Waltzing in Now-time:
the unlikely event of a correspondence between
Barthes, Benjamin, Proust and my mother

by

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Abstract.

Waltzing in Now-time is an interrogation of my motives as digital artist and as collector of old photographs. Within this I situate my art practice as corresponding to certain writings on technology by Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin and Marcel Proust. I begin by looking at Barthes's notion of the *necessarily real* aspect of photography, which emphasizes that the photographic subject must have *existed* at the moment of exposure. It is this existence that allows the viewer to make a connection with certain photographs. Thinking about the photograph as a trace of the original subject and not just a technological reproduction, I draw a connection to Benjamin's concept of the *aura*, looking past the standard interpretations of this phenomenon. Linking Benjamin's aura to his concept of *now-time*, I propose a valuable coming together of a past with a present, based on the auratic experience of time through photography.

Concentrating on the *intersubjective* experience of the aura in photography, I look at two passages from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in order to explore the different possibilities for technologically mediated perception. The *intersubjective* relationship I speak of is not dependent on the viewer having a personal history with the photographic subject, but a personal investment in it at the time of viewing. Given this, I also explore the possibilities for *remembering* that result from interaction with anonymous old photographs.

keywords: Barthes, Benjamin, digital media, photography, Proust, memory, technology.

In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge exists only in lightning flashes. The text is the thunder rolling long afterward.

Walter Benjamin, *N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, theory of Progress]*

To my mother, in memorium.

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Introduction: presenting presence.

I collect old photographs. For the past six years I have been slowly and steadily gathering these fragile traces. And throughout, I have been ordering them in groups: single women, pairs of women, groups of women, uncomfortable looking children, and odd images which affect me in ways I don't understand. These categories are not definitive, but a chronological sequencing that serves only as a reminder of my changing interests, my collecting patterns. Presently my search is for photographs with photo-chemical and age related blemishes that highlight the instability and impermanence of the whole process[1]. Imperfections remind me that the photographic object I hold in my hands has a past; traces contain the time that has elapsed since the pose in each particular image was so awkwardly and painfully held.

I am not interested in the personal, biographical history of any one of my photographs, and yet I am obsessed with the history that each presents. Can I say that my photographs have a history without questioning what that history is? Can I say that they create history in the captured, preserved moment? Can one image of a single, lost soul be historical: be of historical interest or use, in short, be a part of history? I cannot answer these questions here, but they do bring up another, which I am able to approach: What is it that these anonymous women (for they are almost all female) are saying? Choosing one, I assume that she once said something (or many things), and that they

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[1] I am speaking here about the photographic process, but am also referring to my collection. My groupings are not actually physical divisions, but are only virtual ones, and succumb to periodic reorganization depending on my memory or mood. I also knowingly speed the ongoing deterioration of the images in my care by regularly submitting them to the very bright light of a flatbed-scanner. In this respect, my passion kills as it seeks to (re)create through my art.

were compelling words of love, fulfillment, desire, and loneliness (*fig. 1*). To those who knew her, I am sure her image communicated something, if not directly, then still in a language that was her own. Whatever her voice, whatever she had to say for herself, she cannot utter it now. Can I even say that she exists? That she once stood, leaning against an ornate chair, I must believe, but is this the same *she* that I now see? This woman could not be speaking to me (could not have even imagined me), and yet, as I enter into a dialogue with her, she is as active as I. However, all that is possible for her is to engage in a conversation with me (or any viewer). Her image is in my hands, and it is I, as viewer, who develops the dialogue between us. Still, she has many things to say, but these are dependent on *my* understanding for their substance (and I understand so little about her identity, her history, her biography). This anonymous woman has been left with no life, and yet because her photograph survives this anonymity while perpetuating it, she is powerful. Her life, and its influence, comes through me.

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin states "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (1988, 254). I am not foregrounding History itself in my thesis, but its poor cousins memory and time (in photography). Taking my cue from Benjamin, I look to the familiar and the unimportant which is so often thought to be uninteresting. As Benjamin says: "I won't filch anything of value [...] Only the trivial, the trash--which I don't want to inventory, but simply allow to come into its own in the only way possible: by putting it to use[2]" (1989, 47). My anonymous photographs are not lost for

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[2] Benjamin says this regarding his *Arcades Project* and the process of literary montage he uses therein. Although this passage is specific to language, I feel that given his interest in the use and structure of

history *because* their histories have been lost. The loss of their specific histories enables me to 'find' new relationships to myself, to other viewers, to art, here and now: This is the power in their survival.

In my artwork (working *through* my art), I am in the process of engaging the old photographs of single women that I have in my collection. These women, single by virtue of being represented alone within the frame, are an enigma. They have the appeal of unescorted girls at their first prom. In this there is both a sadness (why are they alone, were they always so?), and a delight (that they are independent; perhaps planning to present this photograph to a secret lover). There is also something erotic about many of these images. It is not the women themselves, but the whole situation that I find erotic. The presence of the photographer, although unseen, is felt. It was the photographer that had the power to 'expose' these women to me, but they held only half of the power in those situations (in portrait studios the models are the clients). It is also the power I feel as anonymous viewer (unknown to all involved in those studio sittings) that brings up this feeling of eroticism. It is not, however, to every image that I feel an erotic attachment, but only to those where the woman is, perhaps, *open*. Barthes would probably refer to this as her *air*, and I will return to this in Chapter 1, but I am here trying to locate her outside, as well as inside the frame (where she is pictured). Her openness takes me beyond what is there to see, into a space of fantasy[3].

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images, it can also be read in relation to my use of found photographs.
[3]   Roland Barthes attaches Andre Bazin's cinematic term 'blind field' to photographs in which the person figured 'emerges' from the frame. He also uses this term to separate sexual images into the erotic, which have a 'blind field,' and the pornographic, which do not (55-59). I, however, feel that it is this 'blind field' that confers an eroticism on

And it is this erotic relationship that I play out in the images I make (using these woman who are open to appropriation), images which attempt to describe this connection, this desiring.

But there is something more that pulls at me, and if I am reticent to call it pity (as Roland Barthes does), it is for fear of being thought nostalgic (I do not yearn for their lives, I do not romanticize). It is not nostalgia that brings me to this compassion (this pity), but a maddening awareness that these women, locked in these many photographs, will stay unescorted for eternity. However, it is this very awareness which ends that eternity, changing the flow of time as I bring them forward into my existence, simply by an act of consideration. Pity is not immediate or impetuous, it requires distance, the space of thought. This does not mean that pitying, the act, is not powerful or dangerous (in the sense that it creates a precarious situation, a moment of tension that can be creative, or revolutionary in Benjamin's terms). Barthes's certainty that those he loves (in certain photographs) exist in a moribund cycle, forces him to entertain a quiet madness. But it is this madness that allows him to pass through time and space, taking hold of what is important from the past, bringing it forward to himself:

> I then noticed that there was a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know. [...] In the love stirred by Photography (by certain photographs), another music is heard, its name oddly old-fashioned: Pity. I collected as a last thought the images which had 'pricked' me [...] . In each of them, inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into

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certain images which are not attempting to be sexual at all. That in fact, it is my part in the creation of this space that is my power in this situation, and the basis of the eroticism of the image. See Jane Gallop's essay, "The Pleasure of the Phototext," for a more detailed account of Barthes's erotic relationship to photography.

> the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms
> what is dead, what is going to die [...] gone mad
> for Pity's sake (116-117).

Apart from all those which I have rescued from the indifference of others, I have also inherited a great many photographs that represent generations of my family's history. I choose not to use these in my art, and I don't count them as part of my collection (although, perhaps I am part of their's, added to the pile: daughter of, sister to, lovers with ..., what will end up scrawled on the back of my portrait?). There is too much I know, or imagine I know, about these people (my family), for me to try to re-create them in relation to myself.

I am more drawn to those anonymous women whom I happen upon by chance: the ones who float between memory and oblivion, from photo-album to grandchildren to estate sales to junk sellers to collector to collector. All names are lost, except those of the photo-studios, which are mechanically embossed and overpowering in their constant and unwanted reminder of the process -- magicians should leave no trace. These images, scattered in junkstores, are like so many gravestones dotting a cemetery, markers of what was once there, but now arranged for eternity, smiling, posed and still. They are ambiguous markers that bear witness to a life, but of what measure it is impossible for me to know. Like names and dates chiseled into marble (but not nearly as permanent), they refer to those women lying beneath the surface of the image. Although I must believe the referent existed at the moment of exposure, the image itself tells me so very little about those women.

In chapter 1 of what follows, I will be looking to Roland Barthes (specifically *Camera Lucida*), for his insight

into the personal nature of photography. I am dependent throughout this thesis on his explication of the various forms of *punctum*: particular, unintended details or factors that allow for, or create a powerful, personal interaction with certain photographs. They are, in Barthes's terms, "what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*" (55). As well, I am interested in the relationship between Barthes's *punctum* and Walter Benjamin's notion of the *aura*, which I see as having similar properties. Both involve a *subjective* viewing experience that prioritizes what is outside of the frame over that which has been framed. This creates a relationship that bridges the distance between viewer and object while maintaining a necessary separation. I am exploring the potential for an auratic experience of photography, by looking at some of Benjamin's writing on the aura and technology. It is my belief that, although technology has the potential to destroy the aura (as Benjamin explains in his "Work of Art" essay), it can also create a space for a positive auratic relationship with the photographic *other*, because of the bridge it provides. I can best explain the positive nature of this aura in relation to another of Benjamin's concepts, *now-time*: time which stops the eternal flow of history, time which is not linear but creates the present in close relation to a past moment (1988, 262-263). Technology can promote a contemplative distance from the everyday, and it can contribute to a connection of past to present.

I am seeking, in the whole of this thesis, to map out a relationship between the interests of Barthes, Benjamin, Marcel Proust, as they address questions of technology, and myself in my role as viewer of old photographs. As well, I am looking to these writers for a link (a separate but

overlapping history) to my artistic practice, which combines old photographic images with computer scanning and imaging devices. This last link is one that I have forged on my own. All three of the men I have chosen to use in my thesis are decidedly uninterested in the role of the photographer as artist. In my position as viewer I am often aligned with Barthes, and I can find in Proust and Benjamin an understanding of technology (especially photography) that inspires me. However, as an artist, as one who intends both a conceptual and aesthetic dimension to the images I produce, I am at odds with these thinkers, and yet within their writing, I find a path that leads, circuitously, to my art.

I also explore, in chapter 3, a different photographic experience of the auratic, one that bears a strong relationship to the moment of exposure, to the action of the photographer, not the action of the viewer. I am locating this position as one which actually forces a decentering of the subject. Although I am not a photographer I take on a similar role as artist. I also attempt to position the viewers of my work as both spectator and operator. This dual perspective is meant to promote an understanding of the viewer's own presence in relation to a past that resides within the present. My aim, in working with old photographs is not to represent the past, nor the present, but to present the presence of the past (a moment that cannot be tied to any calendar or clock).

Chapter 1: *the present of presence.*

> [A]n experienced event is finite--at any rate,
> confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered
> event is infinite, because it is only a key to
> everything that happened before it and after it.
> ... Only the *actus purus* of recollection itself,
> not the author or the plot, constitutes the unity
> of the text.
>> (Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust,"
>> *Illuminations*, 202)

> Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other:
> tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by
> aesthetic or empirical habits (to leaf through a
> magazine at the hairdresser's, the dentist's); mad
> if this realism is absolute, so to speak,
> original, obliging the loving and terrified
> consciousness to return to the very letter of
> Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses
> the course of the thing, and which I shall call,
> in conclusion, the photographic ecstasy.
>> (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 119)

Recently, while preparing to work with my collection of found photographs, I came across an image that I could not place. It was a portrait of a young girl (maybe ten or twelve), which was probably taken somewhere between the late thirties and the early fifties. She looked so familiar. I thought I could be holding a picture of my mother who died in 1989. I could feel hope (not that this image was her, but of finding *her*) and pain (of impossibility) in my stomach. Nothing was written on the back of the photograph and I couldn't remember if I had or hadn't purchased the image. The young girl reminded me of my memories of my mother as a child (which are of course memories of photographs), but I was certain I had never mixed the images I owned with the ones that owned me (claimed me as one of their own). I would

never know for certain. In finally deciding to use this photograph in my work, I chose not to define the image as *my mother*, and not to *find* my mother in that image.

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes goes *looking for the truth* of the face he had loved, and after following its trace back in time, he finally happens upon the little girl in the *Winter Garden Photograph* and rediscovers his mother (67, 69). In some of the photographs that Barthes passes over on his way to the *Winter Garden Photograph*, he finds fragments of his mother and recognizes familiar aspects of her form, but he is still left unsatisfied: "I never recognized her except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her being, and that therefore I missed her altogether. It was not she, and yet it was no one else" (65-66). Although Barthes speaks about recognizing actual body fragments, he is not hoping to eventually recognize her whole body. Further on in the text he describes the *her* he finds as being beyond a likeness: "Likeness leaves me unsatisfied and skeptical (... the only [image] which has given me the splendor of her truth is precisely a lost, remote photograph, one which does not look 'like' her, the photograph of a child I never knew)" (103). If her essence is outside of likeness, then it cannot be that those other images are not enough alike, but that they are, in fact, missing a key element. However, he says of these images, that even though they do not contain the essence of his mother, there is in each one a "place set apart, reserved and preserved: the brightness of her eyes." The photograph had preserved her gaze, which in itself is a "mediation which led [Barthes] toward an essential identity, the genius of a beloved face" (66). But what does her gaze mediate? It is the space between her and Barthes that the lasting brightness of her eyes mediates, bridging the

distance between her at the moment she was 'captured', and Barthes as he holds her flattened image in his hands. And yet this gaze does not in and of itself allow him to find his mother in these images. Perhaps this is because all the images wherein Barthes recognizes part of his mother actually provide him with a vision that he knows refers to her, but which he cannot align with the intangible vision of her he carries in his memories. He settled, finally on the first photograph taken of her (in which his memories could recognize no likeness).

But what if Barthes had *not* been sitting in the apartment where his mother had died, tracing her identity back, photo by photo, to that early, essential image? What if he had, like myself, come by chance upon that photograph in a context that made the imbrication of identity and truth less apparent? Would he have been as quick to claim that photograph as a kind of truth, as pure referent? It seems that as he went looking for the truth of someone so dear to him, finding it was a *fait accompli*. Barthes would disagree, insisting that there is an element of chance at work in his scenario, and although I do not dispute this, I am suggesting that he was more willing and eager to enter into a dialogue with this image because of the context of the situation.

However I, who have denied finding my mother in my photograph, still cling to a faint hope, or if not hope then desire, that this image which I allow myself to use, mold, re-create, and in some ways reincarnate, is unbeknownst to me (for I couldn't do it otherwise), my mother. Why I cannot use an image of my mother in my art is still a mystery to me. Perhaps the best way for me to get close to my reasoning is to defer back to Barthes's explanation of why he would not publicly reproduce the *Winter Garden Photograph*:

> I cannot reproduce for you the Winter Garden
> Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it
> would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one
> of the thousand manifestations of the "ordinary";
> it cannot in any way constitute the visible object
> of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity,
> in the positive sense of the term; at most it
> would interest your studium: period, clothes,
> photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound. (Roland
> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 73)

Barthes felt that others could not relate to his *understanding* of this image, that it could not illustrate his argument. Although I agree that no one could share my feelings for my mother, it is also that I do not wish to use her as a narrative element in my work. I don't want the viewers of my work to read a specific, determined relationship between myself and the images I use. I might also say that my feelings for my mother overwhelm me, and that it would be useless (and somehow wrong) for me to attempt a translation from this emotion to representation. However, the artist-me is very different from the lamenting-daughter-me (producer separate from receiver), and the journey from one to the other, the time of translation, creates a yearning for old photographs *in general* (although not all photographs). It is old photographs that speak most clearly about death and loss (not just of life, but of appellation: of being lost), and as such speak not just about my loss of my mother, but also through that loss, my loss of self. This self is the one that is dependent on being known and loved, on the connection to others who have helped in my creation, my naming. This loss of self actually maintains my solitude (like the solitary photographs of 'single women' I collect).

On finding *his* mother (or perhaps *in order* to find her)

in the *Winter Garden Photograph*, Barthes sees back into time
and 'watches' her posing for the camera, 'hears' the
photographer directing her pose, 'feels' the sad bond she
had with her brother. And yet, he cannot share his vision of
her with his readers (cannot reproduce it), he can only
explain it, define it, illustrate *around* it. His is a
private vision. The faded image of a young girl he could
never have known allows Barthes to create pages of narrative
that could not have come from any direct evidence within the
photograph. He uses the image as raw material to re-create
(reincarnate) his mother in his eyes, from his subject
position.

However, without the referential quality of the
photograph, without its being *dependent* on the photographic
subject's existence, he could not be absolutely sure that it
was his mother whom he was pinning his desires to, and
resurrecting through memory. He calls this essential quality
"*That-has-been*" (77), and it is this feature that separates
photography from all other representational mediums: "I call
'photographic referent' not the *optionally* real thing to
which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real
thing which has been placed before the lens, without which
there would be no photograph" (76).

Barthes's route back to his mother was through the many
old photographs that had belonged to her. This passage was
not contingent on an objective, visual resemblance, which
was always disappointing to him, but on the *air* of the
subject (his mother).

> The air (I use this word, lacking anything better,
> for the expression of truth) is a kind of
> intractable supplement of identity, what is given
> as an act of grace, stripped of any 'importance':
> the air expresses the subject insofar as that
> subject assigns itself no importance. In this

> veracious photograph, the being I love, whom I
> have loved, is not separated from itself: at last
> it coincides. And, mysteriously, this coincidence
> is a kind of metamorphosis. (109)

For Barthes this *air* is not a necessary attribute to the photograph, except that it animates the image, extending the life of the photographed subject beyond her own mortal life span. It is also unruly in its temperamental existence, in that neither photographer, photographed or even the one holding (looking at) the photograph, can control, intend or cajole this *air* into existence. And yet, it is the viewer that brings this *air* to light; it is the viewer that sees it, and none other (not even, necessarily another viewer).

The coinciding, in this photograph, of Barthes's mother with herself is a *coincidence*: a chance occurrence. In other images this metamorphosis does not occur. Perhaps this *air* cannot exist in an atmosphere heavy with expectation. In the other images of his mother he was looking, expecting to find her, but in the *Winter Garden Photograph*, he was shocked by his discovery of her in an image which was unrecognizable to him. But what does he mean when he speaks of this harmonious collision, the coinciding of a being with itself?

Perhaps this metamorphosis is the transformation that occurs when the being Barthes knew, whom he loves, is met by the one he could never know, but now does, by perceiving her in a new way. Perhaps it means that in this one photograph he can see through time, recognizing the trace of his mother. Barthes would then understand, in this trace, that what was *then* is possibly also *now*. If this is true, then this simultaneous existence of the being he knows with the one he doesn't (two different time-frames) relates to Walter Benjamin's concept of *now-time*[4]. Eduardo Cadava explains the

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[4]   I owe what understanding I have of Benjamin's *now-time* to Eduardo Cadava's explication of this concept in *Traces,* his chapter on historic

necessity of the *trace* in relation to Benjamin's *now-time*:

> The possibility of history is bound to the survival of
> the traces of what is past and to our ability to read
> these traces as traces. That these traces are marked
> historically does not mean that they belong to a
> specific time [...] Rather, as he says of images in
> general, they only come to legibility at a specific
> time. (64)

In N^5 Walter Benjamin uses *now-time* to define an event

which is the *emergence* of the present, but not the presence

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time in Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History. In his own
words, his book "attempts to understand Benjamin's concept of history by
analyzing his persistent recourse to the language of photography in his
discussions of history" (xix). However, he makes it clear that
photography is not just a useful metaphor for Benjamin, but that memory
can be likened to memorization, and in turn to photography. Cadava sets
photography up not as a metaphor, but as a structural base for work
around history :

> The extent to which memory and thought can be said to belong to
> the possibility of repetition, reproduction, citation, and
> inscription determines their relation to photography. Like a
> camera that seeks to fix a moment of history, thought wishes to
> bring history within the grasp of a concept ... Both
> historiography and photography are media of historical
> investigation. That photographic technology belongs to the
> physiognomy of historical thought means that there can be no
> thinking of history that is not at the same time a thinking of
> photography (xviii).

He explains that for Benjamin, the structure of the photographic moment
(a ripping out of context, out of time) is also that of historical
thinking, which is involved in the *arrest* of continuity, of flow, of
linear time.

Benjamin was also very interested in the image itself and its
(re)production as it pertained to modernity. Cadava, explicating
Benjamin, says that "there can be no critical theory without an
understanding of the relation between social tradition and photography,
without a sense of what an image is and of what it might mean to assume
responsibility for one" (xxix). My understanding of, and interest in the
concept now-*time* is dependent on both Benjamin's respect for the
photographic image, and his dependence on its language (its structure)
in his writing. Because I am both confused and excited by the
correspondence of the two in relation to *now-time*, I have chosen
(assuming responsibility) to read Benjamin's 'image', his imagistic
text, as pictorial inscription -- as an actual photograph.

[5] According to translator Richard Sieburth, *N* was one section of the
"Notes and Materials" for Benjamin's ongoing *Arcades Project*. There were
36 sections, each corresponding to one letter of the alphabet. A table
of contents (included with the published "Notes and Materials"), which
may or may not have corresponded to chapters Benjamin planned to use,
included: *N* re *the theory of knowledge, theory of progress*. ("N [Re the
Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," from Walter Benjamin, *Das
Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982,
pp. 570-611. *Gesammelte Schriften, V.*)

of it (not its fulfillment). *Now-time* can be thought of as the act of making legible that which wasn't up until that point, and which will never *be* again. This emergence or coming into legibility is always happening; it is itself the performance of this coming. And importantly, within this emergence is the presence of the past. As Benjamin states: "It isn't that the past casts its light on what is present or that the present casts its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning" (1989, 50). The constellation is a moment of arrest where the two meet. It can be thought of as a moment of reflection, which is in itself, an important action. This concept is used by Benjamin to distinguish between the "homogeneous empty time" of historicism which he sees as bound up in the notion of historical progress (at all costs), and the "constructive principal" of materialist historiography, in which "[t]hinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well" (1988, 261, 262).

Benjamin talks about images as being the space of now-time. Images are ambiguous and can encompass oppositional meanings, as well as tenses. This is perhaps why he states that "an image is dialectics at a standstill" (1989, 50). It is the momentary standstill, the 'flash of lightning,' that is needed to "isolate the detail of an event from the continuum of history" (Cadava, 59). The task that Benjamin sets himself, a task dependent on his ability to stall history (in order to speculate on it), is "to set in motion an experience with history original to every new present" (Cadava, 60, quoting Benjamin in *One Way Street*, 352).

According to Benjamin, "[t]he past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (1988, 255). I liken

this to a photograph that, in the instant of the flash-bulb
explosion, wrests time from itself, spiriting away the
moment until, with another flash it settles (restlessly) in
a different instant. This settling is the appropriation of
the image, and it is not tied to the original context. These
images that flash like lightning into the *now* create a truth
out of the present situation:

> These images must be thoroughly marked off from
> 'humanistic' categories, such as so-called
> habitus, style, etc. For the historical index of
> the images doesn't simply say that they belong to
> a specific time, it says above all that they only
> enter into legibility at a specific time. [...]
> Every Now is determined by those images that are
> synchronic with them: every Now is the Now of a
> specific recognizability. In it, truth is loaded
> to the bursting point with time. (This bursting
> point is nothing other than the death of the
> intentio [intention], which accordingly coincides
> with the birth of authentic historical time, the
> time of truth.) [6] (1989, 50)

I am not interested in examining Benjamin's concept of
"authentic historical time;" it is his idea that *truth* can
be *filled with time* that I am intrigued by. If one does not
intend or assume connections, nor plan sequences (between
past, present, future), then one is left only with what is
synchronic with the now, with what could not be presumed,
but cannot be denied. This, then, could be considered a
moment of truth filled with time (not linear time, but an
encompassing time that brings together remote but
synchronous images). In relating these occurrences to the
death of intention, I find that I am comfortable speaking of

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[6] I believe that here he is referring to his concept of "Messianic
time." In the thesis 'A' of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History",
Benjamin talks about the important connection between different events
in time: "A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops
telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he
grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite
earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the
'time of now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (263).

truth, and yet I am sure that my moment of truth is far from the possibilities which Benjamin had envisioned.

The question here might be what is the *truth* that comes out of such a specific recognition? For Barthes, the *Winter Garden Photograph* is an incomparable event of discovery: "a sudden awakening, outside of 'likeness,' a *satori* in which words fail, the rare, perhaps unique event of the 'So, yes, so much and no more'" (109). It is exterior to what he calls 'studium' (what Benjamin refers to as "humanistic categories"), which are the qualities of an image that are of general sociological or historical interest. Although Barthes asserts that words failed him at the moment he saw this photograph, there is a recognition involved, a reading (although not semiotic), and the readability of this image exists for *only* Barthes and *only* at this time. He seizes the image, without *intention*, at the same moment that it shocks him by its presence. In it he finds the *truth* of photography, which is (perhaps only ever) the *promise* that provides its ambiguous and open structure:

> The photographic image therefore comes only in the form of a coming, in the mode of a promise, within the messianism of its 'event': photography promises that everything may be kept for history, but the everything that is kept is the everything that is always already in the process of disappearing, that does not belong to sight. What is kept is only the promise, the event of the promise. (Cadava, 65-66)

After his personal experience of his mother's *air* in the *Winter Garden Photograph* (her *truth*, which is perhaps only the promise of finding her), Barthes goes on to explore the *air* of certain other images (110). What is not clear to me is whether the *air* exists equally for all viewers. It is clear that he derives this concept of the *air* of the subject

in relation to the *Winter Garden Photograph*. He sees no reason to re-present this image, so I assume that her *air* is only perceivable to Barthes (for me, "no wound"). If his mother's *air* is indeed *the promise of her*, then a different viewer, one to whom this *promise* is not a gift, might not see her *air*. Barthes, as I have said, plays a large part in the *creation* of the *air* of certain subjects (his mother and the other images he speaks of) because of the context in which he finds them. If each of us experiences the *air* of *different* photographic subjects (and how could we not?), then I can place the *air* in the category of Barthes's *punctum*, a variable but critical detail that shows itself only to those who create meaning in relation to it. Barthes specifies that the experience of the *punctum* is both irrational and subject to chance, however it is also dependent on what is *brought* to the image *by* the viewer.

At first, Barthes gives concrete examples of odd, unintended, physical *details* in certain photographs that catch his eye and disturb him. "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). Entering into the discourse of the author/photographer is incompatible with finding a *punctum* in an image. For Barthes, the *punctum* allows each spectator access to information that is not intended or anticipated by the author of the image. But in order to find meaning that is not created by the photographer, the spectator must invest the *punctum* with personal, subjective meanings of their own.

This definition allows Barthes to broaden his search to other unintended, uncontrollable (magic) aspects of the photographic image. "The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond* -- as if the image launched desire beyond what it

permits us to see"(59). So, the "subject [that] assigns
itself no importance" (who has resigned intention?), might
allow for an accidental photographic moment that results in
the capturing of their *air*, which might also be seen as
their *aura* (109). But here again, the question arises, is
the *air* or the *punctum* inherent in the subject or is it
contingent on the investment of the spectator?

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction," Walter Benjamin defines the aura as "the
unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be"
(1988, 222-223). An object (or person) which has an aura
remains seemingly distant, no matter how closely or intently
it is viewed. However, Benjamin asserts that mechanical
reproduction (photography and film specifically) has the
power to break the spell of the aura. He says that "[o]ne
might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and
go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical
reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (221). This is
because the unique, ritualized object (religious icon,
important person, famous painting) cannot maintain an aura
when mass reproduction destroys its singular quality,
changes its context and reinvests it with new meaning for
the modern spectator:

> One might generalize by saying: the technique of
> reproduction detaches the reproduced object from
> the domain of tradition. By making many
> reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies
> for a unique existence. And in permitting the
> reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in
> his own particular situation, it reactivates the
> object reproduced (1988, 221).

However, in Benjamin's *Short History of Photography,*
(published almost five years earlier than "The Work of Art"
essay) his definition of the aura describes a much more

contemplative, intersubjective experience:

> What is aura? A strange web of time and space: the
> unique appearance of a distance, however close at
> hand. On a summer noon, resting, to follow the
> line of a mountain range on the horizon or a twig
> which throws its shadow on the observer, until the
> moment or hour begins to be a part of its
> appearance--that is to breathe the aura of those
> mountains, that twig. (1977, 49)

I will go into this intersubjective exchange in more depth
in chapter 2, but here I would like to set forth a reading
of the aura as a positive experience instead of a negative
attribute. The words that Benjamin uses in the above passage
describe a situation that involves both viewer and viewed in
a remarkably contemplative experience. This is not to say
that I am not interested in a technology that 'reactivates
the object reproduced', it is that, in my opinion, this is
not antithetical to the experience of the aura, as I will
explain later.

For Barthes, the memory of his mother is launched by
the punctal qualities of the *Winter Garden Photograph*. I
would also describe his memory as being auratic because the
personal experience of a photographic subject involves the
aura. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the aura of
photography, or its possibility when he describes his
relationship to photographs that move him. He accomplishes
this transposition by 'imagining' that it is not the
photographic object itself that returns his gaze, but the
original referent, which looks at him *through* the image. He
also focuses on the essential distance of the photographic
image (in time and space) from its referent. For Barthes, it
seems that certain photographs remain distant because they
remind him of his distance from the referent. The very
structure of photography creates this distance, while

simultaneously allowing the viewer to cross this breach.

Barthes describes his encounter with the photographic process: "A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" (81). To be linked (even metaphorically) by something as simple as paper, as basic as light, to share skin and life itself with the photographed subject seems very similar to *breathing* its aura, as both distance and time dissolve. Or perhaps it is not that time dissolves, but that, in certain photographs there is the possibility of a different experience or understanding of time. The technology of photography allows a sharing, not of skin or of *air*, but of time (of a distant time).

In some photographs Barthes experiences the past as the future, and in these, time itself becomes a *punctum*. It is not just that time has stopped in these photographs, it is also that time has been brought forward to be examined: "the punctum is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake" (96). For Barthes, all photographs remind him of his own death because the future of the past, and therefore the unavoidable future of *his* present is always contained in each image.

I have drawn a connection between Barthes's *air* and Benjamin's aura, but it is Barthes's faith in the absolute referential quality (the *that-has-been*) of the photographic image that allows me to make this association. Examining Barthes's relationship to the *Winter Garden Photograph*, I ask: how else could he *find* his mother except through a temporal bridge that is the aura of the photograph? Barthes

experiences the photograph as a carrier for the emanation of light rays (*that-has-been*), and not the ocular reconfiguring of reality. However, his experience is dependent on the transparency of the medium. It is this particular quality of the technology that allows him to imagine (create) an auratic connection.

Benjamin speaks about the authority of death in his essay "The Storyteller," where he says that "[d]eath is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death." This is because "not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life--and this is the stuff that stories are made of--first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death" (1988, 94). Unlike other people, who can only fully know themselves by looking back at their lives, the storyteller has the authority of a knowledge (of accumulated experiences) that is transmissible through narrative. This accumulation of the experience of others mingles with personal experiences, which leave their trace in these ever evolving narratives. In a good story "[i]t is left up to [the reader] to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.(1988, 89)"

Barthes's experience of the punctum *time* (death) in photography gives him the borrowed authority of a storyteller. However, this authority is limited, as the information (truth of death) is of little use without the ability to make it mean something in the context of living. He cannot communicate the experience of death because it comes to only those who are dying. And yet, he does experience the catastrophe of a death that has inevitably already occurred, in the stilling (and compressing) of time

in certain old photographs. Barthes, or anyone who shares this experience, is placed in a position of authority -- of having privileged knowledge of the subject's future death. But this knowledge can do little more than help shape the narrative that results from viewing the photograph.

The authority that I have borrowed from death, in my capacity as artist, allows me to talk of *memory*, but not of *memories*. I am not a storyteller, but a story stealer: I collect old photographs and with them sometimes comes traces of real lives, but without knowledge of them they die in my hands (again and again). I can only speak of this impotence. However these women, whose images I collect and work with, do not only bring death, they also live through my interactions with them, and through their effect on me. But can I say that this new life I create for them, or allow them to live, is useful? The fact that the women in my photographs affect me is true, but if I cannot in turn affect others, then the stories I steal really do die in my hands. However, my aim is not to offer up their stories, but to offer one example of an intersubjective relationship. This relationship is the result of the effect that these traces have on me, and the affect that the traces of my experience have on the whole.

Barthes describes an image that does not yield a punctum as "a motionless image, this does not mean that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not *emerge*, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies" (57). And yet, in so many old photographs it is this that I am drawn to, that is a punctum for me: a feeling that the figures are trapped, their likenesses (and souls) displayed and yet kept at a distance by the same smooth paper that displays them. Whereas Barthes

experiences the aura of a specific detail (its *emergence* through the photograph into a space of fantasy), I am moved by the photograph itself, and by the aura which crosses its history. An aura created through the interaction of photographic object, subject matter, and viewer.

Early on in *Camera Lucida* Barthes relates the photographic image to two distinct ways of seeing: the operator's view which comes from peering through the dark hole of the Camera Obscura (framing, composing, optically controlling vision), and the spectator's view which is dependent on the chemical process to reveal the object "from which [is] receive[d], by deferred action, the rays" (10). Barthes positions himself as both a spectator and spectacle (as the occasional subject of the photographic process), but never as an operator. As a spectator, what Barthes values is the immediate, personal connection to those photographic images he cherishes; if the photographer does anything in aid of this bond, it is to capture, usually by chance, the *air* that makes the distance of time and place dissolve. Barthes says of photography that it is "a *magic*, not an art": not a copy of reality, but an emanation of past reality (88).

Barthes is a spectator, and I am both that and the other. Not a photographer, but an operator nevertheless, in the sense of one who views and uses images as framed, composed signifiers. I don't use a camera, instead I re-engage old photographs, capturing the reflection of light rays using a flatbed scanner and a personal computer. Although I will discuss my artistic process in relation to technology in chapter 2, here I am drawing a distinction between Barthes's relationship to photographs, as viewer, and mine, as artist. Also, the fact that I use a computer to

work with appropriated images, and not a camera to capture life (posed or candid) is significant. Appropriated, old photographs of unfamiliar women provide me with details and fragments of imagery to invent a past that extends beyond my own. I wish intensely for some detail I can identify with, all the while knowing that for me the *punctum* of photography is my ability to animate those lives (and my own) for a moment.

An old photo is a not a window into the past (I see no life, no change), it is a piece of the past (which whispers impenetrable secrets through its details). As the photograph ages or travels, and its relevant biographical information gets lost or forgotten, what remain are the details of dress, stance, light. Time and history also remain, and sometimes the truth of an instant, not the instant of the photographer's flash, but the moment of present meeting past. For me, these aspects of the photograph are a trigger for fantasy as my body merges with details of perfectly still B&W smiles, poses, hairdos. My fingers touch those figures, creating a bridge that allows passage (at a distance), as I fondle, manipulate, and add, through my interactions, another layer of contingency to the photographic images I collect. Each image, held in the present by my hands, by my interaction (no longer lost but repositioned, retouched) becomes lost again the moment I exhibit it. My hands cannot protect it from the disinterest of the viewer. In fact, there is so little left that is visible in the old photographs I use, it is probable that viewers will not make their own connections to the original (old) images. But I do not want viewers to identify with these women, instead I want to locate them in the present, in relation to an active and thoughtful engagement with the past. The images I am speaking about do not represent these

women, but present them in relation to me (specifically to my hands), acting out our interaction.

In the installation of this work, I hope to maintain a distance, while forcing intimacy in a space so empty it can support even the subtlest change in perception. The hands that present the photographs to the viewer also come between the viewer and the photographs in this work. It is not an identification with my hands that I propose, I do not want viewers to imagine their body in my place. The fact that I keep my fragmentary images behind glass and imbedded in a wall will hopefully make that type of identification less likely. In response to my interventions, I want viewers to simply acknowledge the distance between themselves and the images. Perhaps this will allow them to acknowledge their relationship to the work in the present (the *now*) of their presence, in the time of their reading (the images, the space, and themselves within it).

Chapter 2: the presence of absence.

> It is no accident that the portrait was the focal
> point of early photography. The cult of
> remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers
> a last refuge for the cult value of the picture.
> For the last time the aura emanates from the early
> photographs in the fleeting expression of a human
> face. This is what constitutes their melancholy,
> incomparable beauty.
> > (Benjamin, "The Work of Art in The Age of
> > Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 226)

> In this glum desert, suddenly a specific
> photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I
> animate it. So that is how I must name the
> attraction which makes it exist: an *animation.* The
> photograph itself is in no way animated (I do not
> believe in 'lifelike' photographs), but it
> animates me: this is what creates every adventure.
> > (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 20)

I am writing this chapter from my position as an artist
who is fascinated with and obsessed by *old* photographs. You
may notice that I have not expressed an emotional attachment
to *photography,* as in this chapter I am not interested in
the act of taking pictures, nor am I interested in the
images themselves, but it is the existence of the objects
themselves that hold my attention. It is the little paradox
that resides in each old photo-portrait, the presence of the
absence of the one in the image[7], that seduces me.

It is from this perspective that I will be looking at a
passage out of "The Guermantes Way", the third volume of
Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* which describes a
telephone conversation the narrator has with his beloved

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[7]   By this I simply mean that the photograph itself is a marker of the
absent subject of the image. As well as representing her, it makes her
absence abundantly clear (especially, but not exclusively, to those who
would care about her presence).

grandmother. It is his relationship to the technology of telephony as a medium, and to his grandmother, experienced through this medium, that I will examine for similarities to Roland Barthes's experience of the photograph in *Camera Lucida*. Also in relation to this consideration of technology, I will briefly bring in Walter Benjamin's discussion of the auratic nature of relationships distanced by time and space.

In the last chapter I asked what my anonymous photographs might be saying, if anything. My answer at that point described a dialogue in which the woman pictured is as active a participant as I, but dependent on my *translation* for her existence. This dialogue, needless to say, is not one of verbal or written language -- nothing as definite as that. But in this chapter I will look at a verbal dialogue between two living subjects[8]. There is a certainty here that cannot be had from a visual, imagistic dialogue (dialectic), because in this context each has the benefit of their own words and the capacity to direct the other's understanding. Although I am not speaking of the level of ambiguity of images, this is an ambiguous dialogue, and it is *open* because the distance that separates the speakers also transforms their 'appearance'. Although this dialogue cannot be transposed to one of subject/photographic object, it is the technology that mediates this encounter that I am attempting to explore.

Within the technological encounters which both Proust's narrator and Barthes have with their particular loved ones, it is the element of desire that I am interested in. I want to correlate their personal relationships with my slightly

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[8]   This is of course, in the context of Proust's narrative, but for the sake of my discussion I will be overlooking the fact that these characters are fictitious, and therefore not actually living subjects.

obsessive appropriation of found, anonymous portraits. I attempt to create a space of longing and frustration with these images, similar to the emotion described by both these writers. However, mine is an auratic experience of a different order from that of both Barthes and Proust, who in my opinion, set forth profoundly auratic relationships to technology because it allows them, circuitously, to embrace their respective loves. I am interested in exploring possibilities wherein technology can be instrumental in creating a space for desire. I am aware that this space cannot have the same aura that exists for Barthes and Proust, because theirs depends on a personal history that viewers can never bring to my work. But I attempt, nevertheless, to orchestrate an experience of frustrated desire, by creating the necessary distance for an auratic relationship.

To begin I must briefly explain that Barthes only acknowledges the *existence* of photographic subjects which carry with them an *air*. Barthes uses the metaphor of a conduit to describe a *vital* connection that traverses time as well as space to deliver this *air*:

> "The air is the *luminous shadow* which accompanies the body; and if the photograph fails to show this air, then the body moves without a shadow, and once this shadow is severed ... there remains no more than a sterile body. It is by this tenuous *umbilical cord* that the photographer gives life; if he cannot, either by lack of talent or bad luck, supply the transparent soul its bright shadow, the subject dies forever" (110, italics mine).

Barthes speaks metaphorically in this passage in an attempt to describe *something* that is not physical or fixable. Many would casually call this a person's aura. Barthes also calls it an "intractable supplement of identity" (109), and I must

agree that there is something *outside* of what can be
described in terms of identity. However, I do not agree that
only photographs that proffer this *air* have value, nor am I
convinced that this *air* is not experienced as a result of
the viewer's desire (as I have explained in chapter 1).
However, here I am interested in what I perceive to be a
strong relationship between Barthes's metaphor of a temporal
umbilical cord that connects him to the body and soul of the
one pictured in certain photographs, and Proust's
description of the workings of the public telephone which
brings him close to his grandmother in a way he has never
previously experienced.

Proust's description starts with a long account of the
invisible and almost magical workings of the telephone
system. Proust's narrator explains the process of placing a
call as:

> ...admirable sorcery whereby a few moments are
> enough to bring before us, invisible but present,
> the person to whom we wish to speak, and who,
> while still sitting at his table in the town in
> which he lives [...] finds himself *transported*
> hundreds of miles (he and all the surroundings in
> which he remains immured) within reach of our ear,
> at the precise moment which our fancy has
> ordained. And we are like the person in the fairy-
> tale for whom a sorceress, at his express wish,
> conjures up, in a *supernatural light*, his
> grandmother or his betrothed in the act of turning
> over a book, of shedding tears, of gathering
> flowers, close by the spectator and yet very far
> away, in the place where she actually is at the
> moment. (134, italics mine)

I will begin by speculating on the meaning of this
supernatural light which does not present a copy, but
magically produces the loved one at the same moment she is
busy elsewhere. She is both far away and present

simultaneously, at the wish of the narrator. However, this distance is spatial, unlike the temporal distance crossed by old photographs. The ringing of a phone stops everyday life in much the same way as a photograph, but in some ways the interrupted moment remains closer to 'real life' than a photograph, which offers only a mute, immovable pose, despite the original actions of model. Still, despite the 'normal' freedom of movement, the telephone *ring* forces a momentary detachment from life. Proust's narrator can call forth, because of this technology, not just a person's voice, but also "all the surroundings in which he remains immured." The voice at the other end of the line brings with it, through the phone line, an image that supplements it.

Perhaps this *supernatural light* produces presence through absence: his grandmother's voice, although very present to the narrator, is *only* her voice, and so marks the absence of the rest of her. As such it is a magical force similar to Barthes's *luminous shadow* which transforms the photographic paper, which is itself a marker of absence (the absence of the photographic subject), into a different form of presence. The power of the telephone is its ability to connect people at greater distances than they could normally communicate, but it also changes the nature of their presence. Similarly, a photograph facilitates connections with the distant past, which becomes accessible because photographs are an "emanation" of that past reality[9] (Barthes, 88). The *magic*, in both these instances, is in the way these technologies change the limits of the mediated

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[9] Although I do not accept Barthes's idea as scientific fact, I cannot dismiss it. I know that the photographic negative does record reflected light, but the paper print cannot contact any of the original reflections or emanations. Still, when Barthes states that the photograph is not a copy of reality, I must agree to some extent. All understanding of context and intention aside, I believe that a photograph is both a copy *and* an emanation of past reality, not the original, but a trace.

subject, creating a more fluid body. They create this fluidity by facilitating an understanding of the *presence* of the mediated subject's body, through its absence. This fluid body might also be thought of as a ghost which haunts only those who can see its illusory form. These technologies also accomplish a different type of shift in the subject's perception by supplying fragmented optical or aural information. This information compels a reconsideration of the subject's habitual perception.

As far as Proust's narrator is concerned, the telephone receiver (the physical apparatus) is only a "lifeless piece of wood." It is the telephone operators, "the All-Powerful, by whose intervention the absent rise up at our side, [...] handmaidens of the Mystery, the umbrageous priestesses of the Invisible, the Young Ladies of the Telephone," who animate, through their almost mythic skill, the "apparitions to which our ears alone are unsealed" (134). It is worth pointing out that the narrator, of course, was not alone, as the operators themselves were always listening, much like the anonymous photographer who is the invisible mediator between you and the loved one you privately gaze at in your wallet. These are the unseen, yet powerful and absolutely necessary agents who make the experience possible.

But, at one point in this passage the "lifeless piece of wood" becomes a "vociferous stump." Wanting desperately to talk with his grandmother, the narrator picks up the receiver and hears some unknown voice babbling incessantly, oblivious to the fact that there was nobody (who cared) to answer it. He speaks of the phone chattering convulsively and of his repeated attempts to silence it. Here I am interested in the distinction Proust draws between the loved, anticipated voice he yearns for, which is animated by

an invisible *mysterious force* in order to exist for only him, and the annoying chatter which animates the phone in a different, less personal way. He makes an analogy to a puppet, which is presumably manipulated by a not-so-powerful or mysterious, human puppeteer. The comical voice which reaches out to a non-existent other could just as easily have been involved in a private conversation with a caring counter-part, so I assume that it is an illustration of the public, mundane side of telephony. It can also be seen as a reminder that the narrator could have easily missed his revelatory encounter with his grandmother.

I see this passage corresponding to Barthes's distinction between the photographs that *exist* for him privately, and other public images that are only annoyances. In Barthes's photographs, the deafening noise of images that belong to the mass media transform into a burning silence (98). This silence exists within the image, but must also be affected through an effort on Barthes's part to ignore or go beyond the semiotic "to say nothing, to shut [his] eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness" (55). What is common to both Proust and Barthes is the *effect* that the technologically mediated subject (different from the original) has on the viewer/conversant. This seems to occur through an openness, a connection that exists very rarely if at all, and depends on the a personal investment in the mediated subjèct.

In "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin speaks about this idea of an animated space that exists between the mediated subject and the 'real' subject. His emphasis here is on visual, intersubjective contact: "Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the

inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (1988, 188). In a note about this *investment* he writes that "[t]his endowment is a wellspring of poetry. Wherever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance. The gaze of nature thus awakened dreams and pulls the poet after its dream" (n17, 200). To experience the aura of a thing is to understand that the distance associated with it is one of time (in the sense of a dissolution of rational, linear time), as well as one of spatial distance.

To *breathe* the aura of a distant thing (to share *physically* with it through its aura, as Benjamin describes the experience), is seemingly contingent on investing it with the ability to look back and allowing it a subjectivity of its own. By looking back it draws the subject into a space where new meanings are created in an intersubjective exchange. However, that exchange is always developed at a psychological, as well as a real distance because the auratic subject is always inaccessible[10] ("The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. [...] True to its nature it remains 'distant, however close it may be'" (243).) A thing endowed with subjectivity must have a kind of autonomy, there must be a separation between the viewer and this subject. In order to be affected by this endowed subject, the viewer must perceive it as outside of herself, as separate, distant. Only then can a relationship or an exchange take place. Barthes's mother, in the *Winter Garden Photograph*, is always (no matter how tightly he grasps the

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[10] Kaja Silverman discusses Benjamin's aura in relation to the ethical value of this always distant intersubjective exchange in her chapter "Political Ecstasy," in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, pp. 93-104.

image) removed from him. This is true *because of,* and not despite, the fact that she affects him. He would not want to hold so tight or come so close to an image that did not affect him in such a way.

This space of intersubjective fantasy, brought on by the creation or acknowledgment of the aura is wholly dependent on the relationship the spectator has to the subject. It is also seemingly dependent on technologies that produce presence through absence. Both photography and telephony create fragmented perceptions that force a psychological distance. Proust's narrator feels an exaggerated distance between his grandmother and himself *because* the technology makes her 'appear' so close at the precise point at which she is unreachable. These conduits effect a spatial and temporal expanse (constructed through the very act of bridging) which is seemingly necessary for a subjectivity to be attributed to the mediated subject.

When Proust's narrator finally connects with his grandmother, who has been trying to telephone him from Paris, he is astonished to discover that hearing her voice separated from her body is a new and different experience. He discovers two things: that her voice sounds sweeter and more sorrowful than he had previously realized when speaking to her in person, and that he feels differently towards her because her presence on the telephone marks an absence -- the absence of their everyday life together.

> "...I heard that voice which I mistakenly thought I knew so well; for always until then, every time that my grandmother had talked to me, I had been accustomed to follow what she said on the open score of her face, in which the eyes figured so largely; but her voice itself I was hearing this afternoon for the first time. And because that voice appeared to me to have altered in its proportions from the moment that it was a whole, [...] I discovered for the first time how sweet

that voice was; [...] having it alone beside me, *seen* without the mask of her face, I noticed in it for the first time the sorrow that had cracked it in the course of a lifetime.

Was it, however, solely the voice that, because it was alone gave me this new impression which tore my heart? Not at all; [...] The commands or prohibitions which she constantly addressed to me in the ordinary course of life, the tedium of obedience or the fire of rebellion which neutralized the affection that I felt for her, were at this moment eliminated [...]"(135-36).

The narrator first notices how different his grandmother's voice seems as a fragment of her whole being. He calls her face, which he is very used to seeing, "an open score." Although it presumably holds no secrets for him, he later refers to it as a mask. In my opinion, this contradiction relates to the fact that the narrator, who has always encountered his grandmother's voice in person (where her voice was obscured by her body), now encounters her voice as an apparition, a substance without form. This is not just a ghostly murmur, but is a presence 'seen' by the narrator who finally notices the cracks in his grandmother's voice. Here we are presented with a substance without form, which can nevertheless be seen, all of which leads me back to the photograph and the presence of absence. Perhaps only by isolating the fragment (in the case of photography, the visual, for telephony, the voice) can one apprehend the "truth" of the subject. At this point it is worth recalling Barthes's notion of the *air* of the subject, which holds its individual essence, and is connected tenuously to the body by an umbilical cord which is the photograph (or perhaps the telephone cable which runs from Paris to Doncieres[11]). At

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[11] In the context of awaiting a call from his grandmother in Paris, Proust writes of a 'miracle' which is the voice of a loved one on the telephone: "A real presence, perhaps, that voice that seemed so near--in actual separation! But a premonition also of an eternal separation!" (135). The miracle comes in the transposition of real with imagined

one point Barthes describes all the images of his mother which lead him to the *Winter Garden Photograph* as "a little like so many masks," her body in those images did nothing more than hide what it was that he associated with his mother (109). However, in the *Winter Garden Photograph,* the presence of the *air* of his mother allows him to see not just her as a child, but an ageless vision of her which coexists with the face that he had known throughout his life (109).

Whereas Proust's narrator notices *time* and its ominous effects, Barthes, for whom time is over ("at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two nothing more than waiting" 93), focuses on what can transverse a lifetime, and outlive it. Neither he nor Proust speak about memory in relation to photography, and, in fact, both feel that it blocks memory (Barthes 63, 91). It is not memory that inhabits these technologies, but ghosts (this is his mother's *air,* this is the murmuring, and disembodied voice of Proust's anxiety-ridden fantasy). I use the term ghost to describe a phenomena that extends the subject beyond their temporal and spatial limits, creating an existence that is dependent on haunting. Barthes uses a more religious metaphor, stating that photography "has something to do with resurrection," in that it does not recall the past, but is "reality in a past state" (82).

Returning to Proust, I want to explore the narrator's thought that his view of his grandmother has changed (her voice seems sweeter). This change occurs because he realizes that they no longer have that habitual daily relationship which tended to neutralize his affection for her. This new view suggests that the telephone creates a separate space

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distance, in the anxiety he felt at the eventual death of his loved one, the murmuring voice on the telephone becomes the returning spirit, only partially present and always unreachable.

where one can see life differently from a distance. The
ethereal moment of the telephone conversation stills
everyday time, bringing the narrator emotionally closer to
his grandmother.[12]

> "Granny! I cried to her, Granny! and I longed
> to kiss her, but I had beside me only the voice, a
> phantom as impalpable as the one that would
> perhaps come back to me when my grandmother was
> dead. 'Speak to me!' But then, suddenly, I ceased
> to hear the voice, and was left even more alone.
> ... It seemed to me as though it was already a
> beloved ghost that I had allowed to lose herself
> in the ghostly world, and, standing alone before
> the instrument, I went on vainly repeating:
> 'Granny! Granny!' as Orpheus, left alone, repeats
> the name of his dead wife." (137)

It is not something in her voice but the ghostly presence of
it within 'the instrument' that creates this premonition of
his grandmother's immanent death. This small madness occurs
because 'the instrument' brings his grandmother close to him
and then wrenches her away. His anguish spurs a memory from
the distant past of the anguish he felt once searching for
her as a child. This in turn makes him imagine a future
anguish when, on her deathbed, he will not be audible to
her. Like Orpheus, the narrator is caught, at that moment,
forever calling out in a loop of private torment and
frustration. Similarly Barthes writes about the photograph
of his mother as a child: "...I tell myself: she is going to
die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, over a
catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the
subject is already dead, every photograph is this

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[12] This ties in with my exploration of Benjamin's concept of now-time
which I take up in detail in chapter 1. Here I would just like to bring
up the idea that an arrest, a momentary stilling of the everyday, is
actually necessary to an understanding of the present. This arrest can
occur through the acknowledgment of an image that comes up from the
past, but also I think it can be occasioned by a shock that forces a
different perception.

catastrophe. (96)". Perhaps every time the telephone line goes dead, the mute noise on the other end is a small death, a premonition of what will one day have already occurred.

Proust describes, in the passage that I have just considered, what it is that attracts me to photographs: the fact that they are the presence of absence, the collapsing of time, the isolating of a fragment that is contingent upon both the processes of the medium and the one who comes to it. I have been describing, up until now, an occasion where Proust re-discovers his grandmother, and one where Barthes finds his the spirit of his mother. Neither of them expected these occurrences, and neither is given the opportunity to extend the experience (except through narrative). Barthes is cut off by the opacity of the medium itself which can give no more than what is available at first sight, and Proust's narrator is cut short when the telephone line goes dead, leaving nothing but the ringing of her voice in his ears. Both experiences seem designed to frustrate, as well as rejuvenate.

Although the women in my photographs could be described as substitutions for *my* mother, it is not quite so simple. Even though I am *not* trying to reach her through these unnamed women, I am perhaps trying to describe a yearning for her. It is not just a yearning for her, but also a desire to bring forward that which should not be left behind. It is a frustrated yearning, but this contains the useful energy of frustration itself. If I do not have a *Winter Garden Photograph*, or a portentous telephone conversation to guide *me*, I do have many chance encounters with strangers (devalued and forgotten women) that aide my attempts to unearth what is forgotten. Nothing is remembered here, despite the fact that the *tangible effort* is replayed,

over and again. My work is an empty gesture perhaps, or one
that is too full, preserving the distance of what was then,
while forcibly dragging it into "the now."

Just as Proust's gestures were played out through a
technology that was considered a marvel of modernity in his
day, and Barthes's were concentrated on an image which was
created in the early years of photography, my gestures are
invested in a new technology. Working with a computer and
scanner, my gestures get recorded, sorted and appear before
my eyes in less than a minute. There is no negative, are no
developing chemicals, and no waiting to see if the image
'worked'. There is also no image, at least not in a physical
sense. What I see on my screen does not exist in the same
sense that Barthes's photograph existed for him. There is
nothing for me to grasp, no physicality, and no direct
'emanation' of the original. Instead, what I see is a
reconfiguration of data, a coded series of binary digits
that I cannot comprehend. This digital information does not
align with what appears before me: a screen image of my
hands clutching a young girl who could have been my mother
(*fig. 2*). This illusion is, however, one of the ways that my
technology is similar to Barthes's. As far as I am concerned
what I see on the computer screen is a fantasy, a leap of
faith, a magical apparition; my work is partially a reaction
to this unfathomable reality.

However, before the image appears on screen, it does go
through a process similar to that of photography. The
flatbed scanner I use has a photo-cell that relies on
reflected light from whatever lies on the surface of the
glass plane. A beam of light records, from beneath the
glass, as it passes slowly across the scanner. There is no
lens that instantly captures whatever is within sight, only
what is pressed up against the surface is recorded. There is

also no illusionistic deep space or 'depth of field' in the images created by the scanner, but this lack of depth is balanced by an incredibly precise recording of minutiae. Here, the all seeing eye of the camera has been reworked into something closer to a microscope. The result is a sense of reality that is slightly askew. In my scanned images the detail takes the place of the whole. Actually, in my images the different realities of detail and whole co-exist. The old photographs I use depend on an illusionistic deep space that is re-presented by the scanner alongside the details of my body.

The scanner itself does have other, important similarities to the processes of photography. The length of time it takes for the apparatus to pass across my posed hands is the duration that I must hold that pose. This pause reverses time, and I find myself holding my breath alongside the women in the photographs I appropriate. But unlike those women, who held themselves upright and still with restraining devices, I must press against the glass plane, using the apparatus itself for support. Those women and I also share the experience of not knowing what it is the camera sees. They pose, hoping that it catches them at their best, hoping that the photographer has a certain skill or luck (as Barthes would have it, and I would add aesthetic sense). My pose is also impossible for me to see, because it gets recorded from below, and I strain to imagine how it will appear. However in my case there is no photographer, the apparatus that 'captures' my pose has no aesthetic sense. In these self-portraits (what else am I to call images made of and by myself), I rely on whatever conceptual or aesthetic sense I bring to the session, and the chance that my hands have found a 'good' position.

Although I have defined these images as self-portraits,

I am not comfortable with this designation. My hands do in one sense stand in for my self, but it is the interactions that are important here, such as the relationship of past and present, and active and passive. I am also interested in a coming together of different representation models, where a standard photo-portrait from one era encounters, in a new time, a mode of representation which would have been considered unacceptable (or even incomprehensible) in its time.

More important than the magical, screen apparitions that appear before me, is what I am able to do to them. Like the photographic technicians of the past, but with more ease and a greater range, I can modify the reality before me[13]. The ease with which I am able to rearrange the data at my disposal leads me to question traditional understandings of reality. A digital image can never provide the same certainty as the direct "emanation" that had led Barthes to invest so much in the *Winter Garden Photograph*.

Perhaps, despite its visual relationship to photography, digital imagery is the antithesis of it. The interesting aspect of digital imagery is its inability to offer proof. It is not that digital imagery lies or misconstrues, but rather that it allows a reconciliation of imagination and reality. There is no reason to expect *veracity* in digital imagery because it is not immured in the same type of physical reality as photography. Although I appreciate this aspect of the medium, I do not try to create an alternative or surrealistic space in my work. Instead, I am interested in the tension between the trace of reality

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[13] The fact that this has enormous repercussions for the information industry, has been much discussed in relation to digital manipulation of press imagery and other images of the mass media. See, for example, Geoffrey Batchen, "Phantasm: Digital Imaging and the Death of Photography;" Timothy Druckrey, "From Dada to Digital: Montage in the Twentieth Century;" Kevin Robins, "The Virtual Unconscious In Postphotography."

that exists in old photographs (perhaps the last of a dying breed), and the element of impossibility that comes with digital imagery.

What is true, and what false in the relationship of my body to the bodies of the women I hold? Is the now of technology more or less real than the now of the past in old photographs? If my hands hold the past in the present, then what is past and what is present to the viewing audience (who must see both as past)? Although I don't often manipulate my images in any obvious way (since I don't want to distract from what is, in my mind, already a profound tension), I hope that these questions hang in the air between my work and its viewers.

fig.2

Chapter 3: the present of absence.

> There has never been anyone else with Proust's
> ability to show us things; Proust's pointing
> finger is unequaled. But there is another gesture
> in amicable togetherness, in conversation:
> physical contact. To no one is this gesture more
> alien than to Proust. He cannot touch his reader
> either; he could not do so for anything in the
> world.
> (Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust,"
> *Illuminations*, 212)

> All the world's photographs formed a labyrinth. I
> knew that at the center of the labyrinth I would
> find nothing but this sole picture, fulfilling
> Nietzsche's prophecy: 'A labyrinthine man never
> seeks the truth, but only his Ariadne'.
> (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 73)

Sometimes, even though its capacity to point is
unequaled, a photograph does not touch, or make intimate
contact with the viewer. Although I am making an analogy
with Benjamin's statement about Proust, I am not trying to
imply that Proust's writing does not elicit a strong
response. I am instead suggesting that this response is
bound up with the act of contemplation. In this chapter I am
looking at a different auratic aspect of photography. In the
rest of this thesis I have set up the aura as a useful and
positive result of a dynamic relationship. In this chapter I
am attempting to explore an equally powerful severing of
relations between the self and other. This separation also
occurs between the self and *itself*, creating what I see as a
valuable destabilizing of the subject.

Many photographs exist which, although they are of
every interest to the viewer, do not *wound* in the Barthesian

sense. These images do, however, offer insight which would otherwise remain hidden. Barthes discovers this in relation to the process of having his portrait taken by a photographer:

> "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. [...] In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. (14)

This paradox is perhaps an inevitability of mechanical vision. The photograph presents Barthes to himself, but as an inanimate image; a cold representation incapable of reaching outside of the image. I am using the term 'cold' to refer to what does not interact with the viewer (Barthes, in this case). Cold in this case means that which does not have the aura of life, of subjectivity. Sometimes a photograph is only a photograph.

During the telephone conversation with his grandmother, Proust's narrator does *not* experience this lack of aura. His grandmother's aura was not, in fact, diminished by the telephone, but bolstered by this mysterious apparatus which modified his image of her without destroying it. She was auratic because of the distance that she overcame with the aid of telephony. However, it was the mechanism of *human vision* itself that presented, for the narrator, a cold and alien image of his grandmother. After their telephone conversation he quickly returns to Paris to see his grandmother and close the distance that had emerged between them. His first sight of her was a sudden but fleeting

vision which did not render a resemblance to the one he loved, but produced "a dejected old woman whom [he] did not know" (143). He relates this ocular unveiling to photography, saying "[t]he process that automatically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph" (141-142). I use the term *unveiling* here, not to refer to a 'true' vision of 'reality', but one in which something meaningful has been lost. Proust lost, through this mechanical (human) gaze, a type of love. This is the love that perpetually translates the stories (the lives) of loved ones into its own language.

He goes on to contrast the stilling photographic vision (in which there are no stories, no fantasies) with what we habitually see when looking at loved ones:

> "We never see the people who are dear to us save
> in the animated system, the perpetual motion of
> our incessant love for them, which, before
> allowing the images that their faces present to
> reach us, seizes them in its vortex and flings
> them back upon the idea that we have always had of
> them, makes them adhere to it, coincide with it"
> (142).

Is it that, for Proust, love molds the existence of its object? The narrator says that "every habitual glance is an act of necromancy," just as "each face that we love [is] a mirror of the past" (142). Perhaps this loving gaze actually inhibits the life of its object. Can what is seen in the past, seen as the past, exist simultaneously in the present? Yes, but only in relation to its pastness, and to the one who sees and creates it. If the everyday act of looking at a loved one is suffused with a magical force strong enough to sustain or recreate the past, then what gifts can technology bring to that vision?

In the cold light of photographic vision, the narrator's grandmother is momentarily ripped from the past

(from his ideal of her, his love for her). In a sense she dies in this process by becoming a stranger to him. It was a "cruel trick of chance" that allowed this fleeting vision which, in turn gave him a clear, detailed, and unbecoming view of a crazed, old stranger-woman (142). However, this stranger was no stranger, but one he knew well. His photographic vision had not, in fact, murdered his grandmother, but had only stilled the actions of his love for her which had, up until that point in time, forced her into the mask of his beloved memories. The gift of technology, in this instance, was to free his grandmother (and himself) from his need for her.

I am tempted to interpret this momentary vision as a variation of the Barthesian punctum. The narrator's telephone conversation had created, in his mind, a phantom: his grandmother lonely and aging in his absence. He had never, until that moment, thought of her as existing apart from their interactions. But this phantom of his grandmother does not take full form, does not touch him with its otherness, until he sees her *as in a photograph*. What he sees rushes at him through the fog of the everyday and wounds him, not by piercing, but by the hard slap that awakens one from a dream state. However, unlike Barthes's wound, which lingers leaving a lasting scar, the sting from the slap that the narrator receives lasts only a moment after the shutter has been released.

Barthes finds his mother in the *Winter Garden Photograph* through her *air*. In it he even finds "a sentiment as certain as remembrance" (70). That Barthes modeled his punctum, at least loosely, on Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, is glaringly apparent[14]. However, this shocking sight of the

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[14] For a clear outline of Barthes's indebtedness to Proust, see the article "Looking Back," by Beryl Schlossman.

narrator's grandmother is not a memory, involuntary or otherwise. It is an insight that forcefully severs their connection, changing their relationship forever. Proust's narrator loses his grandmother through a vision that is as certain as photography, but contains nothing of the remembrances he succumbed to during their previous telephone conversation. On the contrary, it seems to foreclose on the possibility of remembrance altogether.

It is important to point out that the narrator's vision in this instance is similar to the photographic process, not the photograph itself. Unlike a photographer who is left with an image to cherish (or sell), the narrator snapped the shutter of his eyes and then saw no more. He was, at that moment, not photographer but *camera*. It is the distancing perspective that is spoken about in this scene, not the animating *air*. The *air* of a photograph cannot be detected until it has been brought to light and inspected. But the perspective itself comes from a removed position: a fragmenting vision similar to peering through a optical lens. Unlike Barthes, who defines himself as spectator, Proust's narrator is, not operator, but one who is operated (on) by the cruel hand of chance.

The comparison of Barthes's vision of his *Winter Garden Photograph* to Proust's narrator's photographic vision of his grandmother seemingly ends in a antithetical relationship. Barthes's defines a personal connection with the object: an intimacy that comes with interaction and a bridging of temporal and spatial distance. Proust's describes an impersonal, mechanical view that heightens awareness but imposes distance, and closes down all memory and understanding because of its vivid representation. This is the important difference between an auratic image and one that casts only a cold, informative light.

However, one very important thing was understood in Proust's moment. The narrator understood that his grandmother had an existence outside of himself, and although it was a sad and ugly one at that moment, it was just as true as the grandmother that existed within him. The narrator describes this brief exorcism and the veils that lifted during this process:

> "I for whom my grandmother was still myself, I who had never seen her save in my own soul, always in the same place in the past, through the transparency of contiguous and overlapping memories, suddenly [...] for the first time and for a moment only, since she vanished very quickly, I saw, sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, vacant letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, [...]" (143).

All of the narrator's speculations about the mysterious workings of the telephone halt at this moment. No longer can he imagine a sorceress who conjures up "his grandmother or his betrothed in the act of turning over a book" (134). His wishes have been fulfilled by a stark photographic vision, one that Barthes says "*fills the sight by force.*" He adds that "in it nothing can be refused or transformed" (91). Barthes is right in this instance, nothing that the narrator sees can be refused, and nothing could be attached to it: not hope, not love. In this passage, not even the narrator's memories of his grandmother can be captured by the stark light of the flashbulb. They are what exist, and what must remain, outside of the frame. They also dwell outside of vision, because vision (often) operates from deep within a complex realm of memories.

All photographs 'fill the sight by force,' but they are also auratic. And for an aura to exist, there must be an interaction between subjects: animate and inanimate, past

and present. In order for an auratic experience to take place, the viewing subject must (as Benjamin says) bestow upon the other the ability to gaze back[15]. For the Proust's narrator, not only was the moment of the exposure of his grandmother's frailty not auratic, it actually gave him the ocular position of an observer. His mind snapped a photo *before* she could focus her 'slightly crazed eyes' on his. And at that moment he was uncaring, removed, distant. As she was unaware of his presence, she could not engage his photographic stare, an action which would have presumably burned through the mechanical apparatus that had momentarily replaced his mind, eyes, soul. Not only does the subjectivity of a photograph rely on its relationship to the viewer, it also depends on the photographed subject's relation to the camera at the moment of exposure. It is the camera that they must bestow with the ability to return their gaze, the camera that they must engage.

In portraiture, it is the look of the sitter that is important. This look includes both the sitter's gaze at the camera (in forward looking shots), and their general *air* which Barthes deems responsible for "mysteriously contributing to the face the reflection of a life value[16]." The gaze itself, however, is a sort of lie. What are they looking at, those sitters who gaze into the blackness of the lens? There is nothing but the lens itself which cannot hold their interest, inspire love or hate, or bring about any feeling at all. I suggested previously that the sitter returns the 'gaze' of the camera, after having invested it with a sort of subjectivity. But what can they be trying to

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[15] I explain Benjamin's notion of the aura in this context more thoroughly in chapter 1.
[16] This quote is actually placed in the context of a question, but one which he goes on to affirm: "I have been photographed a thousand times; but if these thousand photographs have each missed my air (and perhaps, after all, I have none?), my effigy will perpetuate (for the limited time the paper lasts) my identity, not my value" (110).

communicate to the camera? If it is anything at all, it is in an attempt to produce a 'good' likeness of themselves. And if no communication is attempted, then why is it that they so often look as if they would like me to know something about them? Can a sitter return the gaze of the camera without attempting to communicate, without expecting or desiring anything in return? Although I am sure that this is so in some cases, it is tempting to think that in other cases the subject's mind stretches past the camera lens to the eyes of whomever will be gazing back at some point in the future. Perhaps I am misreading the look, and it is, as Barthes says about the young boy in a Kertész photograph who seemingly looks at him with "lacerating pensiveness," that in fact, "he is looking at nothing; he *retains* within himself his love and his fear" (113). Perhaps their looks, like that of the boy, come from their inability to express (confess) anything in the absence of someone who cares.

Sometimes *only* a photograph is a photograph. That is to say that photographic vision is uniquely enlightening. The vision revealed by an observer's perspective does not correspond to an auratic effect, but the distance needed, demanded by that vision does. It is the sudden realization of separation that is auratic in this instance. What is seen (or pictured) is less important than what is learned from the act of seeing it. For Proust's narrator, learning that his grandmother was aging and sick was indeed important information, but perhaps more important was the shocking realization that she was not who he had previously imagined her to be.

I am interested in what I see as Proust's division of

what can and cannot be reproduced in a photograph. What cannot be reproduced is either emotion or memory. What can be reproduced is generally bereft of any connection to normal vision (which falls under the sway of both emotion and memory), but demands attention precisely because of its disconnected state. What can be produced is otherness. For Proust's narrator it was his grandmother who momentarily appeared as other. But this can also occur when seeing oneself in a photograph. A photograph has the ability to bring a person face to face with themselves because it is a photograph and not an individual, a reproduction not a unique being.

In order to look oneself in the eye, one has to be in two places at the same time. A photograph of a person may exist in the same space and time as that person, functioning as would a mirror. But that same photograph is also tied to a previous time (the moment of exposure), a time that the person has left behind. Looking at oneself 'face to face' in a photograph, what is seen is not only a copy of oneself, but also one's separation from oneself through time as well as space. No matter how strong the subject's urge to "take possession of the object[17]," it is in the end impossible because of the temporal distance that separates the two. And yet it is this very distance that makes it possible to face oneself in this way.

In a mirror image, the subject is not estranged from their actions as is the case in photography. Barthes raises this point when he describes how strange he felt when he encountered an unfamiliar photograph of himself:

> One day I received from a photographer a picture
> of myself which I could not remember being taken,
> for all my efforts; I inspected the tie, the
> sweater, to discover in what circumstances I had

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[17] Benjamin says this in relation to the process of destroying the aura in a "Short History of Photography."

worn them; to no avail. And yet, *because it was a photograph* I could not deny that I had been *there* (even if I did not know *where*). This distortion between certainty and oblivion gave me a kind of vertigo, something of a 'detective' anguish [...] I went to the photographer's show as to a police investigation, to learn at last what I no longer knew about myself. (85)

Barthes discovered, through a single photograph, that he did not know himself completely. He found that what photography attested to, what it certified as truth, was a past which was lost to him. In coming face to face with himself, he was presented with a 'distortion between certainty and oblivion,' an aberration that intrigued him, precisely because of his loss of self in the certainty of the image. But the certainty of a photograph is of nothing other than presence. "Photography never lies: or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious, [but] never as to its existence" (Barthes, 87).

Although I experience, in my work, a constant feeling of distortion, of vertigo, it is not because (like Barthes) I am more certain of the image than my own memories (knowledge) of myself. Looking *back* at my hands in the images I produce, it is not a spatial terrain I survey, but a temporal one. Despite knowing where and why my hands were pictured, feel a disassociation to what I know is my own body. It is an estrangement from touch and from action, even though I can see my hands rubbing, grasping, pressing in the images I have made. I cannot, however, re-experience those sensations. They produce no body-memories. And I, looking at my finished works, stand inactive and silent, situated an eternity away from those productive moments. But what of the photo-portraits that are retained by my distant hands? They are twice removed from any present viewer, twice captured,

twice exposed, but the lives of those women lingering on the page are not represented here at all.

My vertiginous perspective does stop at the sight of my hands (myself). I try, not now knowing what my hands knew, forgetting the *impossibility* of knowing that stranger in the portrait, to see past this image I have created to one that was made by the photographer. My hands in their desire, in their greed, in their wisdom, have concealed much of the effigy of the photographed woman and left little with which to find her (that stranger with whom my hands are now more intimate than my eyes). There is so little to go on if what I should want is information, but so much if what I want is to remember. Of course this cannot involve remembering her, for how can I if *she* is only ever a stranger?

The memory here is of distance, the distance from her to her portrait and the separation she must have felt, as well as the distance between what my eyes saw and my hands felt while trying to locate something that could not exist on a smooth sheet of photographic paper. There is also the distance between me and her, and me and me. All of this is experienced in the space of 1 inch, where only fragments of both portrait and hand can be seen (*fig. 3*). Does the fact that it is repeated a hundred times over change the measure of what can be learned? Does it count that here there is a swell of stomach under white cotton, and over there is the edge of an eye behind the edge of my finger? Do these details *add up*? In my mind they never could, are not meant to. And yet the numbers are important, not to build up to a larger number or a greater sum of knowledge, but to increase the distance itself. Walking in circles gets you nowhere but further from *when* you began. Likewise, this work is likely to get the viewer only further from where they began.

fig.3

Conclusion: presenting absence.

I am holding an example of technological kitsch. It is a 3-D photograph of my mother accepting an award at some convention. This snapshot has captured her looking off, obviously engaging the look of someone who stands just outside the frame. Although I don't know the exact date of this image, I know that the woman pictured in it is just about to become terminally ill. She seems too old for her years and I can foresee her pain. In this photograph the 3-D technology has almost succeeded in effacing my mother. It is not her but the podium she leans on that seemingly breaks the two dimensional constraints of the image. It appears to protrude, all angles and points, and the vertical blinds in the background glimmer like a mirage, but my mother seems smaller and less alive because of all this wizardry. I do not enjoy remembering my mother at this point in her life unless I can remember *something* that will penetrate my vague and dismal memory of that time. And this image, despite its wizardry, gives me no such magical vision.

I keep this photograph on the table beside my computer. I have inserted it into an old fold-out frame, covering one of the original three portraits of my mother taken on the occasion of her university graduation. I keep it there to stop the feelings that nevertheless cloud my mind when I gaze at this other version of my mother. She is twenty years old and she is beautiful. In one photograph I can see the face of her mother, and in another my sister's smile. In the central image there is only the hint of a smile on her lips as she stares off, and I imagine she is pondering her future. I have fallen in love with this image. Here the devotion I feel for my mother intersects the desire I feel

for this beautiful young stranger. Here I yearn.

Miniature photographic worlds that are very real and yet never existed, or were real and yet don't exist, serve as my connection to an understanding of memory. This memory is not about containment or commemoration, not about imprinting or instilling. Instead it is about other people's memories mingling with memories I used to cling to but have since lost, and memories I wish I had, should have, but can't procure. These include memories that my mother must have had (about me) which died along with her, as well as those I have about her which will die soon enough. This understanding concerns the strength involved in the effort of remembrance, and the shock of remembering (or forgetting) against one's will.

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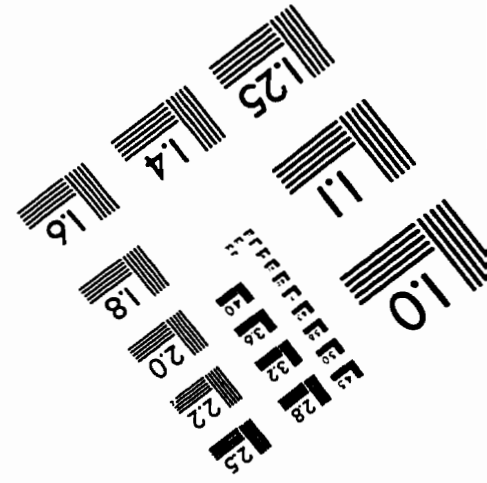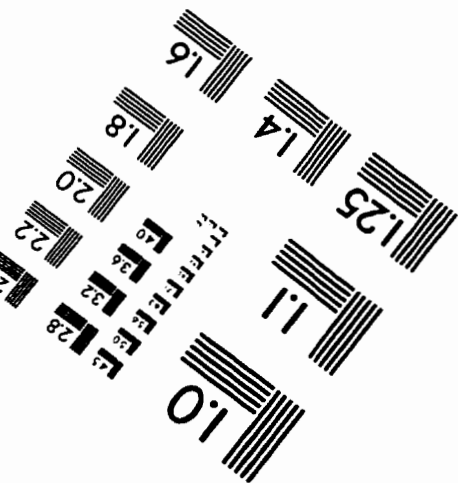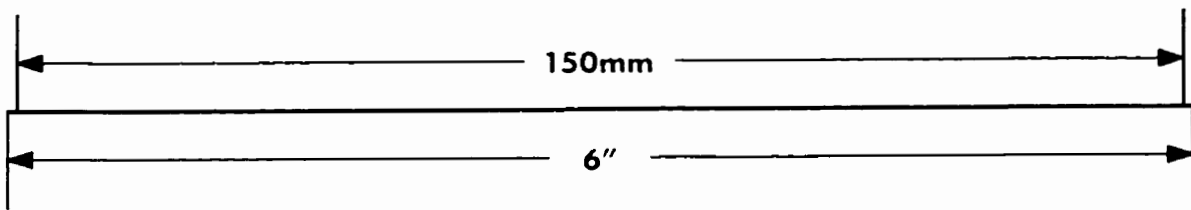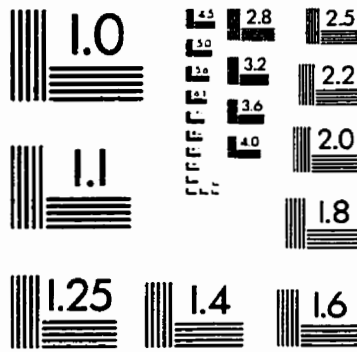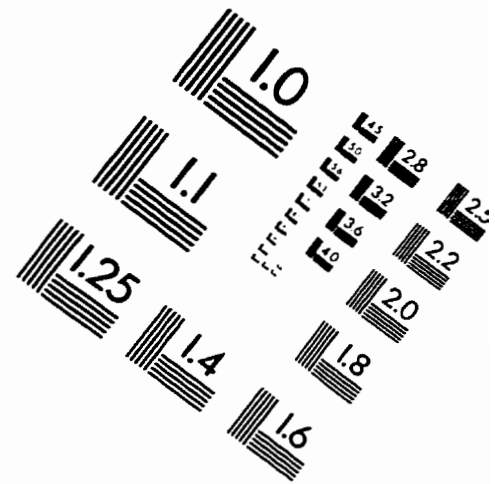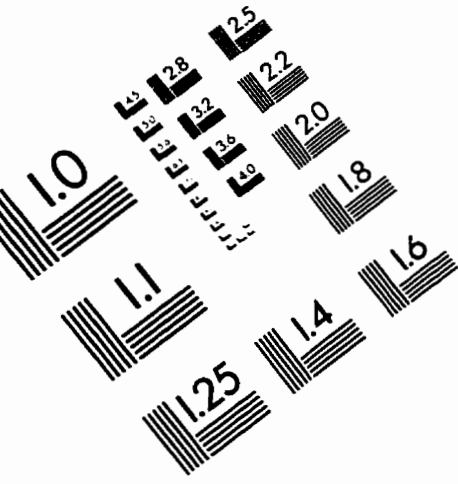   Field of vision. New York: Routledge, 1996.

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