

Apparatus Projects

Daniel Hojnacki and Kioto Aoki

Stay this way, facing the light

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1.

Memory and the photographic have always been inexorably tied to one another's destinies, but what photography's early practitioners often failed to engage with was the task of producing an image whose surface functioned to describe different degrees of remembrance. I am not talking about producing documents to attest to a past cultural or social fact, but rather a subjective form of memory and its varying degrees of decay.

Instead, this task was largely left (at least during the 19th and early 20th century) to writers. From Proust to Duras, novelists were able to create gauzy and impressionistic hazes of memory, forgetfulness and the frustrations of desiring something so intimate to ourselves, but so hopelessly out of reach. Memory, and what Henri Cartier-Bresson dubbed "the decisive moment" are frequently determined by split second differences, never a determined *look*, but rather a passing glance.

2.

Derived from the old French *glacier* meaning to slip or slide, *glance* is itself rooted in the Latin *glaciāre*: to freeze. On an etymological level, we can trace *glance* through to its origin and see how its evolution mimics the progress of memory - first as something fixed and solid, then in action - slipping and unstable. Finally, it becomes something brief, passing and indeterminate. Unsurprisingly, however; photographs tend to progress anachronistically, against the slipperiness of *glacier* and towards the fixity offered by a word like *glaciare* - a fixity offered by past. *Glaciāre* is also the root of *glacier*, an object whose own pace is decidedly opposite that of a glance (glacial pacing) but is capable of storing and preserving things long forgotten just as well as a photograph - heat and light damage both as well. ¹

However, such a fixity is based solely on a subject's position in relation to the object fixed in memory or in this case, silver. Like black ice, the reader of an image may not see the hazard for slippage and collapse unless the light hits the surface just right. The solidity of a thing - be it memory or an image of one - comes with its own hazards.

3.

¹ We all know what climate change is doing to glaciers, but what will it do to photographs? After all, aren't pictures most always undertaking some form of preservation? Should someone or something discover documents of a disappeared humanity's past a photograph would do far better than a book. To decode a book, one would need to know the language, to decode a picture one need only to see.

Apparatus Projects

On an elemental level we could define the photograph as a form of what media scholar John Durham Peters calls “water media”², something inclined to help us commune with or navigate fields and terrains which otherwise would be inaccessible. Peters, uses the examples of ships creating an artificial earth to cross a hostile ocean, but photography frequently allows for us to navigate the equally treacherous sea of memory. “We make signs that speak in our absence, and we are immersed in the leavings of those who’ve gone before.”³

Perhaps though, it was Jeff Wall who made one of the earliest arguments to consider photography as a form of water-based media in his 1989 essay, *Photography and Liquid Intelligence*. In it, Wall outlines the ways in which water has influenced the media on an intellectual and material level set against the backdrop of digital imaging’s proliferation to a broader public at the end of the 20th century. “...the echo of water in photography evokes its prehistory.”⁴ Here, Wall echoes the ideology of a photograph possessing a “deep time”, before it became a buzz word. While Wall isn’t necessarily lamenting the change from the darkroom’s water-based operations to the more minerally inclined sensibilities of the screen, there is certainly a degree of nostalgia present in the writing. From the vaporous and decentralized nature of the cloud, to the “flood” or “sea” of images we navigate on a daily basis to “freezing a moment” the language of water is still deeply embedded into photographic imagination.

4.

Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amour*, is a work of vision, memory and the uncertainty inherent in each. Driven by shifting perspectives and a lack of proper character names (only The Traveler, The Man who Walks and The Woman) problematize any clear idea of who is speaking, seeing, or remembering. The unremitting twists offered by such techniques leaves a foundation of memories and desires that are not quite specific to any one person, but are rather passed around and exchanged, permeating the novel’s atmosphere like the light. *L’Amour*’s drama triangulates between the three characters, their cryptic statements to one another, and the churning atmospheric conditions within the indiscernible borders of a place called S. Thala.

In *L’Amour*, water is essential to the creation of an image with the opening paragraph reading: “A man. Standing, watching: the beach, the sea. The sea is calm, flat; season indefinite, moment lingering.”⁵ Water and photography’s more commonly considered progenitor – light – find themselves compared, complementing, coalescing, and contrasting one another throughout the novella’s duration. “Somewhere on the beach, to the right of the one who watches, a movement of light: a pool empties, a spring, a stream, many-mouthed streams, feeding the abyss of salt.”⁶ or “Far off, the sea, like the sky, already oxidized by the shadowy light.”⁷

² John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

³ Ibid. 91

⁴ Jeff Wall, *Photography and Liquid Intelligence* (1989).

⁵ Marguerite Duras, Kazim Ali, and Libby Murphy, *L’amour* (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2013), 1.

⁶ Ibid. 3

⁷ Ibid. 4

5.

It isn't unusual for light to be similarly characterized to water. Words like "shimmer", "sparkle", and "pool" are regularly associated with each form of firmament. Both mediums are vast and shifting entities, necessary for human life; yet, in the right moments can create spectacles of dramatic awe, chaos, or quiet. Duras, well aware of the linguistic affinity between the two further develops the relationship between the aqueous and ecstatic in moments such as the following passage:

- The light has frozen.

His tone expresses violent hope.

Light frozen, shining.

They look all around them at the flood of light, shining.⁸

The construction of such a scene not only creates moments potent with a fervor for light that edge on the ecclesiastic but are also composed of a pictorial staccato. Each line reads like the click of a shutter before the moving onto the next picture in a combination of the optical and sublimely organic, or what Wall called the "dry" (the optical and apparatus driven) and "wet" (the unpredictable, organic, and liquid) parts of photographic process.

Light and water are largely illegible elements, instead of cutting their own figure in our vision it tends to be against their ground in which others come into relief. So, what happens when images and memories become equally unpredictable, or legible only from a certain vantage point?

Throughout the course of this exhibition Hojnacki and Aoki's work offers a set of glimpses into moments that eschew exposition while still whispering remote threads of a narrative. Where Duras's novel complicates the perspective of who is speaking, who is being spoken to and who might be incidentally overhearing through a repeated choreography of movement

(He moves.

He goes toward the balcony, turns, looks around again intently. Comes back. Walks back in front of the traveler seated in the shadow half-light, does not see him anymore, sees only the room.⁹)

Hojnacki and Aoki have developed their own dance where the viewer's own bodily position determines their relationship to the image and its legibility. Like black ice, Hojnacki's black on black images of flowers, reveal themselves only through careful perambulation against the image surface. Lower to the floor, Aoki's nightlight mounted with a black and white negative of a chandelier (*when walking, night is often light*) sputters and vanishes, periodically triggered by a UV light sensor at the bottom, the device

⁸ Ibid. 9

⁹ Marguerite Duras, Kazim Ali, and Libby Murphy, *L'amour* (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2013), 45

Apparatus Projects

responds to the shadows of nearby bodies allowing itself to brighten. The light flickers like candle fire, or someone struggling for breath.

The contingency of where the light is, comes from, and who experiences its consequences fill the images of *Stay this Way, Facing the Light*. Upon entering the space, the you are greeted by Hojnacki's photograph of a moonflower (*ipomoea alba*) (*Moon Flowers*) - a nocturnally blooming variety of the morning glory - right at the edge of the gallery's entrance. Once inside the dining room, the same image greets you once more, this time placed above a radiator and altered through a process known as solarization; wherein light is introduced in the darkroom during the development process before the photograph is fixed.

What might it mean to introduce light at an inopportune moment? As a regulatory agent, light both is the creative and destructive force for photographs. Wall's assessment of water could be just as well attested to light when he said: "... it has to be controlled exactly and cannot be permitted to spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it in the process, or the picture is ruined."¹⁰ Likewise, Light is also that which regulates our circadian rhythms, and the same rhythms that dictate the moonflower's bloom, introduce light at the wrong time and the bloom will not occur.

The film *Insomnia* (1997), explores what happens when everything is under the illumination's incriminating rays. A detective (Stellan Skarsgard) and his partner who is entering the early stages of dementia (Sverre Anker Ousdal) are sent to investigate a grisly murder in a town located in the Norwegian Arctic Circle that experiences twenty-four hours of daylight during the summer. Throughout the film, Skarsgard's inability to sleep causes him to experience hypnagogic hallucinations. Unable to between distinguish direct experience, dreams or memory, his sleeplessness culminates in the accidental shooting of his partner, which he proceeds to cover up under mounting lies, guilt, and sleeplessness throughout the film, while using photographs to help him solve the murder.

Even with the best effort to preserve our memories light is unpredictable and can either spell augmentation or destruction should any extra light be "shed" upon them. Like light, photographs and moonflowers memory is prone to fade, wash out (again, water language), black out, wilt, bloom, and expose that which we could not have hoped to see before.

6.

Hojnacki and Aoki's images ebb and flow through the space. They peak and crest like the waves - in the case of Aoki's images, actual waves - or the gentle breath of a lover sleeping beside you. Our inability to see a clear subject, form or identifiable figure in the many of these works builds a deafening absence hinting at the disruption of our own natural rhythms when confronted with grief and loss.

¹⁰ Jeff Wall, *Photography and Liquid Intelligence* (1989).

From images of loved ones to hands extended towards an empty firmament, a desire for that which is absent permeates Aoki and Hojnacki's respective practices. Photography has always been in bed with the romantics, but true grief and desire are more complex than the absence they are frequently defined by. The respiratory rhythm of Aoki's nightlight placed nearby one of Hojnacki's gritty xeroxesque images almost gives the feeling of being in the same room when it was made. Photography's relationship to death is well outlined by Nabokov's obsessive photographer-cum-executioner in *Invitation to a Beheading* to Barthes off-handed admission that the essence of photography is death.¹¹ More so, if we take into consideration the way in which Barthes appraises the finger as being the key organ of the photographer, rather than the eye.¹²

7.

The passing light is the earliest indicator our species had for time, and its productive capacity in making photography the time storing technique *par excellence* is no coincidence. In a photograph, memory is complicated by its immediate access and externalization or as Jean-Luc Nancy has said of the image: "It is a real presence because it is a contagious presence, participating and participated, communicating and communicated in the distinction of its intimacy."¹³

Much like the somnambulant characters whose perceptions and memories flow freely across one another in *L'Amour* so to do our most intimate moments in a photograph. What Barthes called the *punctum* of an image - the most subjective part that may prick one person but not the next - is honed and modified by Hojnacki and Aoki's deliberate obfuscational tactics. Their images create memories, visions, and desires that are trepidatious, uncertain, and atmospheric diffusing the cryptic desires embedded in the photographs across the gallery.

The photographs in this exhibition, much like the ocean and light are tempestuous grounds that freeze, change, and sometimes vanish while having just been in our sight a moment prior. Above all though, they are a plea for some sort of intimacy to be sought, but maybe never found amongst their communing surfaces.

8.

The traveler watches: her eyes, indeed, are opening more and more, the lids
separating, and in a movement so slow it is nearly indiscernible, her whole body follows
her eyes, turning toward the growing light.
Stay this way, facing the light.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 15.

¹² Leading with our hands is an act of desire, and to lead your eye with your finger is to calibrate desire on that which you would like to stay. Like the executioner, every shutter click could easily be the falling of an axe, pulling of a lever, or discharge of a firearm. It is called shooting for a reason.

¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009), 12.

Apparatus Projects

The traveler asks:

-She sees?

You Hear: - No, she doesn't see anything.

In the night of S. Thala, the sirens wail. The sea swells,
loses its color the sky.

You hear:

-She'll stay just like that until light dawns.

They are silent. The light grows imperceptibly, its movement so slow. Like the
separation of sand and water.

The light rises, opens, illuminating the growing space.

The fire fades, like the sky, the sea.

The traveler asks:

-What will happen when the light reaches us?

You hear:

-For an instant it will blind her. Then she will start to see me
again. Start to distinguish the sand from the sea, then the sea from the light, then
her body from my body. Then she will separate the cold from the night and give it
to me. Only then will she hear the sound, you know...? of God...? that thing...?

They are silent. They watch the dawning light.¹⁴

¹⁴ Marguerite Duras, Kazim Ali, and Libby Murphy, *L'amour* (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2013), 97, 98.

Apparatus Projects