precarious Life*, 144.

⁴² Fazal Sheikh, "Across the Waters of Sorrow: The Widows of Vrindavan," in *Moksha* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 258. There are approximately forty million widows in India, and roughly twenty thousand widows at any given time in Vrindavan, many (although by no means all) from West Bengal. Even though the Hindu

Succession Act of 1969 made women eligible to inherit equally with men and some individual states have legislated equality provisions into inheritance law, in actual practice widows often are deprived of their legal rights. Local interpretations of caste customs, for example, can determine whether or not a widow will be granted some permanent or temporary share of the family's land or property and, because of this, a widow's rights often are violated. Indeed, the common restrictions on property, residence, remarriage, and employment destine most widows to a life of economic, social, and even physical distress. What needs to be explored, however, is the extent to which their decision to come to Vrindavan, however pressed they might have been, and for often heterogeneous reasons—including the nature of the relations they have or do not have with their families, their age, their economic status, and the fact that, at times, rural widows are more likely to remarry than widows from higher castes, since the latter are more strictly bound to celibacy—truly offers them the solace they come to secure. Sheikh provides a measure of this solace by including passages from his interviews of several of the widows he photographed during his stay in Vrindavan.

⁴³ Sheikh, "Across the Waters of Sorrow," 257.

⁴⁴ As Yates McKee has noted, in a discussion of the role and place of the technical media in nongovernmental organizations, and of the mediated character of vision in general:

if vision acquires an inflated metaphorical privilege because of the centrality of technologies such as cameras, camcorders, television, satellites, the Internet, and PowerPoint presentations in contemporary politics, it is only insofar as they prevent vision from ever simply being itself. It is not that these technologies distort the immediacy typically associated with the optical faculty; rather, they magnify and exacerbate the general point that every visual artifact and experience is always already marked by an unforeseeably mediated network of histories, interpretations, and contexts that, strictly speaking, are not visually evident as such. In this sense, every image is a kind of text that requires both looking and reading, or rather looking as reading, regardless of whether an image contains or is accompanied by text in the narrow sense of the word.

See McKee, "'Eyes and Ears': Aesthetics, Visual Culture, and the Claims of Nongovernmental Politics," in *Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Michel

Feher, with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 330.

⁴⁵ Emphasizing the relation between the embrace of this ancient script and the difficulties of a life that at the same time is "chosen" by the widows, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests—in reference to Butalia's film, in particular—that the widows cannot be seen simply as victims. As she puts it:

It is too easy to have a politically correct interpretation of these widows, although the denunciation of the predatory male establishment of moneylenders and petty religion-mongers is altogether apt. These women, who would seem decrepit to the merely sophisticated eye, speak with grace, confidence, and authority, not as victims. . . . They have come to Vrindavan for freedom, such as it is. . . . As old-age homes for . . . widowed female relatives, these dormitories are harsh indeed. But they are transformed into a space of choice and performance by the gift for theater of these near-destitute widows, ready to inhabit the *bhakti* scripts that are thrust upon them. There is everything to denounce in a socio-economic sex-gender system that will permit this. But the women cannot be seen as victims, and theater of *bhakti* cannot be seen as orthodoxy pure and simple. The contrast between the sentimental voiceover of the documentary and the dry power of the women is itself an interpretable text.

Spivak, "Moving Devi," *Cultural Critique* 47 (2001), 154–155.

⁴⁶ As far as I know, the most extensive and elaborate treatment of this structure—of this series of narratives organized around several kinds of death—can be found in E. H. Rick Jarow's *Tales for the Dying: The Death Narrative of the Bhagavata-Purana* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). Much of my discussion of this collection of narratives is indebted to Jarow's own analysis and, at certain moments, I in fact incorporate a kind of miniaturized photograph-in-prose of this analysis. In the same way that Sheikh suggests that our encounter with the Vrindavan widows is mediated by, among other things, the story of Krishna, my own reading of the *Bhagavata-Purana* has been mediated by Jarow's.

⁴⁷ See Jarow, *Tales for the Dying*, 11.

⁴⁸ Indeed, at the time of Krishna's birth, "the constellations and the stars were all favorable." See *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God (Srimad Bhagavata Purana Book X)*, trans. Edwin F. Bryant (New York: Penguin, 2003), 19.

⁴⁹ I have made this argument in my *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 26–41.

⁵⁰ Krishna was born in the Mathura prison, where his parents, Devaki and Vasudeva, were being held by Devaki's brother, King Kamsa. They had been imprisoned because their eighth son, Krishna, was prophesied to kill his maternal uncle, King Kamsa. The King fully intended to kill the infant upon his birth, but, when Krishna was born, the prison guards fell asleep and the doors of the prison magically opened. Vasudeva walked out of the prison and took Krishna across the Yamuna River to Gokul, where he was cared for by his foster parents, Nanda and Yasoda, in Vrindavan, just fifteen kilometers from Mathura.

⁵¹ If we accept Rimbaud's suggestion that the entry into a photographic space always corresponds to the "advent of [the self] as an other," always implies a transformed version of our "self," then Krishna's appearance as one of Vishnu's ten avatars—his appearance as a transformed double of Vishnu—confirms his photographic status.

⁵² As Sheikh notes, "On my last evening visit to the ashram the widows asked why I had never photographed the altar in the temple. In fact, it was because I felt too conspicuous standing in the middle of the mass of chanting women. But at their request I set up my camera in the central aisle and began to work. The widows' chanting quickened and some of the women let out ululations of a kind I'd never heard before. I found out later that this was because they considered the making of the photographs as an offering to Krishna." See *Moksha*, 274.

⁵³ *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God (Srimad Bhagavata Purana Book X)*, 127.

⁵⁴ On this point, see Jarow, *Tales for the Dying*, 105.

⁵⁵ *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God (Srimad Bhagavata Purana Book X)*, 130.

⁵⁶ Jarow, *Tales for the Dying*, 113.

⁵⁷ *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God (Srimad Bhagavata Purana Book X)*, 136. This point is repeated later in the *Bhagavata*, when Sri Suka continues his narrative: "The *gopis* obtained their beloved Krishna after such a long time. Gazing at him, they cursed the person who had created eyelids on their eyes" (*ibid.*, 349).

⁵⁸ The story of Nimi is relayed in Book IX of the *Bhagavata*. See especially chapter 13, verses 1–11, in *The Bhagavata Purana*, trans. Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976), 1193–1195.

- 59 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 117. Much of what follows is indebted to Chakrabarty's incisive, historico-theoretical reflections on Bengali widowhood.
- 60 Uma Chakravarti, *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of "Ancient" India* (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006), 156–182.
- 61 I develop this idea of a face that is not a face from Butler's discussion in *Precarious Life* of the way in which the giving of a face at the same time can "derealize" the face. As she puts it:

It is important to distinguish among kinds of unrepresentability. In the first instance, there is the Levinasian view according to which there is a "face" which no face can fully exhaust, the face understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation. Here the "face" is always a figure for something that is not literally a face. Other human expressions, however, seem to be figurable as a "face" even though they are not faces, but sounds or emissions of another order. . . . In this sense, the figure underscores the incommensurability of the face with whatever it represents. Strictly speaking, then, the face does not represent anything, in the sense that it fails to capture and deliver that to which it refers. (Butler, *Precarious Life*, 144)

- 62 See Branka Arsić, "The Home of Shame," in *Cities without Citizens*, ed. Eduardo Cadava and Aaron Levy (Philadelphia: Slough Books and the Rosenbach Museum, 2003), 40. I am indebted in this section—and in some of my formulations here—to Arsić's discussion of the face's negativity, and of desubjectivization and exile.
- 63 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 120–121.
- 64 Quoted in Sheikh, *Moksha*, 118, 41, 42, 43, 44.
- 65 See "Photography in Court," *Ohio Law Journal* 4, no. 6 (September 22, 1883), 146.
- 66 Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), 87.
- 67 I would like to thank Jennifer Bajorek and Simon Gikandi for their conversations with me about the portrait, and especially its multiplicity.
- 68 On this point, see Butler's similar discussion in *Precarious Life*, 144 and 146.
- 69 Fazal Sheikh, *Ladli* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007), 143 and 187–188.

vi. Learning to See

This essay was commissioned for the catalogue that was to accompany the retrospectives of Susan Meiselas's work at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona and the Jeu de Paume in Paris in the fall of 2017 and the spring of 2018, respectively (the exhibition later went to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the summer and fall of 2018). Carles Guerra invited me to write an essay that would address Susan's entire corpus in 3,000 words or less. This felt like an impossible task, but, as I began thinking about what red thread I might follow, my dear, dear friend Werner Hamacher died. I soon learned from his daughter Sophie that, shortly before his death, he had told her that he wanted me to organize his memorial. This double demand—to write the essay while putting together Werner's memorial—surely has left its traces on this essay. I always have thought that my writing is smarter than me, that it knows before I do what is happening with me, and this was certainly the case in this instance. What has become clear in retrospect is that my inability to stay within the 3,000-word limit—Werner was notorious for never staying within any kind of limit, but especially within word or page limits—was not only a kind of homage to Werner but also a sign of my inability to let go of the essay, which had become a means of staying with him, of staying with him through Susan's own photographic meditations on death, absence, ruins, and mourning. While the essay is a testament to friendship—my friendship with Susan and with Werner—I quickly came to understand that it had to take the form of a letter to my surviving friend, Susan, even if it inevitably is simultaneously an address, however displaced, distorted, and discreet this address might be, to my dead but still remembered Werner. I say this in order to express my enduring gratitude to Susan for the grace and generosity with which she accepted my delays, my somewhat dilatory epistle, and my silent collaboration with Werner, a kind of ghostly medium whose writings have taught me to see as much as Susan's works have. I even imagine that I would not have seen everything I eventually saw in Susan's work if the circumstances under which I wrote this letter to her had been different. This is perhaps one more lesson about the art of reading in general.

In the end, less than a third of the letter I include here was published in the catalogue

for Susan's retrospective, in three different editions: French, Spanish, and English. This shorter version can be found in English in *Susan Meiselas: Mediations* (Paris: Jeu de Paume, 2018; Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2018; and Bologna: Damiani, 2018), 41–68.

My letter to Susan is neither a scholarly nor an academic piece of writing, but rather an epistolary gesture of friendship and gratitude. It seeks not only to initiate a conversation about the relation between photography and history but also to think about the relations among loving, reading, and mourning—what in this collection I have tried to think in terms of what it means to read historically. I have wanted to suggest that reading and writing always begin elsewhere. In this instance, there is a rather varied constellation of texts and sources that hovered over me like floating clouds that, here and there, graciously guided me along the way as I wrote this letter. I list them here in the form of impedimenta—that set of tools or equipment that, even if an encumbrance, can enable certain activities and journeys to take place. In lieu of footnotes, which would have felt cumbersome or even inappropriate, I trust that these impedimenta can offer the traces of a process of thinking and writing that tells us what is true of all thinking and writing: they are collaborative in nature and can never be said to belong to a single person. Each act of reading and writing exposes the community of texts and relations, the multiple voices, that have made it possible. Here, these have been my companions, my impedimenta:

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Postscript: Lessons of the Hour

1 It is not possible for me to offer detailed readings of each of these photographs in the context of this postscript, but I plan to return to them elsewhere in order to expand the suggestions I make here. Now I simply wish to indicate: (1) the various ways in which each of these photographs, like the Benjamin who returns to Hallman in order to think about the present moment in which he is writing, evokes several pasts and several histories in order to point to different "lessons of the hour," none of which can ever refer only to the present hour; and (2) the different ways in which these photographs can be harnessed to explore the language and discourses that permeate our present pandemic condition. In doing so, I wish to suggest that the modes of reading I enact within this collection of essays—which are illustrated more fully within the essays than they can be in this postscript—can become a resource for

beginning to think our contemporary moment, and of course not only it.

2 Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 92 and 94.

3 *Ibid.*, 95 and 100.

4 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2–3. He rightly adds that, even though it has been objected "that the whole concept of terrorism as a 'war of images' and metaphors ignores the fact that 'terrorist bombings are real violence,'" the destruction of the World Trade Center "was a symbolic event, the deliberate destruction of an iconic object designed as the production of a spectacular image calculated to traumatize a whole society. This in no way denies the reality or the horror of what happened; on the contrary, it is a way of coming to a richer understanding of what happened, both what led up to it and what responses it produced" (*ibid.*, 12–13). For a wonderful analysis of the role of images in the present moment, see Mitchell's essay on the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant crises, "Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of the Present," *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2021), 370–406.

5 Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 3. I am indebted in what follows to Redfield's own discussion 9/11's mediatic character.

6 The video from which the still shot on the left of the diptych is taken can be viewed here: <https://www.britannica.com/event/September-11-attacks>. The still on which the right side of the diptych is based can be seen here: https://tulsaoworld.com/archive/world-trade-center-collapses-in-terrorist-attack-washington-hit-by-coordinated-attacks/article_c8d5debf-400d-5428-a35e-dcb2b56bf9f5.amp.html. By doubling the north tower rather than presenting both towers, Fontcuberta's diptych allows the breach point of the first attack to resemble a pair of eyes that, filled with smoke, filled with the burning images within the breach, cannot see anything.

7 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin*,

Selected Writings, vol. 2, 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 217.

8 On the mediatization of religion, see *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

9 My "400 years" marker refers to *The 1619 Project*, which dates the beginning of slavery in the United States to August 1619, when the first ship carrying enslaved Africans arrived near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the English colony of Virginia. As we know, though, the pandemic of racism reaches back millennia and has always been a global phenomenon, even if it manifests itself differently in different contexts.

10 See *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), 141–143.

11 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Two: Autobiographical Writings*, vol. 2, ed. John W. Blassingame, John R. McKivigan, and Peter P. Hinks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 260–261.

12 *Ibid.*, 28.

13 On this point, see Sarah Lewis, "Vision & Justice," in *Vision & Justice: A Civic Curriculum*, ed. Sarah Lewis (New York: Aperture, 2019), 7.

14 Frederick Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," in John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 129–130.

15 In his 1854 speech "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," Douglass notes that representations of black people often present them "with features distorted, lips exaggerated, forehead depressed," and "the whole expression of the countenance [is] made to harmonize with the popular idea of negro imbecility and degradation." See *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 290.

16 Laura Wexler, "A More Perfect Likeness: Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation," in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 37.

17 Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 127.

18 *Ibid.*, 131.

19 Kass Banning and Warren Crichlow, "A Grand Panorama: Isaac Julien, Frederick Douglass, and *Lessons of the Hour*," *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 4

- (2020), 19. The quote from Douglass that closes this passage is from his “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” speech. See *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 197.
- 20 Banning and Crichlow, “A Grand Panorama,” 20.
- 21 Frederick Douglass, “Lessons of the Hour,” in *ibid.*, 751–752.
- 22 The idea of viewing the project as a history lesson comes from this classroom setting, but it is also wonderfully elaborated in Shawn Michelle Smith’s “Photographic Reenactments: Carrie Mae Weems’s *Constructing History*,” in her *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 133–151.
- 23 The image is reproduced in Stephen Shames and Bobby Seale, *Power to the People: The World of the Black Panthers* (New York: Abrams, 2016), 98–99. That Shames was appointed the Black Panther Party’s official photographer by Seale points to the party’s understanding of the importance of photography to its efforts to visualize itself into existence. For a discussion of what Leigh Raiford calls its “insurgent visibility,” see “Attacked by First Sight,” in Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 129–208.
- 24 Beyond simply reversing the students from front to back—in the movement between Shames’s photograph and hers—Weems composes her class with a more racially diverse and even international student body, something we learn from the video that accompanies the photographic part of the project, and something that perhaps accounts for the three globes in the classroom photograph.
- 25 Smith, “Photographic Reenactments,” 137.
- 26 Werner Hamacher, “Messianic Not,” trans. Catherine Diehl, in *Messianic Thought Outside Theology*, ed. Anna Glazova and Paul North (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 225.
- 27 Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020.
- 28 Odysseus Elysis, *Axion Esti*, trans. Edmund Keeley (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 3.