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IN NAKED REPOSE
the face of candid portrait photography

Long after William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the founders of photography, described its "mute testimony" and promise of "evidence of a novel kind," the young photographer Paul Strand made a unique series of portrait photographs on the streets of New York.[1] These pictures are unusual because Strand had fitted his camera with a special prismatic lens, which allowed him to point the camera in one direction while taking the photograph at a ninety-degree angle – thus enabling him to photograph people without their knowing it. The resulting images, largely portraits of the poor and elderly, are considered a landmark in modernist photography. One seminal image depicts a female newspaper vendor, *Blind*, 1916, and is widely praised for its purity, honesty and objectivity.[2] A large cardboard sign hangs around the woman's neck over a bulky winter coat with the word "blind" painted on it, and a smaller one that reads "Licensed Peddler 2622 New York City." Judging from the blank expression on her fleshy, asymmetric face, it is not entirely clear whether she was even aware of the photographer's presence or if this is simply a portrait of a worker whose senses are dulled through solitary work. Either way, this stolen, unsentimental image delivered on Talbot's promise of visual novelty in unexpected ways.

The photographic act necessarily involves relations of power. In an argument popularized in the 1970s by Susan Sontag in her series of essays collected as *On Photography*, it is now a commonplace to observe that the encounter between the photographer and the photographed always and inescapably involves a measure of violence. Sontag famously compared the camera to a gun and wrote: "[t]o photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed."[3] And the threat of violation that always hangs over the photographic act is obviously dramatized if the subject is unaware of the camera. In cases such as Strand's famous image, the exchange is unmistakably exploitative. Thus the blind woman's lifeless eye, roving to the left of the frame, becomes an allegory for the sly mode of capture and its dubious ethics. Not only does such a photographed subject have no control over their image, being unable to determine its composition or context or mode of distribution, they have not even consented to becoming an image in the first place.

Candid photography of this kind appears to reveal the chronic voyeurism at the heart of the photographic act – the unredeemable nature of

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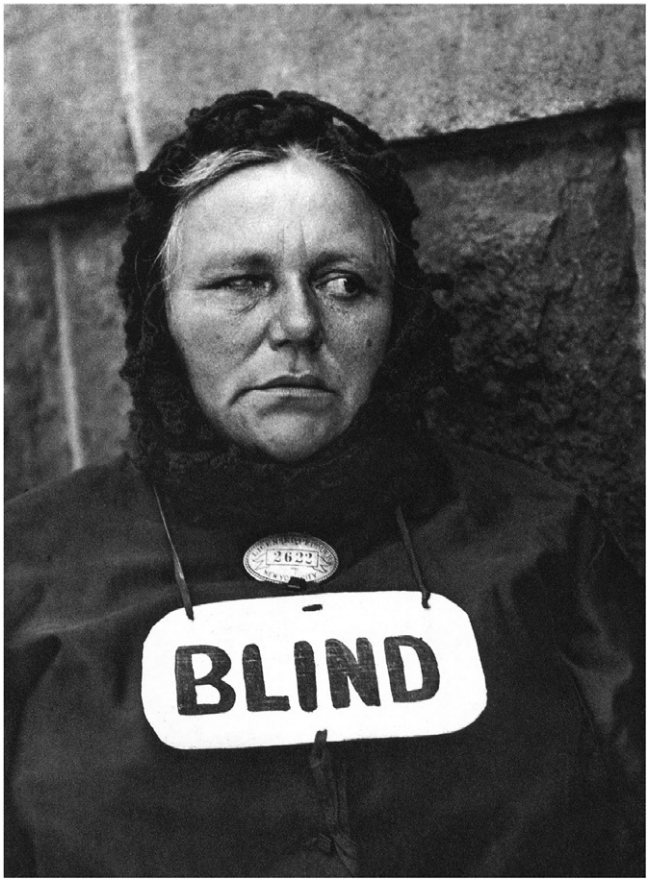

Fig. 1. Paul Strand, *Blind Woman, New York*, 1916 © Aperture Foundation, Inc., Paul Strand Archive.

the desire to possess the world as an image. However, it is possible to approach the subject from a different direction. In this paper, by exploring some canonical instances of candid portraiture and looking at some recent instances of such work, I wish to argue that it not only poses a challenge to portraiture (in the traditional sense of a subject willingly submitting to their likeness) but tests the limits of the notion that the face is expressive of subjectivity. In this sense the current revival of interest in the candid mode – precisely at a time when photographing in public is under pressure – complements another mode of portraiture that has returned to prominence since the 1990s: that style of taxonomic photography initiated by August Sander, now taken to an extreme of non-expressive blankness in the work of European photographers such as Thomas Ruff and Rineke Dijkstra.[4]

Moreover, candid photography's always frustrated efforts to present a transparent portrait of the soul underlines the ethics of self–other relations inherent to what Ariella Azoulay has recently called the "civil space of photography."[5] Photography is always, as Azoulay puts it, "evidence of the social relations that made it possible";[6] the permission to stare involves an unwritten contract between photographers, subjects and viewers that constitutes its "economy of gazes."[7]

Strand's photograph is an early instance of a lineage of photographs of people caught suspended in private contemplation in public space. Walker Evans's photographs of people on the New York subway are undoubtedly the most celebrated twentieth-century series of such images. With a 35 millimetre Contax camera hidden in his winter coat – its lens peeking

Fig. 2. Walker Evans, *Subway Passengers, New York City: Man in Hat Next to Woman*, film negative, 17 January 1941 © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.

through the buttonholes – and a cable release running down his sleeve, Evans spent three years between 1938 and 1941 clandestinely capturing the faces of riders hurtling through the dark tunnels, wrapped in their own private thoughts.[8] Unsurprisingly, Evans – the "apologetic voyeur" – identified Strand's *Blind* image as a decisive influence.[9] Like Strand, Evans aspired to an authentic and unsentimental record of humanity; while Strand was specifically reacting against what he regarded as the falsities of Pictorialism – with its penchant for the sentimental and directed scene – both rebelled against the beautification of studio portraiture.

Evans's subway portraits emerged out of a specific set of historical circumstances. He was one of several American photographers producing images for the Farm Securities Administration (FSA), a government agency whose purpose was to document the life and hardship of rural America during the drought and Great Depression in order to shore up public support for Roosevelt's New Deal policies. Evans's work with the FSA between 1935 and 1937 brought him face to face with the victims of the Depression, whose stoicism he sought to capture in unflinchingly direct portraits. However, Evans refused to provide the sort of dramatic pictures needed for propaganda efforts – such as expressive faces laden with symbolism, designed to solicit sympathy. Thus it is fair to assume that his subway portraits were created in part as a response to his frustration with his FSA experience, and also to the kinds of pictures celebrated in the new picture magazines that emerged in the 1930s.[10] For instance, Evans openly rejected the moralistic approach adopted by *Life* magazine's leading photographer, Margaret Bourke-White, who was known for reducing men and women to the status of message carriers, picturing people, as her biographer suggests, "less as individuals than as symbols or universals."[11] *Life* and Bourke-White both placed an emphasis on the expressive face as a vehicle to tell stories and communicate a sense of national responsibility, as indicated by the title of Bourke-White's 1937 book *You Have Seen Their Faces* with writer Erskine Caldwell.[12]

The subway portraits represent the supreme instance of Evans's desire for anonymous observation and embrace of the automatism of photography over the subjectivity of the photographer.[13] As he later wrote, the subway series was "my idea of what a portrait ought to be: anonymous and documentary and a straightforward picture of mankind."[14] But of course they are not so straightforward. Precisely because

these untitled pictures of anonymous individuals in unguarded moments are created without the burden of heavy commentary, a psychological space is opened. As Evans wrote at the time, aping a text written by his poet-friend James Agee for the publication, "The guard is down and the mask is off . . . even more than when in lone bedrooms (where there is a mirror) . . . people's faces are in naked repose down in the subway."[15] For Evans, this naked repose could only be captured via the automatism of the camera, which is closely related to the "the non-appearance of the author," the "non-subjectivity" that Evans said he admired in the novels of Gustave Flaubert and hoped to emulate in his photography.[16] Evans embraced what he called the "impersonal fixed recording machine," with each subject given an equal, unemphatic treatment.[17]

And yet this is not the whole story, as the publication history of the photographs reveals.[18] For a start, his embrace of "blind" photography was only partial; although Evans relinquished control of framing and lighting, he did not hesitate to crop the images. Contact sheets reveal that Evans had begun to crop his human subjects away from their surroundings and each other, gradually de-contextualizing them.[19] Indeed, the project was provisionally entitled "Faces of Men"[20] – reminiscent of August Sander's earliest publication of *People of the Twentieth Century*, his 1929 book *Face of Our Time*,[21] although without the classification according to profession and social class. Evans's series of eighty-nine images, completed in 1941, were not published as a series until 1966, accompanied by Agee's appropriately religious title and introductory text, *Many Are Called*.[22] Agee's text, originally written in 1940, is worth quoting at length here. After acknowledging the great diversity of races and classes pictured, he underlines their fundamental individuality despite the seriality of the images:

> Each, also, is an individual existence, as matchless as a thumbprint or a snowflake. Each wears garments which of themselves are exquisitely subtle uniforms and badges of their being. Each carries in the postures of his body, in his hands, in his face, in the eyes, the signatures of a time and a place in the world upon a creature for whom the name immortal soul is one mild and vulgar metaphor.[23]

In a lyrical and spiritual tone, Agee points to the lack of mask in these photographs:

> The simplest or the strongest of these beings has been so designed upon by his experience that he has a wound and nakedness to conceal, and guards and disguises by which he conceals it. Scarcely ever, in the whole of his living, are these guards down. Before every other human being, in no matter what intimate trust, in no matter what apathy, something of the mask is there; before every mirror it is hard at work, saving the creature who cringes behind it from the sight which might destroy it. Only in sleep (and not fully there), or only in certain waking moments of suspension, of quiet, of solitude, are these guards down.[24]

Agee thus affirms the central claim of the subway portraits: the paradoxical notion that only an un-posed photograph can reveal any truth about its sitter.

Evans's subway portraits are invariably interpreted as portraits of loneliness.[25] In fact they are only portraits of people alone. One explanation for why they are read as a "somber catalog of isolated souls" – as the critic Sarah Boxer recently called the series[26] – is simply the darkness of the subway, which lends an air of mystery. But there is also the final image in the book, a picture of a blind accordionist making his way down an aisle of inattentive riders with a tin can. The reference to Strand is unmistakable, but so is the link to the fact that Evans was shooting "blind."[27] In fact, a number of the subway passengers are photographed with their eyes closed. As photography theorist John Tagg has suggested, both the mode of producing the images as well as their subject appear to testify to the idea that blindness is a constitutive condition of the human subject.[28] Certainly it would seem that blindness is a privileged condition of this form of candid portraiture, helping the image to transcend its documentary status and to suggest our isolated passage through life.

The subway is clearly a unique site. In his introduction to the 2004 reissue of *Many Are Called*, Luc Sante calls it "the idea portrait studio" while noting that in the subway, unlike the street, "people are free to consider themselves invisible; time spent commuting is a hiatus from social interaction."[29] As he suggests, "the protocols of subway-riding advise turning your gaze inward" and the subway rider is, therefore, "naked."[30] This acutely modern affliction is something that the film director Wim Wenders grasped intuitively in his filmic homage to Berlin, *Wings of Desire* (1987). In the black-and-white film, two human angels have the ability to listen to people's private thoughts. After an important early scene in the public library, in which an old man thumbs a book of photographs by August Sander, the scene cuts to the Berlin subway and to the intimate thoughts of its anonymous, lonely-looking travellers. Evans's underworld is also revisited in French photographer Luc Delahaye's *L'Autre* (1995–97) – a series of close-up portraits "stolen" from the Paris Metro in the 1990s.[31] In his accompanying essay, Jean Baudrillard argues that Delahaye's photographs break a vicious circle of predictable posing, which adds a mythic dimension:

> the image . . . shows itself for what it is: the exaltation of what the camera sees in its pure self-evidence, without intercession, concession or embellishment . . . people are for a moment – the moment of the photograph – absent from their lives, absent from their misfortune, raised from their misery to the tragic, impersonal figuration of their own destiny.[32]

This shift from "misfortune" to "destiny" is something that haunts discussion around such photography and to which we will need to return.

Candid photography tended towards the social, rather than the individual, in the street photography that dominated the post-war period.[33] However, Philip-Lorca diCorcia returned to the formula of the isolated individual and amplified its effect in *Heads* (1999–2001).[34] This series consists of seventeen head-and-shoulder shots of people caught unaware while walking on the street, picked out from the crowd by the light of hidden synchronized flash units mounted on scaffolding. As passers-by stepped on a spot marked on the pavement in Times Square, diCorcia took their pictures from a camera equipped with a 500 millimetre lens set on a tripod over twenty feet away. The heightened, melodramatic quality of the pictures is defined by their clarity of light, deep shadows and narrow depth of field; diCorcia's figures appear like phantoms out of the darkness. They are also monumentalized, printed at larger-than-life size. As the critic Alex Farquharson suggests, the use of lighting "invests the urban flow with the staged look of a fashion shoot" or film still, such that those individuals are "given the unique, elevated aura of a saint."[35] As with Evans's subway portraits, the subject's gaze typically lies somewhere in the distance or aloft, even hidden behind dark glasses or obscured by shadow. In one striking image taken in the rain, a woman's face is almost entirely covered under a yellow hat. Titled simply *Head #1*, *Head #2*, and so on, diCorcia's public statements about the work echo Evans's desire to fade out his presence as a photographer.

Perched on the line between fact and fiction, diCorcia blends a documentary mode with techniques of staged photography. *Heads* is best described as a series of candid shots that appear as staged portraits. By introducing artificial light – as diCorcia had done in previous series in the 1990s – he blurs the genres of street photography and formal portraiture. At the same time, by focusing on individuals, this series fuses the anonymous with the intimate. Once again, the portraits invite consideration of the circumstances surrounding the individuals, but offer nothing beyond surface clues: a young girl with an eyebrow piercing whose T-shirt says "Little Angel," and so on. The images appeal to the inner life of the subjects while simultaneously underlining the gulf between us. Indeed, diCorcia's cast appear united by their introversion and psychological armour: as commentators always note, they seem anxious, guarded, pensive and yet determined.[36] And yet they are people we would expect to find in any cosmopolitan crowd: office workers, tourists, teenagers, shoppers, builders, a policeman, and so on. So it is perhaps no coincidence that diCorcia's *Heads* seemed to

Fig. 3. Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Head #24*, 2001, Fujicolor Crystal Archive print, 121.9 × 152.4 cm © Philip-Lorca diCorcia, courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

capture the Zeitgeist when they were exhibited in New York immediately following the collapse of the World Trade Center, during which the city became a scene for the latest crisis of Western humanity.

Nearly four years later, in 2005, one of the subjects – an eighty-four-year-old retired diamond merchant and Hasidic Jew, Erno Nussenzweig, pictured wearing a black wide-brimmed hat and buttoned overcoat – upon learning of his image commenced legal action against diCorcia on the basis that he had violated his statutory right of privacy.[37] A much-discussed case, pitting artistic expression and the right of privacy, artistic expression eventually triumphed. While expressing sympathy for the plaintiff, and recognizing the fact that a photograph bearing his likeness was spiritually offensive, the court found that the photographs were art, not commerce, and thus a photographer's First Amendment right to free speech outweighed the individual's right to privacy. This case is an interesting extreme; an unusually sensitive subject, with a deep conviction that the use of his image violates the Second Commandment's prohibition against graven images, confronted with an undeniably predatory mode of candid photography that has produced what the *New York Law Journal* described as "uncommonly intimate likenesses."[38] Nussenzweig's lawyer claimed that his client had "lost control over his own image" and that this was "a terrible invasion."[39] Indeed, he had gone out in public, so his face had in a sense become common visual property.

The concept of *le droit à l'image* – the right to one's own image – already enshrined within French law, is now becoming popular for policy makers around the world, amid widespread fear around paedophilia and sexual voyeurism in the age of mobile phone cameras combined with the distributive powers of the Internet. The photography of people in public without their permission has become an issue of considerable anxiety. This is despite, or perhaps also because of, the generalization of surveillance and the ever-encroaching privatization of public space. We clearly do not have space here to think through all the ethical and political issues opened up in relation to the paradoxical notion of "privacy in public" – my focus is limited to candid

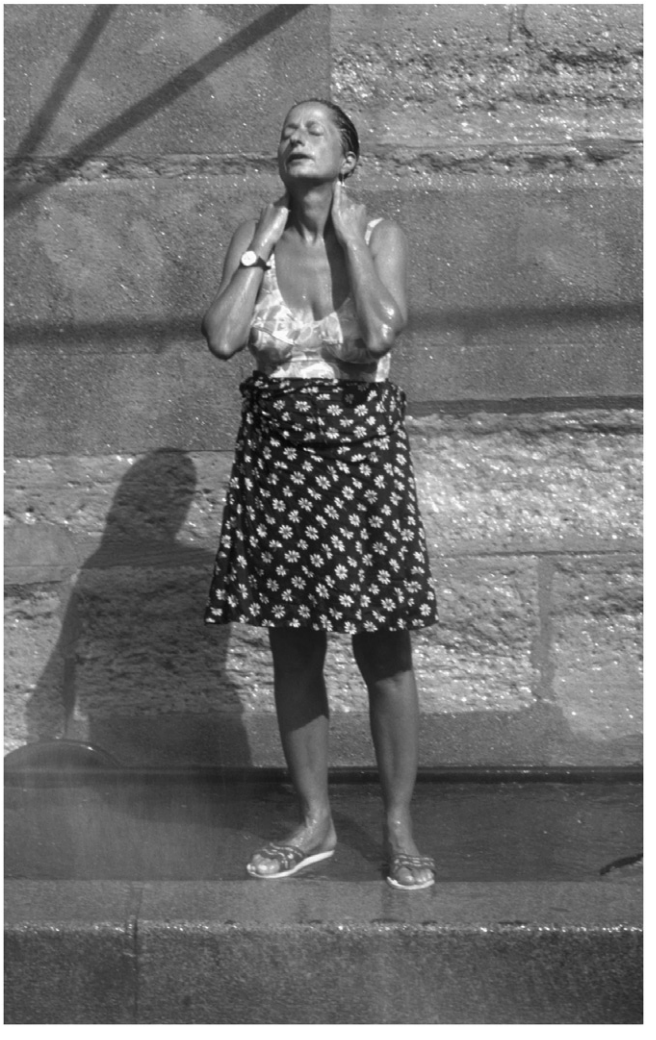

Fig. 4. Cherine Fahd, *The Chosen, Ladylight*, 2003/04, Type C print, 130 × 81.5 cm, courtesy the artist.

photography by artists, rather than the state, or media and corporation organizations. I would defend such photographic practice on the basis that an acknowledgement of being-in-common is more important than the potential voyeuristic intrusion into privacy (as conventionally defined in terms of personal identity).[40] As Azoulay has argued, "the civil contract of photography" requires an open and dynamic framework among individuals, without regulation or monopolization by the state.[41] In any case, any consideration of such imagery must remember that the diminution of street photography in the West is linked to the street's diminished role as a social sphere. In the age of electronic networking, smart phones, iPods, and air-conditioned malls (where photography is expressly forbidden), the city is increasingly a space of privatized media flows and for most people the street is simply a way to get somewhere else. Today, there is something quaint about a photographer standing on a street corner taking photographs of strangers.

I now want to turn to some recent photography by the Australian artist Cherine Fahd, whose images also make the subject's lack of awareness

of the camera a manifest theme but depart from the history sketched above. So far we have established that the figures on display in candid photographs promise the revelation of a secret, absorbed self – in tacit opposition to the one performed for others. We have also seen that this alternation between absorption and performance, between the private self and the one performed for others is an argument about the pose.[42] The absence of pose translates to the spectator's desire for an account of the soul that will in some way be transparent (it is precisely the reverse in theatrical performances that purposely substitute the *mask* – or, masquerade – for any attempt at presence). Furthermore, as we have seen with Evans, this desire appears to be most pronounced in photographs wherein the photographer has given up some or all of their control. And yet it is, of course, an impossible desire, as Italian novelist Italo Calvino already observed in his comical short story "The Adventure of a Photographer" from 1955. In Calvino's story, a philosophically inclined photographer obsessively photographs his lover, in pursuit of her "unique being"; he first decides to turn to the posed photograph, then pursues the snapshot genre. Still unsatisfied, he photographs her "in the street when she didn't know he was watching her . . . within the range of hidden lenses . . . not only without letting himself be seen but without seeing her, to surprise her as she is in the absence of his gaze, of any gaze."[43] Thus, in theory, the absence of the gaze leads to the absence of the pose, which promises a more authentic encounter with the other. However, the immediacy is an illusion; we are only ever given the *look* of revelation.[44]

Yet even as we know that the photographic image is not a physiognomic window to an inner spirit, that its frozen appearance does not necessarily communicate anything about a sitter's psyche, that there is no necessary equivalence between face and "soul" – in short that the other's interiority is not perceivable on the surface – the unposed face still attracts us. Even as we should be on guard against what Martha Rosler calls "the physiognomic fallacy" – "the identification of the image of a face with character, a body-centered essentialism" in favour of social setting – we seem compelled to believe that a momentary facial expression is the product of a specific relationship between inner and outer worlds.[45] Indeed, beyond the realm of the subject's putative psychology, a particular quality seems to emerge in photographs in which subjects have been picked out from the social arena for us to view. Even Sontag agrees: "There is something on people's faces when they don't know they are being observed that never appears when they do."[46] And although we might be tempted to project a certain pathos into the image, on the basis that the isolated anonymity of such subjects seems to mirror the social atomization and alienation under capitalist economic relations, sociological speculation cannot exhaust or account for the appeal of the photographed face.

The temporality of the still image is critical. As Joanna Lowry has observed, the photographic representation of the other's face is situated at some kind of limit point of visibility, a place at which the time of the subject and the time of representation are revealed as ineffably different from each other:

> If Levinas suggested that it was impossible to represent the face of the other, that the gaze of the other somehow presented a fissure in the field of the visible, then photography is situated on the very edge of that impossibility, the time of the other not so much represented as interrupted, and thereby revealed.[47]

Lowry goes on to say that:

> It is the very fact that the still image is a product of that traumatic rupture of the hermeneutic contract between us that renders it fascinating; it produces a sign that is outside the domain of intentionality and its very lifelessness transforms us into forensic investigators of the sign. In the still image the subject in process is translated into a fixed system of signs that we, the spectators, scan for indications of some nascent interior life.[48]

Thus while the subject eludes capture, the photographed face demands an imagined response based on a vocabulary of expression and gesture. This is perhaps true of all

Fig. 5. Cherine Fahd, *The Chosen, Handonface*, 2003/04, Type C print, 130 × 81.33 cm, courtesy the artist.

photographs of faces, but frontal images, and candid images, direct us immediately to such "scanning."

Fahd's best-known series, *The Chosen* (2003/04), features thirteen near life-size photographs of people caught in ecstatic poses against a golden sandstone wall.[49] The scene is Paris Plage, the temporary artificial beach, complete with sand, created annually on the banks of the Seine. Anonymous people are pictured showering in public underneath a cool mist of water from specially constructed sprinklers in the warm sun. Often fully dressed, the subject's give themselves up to the water unselfconsciously, almost as if hypnotized or held in a trance, surrendering to the moment they are in. Once again, this quality of the intimate, private expression in public is conveyed to the viewer thanks to the surreptitious nature of their acquisition; they are taken with a long lens from across the river 30 metres away. However, this is not Evans's "straightforward picture of mankind." Unlike the previous examples, the expressions on the subject's faces are merely an extension of their

Fig. 6. Cherine Fahd, *Trafalgar Square, Blue Parker*, 2005/06, Lightjet print, 120 × 147.80 cm, courtesy the artist.

bodily rapture. Unconscious of the artist's gaze, and by extension our own, those "chosen" are photographed with their arms held out from the body, palms facing upwards, often with eyes closed and mouths open. Iconographic references to religious worship abound. Resonating with the redemptive title – with its echoes of *Many Are Called* – the gestures of the subjects mimic the demeanour of ecstatic figures in religious art found at the nearby Louvre (an acknowledged source of inspiration). The Parisians' temporary relief from the fatal European heat wave of 2003 promises more fundamental salvation.[50] Their reception to the sensual pleasures of water and sun has been turned into receptivity towards what the artist calls a "divine light."[51] This end-of-the-world corporeal drama is dramatized by the isolation of each figure and their shadow, but the artistry lies in the transformation of *gestures* via the immobilizing effect of the camera lens.[52]

Fahd's follow-up series, *Trafalgar Square* (2005/06), also transforms urban space into a stage for suggestive anonymous gestures. In this case the scene is the viewing platform outside London's National Gallery, where tourists and the art-loving British public gather at the entrance, framed by huge classical stone columns. The effect recalls a Greek tragedy, and in a seemingly ritualistic fashion, people lean on an iron railing and look out onto and around Nelson's Column. We might speculate that these people have just spent time looking at the great old paintings inside, and now pause for a moment in contemplation before re-entering the contemporary world.[53] Most are isolated figures, or we are directed towards a particular subject in a group by the framing and the nick-name titles; thus, one group photograph, in which a boy is playing with a camera and talking to a friend, is called *Girl in a Group*. She alone, we might say, appears aware of her finitude. As in many of the images, she is gazing up (we are viewing from below), and her hands are clasped. Once again, the figures are captured in moments of self-absorption – either gazing up or down, or with their eyes closed.[54] As Nils Ohlsen observes in her catalogue essay, they appear somehow disconnected "from their purposeful, rational flow."[55]

There is a distinct level of artifice in Fahd's technique, a careful process of artistic selection that intensifies the sense of day-dreamy self-absorption. For instance, nobody in these photographs listens to iPods or talks on their mobile

Fig. 7. Cherine Fahd, *Trafalgar Square, Eyes Closed*, 2005/06, Lightjet print, 120 × 126.88 cm, courtesy the artist.

phone; they are alone with their thoughts, rather than in a media bubble. Fahd confesses that her first action after scanning the negative is always "to zoom 200% into the face on the computer screen."[56] This is hardly surprising, given the obvious expressive appeal of the face, especially when we learn that Fahd trained as a painter.[57] Indeed, Fahd has revealed that two paintings in particular inspired her when making *The Chosen* and *Trafalgar Square*: Francisco Zurbaran's *St Francis in Meditation* (1639) in his monk's habit, in prayer, hands clasped, head raised heavenwards; and Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk By the Sea* (1809), its solitary figure at the bottom of the frame engulfed by a wild and stormy sky, a lone monk in communion with the universe of nature around him.[58] It would appear that there is a quasi-spiritual ritual to Fahd's searching. She articulates certain incommunicable feelings in terms of an embodied process of photographic seeing:

> When I look through the viewfinder . . . everything moves in slow motion; our daily rituals, the ways we exist in cities . . . Gestures too appear charged in some way. As if at any moment, a sudden glance or movement captured by the camera, opens up a window onto a world which is ordinarily denied the casual everydayness of looking.[59]

Such sentiments, while perhaps not in themselves unusual for photographers, are contrary to the notion that a camera operator seeks to objectify and possess the world. Instead, the artist is simultaneously seeking a closeness and a distance. Fahd goes on to suggest that:

> A stranger in the distance is suddenly within reach . . . And contained in their expressions, their slightest movement, their actions, their looking, are the infinitesimal clues to what it means to be here – in the world.[60]

Here one is reminded of Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of the opposition between the effect of aura and that of mechanical reproduction expressed in the spatial terms of "distance" and "closeness." Aura, in the well-known words of his "Work of Art" essay, is the "unique

Fig. 8. Cherine Fahd, from *The Sleepers*, 2005–08, Lambda photograph, 22 × 31 cm, courtesy the artist.

apparition of a distance, however near it may be."[61] Just as Benjamin in "A Little History of Photography" suggested that early photographic portraits retained an aura – as "the subject (as it were) 'grew' into the picture" during the slow exposures, producing an "expressive coherence"[62] – it would appear that Fahd's quest for a subject's momentary self-revelation can generate a similar effect.

Giorgio Agamben, in an essay on photography titled "Judgement Day," offers a suggestive perspective on the notion of photographic testimony. Agamben begins by observing that the face and gesture are crucial in the photographs he loves. Claiming that there is "a secret relationship between photography and gesture," Agamben writes:

> Thanks to the photographic lens . . . gesture is now charged with the weight of an entire life; that insignificant or even silly moment collects and condenses in itself the meaning of an entire existence . . . A good photographer knows how to grasp the eschatological nature of the gesture – without, however, taking anything away from the historicity or singularity of the photographed event.[63]

Agamben's invocation of a Messianic dimension to the photographed gesture recalls Baudrillard's emphasis on the (future) "destiny" – rather than the (present) "misery" – of Luc Delahaye's Metro passengers. Both writers appeal to a future hope, but Agamben also refers to a certain exigency on the part of the spectator: "the subject shown in the photo demands something from us"; quite simply, he writes, "they demand not to be forgotten."[64] In short, "the photographic exigency that interpellates us [is] a demand for redemption."[65] Although the meaning of this redemption is left unclear, elsewhere Agamben speaks about redemption from the bio-politics of modern democracy, towards a coming community (Agamben's "time of human experience" is always future oriented). Here, then, we have the outlines of a strikingly new way of thinking about candid photographic portraiture. In Agamben's terms, such photographs of anonymous figures, by drawing our attention to the unconscious gestures of others, invoke the world "as it appears on the last day, the Day of Wrath."[66]

This eschatological way of thinking about candid photographs of faces and gestures finds a certain limit case with Cherine Fahd's *The Sleepers*, 2005–08. This series of twenty images features people splayed out asleep on the grass, in what is clearly a park of some kind. Overtly voyeuristic, our gaze floats just above the figures, often from behind, with an uncomfortable proximity. It is obvious from their scruffy

Fig. 9. Cherine Fahd, from *The Sleepers*, 2005–08, Lambda photograph, 22 × 31 cm, courtesy the artist.

clothing and belongings that most of the people are probably homeless and many of them appear to be junkies or alcoholics. One figure – we cannot determine their gender – is wrapped up in a sleeping bag, with a suitcase for a pillow. Men and women use newspaper or magazines to rest their heads. One couple is wearing no shoes. All are apparently fast asleep in public. But what is most striking is their spread-eagled poses, their sense of total abandonment, their sense of vulnerability and isolation. Against this we sense their meek efforts to conceal themselves, to find some degree of shelter in a public space (one exception, a shirtless man on a towel who appears to be casually sunning himself, only serves to highlight the others' exposure). These are difficult pictures to view. The images recall a history of photography of war victims and other damaged bodies, not least because these are black and white and closer to social documentary than Fahd's other series. They were in fact taken with a strong video zoom lens from the privacy of Fahd's apartment, six floors above a park well known for its vagrants, in Kings Cross, Sydney. As video stills, presented in a smaller and more intimate format than Fahd's other work at 8 by 10 inches, they are more akin to the genre of the private detective snapshot.

If *The Sleepers* represents the ground-zero of the voyeurism that constitutes the candid photographic gaze – stretching to breaking point any definition of portraiture – the images also encapsulate a number of issues raised in this paper. While one is reminded, for instance, of Agee's commentary on Evans's subway riders, quoted above, that only in sleep or certain waking moments of suspension are our guards down, these images reveal nothing about the subjects. And yet while some of the sleepers are at peace, there is no sign of the salvation we have seen in other work (we have, in some sense, returned to the excluded social territory of Strand's *Blind*, without the "battered nobility"). Any possibility of humanist identification with the subject is closed off. Unlike a conventional photojournalist project on the homeless, the "exploitative" photographic procedure is made explicit, and the otherness of the subjects is amplified into an impassable distance. Thus confronting the ethics of spectatorship, the images reveal once again the paradox of the desire to break down the pose by photographing people without their knowledge. Such photography carries within it the promise of revelation but also the threat of nothingness. Thus it seems appropriate that most of Fahd's sleepers lie face down or with their back to us. Their facial expressions are almost completely

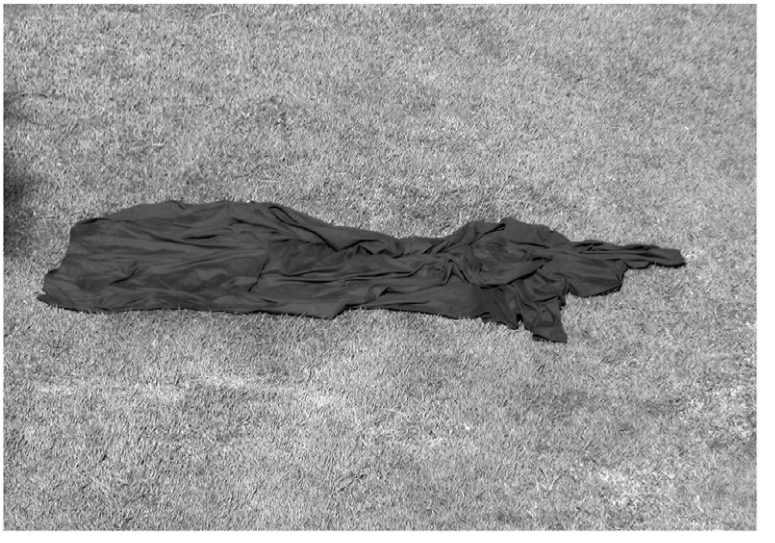

Fig. 10. Cherine Fahd, from *The Sleepers*, 2005–08, Lambda photograph, 22 × 31 cm, courtesy the artist.

hidden from us. And in the final image of the series, the subject has vanished completely – only a crumpled blanket remains, presumably left behind, with just a memory of the body in its folds.

notes

1 William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* [1844] (New York: Da Capo, 1968).

2 The image was published in 1917 as a gravure in Alfred Stieglitz's magazine *Camera Work* and became an icon of new American photography, which integrated the objectivity of social documentation with the boldly simplified forms of modernism. Strand had studied photography with Lewis Hine, the social reformer and photographer, though it is doubtful whether he made these pictures with any reformist agenda.

3 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 4.

4 For an insightful essay on such work, see Julian Stallabrass, "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography," *October* 122 (fall 2007): 71–90. In each case, the subjects are defined by their difference and location within a series, and photographers seem to make a point of presenting only surfaces for us to project onto, spurred on by details of clothing and other adornments.

5 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone, 2008).

6 Ibid. 127.

7 Ibid. 113. As Azoulay puts it:

> In order to create this economy of gazes, each and every one had to renounce his or her right to preserve his or her own, autonomous visual field from external forces, but also acquired an obligation to defend the gaze in order to make it available for others to enter and intermingle.

8 The results are championed by the writer Luc Sante in the introduction to a recent reprint of the series as "a parade of naked, uncomposed faces" and

> a collective portrait of the vast sea of humanity that is New York; a cross-section of one moment in history as expressed through its physiognomies and adornments and haberdashery; a reduction to essentials of the portraitist's art; an exquisitely modernist application of chance procedures. (Walker Evans, *Many Are Called* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004) 14)

Evans's portraits have recently enjoyed a resurgence of interest. They were included in Tate Modern's first major photography exhibition *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the 20th-Century Photograph* (2003) – where almost every review singled them out for praise – and Evans's book *Many Are Called*, long out of print, was reissued in 2004.

9 Writing about Strand's image in 1969, Evans wrote:

> The effect was breathtaking for anyone interested in serious photography; or in pictures for that matter. Seeing it was a strong enough experience to energize on the spot any young camera artist with bold aesthetic ambitions . . . it is one of the lasting glories of the medium. It reverberates. (See Walker Evans, *Unclassified: A Walker Evans Anthology*, ed. Jeff L. Rosenheim (Zurich: Scalo, 2000) 103)

10 As Jeff Rosenheim observes, a year after he had finished with the FSA, leaving under controversy, still out of work, Evans descended into "the subterranean half-light of the New York City subway system" (Evans, *Many Are Called* 197).

11 Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (New York: Harper, 1986) 317–18.

12 Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Modern Age, 1937).

13 Photography theorist Allan Sekula has also suggested that Evans's subway photographs are "evidence of a sophisticated dialogue with the empirical methods of the detective police" (Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (winter 1986) 58).

14 Evans, *Many Are Called* 198.

15 Ibid.

16 Walker Evans, "Interview with Walker Evans by Leslie Katz," *Art in America* 59 (Mar.–Apr. 1971) 84. As Tagg has suggested, "in Evans's thinking, the approach towards automatism was inseparably bound up with the threshold of the 'pure record'" (John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009) 175.

17 Judith Keller, *Walker Evans: The Getty Museum Collection* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995) 160. Tagg has shown that rather than humanist empathy, Evans's biography suggests a melancholic "withdrawal from identification" (Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame* 176).

18 Evans abandoned the project in early 1941, prior to America's official entry into the war in December that year. He revived the project in 1958 and spent the next few years designing an unpublished book titled "The Passengers (Hidden Camera in the New York Subway)." In March 1962, *Harper's Bazaar* published six photographs accompanied by Evans's own text, and finally the book *Many Are Called* was published in 1966.

19 Nor did he seek to conceal this cropping. In an application for a Guggenheim fellowship in 1941 he described the works as "semi-automatic record photography of people" and noted that a third of the prints were enlargements: "large picture-records of faces taken out of, away from, their surroundings in the subway" (*Many Are Called* 201). By 1946 when he shot the series of portraits *Labor Anonymous* for *Fortune* magazine, standing on a street corner, Evans completely isolated his male pedestrians, such that for one writer "they seem like automatons, soldiers on parade in lockstep" (see Daniel Mark Epstein, "The Passion of Walker Evans," *New Criterion* 18.7 (2000) 21).

20 Evans, *Many Are Called* 201.

21 *Antlitz der Zeit* (Munich: Transmare/Kurt Wolff, 1929).

22 Ibid. n. pag.

23 Ibid. 15.

24 Ibid. 16.

25 In a 2000 review essay, Daniel Mark Epstein notes that the passengers are "all terribly lonely, never making eye contact with the skulking photographer, and rarely with one another" (Epstein, "The Passion of Walker Evans" 21).

26 Sarah Boxer, "Tunnel Visions," *New York Times* 17 Oct. 2004.

27 Michael Fried has recently suggested that Evans's blind accordionist is a figure for the photographer who was shooting "blind" in the subway. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008) 366 n. 46.

28 Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame* 177.

29 Evans, *Many Are Called* 11–13.

30 Ibid. 12.

31 See Luc Delahaye, *L'Autre* (London: Phaidon, 1999). The pictures are literally "stolen," in that French law prohibits the publication of someone's image without their permission. As McGonagle writes, "Although apparently unaware at the time of this American antecedent, the parallels with Delahaye's project in mid-1990s Paris are striking" (Joseph M. McGonagle, "Photographing the Other in Luc Delahaye's *L'Autre*," *Modern & Contemporary France* 13.2 (2005) 164).

32 See Delahaye, *L'Autre* n. pag.

33 I am referring to photographers such as Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand. Harry Callahan made a remarkable series of photographs of women lost in thought on Chicago streets in 1950 (which may be usefully compared to Winogrand's *Women Are Beautiful* from 1975, in the way the latter features women surrounded by men, and becomes a study of gender in public, rather than the individual, and are framed and cropped in such a way that exaggerates the photographer's presence). There are many other examples of photographers who have made the subject's lack of awareness of the camera a manifest common theme, such as the Swiss artist Beat Streuli.

34 Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Heads* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2001).

35 Alex Farquharson, "Press Release: The Citigroup Private Bank Photography Prize 2002," London Photographers' Gallery (2002) n. pag.

36 Luc Sante in his essay "The Planets" published in the book and Alex Farquharson both note these qualities. Sante ends his text by proposing that diCorcia's images are "the true faces of our time" (diCorcia, *Heads* n. pag.).

37 Nussenzweig's lawyer claimed: "We're not objecting to the picture. But what is offensive is the way the picture was taken, and the fact this guy is making a lot of money off my client's face, without his permission and without sharing" (see Judy Peet, "Hasidic Man Upset Over Image," *The Jersey Journal* Monday 22 Aug. 2005). The suit claims that Nussenzweig suffered "severe mental anguish, emotional distress, humiliation and embarrassment." He sought a cut of photos already sold and a ban on any displays.

38 Mark Fass, "'Art' Photo is Not Subject to Privacy Law, Judge Finds," *New York Law Journal* 13 Feb. 2006, available <http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1139565912319> (accessed 16 Aug. 2007).

39 Ibid. n. pag.

40 Thinking through such work as diCorcia's it is useful to reconsider the classic idea of the modern city as a community of strangers. Recall that Georg Simmel, examining the psychological effect of anonymous city life in his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," identified the "blasé" attitude brought on by excess nervous stimulation. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" [1903] in Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald Levine (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971) 47–60.

41 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* 113.

42 As Lowry points out, much academic interest has focused on the notion of the *pose* because "It is in the pose that we both disguise ourselves and give ourselves away, and the eloquence of the photograph is in its double-edged revelation of precisely this ambiguity" (Joanna Lowry, "Portraits, Still Video Portraits and the Account of the Soul" in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, eds. David Green and Joanna Lowry (Brighton: Photoworks, 2006) 66).

43 Italo Calvino, *Difficult Loves*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker, 1983) 50.

44 Moreover, no matter how invisible or removed from the subject at the moment of the photograph – whether through a hidden camera or zoom lens – the photographer remains involved in the selection of the images. In this sense the fact that Fahd has carefully framed the experience in the viewfinder is little different from Strand's and Evans's more "blind" method in which the photographers "frame" their work in the darkroom, both through the choice of which negatives to print and through cropping.

45 Martha Rosler, "Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?," *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2004) 221.

46 Sontag, *On Photography* 37.

47 Lowry, "Portraits" 65.

48 Ibid. 61.

49 See Cherine Fahd, *The Chosen*, exhibition catalogue (Sydney: Stills Gallery and Gitte Weise Gallery, 2004).

50 As Linda Michael writes in her catalogue essay "Summertime":

> These photographs lure us by a kind of magic whereby a simple everyday act is both just itself and the vehicle for meaning. Different layers of reality and illusion cohere in images of everyday reality reconstructed through Fahd's photographic eye. Actual light is turned into metaphorical light, immobile bodies move our minds. *The Chosen* series . . . gestures towards a promise of salvation. (Ibid. 4)

51 Ibid.

52 Formally, the fact that the photographs are large and made for the wall means that Fahd's work inherits the problematic of "beholding" that Michael Fried first articulated in relation to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French painting. In Fried's sense, they belong to the *absorptive* tradition, in which people depicted are absorbed in what they are doing and thinking, unaware of the beholder standing before the painting or photograph. For Fried this leads to an instantaneous act of perception, an aesthetic which he refers to in quasi-spiritual terms as a state of "grace." Fried's reading of Roland Barthes's *punctum* – and his embrace of Beat Streuli and diCorcia – extends this reading to contemporary photography.

53 The effect is reminiscent of Thomas Struth's well-known photographs of museum goers whose bodily poses seem to mimic those of the figures in the paintings they are viewing.

54 Fahd tells me: "I always zoom right into the faces." E-mail correspondence 21 July 2008.

55 Nils Ohlsen, "Stopping the Pendulum: The Trafalgar Square Series by Cherine Fahd" in Cherine Fahd: *Trafalgar Square*, exhibition catalogue (Sydney: Stills Gallery and Gitte Weise Gallery, 2007) 5.

56 Conversation with the artist 22 May 2009.

57 Fahd became interested in photography via a circuitous and revealing route. Turning to make sculpture, she received a grant to produce a series of plaster casts of the noses of her Lebanese community in Sydney. While waiting for the casts to dry, she took some photographs of the people in various states – struggling to breathe through their mouths, wearing protection over their clothes, such as garbage bags. Although initially intended as mere documentation of the process, she quickly realized that the photographs were more interesting than the actual sculptures. Since this first accidental foray, she has worked exclusively with photography – initially, working with masks and staged poses. We could trace a common motif in her photographs in the way that they began to feature isolated figures in public spaces. Thus *Thinking Thoughts* and *Just Like Love* (2000) – young woman up a tree with newspaper on her head. In these works she staged subjects in a variety of ways, while relying on chance and spontaneity to make the performances. Likewise with her work with fabric (*I Beg the Wind to Blow*). *Soft Sculpture* (taken at Bronte Beach at sunset overlooking the sea) utilizes the sculptural potential in an oversized plastic bag, sourced from an art supplies shop where the artist was working. (Telephone conversation with the artist 13 Aug. 2008.) These early photographs characteristically did not show the face of her subjects; faces were either covered or obscured by a variety of material, from newspaper to fabric to an oversized plastic bag blowing in the wind. Indeed, like the images in *The Chosen*, these images had a frozen, formal quality of sculpture. While often infused with a Surrealist sense of humour, all of these images are escapist, suggesting a kind of personal freedom removed from social contact.

58 This is outlined in Sandy Edward's catalogue essay in *Trafalgar Square* 35.

59 Cherine Fahd, *Looking Glass*, exhibition catalogue (Sydney: Gitte Weise Gallery, 2005) n. pag.

60 Ibid.

61 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" [1936] in *Selected Writings*, ed Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003) 4: 272.

62 Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" [1931] in *Selected Writings*,

ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999) 2: 514.

63 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007) 24–25.

64 Ibid. 25.

65 Ibid. 26.

66 Ibid. 23.

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