

Figures

Fig.1

A distance of five meters is an opacity. In the sparsely populated foyer our line of site is clear, no one stands in our way, our eyes meet, but the gaze doesn't lock. From this distance—though I am looking straight at you, and you are looking at me—I cannot see your pupil drag backwards as it catches onto mine. I do not see the tautening of your jaw and setting of your lip. And you do not see me. At two meters apart this would have counted as a meeting and a disaster. If we'd glanced at each other from a greater distance, you looking down from the second floor walkway at me in the queue for the café. Or me seeing you descend the cylindrical staircase, while I took the main concourse, that would have been scenic. At five meters the architecture of the public archive re-distributes us. The middling distance swallows up our individualities and we are made part of the machinic logic and institutional form of the library. You are miniaturised by the lobby, like a nineteenth-century explorer photographed in a new territory. The body transformed into a referential instrument that proves the scale of the enterprise and the discovery.

Fig.2

Taken as its basic components the camera is simply a space for light to pass through. The most rudimentary photographic device, the pinhole camera, doesn't even require a lens and can be made from any variety household or commercial goods. The pinhole camera is differentiated from the camera obscura— a technique used since the prehistoric period, and by painters and draftsmen since the 1450s— via the possibility of chemically fixing the image. The principles of both devices are the same: an apparatus which organizes the observable world in a contained space, to reproduce it as an image. Photography had a stuttering birth; Louis Daguerre secured his patent for the first fixed chemical photographic process from the French government in 1840. But the daguerreotype was the product of multiple chemical-mechanical experiments conducted in the middle of the nineteenth century, including those by Daguerre's onetime collaborator Nicéphore Niépce, who died before Daguerre received his patent and whose son challenged Daguerre's right to it. Both by definition and

period of influence the daguerreotype has a narrow and specific identity. Made on silver plates, they were expensive, their chemical structure unstable, and by the 1860s the daguerreotype's popularity had been surpassed. "Photography" still describes a continuum of practices from Daguerre's plates to digital image-making. As a system of measurement and documentation photography has a promiscuous history and contestable paternity. It is a porous institution.

Daguerre's *Munich Triptych* (1839) presented to the King of Bavaria in an attempt to acquire patronage, consists of three silver plates, two images of the Boulevard Du Temps in Paris and one in-studio still life featuring plaster casts and reliefs amongst other decorative objects. The daguerreotypes, themselves image-objects, show the street and the studio, liveness and artifice, the capture of movement and the framing of detail. Three calling-card demonstrations for the potential of the new technology. A lesser discussed image made by Daguerre in the same period, *Shells and Fossils* (1839) shows a marine life and its remanence arranged on shelves. Shell are exoskeletons, the positive remains of crustaceans that can be native to our geological epoch, while fossils are the negative impression of extinct species. In Daguerre's image they are lined up with no caption to disclose the ordering system. The fossils, made through sedimentary compression, contain millennia of geographic movement, and are placed next to a shell or piece of coral which may only be years or decades old. Without explanation or specification these inhuman timescales are organised by the exposure time of the daguerreotype into a processional equivalence. Distance and depth made opaque by the illuminating light of the camera.

Here we have Daguerre as an ironic Prometheus. Ironic and pragmatic, a scientist and a businessman, and the aesthetic qualities of the early daguerreotypes are the symbolic currency of his invention. The positive-negative dialectic of photographic production is inscribed in the dark, hollow, geometry of the fossils, and the static image promises a world with no human hand inside or outside of the photograph. In this image the future of mechanisation begets the prehistoric, time bent backwards by the camera's attention. But this is a dramatic fiction, someone aligned the marine life, someone built the shelves; and someone, who we know to be Daguerre, developed the photographic process, clicked the shutter, and secured the patent. This image of the geological abyss is firmly a product of the nineteenth century, anchored by the colonizing and categorizing ambitions of the age.

Writing on Cézanne's *Montagne Sainte-Victoire seen from Château Noir* (1900-04) TJ Clark described the mountain-view as equally "dreamlike and machinelike." (*If These Apples Should Fall: Cézanne and the Present* p.115) The invention of photography is often thought of as crisis point for painting; but in Clark's lifelong engagement with Cézanne, the mechanical documentary function of the camera, and other late nineteenth-century technologies, emerges as a crystalline and reflective system which enabled new aesthetic categories. *Dreamlike and machinelike* enchanted and at the same time industrial. For Clark, the aesthetic is "a moment of adequacy of form and content" (p.118) and "Crystalline does not mean *dead*." (p.135)

Fig.3

The studio still life included in the *Munich Triptych* shows two cast of angel's head which are made from stucco plaster, a mixture comprised of sand, water, and lime. Lime is a calcium oxide, it's the white chalkiness of lime that gives stucco its colour and almost creamy consistency. Calcium oxide is the by-product of a primal process of sedimentation of compressed marine life. The silent, celestial angels in Daguerre's image were moulded out of fossils and shells, digested waste-matter from the material world. They are also mass-produced objects, bourgeoisie object d'art arranged in a charming fashion amongst other such decorations, photographed through a glass lens. Glass and chalk, one describes form in light the other in muffling density. In this image they collaborate to picture the truest process of calcification, bourgeoisie consumerism.

Documentary style was not widely theorised until John Grierson's writing on Robert Flaherty in the 1920s. The subsequent development of specifically politicised documentary practices in Europe, the US, Soviet Union, Japan and elsewhere gave form to truth telling function associated with photography today, as well as to the adjoining anxieties that the photograph lies. But early photography's proto-documentary function can be seen in the material equivalence drawn in Daguerre's entrepreneurial demonstrations. In the contemporary art world, the primacy of the installation shot has created its own sub-genre of still-life-with objects, and the ubiquitous and generic style of these images has birthed its own branch of criticism. Clark's word for the joiner of form and

content in a plausible and compelling aesthetic is *adequacy*. Perhaps what photography is most adept at documenting is its own limits and capacity in a given age.

Fig. 4

Measurement is a process of triangulation, between two objects and one referent. The most enduring tool of measurement might be our attention. The analytic method, critical, scientific, mechanic, bisects in order to enlarge. The gallery displays and defines value, the archive categorizes in hierarchies of significance. The incidental made institutional by human labour, Dependent on our attention, which frequently philanders. Bored by my own work on the history of photography, I left the reading rooms of the archive to sit in the foyer. That's when I saw you from five meters away. In a sense of panic brought on by both the potential for and failure of recognition, I began to worry the overhang on my nail. Pulling at the raggedy bit of dead flesh while I considered the outline of your body, which at another time I knew so much about, but now is not much more than a silhouette. Taking in the architecture and moving between the specificity of my bleeding cuticle and comforting indifference of a public building, I am pleasantly distracted. When I look back you have moved, you're on the mezzanine, then the stairs. You pause, check your pockets, and head out to the street, using the main entrance.

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