



GLOWING EVIDENCE: PHOTOGRAMS – THE DARK SIDE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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Our ability to instantly read photographs is based on our sense of vision operating at a distance. Within the field of photographic processes however, co-exists a very different representation: that of imprint and touch – namely the photogram.

The decipherability of photographs to us is almost immediate but photograms work on a different level. They encapsulate the meeting of material and light-sensitive surface and incorporate the mark of authenticity, while producing an image which may not be immediately “read”.

This paper constitutes a metaphysical inquiry into the perception and ontology of the photogram, which operates in a space which is visual and haptic at the same time – without physical contact in the act of creation, there would be no image. On the border between touch and vision, it makes the contact visible. Through this tactile connection, imaging processes such as the photogram and X-ray challenge the Cartesian hierarchy of the senses while invoking aspects of Gilles Deleuze’s “fossil” and Walter Benjamin’s “fetish” in their power to incite memory.

This paper contains images from author’s recent body of work *Transitaria* part of which consists of photograms of jellyfish, highlighting both the transformational character of the creatures and of the photogram process itself.

Keywords: contact, embodied visuality, photograms, photography, touch and vision.

Introduction

The photogram operates in a space which is visual and haptic at the same time: without physical contact in the act of creation, there would be no image. On the border between direct touch and vision, it makes the contact visible. The question of distance emerges and the difficulty in easily deciphering that which is almost too near. Given that vision is a sense that operates at a distance, as does our ability to read photographs, photograms, which could also be described as *pictures without distance*, fall into another register of perception: namely that of traces. A trace is something left behind on something else. It makes no pretense to a three-dimensional representation but challenges the viewer instead to conjure up an image of what made the imprint. Seen in this way, the photogram is far less accessible than a photograph, distant by

cognitive means, but it carries within itself the certainty of a point of contact having been made.

The basic photogram process is simple, but far from simplistic.

An object is placed on a piece of photographic paper. During exposure to light, and subsequent development in photographic chemicals, the portions exposed to light will turn black. Depending on the opacity of the object touching the paper, the imprint which is left behind will be all white if no light reached the paper, or form a tonal range of greys, depending on the transparency of the object.

The photogram shares with the photograph the physical process of rendering the image visible, but differs greatly in the way it visualizes the encounter of subject matter and sensitized surface.

Near and far

This is a metaphysical inquiry into the perception and ontology of the photogram rather than an exploration of process, other than to say that the photogram is made by contact of the object with the light-sensitive paper. The issue of contact is important.

In a collection of short writings named *Untitled Fragments from the End of the World*, Pavel Büchler remarks on a case of someone's fingerprint accidentally appearing in an antique photograph. Büchler (Büchler 1999: 74) observes in passing "<...> it might be that the finger-print so clearly present here is asynchronous with the photographic image".

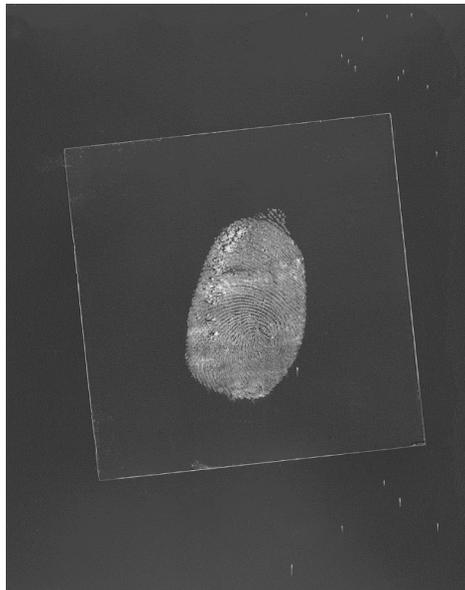


Fig. 1. Susanne Ramsenthaler. From the series *Household Forensics*.
Photogram on Polaroid film

My immediate thought is how the fingerprint always stays on the surface: even though we may be able to briefly immerse ourselves in the photographic three-dimensionality of the scene on offer, the fingerprint forces the eye back to the surface any time the eye scans it. But this is only part of the story here. My point is that the photograph marks a moment in time to be looked at and possibly re-imagined or to be scrutinized for details yielding further stories. The fingerprint, which I am using as a metaphor for the photogram, presents an intervention, both to our perception of the photograph and as an alien intruder into the imagined reality of the photograph.

The fact is that photographs and photograms exist in different perceptual spaces. The fingerprint, addressing the aspect of touch in a very direct way, speaks of presence. Presence, which, while defying classification as to its age and circumstance, proves to be powerful and undeniably “real”. It does not give us a clear picture of the hand from which it originated, but it possesses an authenticity, which is immediately understood.

It is my theory that photograms as well as traditional X-rays acquire a special status because they have been literally “in touch” with the object that made them. This idea of touch is important.

During the making of a photogram, object and image, reality and representation come face to face, literally touching each other. “Indeed”, according to Geoffrey Batchen (Batchen 2000: 37):

“The production of a photogram requires real and representation to begin as a single merged entity, as inseparable as a mirror and its image, as one and its other. These objects have to be removed before their photographic trace can be seen. By this means, photography allows objects to be present as image even when they are absent as objects. The photogram’s persuasive power depends on precisely a lingering spectre of the total entity, a continual re-presentation of this coming together of image and object on the photographic paper”.

The French novelist and philosopher Maurice Blanchot (Blanchot 1992: 84) addresses the ambiguity of distance in his work *Le Pas Au-Delà*, translated as *The Step Not Beyond*. His statement “The game of distance is the game of near and far” has inspired my investigations into distance in photographic imagery. “The game of distance is the game of near and far” is the key to my juxtaposition of camera images versus contact-based processes such as the photogram and, by extension, the X-ray. Camera images are taken at a distance (far), but are easily read (near), whereas the photogram requires the closest of proximity for its creation (near) but the resulting image is often not immediately decipherable and therefore cognitively far.

In our reading of photographic images, the “depictive” is always the first expectation. It is universally understood that, in photography, what is depicted has been photographed and is there for us to view, albeit presented in two-dimensional form. It is for this reason that photograms tend to be not instantly deciphered and are, as I have indicated, cognitively distant. The point is not the visual appearance of the object, but its once-presence having had contact with the surface in question.

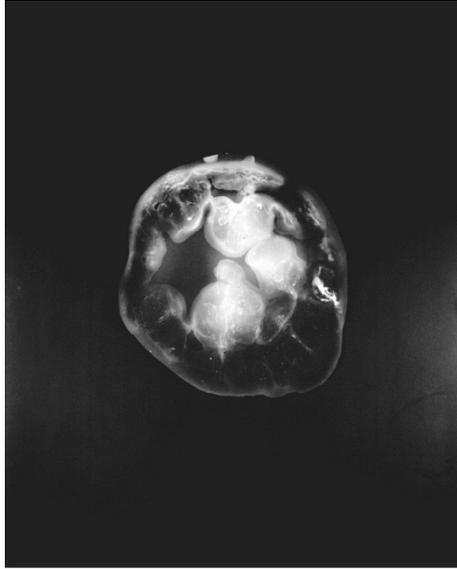


Fig. 2. Susanne Ramsenthaler. From the series *Bloom*.
Photogram on silver gelatine paper

This absence / presence aspect of the photogram, the notion of “imprint”, necessarily conjures up the famous example of the Turin Shroud. Although the visible imprint on the Turin Shroud in no way represents a supposed image of Christ’s body, it literally “embodies” something much more powerful: the implication of direct contact and all the fetishistic and auratic connections implicated there-in.

Auras and fossils

By its very nature, the photogram cannot give a factual record of the surface appearance of the object, which is something the photograph excels in. But this necessary aspect of touch, or contact, classifies it in terms of fetish and Deleuze’s notion of the fossil (Deleuze 1989: 112–113) – restoring – as I am arguing, an auratic presence, which has famously been deemed to be absent from photography by Walter Benjamin, based on the notion of photography’s infinite reproducibility and lack of “the Original”.

The aura I am addressing, is not that of the presence of the “maker” as in brush strokes in a painting, but the presence of the original object in the creation of the photogram. According to Laura U. Marks (Marks 2000: 121), in the religious practices from which the word aura was borrowed, it meant the presence of the sacred. In this way an auratic object is a fetish. It holds within it the presence of the sacred, concentrated in the object through some initial contact or use. “Aura is the sense an object conveys – that it can speak to us of the past, without ever letting us completely decipher it: an auratic object maintains its distance no matter how closely we embrace it: it is distant from us in time even as it is present in space”.

This notion of the auratic object always maintaining its distance matches Benjamin's description of the aura exactly (Arendt 1968: 188). Deleuze's term for certain kinds of images with the power to revive memories, the "fossil", is also powerfully descriptive of the photogram's ability to represent the object involved in its creation, and evoke the memories bound up with the referent. The notion of the fetish is particularly powerful because it constitutes a physical, rather than mental, contact between objects; it is not a metaphor.

In fetishism, power does not reside in beings or objects but flows among them. Fetish objects can encode meanings that become buried in the process of temporal displacement but are volatile when reactivated by memory. As in the fossil, or "radioactive" fossil – another Deleuzian term – fetishes get their power not by representing that which is powerful but through contact with it.

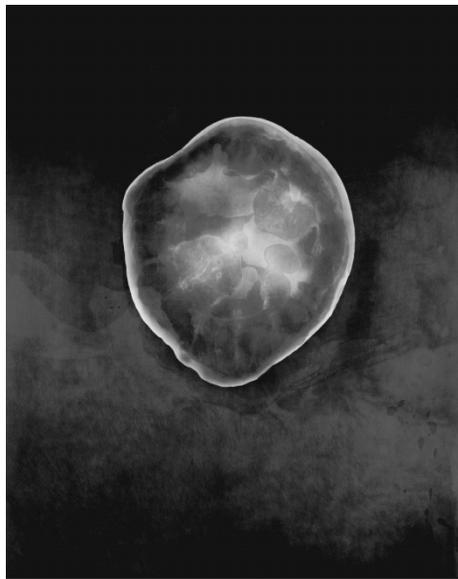


Fig. 3. Susanne Ramsenthaler. From the series *Bloom*.
Photogram on silver gelatine paper

Optics and haptics

The sense of sight must have distance in order to function, thereby detaching the observer from the observed. Touch, on the other hand, needs closest proximity, physically uniting the toucher and the touched.

The German historian Ulrich Raulff (Raulff 1985: 406) explores the immediacy of touch and its clash with the sense of sight in the tattoo parlour (this is my translation from German):

“I am being tattooed – images are starting to appear on my skin. I look at them and am at once distanced from them and my skin. I close my eyes: once again I am in my skin – I am my skin. I look – I am at a distance; I feel and I am one. What is the ‘am’? Where is the ‘I’?”

Again – this difference of perception between interiority and exteriority, of touch and sight, is what separates the photograph from the photogram.

The Austrian Alois Riegl (1858–1905) was one of the founders of art history as a discipline and the first exponent of “haptic” seeing in art, a more modern term for which would be “embodied perception”. He was the first to address the connection between vision and touch in art, which has been enlarged upon in the writings of Deleuze and Félix Guattari and Jonathan Crary.

Riegl formulated the concept of variations in our perception when viewing objects or paintings after reading an influential essay by the sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand in 1893, entitled *The Problem of Form in the Visual Arts*.

As Margaret Iversen notes (Iversen 1993: 125):

“Riegl’s term ‘haptic’ and ‘optic’ are closely related to what Hildebrandt called the ‘near’ and ‘distant’ views. One mode of vision, the near or haptic, is analogous to the sense of touch in the way that it must synthesize mentally a number of discontinuous sensory inputs. The distant, or optic view, on the contrary, takes in a synoptic survey of objects in space. Riegl’s argument proposes two modes of perception in the ‘optical plane’: the optic, in which things are viewed from a distance and make sense in perspective although they are pictured in ever-decreasing scale and the haptic, where, in Riegl’s words, ‘things seen at close hand stand side by side in tangible height and breadth’”.



Fig. 4. Susanne Ramsenthaler. From the series *Bloom*.
Photogram on silver gelatin paper

Riegl's haptic plane, therefore, implies a flattening of space, a lack of three-dimensional pointers such as perspective and shadows, which would allow the viewer to enter into space.

According to Constance Classen, touch has come in for criticism, by Rudolf Arnheim in particular, for being a “sensory snail”, giving up information bit by bit as opposed to literally “seeing the big picture”. Classen (Classen 1998: 148) finds a visual equivalent for this mode of perception:

“The assumption is that tactile exploration is a tedious, time-consuming activity compared to the ease and speed of visual scanning. Yet if touch is slower than sight, it can afford greater pleasure of discovery, of making sense of something not all at once, but in stages. It is this delight of anticipation and gradual revelation which leads us, for example, to wrap presents in paper, perhaps concealing a smaller box inside a larger one, rather than displaying them as they are, to be immediately apprehended by sight”.

This kind of gradual or proximal vision, which translates into the slow scanning of surfaces, is what tactile, or haptic visuality is all about.

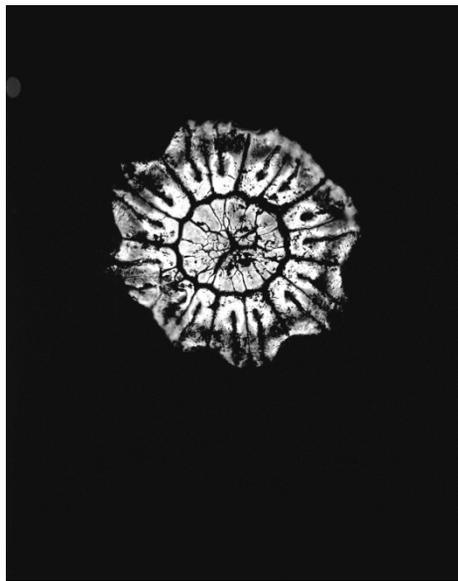


Fig. 5. Susanne Ramsenthaler. From the series *Bloom*.
Photogram on silver gelatine paper

Marks explores this kind of perception through the medium of experimental film and video. Haptic sensations in film can be achieved by speeding up footage, enlarging grain, throwing images out of focus or moving over them in extreme close-up. In other words, denying the viewer penetration of three-dimensional space. For her, the “snail” mode of visual perception is often closely related to memory, which is

much more likely than space perception to cause a surfacing of *mémoire involontaire*. Marks (Marks 2002: xvi) notes:

“In the sliding relationship between haptic and optical, distant vision gives way to touch, and touch re-conceives the object to be seen from a distance. Optical visibility requires distance and a center, the viewer acting like a pinhole camera. In a haptic relationship our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface. When this happens there is a concomitant loss of depth – we become amoeba-like, lacking a center, changing as the surface to which we cling changes. We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting”.

The perception of three-dimensional space is the crucial factor. As long as there is no third dimension to enter into, haptic visibility is in operation as the eye “grazes” the surface. However, as soon as there is an opportunity to visualise three-dimensional space, Marks’ pinhole scenario takes hold; perception becomes distant, closer to disembodied sight and away from tactile proximity.

Contact as obstruction

When contemplating the function and ways of signification of the photogram, the absence of the object becomes a significant part, the absence being indicated by the image itself, while signifying that there was presence in the form of contact. Yet we are blind to this contact since we cannot experience it from the perspective of the light-sensitive surface. Seen in this way, we occupy the blind spot and can only bear witness via the trace, which has been left.

In *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1993: 51) addresses a condition of the invisible inhabiting the visible which seems to me to be pertinent and fitting for the *modus operandi* of the photogram:

“In order to be absolutely foreign to the visible and even to the potentially visible, to the possibility of the visible, this invisibility would still inhabit the visible, or rather, it would come to haunt it to the point of being confused with it, in order to assure, from the specter of this very impossibility, its most proper resource. The visible as such would be invisible, not as visibility, the phenomenality or essence of the visible, but as a singular body of the visible itself, right on the visible – so that, by emanation, and as if it were secreting its own medium, the visible would produce blindness”.

What could be more pertinent to the “visible” resulting in “blindness” than, as in the photogram, the object leaving a trace which so obviously speaks of its absence: a state where we can not see it, merely indicated by a ‘spot’ where it has been, or allegedly has been. This is yet another indication of the photogram’s affinity with fossils, fetishes and auratic manifestations.

This very Derridian idea of the visible inhabiting the invisible certainly finds an echo in Blanchot’s fragmentary writing in *Le Pas Au-Delà*. This time Blanchot (Blanchot 1992: 54) addresses the trace: “And the trace, being always traces does not refer to any initial presence that would still be present, as reminder or vestige, there where it has disappeared”.

All of these seemingly contrasting qualities are contained within the photogram.

I would like to conclude this investigation with a few words from Batchen (Batchen 2000: 36), who reflects once more on the nature of the photogram and finds a multitude of binary relationships operating in this seemingly simple process:

“The photogram could be said to mark what is set aside from itself. It is a marker of the space between the object and its image, but also the temporal movement (the space) of this object’s placement and setting aside – it speaks to the very condition of its own production. So we’re actually talking about a surprisingly complicated maneuver here, a maneuver that simultaneously circumscribes and divides the identity summoned by the photogram. The contact print thereby represents a visible convolution of the binary relationship of absence/presence, past/present, space/time that constitutes the very possibility of photographing of any kind. And the possibility of history too. For what is history but the separation of past and present, the division of time into then and now, an interested demarcation of difference and deferral?”.

Conclusions

I hope to have highlighted the fundamental differences in the perception of a photogram and a photograph, both “photographic” processes. The notion of distance and reversal looms large as I have examined the working methods of the photogram, the Visual and the Haptic, and the dissolution of spatial and perspectival boundaries inherent in the process. Through the non-signification but authentic touch-related aspects of photograms, the notion of Deleuze’s fossil and Benjamin’s fetish are evoked as the implications of both depiction and manifestation are scrutinised. Photographs and photograms may share the same process to bring the image “to light”, but that is where the similarity ends.

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SPINDINTIS AKIVAIZDUMAS: FOTOGAMOS – TAMSIOJI FOTOGRAFIJOS PUSĖ

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Santrauka

Mūsų gebėjimas akimirksniu suprasti fotografijas yra pagrįstas pojūčiu matyti iš toli. Tačiau fotografinių procesų srityje koegzistuoja labai skirtingos reprezentacijos: šiuo atveju fotograma – tai atspaudas ir prisilietimas.

Fotografijos iššifruojamos kone tiesiogiai, tačiau fotogramos yra visai kas kita. Jos leidžia susiliesti materialiam ir šviesai jautriam paviršiumi, o atvaizdas negali būti tiesiog „perskaitomas“.

Šiame straipsnyje pateikiamas fotogramos suvokimo ir ontologijos metafizinis įvadas; fotograma veikia vizualiam kūrimo veiksmo be jokio fizinio kontakto – čia negali būti jokio atvaizdo. Kontaktas tampa įmanomas ties riba, skiriančia prisilietimą ir regėjimą. Per šį taktilinį santykį vaizduotės procesai, tokie kaip fotograma ir rentgeno spinduliai, meta iššūkį karteziškajai pojūčių hierarchijai, remiantis Gillesio Deleuze'o „iškasenos“ ir Walterio Benjamino „fetišo“ galiomis stiprinti atmintį.

Šiame straipsnyje pateikiama atvaizdų iš autorės darbų serijos „Tranzitarija“ dalies, sudarytos iš medūzos fotogramų, atskleidžiančių tiek kūrinių, tiek pačios fotogramos kaip proceso transformacinį pobūdį.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kontaktas, įkūnytas vizualumas, fotogramos, fotografija, prisilietimas ir regėjimas.

Received 19 October 2011; accepted 18 January 2012