

The Search for Traces in Photography Theory and Museology

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Tina Ruisinger's first photo book *Faces of Photography* (2002) was dedicated to those master photographers of the twentieth century who had a seminal influence on the medium and whose names made history even during their own lifetime. Most were nearing the end of their lives by the time Ruisinger interviewed them and produced portraits of them. Her aim was to record the faces behind the viewfinder, and with them the very personal approach to the discipline that each of these geniuses took. The end result of her work is "an archive, historical document, and even a reference work" rolled into one, as A.D. Coleman describes it in his introduction.

Ruisinger's new publication references that first book project *Faces of Photography* in more than just the word *Traces* in its title. For in its preoccupation with the legacy of the deceased and how the deceased are remembered, this photographic inquiry is likewise an engagement, even if only implicitly, with the history and ontology of the photographic medium.

The essay that follows is both a search for traces in photography theory and museology and at the same time a meditation on their origins and premises.

The origins of the museum and of art

The philosopher and historian Krzysztof Pomian once described the practice of placing grave goods in the tombs of the dead that is widespread in various cultures as the "origin of the museum." He makes the same claim for the Greeks' and Romans' sacrificial offerings to the *museion*, the "seat of the Muses" to which the museum owes its name. Alongside the treasuries of rulers and princes, many of which also housed collections of artifacts, Pomian also mentions the importance of relics as collectibles for sacred institutions. Of particular significance to our inquiry is his assertion that all human collections begin as communication between the living and the dead: "The relationship between the living and the dead has always and everywhere been perceived as an exchange: the living give up not only the use, but even the sight of certain objects in return for the benevolent neutrality, if not actual protection of the dead."

As already mentioned, Pomian views offerings, too, as part of a process of exchange, except that here, it was the favor of the gods that was being sought. Visible things, he argues, were treated as intermediaries of the invisible—be it the kingdom of the dead, a deity, or the power of a sovereign.

In his "Ontology of the Photographic Image" of 1945, the film critic André Bazin sees the fine arts as having grown out of the practice of embalming the dead. The Egyptian mummies were the first statues, and the statuettes filled with food for the dead that were placed inside sarcophagi the first sculptures, so Bazin argues. He then proceeds to extrapolate one of the salient characteristics of photography from this assumption of religious origins: "It is this religious use, then, that lays bare the primordial function of statuary, namely the preservation of life by a representation of life." These two works by Pomian and Bazin are cited here as typical not only of how the emergence of collections and later of museums is accounted for, but also of how photography is characterized.

Death and photography

Ever since the inception of the method, one of photography's most powerful reservoirs of imagery has been the semantic context of death. The death metaphor was at first adduced as a negative foil for underscoring the technical aspect of photography as opposed to the creative

craftsmanship of the artist. In the age of literary realism with its rival aesthetic schools, photography was accused of creating “lifeless reproductions” of reality and hence of being inferior to the “living” art of the artistic genius. The critique commonly leveled at portrait photography revived the corpse metaphor. The technical constraints that in the early days of photography resulted in exposure times of several minutes—whether in the blazing sun or in the studio—rendered some form of “head clamp” unavoidable. Later it was the use of flash that in the eyes of critics lent subjects, and with them the whole medium, the look of early-onset rigor mortis.

In no other medium was the transience of human existence as virulent a theme as it was in photography. By “capturing” an instant, photography makes us aware that that same instant has already been lost, whether in the twinkling of an eye or in the click of a camera shutter. Deathbed or post mortem photography developed shortly after the invention of the medium, and the career of post-mortem photographer before long became as respectable as any other. The connection with death has since become a mainstay of photography theory, too. Indeed, ever since people started theorizing about photography, its connection with death has been central to their arguments. Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag are only the most famous names who have followed this line of inquiry.

Post-mortem photography genres

Katharina Sykora’s two-volume work *Die Tode der Fotografie* explores the many different manifestations of portraiture and post-mortem photography in the death rituals of the West. Of crucial importance to Tina Ruisinger’s photographic series is the notion of traces—traces of a life—which is deeply rooted in photographic praxis. Captured by photography, these physical traces in some instances undergo a kind of doubling, as if to emphasize their significance. In spirit photography, for example, a briefly exposed image of the deceased could be superimposed onto a portrait of a living person. By making the dead appear as if alive, often with the aid of retouching, the boundary between life and death could be transgressed.

The ethnographer and art historian Ilka Brändle interprets the understanding of photography that grew out of the cult of remembrance in the latter days of the nineteenth century as a kind of “transubstantiation from a photographed body to media support.” She sees this physical transubstantiation—assuming it exists at all—taken to an extreme in post-mortem photography, which haunts the literature on photography theory rather like a chimera. In support of her argument, Brändle quotes Aaron Scharf, who in his book *Creative Photography* of 1965 drew attention to the fact that the gum-dichromate method, which was developed in the mid-nineteenth century, dropped, and then rediscovered towards the end of the century, lent itself exceptionally well to a very morbid technique: “I cannot refrain from describing the gruesome suggestion which was offered in 1896 for making ‘post-mortem’ photographs,” wrote Scharf. “These were to be made by using the ashes of some cremated loved one, applied to an earlier photograph in the following manner: ‘they will adhere to the parts unexposed to light,’ and a portrait obtained composed entirely of the person it represents.”

The first to introduce Scharf’s aside into photographic discourse was the American art historian, Rosalind Krauss, whose own description of it in 1978 as “[b]reathtaking in its loony rationality” at the same time served to distance herself from it. Bernd Stiegler also resurrected the possibility of chimeras, though not without suggesting that such prints had indeed existed: “Towards the end of the nineteenth century, or so it is reported, prints of photographs of the deceased were made using their own ashes.”

Stiegler references Krauss as his source, who in her turn references Scharf. Yet none of these theorists actually bothered to research Scharf’s source, still less to find out whether the prints

under discussion, based on an idea at once both fascinating and repellent, ever existed. The first writer to quote Scharf was in fact Walter E. Woodbury (active 1890–1910), who was the editor of two photography journals, *The Photographic Times* and *The American Annual of Photography*. Woodbury was also the author of a dictionary of photography published in 1896, and in the year following brought out a compendium of photographic experiments and playful tricks, aptly named *Photographic Amusements*. When explaining the dichromate method in that work, he could not resist floating an absurd idea of his own invention: “Some time ago we suggested a plan of making what might be termed ‘post-mortem’ photographs of cremated friends and relations. A plate is prepared from a negative of the dead person in the manner described, and the ashes dusted over. [...] The idea is not particularly a brilliant one, nor do we desire to claim any credit for it, but we give it here for the benefit of those morbid individuals who delight in sensationalism, and who purchase and treasure up pieces of the rope used by the hangman.”

Note how Woodbury immediately tries to distance himself from the idea by casting it as one that will appeal only to “morbid individuals.” What he calls “sensationalism,” however, actually hits the nail on the head, for what is the rope used by the hangman if not material testimony to death, and hence a macabre, if also perfect “object of transition”?

Objects of transition—Transfiguration—Symbols

If the museum is associated with death, then not just on grounds of a fallacious etymology that links it to the word “mausoleum”. The early days of the museum are of course closely tied to the practice of collecting, which was a form of remembering the dead. Thus the sepulchral statues of Ancient Egypt were not so much portraits of deceased pharaohs as their “ideal form and final shape.” They did not represent the deceased; they *were* the deceased. Alexander Klein, however, notes that in this magic context, the aim was never display, since the statues were not visible to the living. As in Antiquity, so relics were collected in the Middle Ages, too. The cult of relics reached its zenith when Christianity came into the ascendancy. As already mentioned, the Christian practice of collecting relics is viewed as one of the origins of the museum. Some even go so far as to assert that every museum is in fact a secularized “relic collection,” which is why museums have variously been described as “death’s lost property office” or “monuments to the fragility of cultures.” But what does it actually mean to view museum objects as relics? Viewed from the point of view of psychoanalysis (specifically Donald W. Winnicott), relics are transitional objects, which through touch provide a link to a deceased. Indeed, many museums were, and still are, founded in order to save objects and their context from disappearance, which is why they are not unlike mourning in what they do and how they work. The psychoanalyst Karl-Josef Pazzini describes the transfer of objects from their original utilitarian context into the museum as analogous with the Christian theological concept of transubstantiation, meaning the transformation of the bread and wine of the Eucharist into the body and blood of Christ. His theory is premised on the Christian practice of collecting relics and on the principle of touch connected with it. Pomian’s concept of “semiophores” has proved especially fruitful in the field of museology: Semiophores, he argues, are objects that have been removed from circulation and hence are “of absolutely no use.” As part of a collection, however, they become bearers of meaning, that is to say, semiophores that represent the “invisible.”

Traces—A hunt for clues

In her photographic hunt for clues, Tina Ruisinger shows those relics of a deceased loved one

that his or her mourners most treasure. But these are not the random relics of a life; they are rather carefully selected objects that show signs of use by the deceased. Just as Roland Barthes, in his ground-breaking work on interpreting photography, *Camera Lucida*, describes his quest for the one photograph in which he would *find* his dead mother, so the people who took part in Tina Ruisinger's project *Traces* went off in search of things that somehow embodied the deceased. Significantly, in her discussion of Barthes's search for traces of his mother in the form of objects, Katharina Sykora writes of "contact relics of a retrospective physical closeness through real and imagined touch." Objects of everyday use that belonged to or were used by the deceased are invested with a meaning that only mourners can give them. The things themselves are thereupon rendered useless and become what Pomian called semiophores. Searching for his mother, Barthes finally finds a photo of her as a child with her brother, taken in their parents' conservatory. The photograph, however, is one that he cannot show, since "it existed *for me*." Like the sepulchral statues of the Ancient Egyptians that were invisible to the living, and like the relics locked away inside reliquary caskets and revealed only during a religious rite or procession, so the material bearer of memory also needs some form of preservation.

Tina Ruisinger has given it such a form in her photos, in a medium whose artifice is also a way of placing reality at one remove. What she shows us, therefore, are the refracted memories of those left behind: baby photos filtered through the tissue overlay of a photo album—one of the key repositories of memory of the past century and a half; a key ring attached to which is a badly scratched plastic pendant containing the photo of a man; many items of clothing and shoes bear traces of the body that once wore them. The clothes of an elderly person are faded from frequent washing. Especially striking is the role played by media which in a few years' time will no longer serve as bearers of memory: LPs, music cassettes and above all letters are fast disappearing from our lives. The empty water pitcher, however, more than just a souvenir: It also symbolizes a life just ended and reminds us how amphorae, too, can become semiophores. Indeed, many of the preserved things have been placed inside repositories of one kind or another, be it a water pitcher or a wooden bowl, a plastic bag full of sailor's buttons, a jam jar with the ashes of the deceased in the hand of a mourner, a jewelry case, a wooden urn, a plastic box, a metal box with contents. They all contain things that remind the living of the dead. Thus these repositories come to embody the semiotic process as the "auratization and memorial impregnation of things." "Semiophores", concludes Böhme in words as pregnant as they are poetic, are "the things, the vessels of meaning."

Underlying all of Tina Ruisinger's memorial objects is the hope of remaining in touch with the dead. "Fine, invisible threads lead from these things into the realm of the dead, and sometimes the deceased, who is no longer even a thing, is resurrected for a split second, as if the hand were not holding the handle of the fine teapot but were rather touching the body of the deceased in that no man's land between thing and death."