

embalming time
photography and memory



November 23, 2007 - March 2, 2008

embalming time

When I was a child, I stared at the full moon, transfixed by its face in (what was then) the dark skies of rural Nova Scotia. What constantly fascinated me was a distinction apart from the beauty of the moon, my understanding of its size, its distance from us, or my wonder at its cyclically changing form. What really held me was the moon's apparent immutability and, in particular, the knowledge that somewhere in the past Elizabeth 1, Copernicus, J. S. Bach and my great-great-great-grandparents (to name an arbitrary few) were all gazing at the very same unchanging sight.

For all of us, indeed for every human who has ever existed, the enduring face of the moon is a common and unfailing sight. As a kid, the moon became my *a priori* talisman; a representation endowed with the power to dissolve the weighty barrier of time into groundless illusion.

I can look at a star on a clear summer's night, say Vega. I'll enjoy and marvel at its light and that of its companions, knowing at the same time that the light creating the star's image is of another time (in the case of Vega, precisely 26 years old). Looking at the star, like gazing at a photograph, is literally to look back in time. Photographs privilege us with this same trans-temporal vantage. A frozen fragment of the past is transported into our present.

A photograph is a set of spatial/temporal coordinates. Unlike earlier imaging systems that produced a fixed image (drawing, painting, printing, sculpture, etc.),

photographs have, as an inherent part of their construction and reading, a correspondence to a single, specific location and time. To state it simply, *photographs are fractured and dislodged traces of the past*. Apparently, a photograph is the resurrection of an instant long-since spent. Like my moon-myth, photographs function as a constant, unchanging link with *before*.

The conductivity of a past time into a personal present is one reason why photography is sometimes (naively) compared to the process of human memory. Unlike our memories, photographs are entities that have been removed from the context of time altogether. Although human recollections are and revised by new experiences (i.e. through our natural continuation along a subjective time-line), the opposite is true of photographs. They are separate and static. Despite the fact that a photograph (like all things) is subject to material decay, its subject (or at least its appearance) has been removed from its original place in space/time, like a line drawn and perfectly quoted in isolation from the setting of an entire book. The photograph's descriptive authority and its apparent certainty, ironically, can work to replace comparably fragile and ephemeral human memories.

Photographs that hold meaning and importance for us are those with which we are moved to lend a context (or if you will, to furnish with a past and a present; replacing them within the flux of a quickened time-line). Such photographs communicate with us in direct response and in proportion to the information that we contribute to their reading. Images of those we love, signs from our younger lives, pictures of people and places once familiar, now gone: these are among the photographs to which we readily offer our most zealous and ardent imaginings.

We work symbiotically with a photograph to create meaning and narrative. Beyond their strength as a fixed link to a past instant, photographs also hold power for us through their connection to their subject (the physical person, place or object that they depict). Early 19th Century discourse emphasized that a photograph was the tangible emanation of its subject; making the subject, in a way, the actual creator of the image. Daguerre (and others, including Fox Talbot) hinted at this by describing photography as not merely *an instrument which serves to draw nature [it] gives her the power to reproduce herself.*

This is a near mystical attribute, comparable to the religious idea of *acheiropoietai* (miraculous images, from the Greek for “made without hands”). After the legendary Shroud of Turin, the most famous Christian example of *acheiropoietai* is the Veil of Veronica, a mythical fabric unto which Christ’s image was transferred when his face was wiped en route to his crucifixion.

Photographs hold social value akin to the religious relic. We have embraced them, for nearly 200 years now, as secular miracles.

Bruce Johnson
Curator



Unsettled #43, Ship Island Near Twillingate
Scott Walden

SIGNS AND SIGNS OF THINGS ARE USED
ONLY WHEN WE ARE LACKING THINGS.

UMBERTO ECO. THE NAME OF THE ROSE

CAMERAS, IN SHORT, WERE CLOCKS FOR SEEING.

ROLAND BARTHES. CAMERA LUCIDA

THE PHOTOGRAPH IS LIFE AND DEATH
PICTURED UTOPICALLY AT ONCE

CAROL MAVOR



Corner Building, Bell and Henry Street
Manfred Buchheit



Unsettled # 36, Indian Burying Place
Scott Walden

DEATH PERVADES THE LANDSCAPE OF PHOTOGRAPHY,
FOR CAMERAS ARE WEAPONS THAT STEAL LIFE AND
MAGICAL MACHINES THAT DEFY DEATH.

PHILLIPE ARIÉS

Memory

Memory (n)
an embroidered cloth bearing the name
of a deceased relative, displayed on a
wall as a memorial
The Dictionary of Newfoundland English

**Photographs allow us to travel without moving.
Near miracles; they collapse space and dissolve time.**

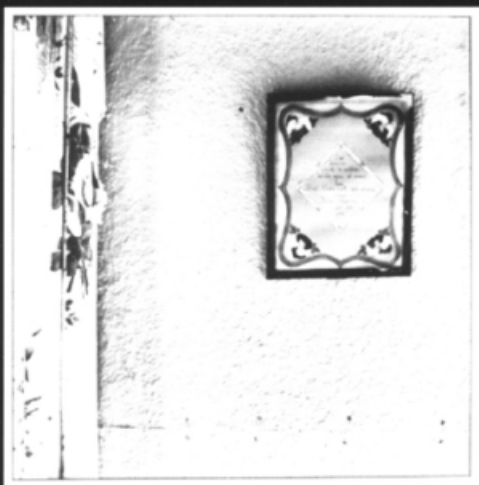
All photographs belong to the past, artefacts of an instant spent. As threads drawn and cut from the larger skein of time, they seduce with a display of magic rules. Each photographic-frame creates a world by removing a precise place from the flux of its surroundings .

This link often brings us to associate a photograph with memory. Unlike human reminiscences however, photographs are entities removed from the continuum of time altogether, alone and unchanging. They are like short quotations taken from an extensive text, sensible in themselves despite their isolation. Looking at them we are moved to extend ourselves, to replace them within a context of our own construction. We work to return them to a quickened time-line, to lend them a story.

In Newfoundland parlance, the word "sketch" means to photograph.* The term is reminiscent of Talbot's famous description of early photography as *the pencil of nature*. Importantly, it also links the act of image-making with a active interaction with the subject. Photographs require this engagement, inviting us each to create the past.

* *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*

*Unsettled #37,
Indian Burying Place*
Scott Walden



Saturday Night
Martin Lyons



Girl Guide - St. John's
Martin Lyons


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Unsettled # 34, Mosquito, St. Mary's Bay
Scott Walden