

We have never been (post)modern: Photography's late encounters with film

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The discussions on the relationship between photography and film have for a long time been centred on stillness and duration. The two oldest of the so-called new media seemed settled in binary oppositions, as it was either the photograph's death portrait or the motion picture's vital progression. Ice or fire, as Peter Wollen aptly proclaimed.[1] At some point it became apparent that these distinct or even opposing visual forms tend to mingle and intertwine. Following the modern period characterised by the strife to media specificity, more hybrid forms became dominant. According to this account, postmodernism replaced rigid media divisions with hybridisation, multi-voicedness, and openness to difference. Yet soon enough it became clear that all-present media hybrids have not erased the questions of media specificity.[2] Quite to the contrary, the ever new possibilities of blurring the boundaries between photography and film urged a renewed interest in their singular potentialities. Two exhibitions happening almost simultaneously in Belgium – the group show *Still Point of the Turning World* in Antwerp's Fotomuseum and Omer Fast's *Appendix* in STUK Leuven – allow us to revisit that debate. If understood as a hybridisation coming after a specificity overdrive, (post)modernity perhaps never even happened.

The group exhibition in Antwerp's museum of photography manifestly takes stillness as its focal point, not so much in order to revive the opposition between the still photograph and the moving image as to counter the preoccupation with speed in the world at large. And it does this effectively by imposing the slowness and uneventfulness of the photofilmic's expanded field.[3] The exhibited works range from single or sequenced photographs, through video and (short) film, to complex audiovisual installations. What

unites them is the persistent foregrounding of the medium, which is interrogated from within and by a reference to what is conventionally seen as non-filmic or non-photographic. The resulting constellation of artworks is often engaging and intelligent, but at a certain point also wearisome in its penchant for formal gimmicks. More importantly, the exhibition's overt promise of peace and calm beauty found in the decelerated views of the world is misleading. Gradually, it becomes apparent that the most compelling aspect of the show lies in what the selection and arrangement of artworks effectively obfuscates from view.

One of the dominant visual strategies in the show is photographic sequence. In theoretical accounts, the sequence is often seen as a strategy of breaking the singleness of the photograph and introducing a narrative aspect. Hardly any of the displayed works, however, uses it with the aim of conveying a straightforward narrative. Even when the photographs show consecutive moments, the situation or scene registered is too insignificant for a narrative to crystallise. In Guido Guidi's *Preganziol* (1983), a sunlit room's slightly shifting shadows mark the passing of time. But this is not the methodical visualisation of night turning into day and then back into night, as in the well-known series by Jan Dibbets. Rather, the less systematic, serendipitous states and processes are put to the fore.

A similar approach can be seen in the work by Jeff Wall and Paul Graham, but their well-rehearsed conceptual manoeuvres of uneventful series fail to grab one's attention. More convincing than the somewhat repetitive insistence on triviality is photographic sequence based on shifting space rather than time. This latter strategy is visible in the work by Duane Michals and David Claerbout. *Things are Queer* (1972) by Duane Michals begins with a photographed small-scale model of a bathroom, which is then re-photographed with oversized bare legs standing in the middle of the suddenly miniature-seeming space. The following images gradually show a larger field of view. The giant man in a tiny bathroom is revealed to be a picture in a book. Enlarged even more, this also appears to be a picture within a picture, which in turn emerges on the wall of the bathroom seen in the very first photo. In this way, the last image returns to the beginning of a Droste-effect loop. The series is often described as a narrative but it does not contain any story in the strict sense. There is no movement or temporality either. While this is already a classic work of the 1970s, it enters into a dialogue – thanks to this exhibition – with a more recent installation by David Claerbout. *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008), which takes centre-stage in the show, is a

projected sequence of still black-and-white images, accompanied by a musical soundtrack. The images show a small football field on the roof of a building in a maritime city. A group of boys and men pass time playing or watching the game. Seagulls, which are even more numerous than people, are seen mid-flight above the sun-lit houses. Large views of the scene are followed by portraits of both people and the birds. But these are not simply close-ups of one and the same image. Rather, it is as if the photographer had the possibility of capturing one single moment from infinitely many points of view. This approach could be seen as a clever elaboration of the bullet-time effect. For instance, the figure of a boy standing on the field is seen from afar, to then appear from a side and from the rear on subsequent pictures. Similar to Michals's sequence, no temporal change occurs between the images. Staged and composed from various discrete elements, this sequence skilfully conceals its laborious construction. At the same time, it persuasively creates a semblance of a narrative by gradually shifting the spatial vectors of the images.



Fig. 1: David Claerbout. *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment*, 2008. Single channel video projection, black & white, stereo audio. 37 min loop. Courtesy the artist.

Quite a different sequencing principle guides Ana Torfs' installation. *Du mentir-faux* (2000) consists of an analog slide projection of photographs and bits

of written transcripts from Joan of Arc's trial. The images are minimal portraits of one and the same woman. Expressing sadness or reverie, they also eschew narrativity. But their focus on the face calls forth the aesthetics of photo-romans in which the story is carried by the text while images essentially convey emotions of the principal characters. Moreover, the close-up framing of the woman's face also triggers recollections from what Victor Burgin called 'the remembered film'.^[4] Or, perhaps it should be said 'films' in plural, as it is not entirely certain if Ana Torfs' portraits recall the main character from Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), or rather her double in Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962). In a key scene, Godard's heroine Nana watches Dreyer's screen personification of Joan of Arc and just like her silently sheds tears. The two films' prolonged scenes showing the emotional pain on the faces of young women are turned into an eternal present in Torfs' photographs. The title's neologism 'fake lies', a darkly humorous twist on Louis Aragon's 'true lies', seems to name that slightly too lengthy drama of the filmic adaptation. The historical figure of the female warrior remains invisible and inaccessible in these multiplying fictional renditions.



Fig. 2: Ana Torfs, *Du mentir-faux*, installation view, Fotomuseum, Winterthur, 2007. © photo: Ana Torfs.

Cinema by other means appears in many other guises in the show. The banality of the everyday, which seemed exhausted in some photographic works, is put to a better use in John Smith's film *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976). The

formula is simple: footage of a nondescript street scene in England is supplied with a director's voice-over. An insistent and slightly arrogant male voice commands people to perform small and simple gestures such as cross the street or wave a hand. His sometimes absurdly complicated instructions are heard just before a passer-by appears in the frame. Any otherwise insignificant and accidental gesture or movement look as if they were deliberate and carefully rehearsed. A filmic scenario is thus imposed on an uneventful and intrinsically observational video. The effect is comic but also revealing of how much the voice-over can redirect the reception of the image.

As a way of forgetting film, other artists featured in the show reach to pre-cinematic experiments with photographic sequence. One of the works inspired by Edward Muybridge's moving horse studies is Michiel Van Bakel's *Equestrian* (2003). The video comprises many short clips registered by multiple cameras arranged in a circle around a police mounted horse. Initially flickering and disorienting due to a rapid succession of sequences, the video arrives at a near stand-still towards the end. Multiple cameras devised by Muybridge in order to register the tiniest phases in the horse's movement are here transposed onto a more recent and disquieting context. The multiple cameras used by Van Bakel imitate not the scientific gaze of the nineteenth-century predecessor but rather the omnipresent surveillance. Even when slowed down, the effect of the video is far from the calm and quiescent contemplation promised at the entrance to the exhibition.

The exhibition's programmatic insistence on slowing down and doing away with narrative is perhaps most apparent in the (barely) moving images. At the beginning of the show, the early film by the Lumière brothers shows a group of photographers at an outdoor meeting. Various gentlemen with hats disembark from a boat. They are observed entering and leaving the frame rather indifferently, except for one photographer who pauses briefly, just long enough to aim his camera towards the cinematic apparatus operated by Louis Lumière. It is a telling sign not only of what scholars recognised as the remediation of the older medium within the newer one, but also, more importantly, of the mutual interest photographers and filmmakers have demonstrated in their respective media ever since.

This shared curiosity is evident in works which employ moving image in such a way as to approach the photographic stillness. This effect appears in videos by Mark Lewis, Raqs Media Collective, and Mark Neville, as well as in Lisa Oppenheim's two-screen installation. *Above and Below the Minhocão* (2014) was shot by Mark Lewis from the air. The camera roams above the elevated

highway that runs through the city of Sao Paolo. The otherwise busy road is here seen on Sunday, when it is car-free and open to pedestrians. Nothing really happens in the video. Similar to the Lumière film, passers-by enter and leave the frame, sometimes pausing for a while to chat or just gaze at the cityscape. Some people linger just a little too long in front of the elevated camera, making one doubt if they are really just going about their normal lives. As a matter of fact, Lewis employs a limited number of extras in his otherwise observational videos.

In *Re-Run* (2013) by Raqs Media Collective change is even less perceptible; it is a tableau-vivant staging Henri Cartier-Bresson's photograph *Shanghai* (1948-49, also in the exhibition). The densely-populated frame shows people queueing at the closed doors of a bank. They stand so close to each other that they are forced to embrace each other in order to stay in the line. At another location in the exhibition, Mark Neville's film *Bolan Market* (2011) is slowed down and soundless, turning the moving image into a contemplative registration of a street scene in a British-controlled zone of Afghanistan. Filmed from an elevated position of a military vehicle, the image pans at a steady speed through the somewhat disoriented faces of the merchants and their clients. Lisa Oppenheim's two-channel video is more abstract as it shows only clouds in various forms and lighting. Sometimes the image is black-and-white, sometimes it is polarised or entirely reversed as in a negative. These videos relate to each other in their insistence on stillness verging on immobility. Small changes in the image only strengthen their slowness and uneventfulness. Praised as an entry point to contemplation and slowing down of the hectic speed of the everyday world, these works might, however, reveal themselves to be something quite different.

Calmness, voluptuousness, and luxury is far away from the realities represented in these works. Consider the installation by Raqs Media Collective. It is a re-enactment of the photograph made by Cartier-Bresson in Shanghai as part of his reportage for *Life* magazine. The photograph conveyed the panic of the population at the looming effects of the financial crisis. The New Delhi-based art collective restaged this dramatic moment from 1948 China shortly after the global economic collapse of 2008. Their work is a video in which extras try to remain still in the poses captured by Cartier-Bresson. The contemplative effect of the stilled action perceived in the tableau vivant has in fact little in common with tranquillity. This is even truer in the case of Mark Neville's video. Projected at a slower pace, the image may at first sight

convey serenity and detachment. The caption insists that some of the merchants smile or greet the camera operator. Yet what strikes in the images is the opposite – many of the gazes thrown at the filming apparatus are filled with anxiety and anger. Some of these people can probably hardly distinguish if what is aimed at them is a camera or a weapon. The shadow thrown by the armoured vehicle reveals that there is a gun turret at the top. The filmmaker appears here as a predator rather than a peaceful observer. The slowness and serenity achieved through the editing of the video are more of a smoke-screen concealing ghastly realities. What becomes clear in this constellation of art works is that each visual component – a photograph, a video, a sequence, or an installation – asserts its own network of meanings and visual strategies which cannot be left out. These pictures do not so much provide an alternative to the hectic world outside of the gallery but rather insistently point back to that world in many complex ways.

An important intervention in this discussion comes from the smaller but particularly relevant solo show Appendix by Omer Fast. The Israeli-born and Berlin-based artist shows a new 3D installation *August* combined with the 2008 *Looking Pretty for God (After G.W.)*. The latter video is presented in a rather mysterious, site-specific reconstruction of a family apartment. Cardboard boxes, garbage bags, and untidy beds hint at an ordinary and intimate space which is now utterly empty. The themes woven into *Looking Pretty for God* are at an intersection of photography, death, staging, and visibility. A series of off-screen interviews with morticians are combined with seemingly unrelated images from a photo shooting session involving children in winter clothes. The professional funeral directors describe their efforts to make the last appearance of a deceased person as dignified and memorable as possible. Simultaneously, the images show children being beautified for an advertising campaign. The overabundant make-up and photogenic arrangements of the young kids find uncanny echoes in the descriptions of display techniques designed specifically for dead people.

August, on the other hand, is a story of the late years of August Sander, the celebrated German photographer who spent most of his life working on a comprehensive series showing German people in the 20th century. Considered an impartial visual historian of his own time, Sander mastered a consistent, uniform portrait format. Even the gaze of his sitters is invariably cool, distanced, and intensely fixated on the camera. In the period of National Socialism parts of Sander's extensive archive were confiscated and destroyed. He also lost his son and collaborator Erich, who was imprisoned by the Nazis

and died of untreated appendicitis. Yet, despite this loss, and despite his aversion towards fascist ideology, Sander portrayed several National Socialists with the same objective documentary style.[5] Omer Fast imagines Sander at the end of his days, nearly blind and haunted by the very ghosts of his sitters. The Nazi officer who came to his house to communicate his son's death is unflinching in his praise of the photographer's achievements. He requests a portrait which Sander executes in the same cool and distanced manner.



Fig. 3: Omer Fast, August, 2016 (video still). Courtesy of the artist.

Distance and interconnectedness are two crucial terms in this high-tech vision of the classic figure in analog photography. The cord, which was often used by Sander and his son to measure the focal plane of the camera, reappears in his late life – and late night – visions. This cord helped calculate the range of the camera and thus can be seen as an instrument of distancing. But it was also a material device connecting the photographer to his sitters. This double function of the cord is repeated in the arrangement of the photographer's apartment. Losing his eyesight, Sander moved between the vital spaces of the house by means of a system of cords stretched across the rooms. The tactile effect of the old man following the cords with his hand is enhanced in the three-dimensional rendition of the video. As has often been the case with Fast's work, documentary and fictional elements are seamlessly intertwined in the story. The photographer's blindness and, it can be assumed, also the cords connecting parts of his house are the 21st century artist's invention. They visualise something that was not there. But the cords spanning what must have otherwise been a very familiar space of the old house become a

powerful metaphor of artistic endeavour. Linking the modern photographer to the high-tech present, Omer Fast's fake lies make something crucial visible.



Fig. 4: Omer Fast, August, 2016 (video still). Courtesy of the artist.

As August Sander gropes to his fraught past by way of materialising nightmares, the installation manages to turn linear time into a complex web of cords extending across space. Rather than seeing this work in terms of post-modern hybridisation, it might be more relevant to recuperate the idea of lateness. Late style, understood as resisting timeliness, privileges returns and repetitions. Edward Said enigmatically noted that lateness has to do with the conversion of time into space.[6] Late encounters of photography and film manifest themselves in their doubling of each other as a form of exile from their own contemporaneity.[7] The lateness of photography can here be understood as the mining of always unresolved pasts. Not in search of beauty, but rather in order to face ghosts past and present. In that process, media and technologies of vision prove to be always already entangled in networks of politics, apparatuses, and ways of seeing.

Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans (Free University of Brussels)

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Notes

- [1] Wollen 1984; Metz 1985.
- [2] Baetens & Peeters 2007.
- [3] The notion of the photofilmic has recently been explored in Cohen & Streitberger 2016.
- [4] Burgin 2004.
- [5] For a recent discussion of Sander's possible political engagement see Washton Long 2013.
- [6] Said 2017, p. ix.
- [7] Said speaks of lateness as an exile from the present (Said 2017, p. 10).