

Violating the Documentary:

Photography's Endgame and the Work of Zoe Crosher

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Photography cannot escape the documentary. Still, photo (light, paper, gadgetry) has often become unstuck from itself, with some images undergoing so many levels of digital or physical manipulation that their connection to the reflected light of the real present, permanently fixed, is tenuous at best. Let the trompe l'œil continue to trompe. Out of either trusting naïveté on the part of our subconscious or a primitive impulse to see what looks real as real, when we look at a photograph, our immediate impulse is to believe its veracity. What you see is what you get.

But this, as we know, isn't always true. In fact, it's rarely true. The first filter on reality is merely the photographer's choice. A camera moves a little to the right or left, and the picture changes; reality is bent, focused, filtered. What you get is what you see.

And we cannot forget the darkroom—or, more likely in the twenty-first century, the digital darkroom. Tones and colors shift and change; unnecessary information is filtered out, shadows added or subtracted; and then there are always outright fictions, for which newsroom photographers lose their jobs and artists are sometimes celebrated. None of us are Pollyannas about darkroom and digital trickery; we've seen and perhaps done enough ourselves, professional for some, amateur for most, at the very least cutting red eyes out of our snapshots. But even though we know this, our immediate impulse is still to believe.

When talking about the medium's capacity for documentary, though, we have to expand our field of vision to include the filtering not only of hardware and logistics but

also of history. Just as hardware and technology has changed how we see through photography, the history of its practitioners, added to their declarations and experiments, has shifted what we look at when we're looking at a photo.

Photography has changed, again and again. It exists in a mercurial continuum. The technology shifts, and the medium moves in another direction, expands. Let's start with an old story. (If you know a lot about photography, this history might be a bit reductive; feel free, educated reader, to skip to the next paragraph.) For millennia, image making, especially mimesis of the world, was the almost universal monopoly of painters and draftsmen. Even in its infantile ambrotypes and daguerreotypes, photography broke that monopoly. The introduction of the Kodak #1 in 1888 democratized the medium somewhat, and with a bit of lashback back towards exclusivity of the medium, some years later the first declaration of "photography as art" arrived with Alfred Stieglitz's organization of the Photo-Secession in 1902. The developments with which painting had grappled for a few centuries were collapsed in photography into a mere thirty years: from the simple capturing of an image, to more traditional views of art (landscapes and scenes mimicking those popular in painting, as in Pictorialism), to formalism with Group f/64 (which included Ansel Adams and Edward Weston), to the avant-garde experiments of Man Ray and all the isms that followed. The medium continued to evolve. Black and white gave way to color. William Eggleston and Stephen Shore brought a deadpan artfulness to the snapshot; the Conceptualists de-skilled it, along with everything else; it had a brief last gasp as New Pictorialism in the hands of large-format photographers like Andreas Gursky, with the crowd and network being the contemporary condition, which was as well merely a component in a relational scene, playfully rendered by Wolfgang Tillmans and with more intentional composition by Catherine Opie. And at the end of that hurried (and as

I said, somewhat reductive) history, we're in the formalist and materialist endgame. A few short clicks, and the technology of photography displaced painting, giving it the existential jitters; now digital technology has replaced photography, which now has its own case of the existential jitters. Photography is collapsing so rapidly even now that this essay might be dated before it's published.

Painting went into its tailspin of existential dread over a century ago; from the birth of photography to the "death of painting" (which must always take scare quotes) we have almost a century. From the introduction of the digital to the current finale of photography, we got less than thirty.

If we take a long look at painting's perceived trajectory, we've more than one hint toward the future of photography. Moving more and more toward material and form, painting finally imploded as a medium somewhere around either Ad Reinhardt's black paintings or International Klein Blue, take your pick. It was only revived by Gerhard Richter's adulterating it with photography, something that was taken up with zeal by Pictures Generation painters, who emerged hand in glove with the medium. But all bets are off with painting; it continues to move, but now neither forward nor back. It has hit the end of its linear progression, the so-called death of painting, and painters are now free to define the medium individually. As John Ashbery famously commented in his 1968 Yale lecture "The Invisible Avant-Garde," "Today's young artist has the additional advantage of a fuller awareness of the hazards that lie in wait for him. He must now bear in my mind that *he*, not *it*, is the avant-garde."

But before painting broke free from its trajectory, it had to go down a hard road toward increasing form and materiality. For photography, the singularity has been reached (a la Ray Kurzweil and Moore's Law). Painting didn't go away with photo, and photo won't go away with digital. After a long, dark teatime of the soul, photo will

emerge like painting, without any rules or schools anymore, just individuals crafting their own avant-gardes. Though George Baker in his 2005 essay "Photography's Expanded Field," published in the journal *October*, picks up on Rosalind Krauss's notion of the expanded field of sculpture put forth in the same journal in 1977, I believe that before photography can expand, it must contract, finish itself off. Some expanded-field practitioners have already touched upon the possibility of the genre breaking its formal moorings. Not only does Stephen G. Rhodes use photo and film in his installations, but the content of his gestures enacts a Beckettian finale. Elad Lassry, continuing a project set in motion by Christopher Williams, transforms stock photographic images into slickly framed objects, each the size of a magazine page. Alex Klein turns photography into a reflection of itself, combined with the far-reaching poetical connotations of a singularly lived culture of images. This is to name only a few contemporary practitioners. *Après le déluge*, there's nothing left to do but keep moving, keep making. These expansive gestures in regards to photography are a little premature, fulfilling more the Conceptualists' de-skilling of the craft than it does the potential of an expanded field. But, I conjecture that an entire shift in the medium is necessary before this can happen, that artists like Rhodes, Lassry, Klein, and, on a different trajectory, Zoe Crosher can lay the foundations for what comes next.

In other words, though the discourse is ripe for breaking, before photography can enter fully into the expanded field, it has to play out its endgame. Photographers and filmmakers, that pseudo-couple, have recently become obsessed with material. Like the filmmakers/artists Erika Vogt and Amy Granat, they erect elaborate projections for expensive and seemingly antiquated film stock when video is much cheaper and easier. Like James Welling, Walead Beshty, and Wolfgang Tillmans, photographers have returned to László Moholy-Nagy's photogram with a different set of contexts. Though

these artists are smart enough to individually frame the material with different language than their predecessors going through the death throes of painting, it amounts to the same: the medium as a trajectory is coming to an end.

Don't shed too many tears for photography; ever since people who work exclusively work with photos started calling themselves artists rather than photographers, the writing was on the wall. This initially had more to do with photography's systematic inclusion in the gallery system, but became increasingly about the medium's blurred boundaries. These boundaries are again being assessed, tightened, for the end is near.

Photography has been democratically flattened by the point-and-shoot, by Conceptualism, by the onslaught of media culture, and now by the digital. Yet in the last twenty-five years all manner of photographic practices have continued unabated. Ultimately, most of the current crop are mimicking the practices of previous photographers. The lineage of the social-critical tradition can be traced from Jacob Riis and Dorothea Lange to, now, Allan Sekula; of the Pictorialists from Alfred Stieglitz to Andreas Gursky. Even though they obviously update it with contemporary scenes, neither Sekula nor Gursky has substantially pushed the conversation of the medium forward. Necessary as social-critical photography may be, especially as mainstream magazines give shorter shrift to serious photo essays, Sekula's work doesn't break new ground. Gursky's snaps are breathtakingly aesthetic (and expensive), but they are merely enacting the same strategies Stieglitz used (see Stieglitz's 1904 photo *Going to the Races* to witness a familiar Gurskyesque tableau). Both Gursky and Sekula, though I could have easily picked others, represent one last backward glance before the whole thing comes to an end.

The transformation of photographic practice since the 1990s as it has grappled with problems of photography in the age of digital reproduction is easily mirrored in the work of Zoe Crosher. From her early intimate snaps of friends at parties, one part Nan Goldin, another Wolfgang Tillmans, both of whom were akin to the immediacy of punk and indie culture and their emphasis on the community in the face of the crushing totality of the mainstream. Crosher's camera shifted in the late 1990s toward a psychic awareness of space, settling around the battered twentieth-century transience, going low-cost in the twenty-first, of the Los Angeles airport. Her aesthetic mode of this period lends itself more to the snapshot index of Eggleston and Shore, and to a certain extent to Dan Graham's *Homes for America* series. The most important aspect of this work is the introduction of the narrative fantasy into these spaces as well as her means of production (driven by a deadpan, reiterative concept) in producing these works.

I'm reminded of Jack Kerouac's stand-in Sal Paradise awakening in a railroad hotel in the Midwest and losing his memory for one frightening and exhilaratingly liberating moment in *On the Road*. Crosher would invite friends and accomplices (myself included for the low-rent excursions) to join her in renting rooms in various hotels and motels surrounding LAX so that she could snap images through the window of planes taking off or landing at the airport. People are never included in this series of photographs, but as much as the space-age vision of flying (embodied by the Cosmic Restaurant, an architecture-as-flying-saucer building flanking LAX) is looking a little tired, so are the hopes and dreams attached to that transit. Integral to the pictures' production was the overnight adventures in motels and hotels with friends. This idea of the personal and international transience has come to full fruition in Crosher's series the *Reconsidered Archive of Michelle duBois*. Not only does the series complete a cycle in Crosher's own work, but it also reflects a potential outcome of photography's first

steps into the expanded field of photography through its distinctive blend of the documentary and imagination. Unlike the staged scenarios of Jeff Wall, these photographs, taken by their subject many years before Crosher started to intervene in their archiving, examine narrative space without imposing on it a cinematographic scenario.

Crosher encountered Michelle duBois (one of many pseudonyms) through channels the artist wishes to remain secret and was immediately adopted by duBois, to whom Crosher bears an uncanny resemblance. DuBois's "adventures" as a prostitute working the Pacific Rim mirror the promise of international transience with a somewhat tragic life.

Crosher's necessary personal connection with her subject and the object of her series continues the importance of informal social networks in her practice. The snapshot is the language of these encounters, and Crosher has long played with the soft textures, candid moments, and deadpan angles of the point-and-shoot, though she captures the vernacular in such a considered manner that its veracity as snapshot is challenged. It's as if Crosher apprehends the moment of emotional exuberance, nostalgia, and competition, with the quiet creep of death always in the background, too aptly to make her work anything less than art.

Everything about this archive is carefully constructed, from duBois's own guises and poses, which range from seeming vacation snaps to headshots of duBois in various obvious and inobvious disguises, to Crosher's presentations (like this book) and arrangement (as they might be displayed on the wall). Crosher's intervention as artist comes in with the material awareness of the photographic archive, which uses some of the tactics of the Pictures Generation artists; but rather being exasperated with the image saturation of media culture, Crosher takes it a step further, examining the effects

of mediation on one very real, very human tragic figure. This strange archive, re-presented in its bracing totality of a lifeconstantly performed, shows the effects of media cultures on an individual.

Michelle duBois documented the various fictional personas of herself. Zoe Crosher is documenting that documentation, in sculptural arrays and poetic re-organizations. Gained in this transmission is a material photography that isn't materialist, a social-critical photography without a political agenda, a documentary that underscores the failure of documentary, the limits at the edge of the camera, the inability of cameras to capture the total sense of reality, how reality itself is ultimately impossible to fully define or is regularly redefined by the fictive impulse.

Photography perhaps needs to be finished off by the New Materialists in the form of artists like Walead Beshty, James Welling, Eileen Quinlan. Photography's future as a medium is over. Photography's future as a medium has yet to begin.

Walead Beshty writes in "Abstracting Photography," his contribution to the online forum-cum-book published by the Los Angeles County of Museum of Art, *Words without Pictures*, that the likely conclusion/new beginning isn't the dichotomy of Pictorialism and social-critical photography but an either/or: "These momentary openings, the pockets between, their ruins, their transitory spaces, their ignored seams and forgotten vistas, promise a site from which the either/or of utopian and apocalyptic thinking—or the political/formalist opposition—can be dismantled, and production can be both symbolic and literal at once." Though Beshty would likely argue with how I conceive of this end of the either/or, I think Crosher's work embodies the potential of a *détente*, both charged with human tragedy unstuck in political economies and a tacit acknowledgment to the texture of material (especially photographic material). It's too soon to declare in this endgame what the aftermath will be, but Crosher offers a



solution, a “last exit,” as Thomas Lawson once called it, speaking of painting, in the October 1981 edition of *Artforum*.

Photography cannot escape the documentary; as painting must always involve paint (no matter how loosely defined), photography is documentary by definition. Whether by composing the snapshot or playing with the chemicals of reproduction, the photographer through their technologies capture light and conjure a document to the event. But this documentary impulse can be perverted, bent, reshaped, at the will of the artist. The photographic space has the world-encompassing potential of the novel, but it has not often been used to its full capacity. As postmodern writers introduced nonliterary texts into the fabric of literature, so has Crosher woven in these found images from a failed archive. They exist in that dangerous (and to me, titillating) zone between the documentary and imagination.

The either/or as one is embodied in Crosher’s handling of the documentary. The idea that started this essay and forever the bugbear of photographic practice is the inability to escape the documentary; but rather than embracing it wholeheartedly or attempting to reject it with visually abstract darkroom procedures, Crosher captures the hazy space between documentary and the imagination. The images and identities are constructed, the archive is an attempt at capturing the multiplicity of duBois as a self-made character. But the attempt is real; the costumes duBois wears and the poses she strikes form the documentation of one person’s kind of madness. Real and not real, both either and or. A violation of the crisp terms of what it means to document, but one that Crosher pick ups on with an astute understanding of how this archive becomes the nexus of a series of interlocking issue about reality (both empirical and constructed), about the history of photography and its relationship to art, about this breakdown of the medium into something new, sculptural, porous. Crosher’s experiment with the

archive of duBois is one way forward past the current endgame in photographic practice.

The archive itself is also an attempt to organize unruly reality, what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has called in a different context “the aesthetics of administration.” The administration is bound to fail; though fail again it must, it can still, in the words of Samuel Beckett, fail better. In a moment when in political terms, reality is regularly constructed as a competing fiction to the empirical (think the entire Bush administration), a valid response is perhaps the philosophically tricky “truth” of fiction, an acknowledgment of the limitations of the documentary, how easily it can be subverted or manipulated, the transparent inculcation of the imaginary into the documentary, an openness about the malleability of fact, which when closed can and has supported new varieties of tyranny. We cannot escape the documentary, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.