

Doubles, Echoes, and Multiple Selves (Michelle DuBois in Fragments)

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“Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.” Susan Sontag made this claim in her legendary book on photography, published in 1977 while Michelle Dubois was finding her way in Asia (1). But do photographs seem to be more forthcoming or less when their numbers multiply in a given context, say, as portraits double up and replicate before your eyes? If you see the same woman again and again, in almost identical poses, where does your mind go and what comes to pass with the repetitions? Do they translate directly to more reliable deductions or set fantasy loose like a flock of birds? Or might it lead, I suppose, in a more banal manner to boredom and fatigue?

A small case study often helps, so consider the various self-portraits that Michelle DuBois made in the bland style of a passport photo. (We all know the type: head and shoulders neatly framed; a serious expression). One nearly identical pair of black-and-white prints shows our protagonist as a blonde wearing a ruffled shirt with a flower pattern. Another pair of photographs, in color this time, finds her with dark, shaggy hair instead as she stares out through round, red eyeglasses. Within each set, the coupling of similar images raises the possibility of teasing out meaningful differences. Comparing one modest pair of portraits to the other, however, leads to more sensational ideas. Maybe that dark-haired version is just a costume for DuBois’ passing amusement. But it could also be a disguise, proving this woman’s on the run. Then again, perhaps it is a more a genuine expression of identity after all: the declaration of a new look, a new persona, a whole new self.

The fact that these particular photographs mimic the style of a government ID — or perhaps they were actually made for official use — situates them in representational territory where one fixes identity in place. Aesthetic negotiations in that context have practical and legal implications. Warm expressions of individuality bow to the somber exigencies of state surveillance... All of a sudden, DuBois’ demeanor in the dark-haired portrait looks knowing and deadpan. Her face is just a little *too* blank, like this is all some kind of subversive joke. Now all her other

photographs, colored by these suspicions, start to radiate their own strange heat. One after another they start to read like a teasing challenge to the eventual observer, whether that happens to be a stamp-wielding officer at an airport in the eighties or someone like you or me a few decades after that. "Who do you think I *really* am?" the pictures seem to ask. I can only reply, "I'm not sure, but I'm curious to know." The temptation then is to pour over the doubles and scrutinize the similar clusters of pictures until answers emerge. Are two photographs better than one? Is a full-blown archive best of all? Maybe one photograph *can* reasonably stand in for all the others like it. Maybe these photographs are largely interchangeable, since many of them are almost the same. But there's clearly more to it than that. The dynamics of the encounter, at the very least, shift as the numbers grow.

2 //

"Each of us is several, is many, is a profusion of selves," Fernando Pessoa wrote in the early 20th century. "In the vast colony of our being there are many species of people who think and feel in different ways." (2) This idea shaped the Portuguese author's literary output over his lifetime, which he wrote using a variety of heteronyms (a different name and persona, each with its own distinct biography, outlook, and style). Considering this fragmented sensibility, there are conspicuous parallels between Pessoa and the woman we know as Michelle DuBois — just one of many names she assumed during the 1970s and '80s. But as I pour over DuBois' immense collection of self-portraits, as reworked by artist Zoe Crosher, one of Pessoa's books in particular comes to mind. *The Book of Disquiet*, published after his death, consists of nearly five hundred short fragments in which the author's stand-in circles repeatedly through his own mind and feelings, his waking dreams, the existential maneuvers of his daily life. As Richard Zenith writes in his introduction to a recent edition, "If Pessoa split himself into dozens of literary characters who contradicted each other and even themselves, *The Book of Disquiet* likewise multiplied without ceasing, being first one book and then another, told by this voice and then that voice, then another, still others, all swirling, uncertain, like the cigarette smoke through which Pessoa, sitting in a café or next to his window, watched life go by." (3)

There are notable differences, which are hard to ignore. DuBois clearly enjoys

sex a lot more than her celibate counterpart, and she was a restless traveler in a way that the writer, firmly grounded in Lisbon, might not have understood. Maybe hardest to reconcile, photographs themselves have a different life than words. But if her output will never map smoothly onto Pessoa's, DuBois seems to share a similar impulse to scrutinize herself, to look again and again and set down some kind of never-ending record. She's caught up in a "pathological production", as Pessoa put it. In both cases, we're left to pour over the outcome of an ongoing process that's controlled and irrepressible, purposeful at its heart but more or less impossible to regulate and reckon with. Even as the creator-cum-subject ages over time and the daily outcome shifts in kind, even as something later brings these activities to an end, the larger endeavor remains forever fragmented and unfinished.

3 //

Earlier this winter I happened across a photo-album in a thrift store and spent the better part of an hour sifting through one sequence in the middle. Removing individual photographs, small with rounded corners, from sticky plastic sleeves, I eventually began idling over the handwritten captions on the back. *1978, Estes Park...* a driving journey through the mountains. What drew me to them initially however was that the left half of every picture was obscured by a white haze, a camera glitch like a sudden blindness that the original owner simply shrugged off. Somebody chose to keep these imperfect images, with their recurring flaws and guarded secrets, in the neat rows of this album for the next thirty years.

What the photographs brought to mind, as I crouched on the carpet of the cluttered shop, was how generations of casual photographers have used the camera to mark their movement through the world. That particular set of pictures happened to describe a literal journey, played out in scenic overlooks and side-view mirrors, but two women float in and out of the frame as well, the predictable, self-designated protagonists; these photographs were just an excerpt, naturally, from a larger story years and years in the making. Speaking for the predominant Euro-American traditions at least, we trace our way in images; our individualized biographies, presumed to be continuous and coherent, are anchored in photographs. Not only do we anticipate how we'll appear in pictures and present ourselves accordingly, there's a tendency to edit out the less-than-ideal depictions after the fact, to hone and

delimit our own stories by ditching the out-takes. The unusual set of clouded-over photographs in front of me, given their blatant, recurring flaws, felt like the exception that proves the rule. (These common practices are also tied up with the developments of photographic technology, but we'll leave that story for another day.)

Are Michelle DuBois' photographs really that different from any other collection of personal snapshots — from, say, those thrift store photos, which date from right around the same time? The answer, somewhat obviously, is yes and no. Most of DuBois' pictures, when viewed one by one, are fairly ordinary, but as Zoe Crosher ushers us through the accumulation of images, my suspicions start to grow that there's an alternate logic at work here. DuBois' personal archive swells with nearly identical pictures. Some of them were evidently made on the same day as others, linked visually by a single setting or the same black dress. Others yet play out repeated gestures across the years. This aggregation, in the end, doesn't consolidate a biographical narrative so much as send it splintering off in different directions.

The conventional photo album's vital arithmetic is that of addition, with each picture bolstering the ones before and continuing the trajectory with occasional twists and turns. The standard "life in photos" is structured around a gradual process of unfolding. DuBois' photographs, in contrast, seem to embody a more diffusive mindset, a method of multiplication. Continual reiteration, or theme-and-variation, takes precedence over the usual sense of progression, even if clues to her biography still surface here and there. It's a widening whirlpool rather than a rushing river. Swirling surface trumps forward movement and the photographic act itself seems paramount without too much regard for external events. And with the exception of a few underexposed negatives or off-kilter compositions, it's not easy to tell which pictures would be out-takes and which would be the keepers. As you can see, she kept them all.

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Despite her air of self-assurance and the occasional whisper of self-parody, one can't assume DuBois herself holds the answer to every mystery. If you scan through her photographs it's hard to overlook how she repeats certain poses, picture after picture

and year after year. Many of them are familiar, reminiscent of countless calendar girls, starlets, or other cultural templates that rumble around loosely in the brain. Adorno and Horkheimer long ago observed how the culture industry invites identification with its stars and its stereotypes, gestures, and narratives (4). In her book *Prosthetic Culture*, Celia Lury revisits these ideas for an era in which the “publicity of the private” has become a new social value. In a chapter analyzing how photography generates narratives of identity, she writes, “In participating in the regulation of this social value, the subject draws upon models of the private, the immediate, the interior, derived from the public, the mediated, the exterior. In doing she is drawn into a process of *stylized* repetition or iteration” (5). This would appear to encapsulate DuBois’ actions pretty neatly: her own self-portraits are obviously stylized repetitions of familiar poses, drawn from a cultural reservoir. Beyond the presence of recurring motifs, DuBois’ personal archive attests to a kind of cultural doubling on the level of the body, activated through imitation and repetition.

While DuBois was traveling in Asia at the end of the 1970s, camera close at hand, Cindy Sherman was producing her *Untitled Film Stills* in New York. Some of DuBois’ self-portraits bear an uncanny resemblance to Sherman’s photographs, as Crosher has pointed up in certain exhibitions. Setting aside differences in context and intention, on a deeper level the photographs of both women conjure up a fraught nexus where a sense of identity-as-performance entangles with an insinuating awareness that culture constructs the self. At first Sherman made “six pictures showing the same blond starlet at different points,” Molly Nesbit describes, but “later Sherman took her shots and her characters one by one. She arrived at them by poring over books about the movie idols of her childhood, unfocusing her memory and trying from that blurred point to embody the increasingly distant reflection.” (6). This sounds like a more deliberate, conscious version of what one can imagine was going on in DuBois’ head, a critical dramatization of a prevalent mental process.

Conceived as film stills, Sherman’s photographs suggest interruptions of melodramatic narratives; her female characters are always isolated, waiting for something to happen or reacting to some unseen incident, as Lury observes in own her comments on Sherman’s work (7). By framing moments of anticipation from movies that never existed, the *Untitled Film Stills* make the viewer complicit in the scene, underlining how notions of the feminine are consolidated in terms such as vulnerability and passivity — with an underlying joke at the expense of those who

might simply find the images sexy. Unlike Sherman, DuBois didn't create her photographs for the public eye, so her motivations are more enigmatic; the viewer she anticipated was most likely only herself and her companions at the time. But, even if one assumes that the person clicking the shutter was one of her male associates, DuBois is always in control and setting the terms. Even with their stylized repetitions, DuBois' photographs read as small expressions of agency. Privileging the self in the moment, she favors the fragmented logic of collage over a conventionalized narrative, with all its comforts and constraints (8). Sifting through DuBois' self-portraits the ground shifts beneath your feet as the images pile up: any single photograph (with its pose a shorthand for sex appeal) is voyeuristic and open to a possessive gaze; but her self-portraits as they repeat amount to a nonstop assertion of the self (whoever she may be), insistently embodied and projected outward.

5 //

"A portrait holds a corporeal imprint of the person that it draws and redrafts, or that it photographically 'designs' for viewing," Giuliana Bruno writes. "In a way, the portrait presents a 'map' of character. It makes a chart of the flesh. The self-portrait is a self-made map — a map of the self" (9). What to make then of Michelle DuBois' continual self-mapping, this one woman's perpetual charting of her own flesh? If DuBois is a cartographer as such, she's devoted to the prospect that redrawing the map might transform the terrain. She's circling the same island, renaming the bays and harbors with every pass.

In her cultural history *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Bruno illustrates how travel, photography, and the siting of sexual difference have long been bound up together (10). In contrast to their male counterparts, female travelers in past centuries often settled into a welcome state of dislocation, which oddly enough sounds familiar here; unlike the male archetype of the traveler, going back to the Odyssey, these women were not traveling in a nostalgic circuit with the ultimate goal of returning home. Of equal note, they were more interested in possessing themselves than in conquering foreign territory, whether figuratively or literally. What this often meant, in the end, was taking control of representational territories instead, specifically one's own image. Bruno later offers the example of

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, traveling in Constantinople in 1717. Montagu not only wrote about her experiences, per the custom, she also made photographs of herself in which she breaks taboos by wearing Turkish clothes, envisioning the concealing attire as a liberating disguise. As Bruno writes, "In an album of views and a transgressive sartorial performance, a new self is being fashioned" (11). Travel created a freer zone of action and a space for a kind of experimental individualism, negotiating notions of gender and the self, not least of all through photographic representations, while absorbing the surrounding culture.

In DuBois' time, travel may not have been considered a man's domain like it was in the age of imperialism, but her wanderings in Asia and her implicit claims for self-portraiture echo the accounts of these female nomads in the past. A handful of DuBois' photographs show her as a teenager, but her photographic habits found a new urgency and form when she finally hit the road. That's when the photographs start to multiply. DuBois even goes one step further than her predecessors by using different names along the way. In this light, the serial quality of her photographs, as it eventually comes to pass, hardly seems aimed at achieving a truer expression of her self, the goal of conventional portraiture since the idea of individuality. Rather than manifesting who she really is, her photographs seem designed to see who she could be. There's something not only experimental but also aspirational in DuBois' efforts. And yet, while her photographs are infused with a certain optimism, this perennial mapping of the self could just as easily describe a kind of lasting sadness as well, one hitched to struggles for self-knowledge and belonging and the human trials of becoming (12).

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Let me voice another suspicion: what makes DuBois' archive fascinating might have nothing to do with these various hypotheses. As tempting as it is to try to decode what DuBois is doing and to pursue the implications as they spiral outwards, these efforts to make sense of the doubles and internal differences don't fully account for the experience of seeing the photographs themselves. "I am, in large measure, the selfsame prose I write," Fernando Pessoa observed. "And so," he went on to say, "describing myself in image after image — not without truth, but with lies mixed in — I end up more in the images than in me, stating myself until I no longer exist" (13). That possibility might apply just as well to DuBois. As we encounter this woman's

photographic record now, long after the dubious fact, she is above all a cipher.

In a way, this allows artist Zoe Crosher to work freely. As Crosher reconfigures various subsets of this unofficial archive and re-photographs different elements, she highlights or even creates various relationships, both contained within the collection itself but also extending to the world beyond it. Sometimes this entails emphasizing groups of almost identical pictures, in a brisk game of doubles. In other cases little thrills arrive in the echoes, like when Crosher alludes to inadvertent similarities with other artists' work or invokes the larger history of amateur photography. DuBois' photographs altogether become their own distinct entity, full of interlocking parts, but this image archive overlaps with numerous other domains on shifting scale, from the individual to society to the history of art.

All the same, "the camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque," as Susan Sontag wrote. With photographs, you get "a view of the world that denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery" (14). What does a single photograph here really tell us about all the others that are almost like it? What does the whole archive actually reveal about DuBois, or for that matter, the mechanisms of culture? Celia Lury reminds us, "As constructs, things are by their very nature partial, and the necessary contextual knowledge of them is also always full of gaps and spaces" (15). DuBois' accumulation of self-portraits, and in turn Crosher's sequence of exhibitions, don't bring us much closer to this person or the truth. Between two similar pictures there is a chasm. In the space between the portraits and the person entire shadow worlds exist. We could say the same for the individual and society as well. But in the end, it's precisely in the gaps that Crosher's artistic venture really operates. These spaces are what give her work its charge and over time they emerge as its hidden subject.

If one couldn't ask for closure, maybe it's best to leave things with Pessoa. Using the name Bernardo Soares, he wrote, "Metaphysics has always struck me as a prolonged form of latent insanity. If we knew the truth, we'd see it; everything else is systems and approximations" (16). Like metaphysics, a belief in photography is still often premised on the hope of securing the truth and not least of all when using the camera to situate the self. Crosher latches on to our vague yearnings to make sense of things and her ongoing work with Michelle DuBois' informal archive mirrors the common recourse to systems and approximations. But she never denies that final inscrutability. Perhaps it's not unlike the photographs I found in my neighborhood thrift store, each partially obscured by a white haze. Someone decided

to keep those images, rather than throwing them away. You can't really see much in them, but that cloudiness itself is rather spellbinding, and even more so as it repeats, one instance after another.

Notes:

- (1) Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, p. 23.
- (2) Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, New York: Penguin Books, 2003, text no. 396, p. 327.
- (3) Richard Zenith, introduction to Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, p. x.
- (4) See for example, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- (5) Celia Lury, *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory, and Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 78.
- (6) Molly Nesbitt, "Without Walls," in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960-1982*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, p. 252.
- (7) Lury, p. 104.
- (8) This quality itself echoes Celia Lury's descriptions of "experimental individualism" as it plays out via contemporary photographic practices, especially those of the family photo album. These practices "are making it possible for an individual to discard old selves, to try on personae and compare the multiplicity of subject-effects of retrodictive self-transformation." Lury adds, "For some, but perhaps not for all, this is an opportunity." See *Prosthetic Culture*, chapter 4.
- (9) Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, New York: Verso, p. 112.
- (10) *Ibid.*, see chapter 2.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- (12) I am indebted to Rachel Furnari for sharing this final insight with me.
- (13) Pessoa, text no. 193, p. 168-9.
- (14) Sontag, p. 23.

(15) Lury, p. 13.

(16) Pessoa, text no. 87, p. 83.