

Vanishing Portraits: Seeing Time

Imagine if Victor Hugo had come upon photographs of the dead as he clambered over the ruins of the Rhine valley, seeking to “see the past.” This was a romantic trope of travel literature, associated with an esthetic of the picturesque, whose value radically shifted with the invention of photography. Today, small rural graveyards in southern France, enclosed by stone walls built into diminutive romanesque churches, are fast becoming modern ruins for the contemporary traveler; the little photographs one finds there pop out at you like wildflowers. Here, we sense, where photographic images explicitly assume a public memorial function, photography can reveal something of itself.

The documentary value of these images depends upon the celebrated *ça a été* Barthes theorized: the referential image is authentic because a physical trace of the living presence of the person was transmitted through a chemistry of light. The referent adheres to the photograph. We can study these images, analyze the cultural codes they reveal. They open onto History and introduce us to the scene of the “impossible science of the absolutely singular” (Barthes).

But this exhibit also lets photography appear. It presents photographic portraits of photographic portraits, catching photography in the act of performing its commemorative function. Fixed in glass or porcelain, photographs are referents here, things attached to stone monuments with staples and screws, sometimes chipped or cracked into pieces. In the meta-portraits of this exhibit the two levels of reference—pictures of people and pictures of photographs—overlap. What is the impact of this photographic doubling on the commemorative function? Does the authenticity of the trace still prevail in the trace of a trace (the questions become all the more challenging when, as here, we have a digital recording of an analogue trace)?

The eyes of these photographs appear to return our gaze (sometimes they seem to reach out and capture it, as if photographing us from some spectral horizon). Of course the gaze that appears to address us was not meant for us. Because we stand in the place of the camera we intercept a gaze that belongs to the time of the pose. But what is this time? What is doubled here is not just the photographic object (the Portrait) but also the photographic act. The camera has acted twice—once when the subject was living and once after his or her death. As viewers, we find ourselves situated at two distinct moments in time simultaneously, two moments that exist in uneasy relation to a third: the event of the person’s death.

The interval between the two moments of time we experience cannot be measured. It does not align with available dates concerning the birth and death of the person. We know nothing of the instant when the first portrait was taken (an indeterminate moment within the finite frame of a lifetime) and nothing of the moment when a certain familial gaze (Hirsch) selected this portrait to stand permanently in the place of the person. Nor do we have knowledge of the interval that occurred between the time the initial portrait was taken and the time of the event that precipitated its subsequent transformation into the commemorative image that holds our attention.

One of the mysteries of Stephen Sharnoff’s photographs is the relation between the two moments that, as viewers, we yoke together as we reenact (or reactivate) the gazes involved in the production of these overlapping portraits. What happens in between? This is precisely what this work lets us see. When we look at these photographs we see time—the “catastrophe” of time, as Barthes would say (repeating Georges Bataille).

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