



LAY FLAT

01: REMAIN IN LIGHT

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# THE CRISIS OF EXPERIENCE

*Eric William Carroll*

Photography has been the subject of a number of intellectual studies, papers, and books. Philosopher/historian Walter Benjamin can be said to have initiated the intellectual discourse on photography with his oft-cited essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," written in 1936. Since then, photography has been analyzed in a number of popular texts, with authors such as Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Vilém Flusser writing entire books on the subject. Because of its ubiquitous nature in the lives of both western and eastern societies, photography is often studied for its cultural implications, which are many and multi-faceted. Like others, I am interested in these cultural effects, but I also find photography's economical and psychological characteristics worthy of serious discourse.

My ideas regarding photography are the result of three general avenues. As an intellectual, I have had the chance to study a number of texts by the authors mentioned above, as well as more current takes on photography by writers such as Sylviane Agacinski, Mary Ann Doane and Geoffrey Batchen. As a professional photographer, I have been able to understand photography as a commercial and creative industry, becoming

familiar with its technological and economical history. Lastly, as a member of your average American family, I have tried to pay special attention to the role photography plays in the lives of those around me who aren't philosophers of photography or professionals of the trade.

The reason I took photography as my subject, like many before me, is because of the overall uneasiness I feel towards the medium, almost a sort of crisis. Ross McElwee sums up this crisis best in his 1993 film *Time Indefinite*. While filming his newborn son, McElwee soberly acknowledges that one cannot both experience and document something at the same time. This crisis, of having to choose either experience or the document of it, has been one that surfaces throughout my life and my art. As a photographer, do I 'experience' less because I 'document' more? Is experience more valuable than documentation? And how do we understand the experience of making documents?

One problem that McElwee's statement and the following questions create is the supposed binary relationship of experience and documentation—as if one is the antithesis of the other. McElwee, like many others, posits experience without a camera as being unmediated and pure. The French theorist Jacques Derrida writes at length regarding this myth of pure experience, or presence. He has noted the privileging of pure experience and language over 'imitations' such as writing and photography throughout history. As for myself, while I don't agree with the extreme binary opposition between photography and life, I do find them existing on a spectrum of sorts.

Susan Stewart uses the quotation in an analogy that I find useful in my understanding of photography in relation to the world. Stewart understands the quotation's existence as both privileging the origin (by paying respect to its sources) while at the same time maintaining its own authenticity (by being open to inter-

[1] Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (London: Duke University Press, 1993), 19.

[2] Experience seems to be the most neutral term to describe the world—the 'real' or any reference to 'purity' only seems to reinforce the privileging of origin that I'm trying to wrestle with.

[3] Sylviane Agacinski, Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 91.

[4] Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 91.

pretation and losing its context). [1] If we substitute 'the world' or our lived experience for Stewart's text, we can see the photograph operating much like a quotation from life. A photograph pays tribute to its original source; the fact that the 'this' pictured in a photograph is believed to have actually happened at one point in history, and also that the act of photography usually deems something important or worthy of being photographed. But it also attains a life of its own, as photographs often become the memory and are collected, framed, bought and sold as actual objects in the world. I understand the photograph as both a fragmentary interpretation of the real (through the physical operations of cause and effect it maintains some sort of truth value), as well as being a participant in what it supposedly captures: 'experience.' [2] While the act of photography does not destroy experience, I will argue that it always *changes* it.

Sylviane Agacinski writes, "...the amateur photographer risks depriving himself of any present. In fact, it is risky to sacrifice present experience or subjective memory to recordings because—apart from being different in nature—the material memory is much less sure than we would believe it to be." [3] While devaluation of the present is awfully close to McElwee's non-experience, I still partially agree with Agacinski's mistrust of the medium as a 'material memory'. Roland Barthes even argues against photography's function as an external memory: "Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory, but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory." [4] Barthes also understands photography's ability to record everything in the frame with the same amount of detail and accuracy—resulting in an overwhelming amount of archived information.

Mary Ann Doane notes how time, through photographic and cinematic technologies, has become atomized.

This in turn allows for a more rapid consumption/ experience of time, while simultaneously preserving minute details—what Doane refers to as the contingent.

[5] As a result, the photographic archive falls back onto itself in a great irony—*everything* is being saved (whereas previously the archive was a place for things of value/worth) and yet our experience of time is so fast we rarely have a chance to revisit our recordings. It is the great catch-22 of photographic technologies. We spend time and money archiving our lives, only to find out that either we don't have time to revisit them, or the technology we saved them on has become obsolete. It is a bittersweet irony that photography's supposedly essential drive is to preserve, when in fact the technology that is driving photography is producing material just as ephemeral as the moments it claims to record.

The 'crisis' here that Barthes, Doane, Stewart, and to some extent, myself, are trying to argue, is that a photographer, in choosing to document an event rather than participate in it without a camera, is trading her subjective memory of the experience for a photographic/material one. The problems arise when the photographer attempts to revisit the experience, but is only left with a longing nostalgia for one of several reasons: A) The tempo of our lives has increased to such a speed that one cannot spare time to revisit the documents, so they sit in a box in the attic B) The photographs in the box will most likely fade and the memory cards that the images are stored on will become obsolete in a matter of years and C) If time is found and the images are *still* viewable, re-visitation of the photographs recall only the absence of the 'original' moment—its unrepeatability—of which the image is only a quotation.

[5] Mary Ann Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 31.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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DARIUS HIMES (b.1970) loves photography and books and photography books. He founded Radius Books with three colleagues in 2007. Before that, he was the editor of the Photo-eye Booklist. He is happy to have written for such journals as Aperture, Blind Spot, Bookforum, BOMB, and now, Lay Flat. Darius likes to hear what people think about the world, and considers himself an intractable optimist.  
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