INDEXICALITY AND THE DEPICTION OF TIME
ON THE RADICALITY OF *VANISHING ZONE*

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Myths of Indexicality

The term indexicality stems from the semiotics of linguist and philosopher Charles S. Peirce, and his categorization of signs into icon, symbol and index[1]. An icon, according to Peirce, is a sign based on resemblance, a symbol is a sign based on normative grounds, and an index is a sign that has some causal relation to the object is signifies.

Indexicality has become a key term in the discourse on photography. It stands to mark the direct relation a photograph has to an outer reality, the way the photographic image is a physical trace or consequence of the world it depicts. The indexical nature of the photograph is challenged time and again by critics who point out that the use of indexicality as the mark of photography, portrays it as passive, while in fact, photographs are the result of an active agent, favoring and singling out a distinct and chosen perspective. We may no longer regard photographs as documentation, but rather as manufacturing, but indexicality remains a key term in the field of photo-theory, for it seems to capture a distinct feature of photography that sets it apart from other forms of art, such as painting and sculpture. The peculiar way in which photography makes use of light (existing light, light that is 'out there') in producing an image is something that simply cannot be denied.

Photography is not only indexical, of course; it is undoubtedly symbolic, in that it builds on norms of interpretation, but much more than that, it is usually hyper-iconic, in that it bears an extreme resemblance to the object it depicts. Yet the iconic nature of the photograph is not separate from its indexical nature; rather we can point to a causal relation between the

[1] See: Charles S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in: *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New-York: Dover, 1955), Ch. 7, esp. pp. 102-3.

indexicality inherent in the process of photography and the iconic nature of the resulting image. In what follows I will refer to this type of indexicality, in which indexicality leads causally to resemblance (icon), as strong-indexicality.

The historical roots of human fascination with strong-indexicality seem to go back to the myths of the origin of painting[2]. While strong-indexicality can hardly be said to be characteristic of painting, it nevertheless stands at the heart of painting's self-image as formed in its origin myths and metaphors. This will be shown by examining two myths that became central to the history and discourse of painting: the myth of Butades' Daughter and the myth of the Veil of Saint Veronica.

The myth of Butades' Daughter tells of a young woman who traced the contour of her lover's shadow on the wall, as he was about to leave for battle[3], thus, according to the myth, giving birth to drawing [fig. 1]. One could say that this myth fits photography much better than it does painting, for the act it describes utilizes light in manufacturing an image based on resemblance, thus exhibiting strong-indexicality. This seemingly passive fixing of shadows and the image produced could be taken to be the first photogram[4] in the history of art [fig. 2].

[fig. 1] Joseph Benoit Suvee, *Dibutades,* or *The Discovery of Drawing*, 1793 (detail)

[fig. 2] Arthur Siegel, *Study of Negative/Positive Profiles*, 1937 (photogram)

The second myth tells of Saint Veronica, who used her veil to wipe the sweat and blood off Christ's face, on his way to crucifixion. Looking at her veil, she discovered an image of Christ's face miraculously imprinted on it [fig. 3]. Just as in the case of Butades' daughter, this myth of the "true image" ('vera-icon'[5]) places strong-indexicality at the heart of painting, portraying painting as a passive act resulting with an image that directly captures an outer reality.

[2] In fact, strong-indexicality can be traced back even further, to cave painting, e.g. Cueva de las Manos ('Cave of the Hands'), Santa Cruz, Argentina.

[3] The source of this myth is Pliny the Elder's account of the origin of painting in his *Natural History* (circa 77-79AD), Book XXXV. On the indexical nature of this myth see: Hagi Kenaan, "Tracing Shadows: Reflections on the Origins of Painting" in *Pictorial Languages and Their Meanings, Liber Amicorum in Honor of Nurith Kenaan-Kedar*, eds. C. Versar and G. Fishof, (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Publishing, 2006).

[4] A photogram is a photograph produced without a camera, by directly exposing the photographic paper or film to a light source.

[5] The name Veronica was considered in Catholicism to be tied with the Latin words 'vera' (true) and 'icon'.

[fig. 3] Hans Memling,
Veronica Holding Her Veil, 1470

[6] Georges Didi-Huberman, "The History of Art Within the Limits of Its Simple Practice", in *Confronting Images* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005), 11-52.

[7] In Rosalind's Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America", *October* 3 (1977):68-81; *October* 4 (1977): 58-77, Krauss points to the role indexicality plays in 1970's art as a consequence of the adoption of the 'photographic model'. It is doubtlessly the case that certain forms of painting, such as Action Painting, are heavily based on indexicality, for the mode of action is taken to leave a trace that points back to the movement or gesture that caused it. It is questionable though, whether this is indeed a case of strong-indexicality, and whether we can justifiably speak of the resulting image as resembling an outer reality, even if we take this outer reality to be the artist's movement itself. I am grateful to Larry Abramson for pointing this reference out to me.

While these two myths played a central role in the history of painting, they do not seem to fit well with (most of) the praxis of painting. In times when painting centered around biblical and mythological themes it surely did not fit; firstly, because the subject matter that appeared in the painting did not correspond to a given reality that the painter had before his eyes, and secondly, because much of these paintings dealt specifically with themes that were beyond perception and depiction, as in the case of painting of the Annunciation to the *Blessed Virgin Mary*[6] and other religious themes. In more recent times, with the modernist emphasis on the active agency of the painter and the resulting abstract mark, one can hardly see how strong-indexicality plays any part in the conception of painting[7].

The fact that these myths played such a central role in the history of art despite this 'inadequacy' can be given varied explanations. For our purposes, let me offer one possible account - these two myths bind index and icon together in a way that seems to express two desires that drive mimetic art in general; the first, to overcome the gap between the real and its representation, and the second, to overcome time, and thus defeat death. The two myths also reveal that these two desires are paradoxical to the end– overcoming the gap of representation in the case of Veronica's veil is only made possible by divine intervention, and in both myths death is surely not overcome; the death of the lover, as well as that of Christ remain vivid facts that are themselves eternalized and constantly reminded to the viewer.

The origins of strong-indexicality and the problems and paradoxes that come with it thus go much further into the history of representation than does the birth of photography. Problematic as it may be, we seem to remain captivated by the strong-indexical scheme; captivated by the possibility of an image that simply allows reality to appear by and in itself, that captures a piece of world and transposes it out of time[8].

Indexicality and Time in Photography

Our present conception of the way that photography relates to time is primarily influenced by straight-photography[9], a form of photography which is a paradigmatic case of strong-indexicality. The peculiar thing about straight-photography is that it seems to capture a single moment in time, to freeze time, so to speak, and transcript a certain reality in its momentary form[10]. Although zero exposure time would not produce an image at all, and so every photograph is in fact produced through some measurable exposure-time, straight-photography makes the viewer feel as though it is timeless; it forces upon him the conviction that it depicts a moment devoid of duration, telling him that things were not this way just before, and will never be the same just after.

Straight-photography thus supposedly functions out of time by capturing a durationless moment, by reducing the present to a temporal vanishing point. There is yet a second sense in which photography defies time; Photography involves the idea of fixing reality in time, and so, as in the case of the abovementioned myths of painting, it too involves the notion that a temporal presence could be given eternal form. The photograph fixes its subject in a way that seemingly enables it to defy time and thus defeat death[11].

These two aspects of the way photography operates find their equivalent in two rival ways of relating to time – time as a succession of momentary, durationless states, and time as eternal and fixed that are characteristic of both ancient and contemporary ontological philosophical debates. In current debates these two positions are given in terms of the A-theory, or presentism, holding that only the present moment exists, versus the B-theory, taking the universe to be a fixed four dimensional block, in which time in its entirety 'already exists.' In both cases, time as it figures in human experience is taken to be an illusion, and the passage of time, time as movement and change remains unaccounted for.

[8] The problems that time poses for strong-indexicality can be linked with the latter's preference of space over time. Although I cannot pursue the issue here, its implications will recur throughout this paper.

[9] I will be using the term 'straight-photography' to relate to any form of 'realistic' photography, including the snapshot, but also other forms of 'realistic' photography that may be premeditated and even staged.

[10] Compare: Janna Lowry, "Modern Time: Revisiting the Tableau", in: *Time and Photography* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), 47-64; Esp. her discussion of Derrida's analysis of photography on p. 49.

[11] The idea that photography overcomes death is complemented by the idea that photography kills. Comments in this spirit appear in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Note that according to Barthes, photography kills precisely because it cannot capture change: "'Myself' never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn… and 'myself' which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp,

The most difficult position, and undoubtedly the least popular stance among philosophers[12], is that which attempts to give due account to the passage of time, to the flow of time as change[13]. Change is illusive and hard to capture. Not only does it flee before we are able to grasp it, but it is the medium within which we live, and thus does not allow for an external viewpoint from which it could be observed and analyzed.

My analysis of straight-photography's relation to time is highly linked to its strong-indexicality, but it is important to note that much of what has been said applies not only to 'realistic' photography. Even when photography rebels against the conception of documenting reality, it is assessed by its measures. Hence, when photography is abstract, it is primarily judged through this abstraction and regarded as a reaction to the all-pervasive strong-indexicality that is photography's ('true') nature. Photography is thus conceived as either indexical or anti-indexical. Indexical when it is 'natural', 'realistic', and relatively sharp. Anti-indexical when it is blurry, vague, or manipulated (digitally or otherwise).

This indexical dichotomy again bears consequence on the way time figures in photography. While the (strong-) indexical photograph paradigmatically captures a durationless moment and transposes it out of time by giving it eternal form, the anti-indexical photograph seemingly operates outside of time (as in the case of extremely abstract or manipulated photography). It is rarely the case that time in its changing, durational, flowing capacity is even considered within photography.

Capturing Change

So how can change be captured? Long exposure time would seem a viable option. When photography was first invented, straight-photography was far from being the paradigmatic form of photography, as technical requirements necessitated long exposures. Daguerre's *Boulevard du Temple* (1838) [fig. 4] can serve here as a demonstration of why I believe long exposure photography does not stand up to the challenge of depicting time as change. This image of Paris shows a frozen city, as only the fixed could be represented in the image, while the moving people and vehicles simply could not be captured[14]. Long exposure photography thus gives precedence to the immobile, it imposes a hierarchy onto the world, where the static is vividly represented, while the moving is smeared, or in this case, erased.

"myself" doesn't hold still, giggling in my jar…" (p. 12); "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…. when I discover myself in the product of this operation, what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person …Death is the eidos of that Photograph " (pp. 14-15). Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New-York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

[12] A notable exception is that of Henri Bergson.

[13] For further reading see: Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will, An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1910); Yuval Dolev, *Time and Realism*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007).

[14] Note however, that the image does depict two human figures (left, on the sidewalk), which apparently stood relatively still throughout the ten minutes exposure time it required.

[fig. 4] Louis Daguerre, *Boulevard du Temple*, 1838
(daguerreotype)

An alternative way of dealing with change in photography is 're-photography.' In *What Photography Is*, James Elkins discusses at length 're-photographic' projects (e.g. David Taylor's *Working the Line*; Zane Williams' *Double Take*, Mark Klett's *Under the Ruins* and others)[15]. The method applied in these projects is parasitic in a sense, the photographer takes hold of a bulk of pictures taken decades ago, by either himself or another photographer, sets out to the original location, reproduces the photographic conditions (e.g. duplicates each photograph's vantage point, lighting conditions and technique), and finally presents the original image and the 're-produced' image side by side. The differences found in the images that comprise each couple (the 'original' and the 're-photographed') stand to represent the change, brought about by time, nature and society that took place in the time that passed between them.

At first glance, the strategy of re-photography may seem a good way of capturing time and change, but in fact it operates by devising time (and world) into static states of affairs. It may seem as though these diptychs depict change, but in fact, they do not capture change but rather allow the viewer to deduce or infer change by comparing two static 'timeless' moments[16].

I find it no coincidence that in *What Photography Is* Elkins focuses on sets of images where the change is almost unnoticeable [fig. 5,6] and takes considerable pains to trace the minute changes that appear in them [fig. 7]. The greater the difference, the more it is apparent that through re-photography change can only be inferred, but cannot be experienced. When the differences are minor, more conscious reflection on time and change is called into play.

[15] James Elkins, *What Photography Is* (New-York: Routledge, 2011), esp. on pp. 52-72.

[16] See my previous discussion of straight-photography as aiming at a durationless moment. In the philosophy of time the view that the experience of change is the result of the accumulation of momentary static states is referred to as 'the cinematic model.'

[fig. 5] Timothy O'Sullivan, *Vermillion Creek Canyon* (detail) 1872

[fig. 6] Mark Klett, *Vermillion Creek Canyon* (detail) 1979

[fig. 7] Reproduction with marks made by Elkins. From: James Elkins, *What Photography Is*, pp. 58-59

A similar approach of handling change and movement in terms of a composition of momentary states had acquired a central status following the appearance of Muybridge's influential works (e.g. *The Horse in Motion*, 1878). Ever since it is often the case that photographers, in attempting to capture change, do so by juxtaposing a sequence of stationary images.

Again, this operation fails at capturing change, and instead enables the viewer to infer it from the comparison of subsequent static states. A similar critique, directed at these very images by Muybridge, appears in Merleau- Ponty's "Eye and Mind"[17], where he writes: "Rodin said very wisely, 'It is the artist who is truthful, while the photograph is mendacious; for in reality, time never stops cold.' The photograph keeps open the instants which the onrush of time closes up forthwith; it destroys the over-taking, the overlapping, the 'metamorphosis' [Rodin] of time".

Fossils, Scars and Wrinkles

Let me summarize the discussion to this point. We saw that first, the concept of strong indexicality has been haunting human imagination for centuries and its roots appear already in the myths of the origin of painting; second, I have suggested that the many problems and paradoxes brought about by strong-indexicality are related to time; third, I have tried to show that photography, with its emphasis on the indexicality-axis, reproduces these problems and paradoxes; and fourth we saw that as a result, photography seems unable to capture time as change.

Against this background, two series of works by photographer Roi Kuper merit special attention: *Vanishing Zones* (1990-1994), an early series which will stand at the center of my discussion, and *Atlantis* (2007), a more recent series which will serve as a reference point. It is my view that the two series aim at the same goal, that of giving form to time as passage, of overcoming the indexical dichotomy by placing time at their center.

In a sense, Roi Kuper's *Atlantis* (2007) is a re-photography project, an extreme instance of the re-photography strategy. The 23 images comprising the series depict an oceanscape with some vegetation in the foreground. All 23 images were shot from the same camera position in the course of a single minute, and at first glance they appear to be identical [fig. 8]. But they are not, and the viewer's attention is gradually drawn to the minute variations between

[fig. 9] Roi Kuper, *Atlantis*, 2007;
Installation view, Noga Gallery

[fig. 10] Roi Kuper, *Like Stars in the Water*, 2005

[18] Exhibition text by Or Gottlib
(Noga Gallery, 2005).

[19] Quoted in Walter Benn Michaels, "Photography and Fossils," in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), 431-450. Also see Sugimoto's interview on: http://www.art21.org/texts/hiroshi-sugimoto/interview-hiroshi-sugimoto-tradition

the frames [fig. 9]. Change is all pervasive in them, the glimmers on the water fluctuate, the branches of the plants move slightly in the wind. The world simply refuses to stay still. The idea of a 'decisive moment' is strange to these images, but so is the idea of stepping out of time through abstraction. The series of images operates as a whole that captures change and the flow of time.

[fig. 8] Roi Kuper, *Atlantis*, 2007, three images out of twenty three

In an earlier series of works, *Like Stars in the Water* (2005)[fig. 10], the accompanying text pointed to Heraclitus as a conceptual point of reference for Kuper's work[18]. Heraclitus' insight that 'everything flows' recurs and takes form in Kuper's work, time and time again.

The works that comprise *Vanishing Zones* (1990-1994) rebel against the straight-photography-logic that I previously discussed, in that they do not depict a moment, but rather a duration. Kuper used toy-cameras with paper-film, and after photographing, removed the emulsion from the paper-negatives and placed them in different locations, such as gardens and public grounds, thus allowing them to decay, to endure rain and sun, to grow and age. As Kuper re-photographed and re-printed the fractured, damaged paper-negatives, the traces of the trials and tribulations they endured became part of the images. The traces were thus absorbed by the images, and in many cases transformed them so radically that the original image was no longer traceable.

One of the most beautiful metaphors that try to capture the strong-indexical nature of photography is Hiroshi Sugimoto's fossil metaphor[19], or rather, his treatment of fossils as pre-photography [fig. 11]. This metaphor is undoubtedly beautiful, but following my previous

analysis, I believe it does not fit most photography we encounter. Unlike most photography, a fossil is formed through the mediating medium of time. It is placed in the world, in time, and not outside of it. It does not freeze reality, but rather evolves with it over the course of time, capturing the traces of change. It is anything but instantaneous or eternal; it is changing with and in time.

[fig. 11] Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Fossil* (detail), *History of History* (2003-2006)

The works included in *Vanishing Zones* are exceptional because they accomplish the vision that stands at the heart of Sugimoto's fossil metaphor as they are images that were transformed through time and capture the traces that time has left on their surface. More than depicting a 'piece of the world', they capture a 'chunk of time'; they transmute the photograph into an organic entity, giving form to the wrinkled and scarred body of the photograph. In *Vanishing Zones* the iconic nature of photography is compromised, and in some cases overcome, by its indexicaity - by actual marks accumulated over time. The strong-indexicality that is characteristic of photography appears in this series as a problematic, a dialectic go-between rather than a solution to the question of representation.

For photographs to function as fossils, in the spirit of Sugimoto's metaphor, it appears that they must be treated as fossils. They must be put within the world, allowed to absorb time and to change in it and through it[20]. They must be regarded as physical bodies that are transformed through the passage of time[21]. It is this unique understanding of the photograph as body that makes for the radical nature of Kuper's *Vanishing Zones*.

[20] This and the following statements are made in the spirit of phenomenology. I mainly have in mind here Heidegger's account of world (Umwelt), his treatment of Dasein as 'Being-in-the-world', and its temporal structure as well as Merleau-Ponty's insights on the role the body plays in perception.

[21] Especially in the contemporary digital age, when images mostly appear in the form of data file, photography is taken to be bodiless, devoid of physical form and immune to the physical world. For a critical discussion of this 'idealization' of the photograph, see James Elkins' *What Photography Is*, ibid. pp. 24-26.

It is interesting to note that when Kuper himself discusses this series, he does so in terms of the human experience of time, regarding the works as a manifestation of the process that memories undergo in the human mind, becoming fragmented, suggestive and obscure, and often reconstructed to the point that image and imagination are no longer distinguishable. In the process of revisiting the series for the production of this book Kuper started referring to the works as also holding something of a prophetic power, as anticipating and as a form of preparation for what was feared, and what was later to come. "The works in this series portray the mechanism of human memory," says Kuper, "they show how time operates on memories, obscures and distorts them, reminding us of time's capacity of concealing. But looking back at the works some twenty years after, I realize that the concealment serves as a defense-mechanism that guards one from what is to come, not only from what has passed". The temporal dimension of these photographs thus extends beyond their time of production, into the past and the future of the artist's individual history. In their unique way, the works thus tell - or rather, show - how time figures in human experience, not as dead or frozen but rather as a living temporality.