

Abstract

The ways in which photographs and text alter each other's meanings and recontextualize the viewer/reader's understanding is explored through three photographs by Helen Ford and Dave Morrel, Paul O'Neill and Jenny Holzer. Difference in language, in processing, in reference underscore the conflicting operations of viewing and reading. This conflict or struggle is seen as an inherent quality of cross-disciplinarity and is used to describe a new context for photo-text work situating it "in between" overlapping and diverging formal historical and critical discourses. Colliding the materiality of this struggling with a multiplicity of subjective positions from which it can be negotiated, "Axis..." articulates photographic and text based work as a live and shifting territory that resists being fixed by traditional boundaries of practice and theory.

*What lies between the visual and the textual is not a border...we might rather imagine what lies between vision and textuality as so many fault lines, masses exerting pressure on and shifting against one another at a particular location or set of locations in a complex, layered and folded landscape. What counts is how we follow the lines of their intersection, how we pay attention to their circumstances.*¹

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In the adjacent quote, Melville and Readings, open out the line between vision and textuality as a space or a place, alive with action and interaction akin to the geographical shiftings of tectonic plates on the earth's surface. This image of a volatile and ceaselessly dynamic landscape provides a rich 'ground' in which to begin to locate a context for image-text work and more specifically in the case of this writing, photo-text work. The richness of this idea is not only due to the way in which they articulate the dynamics of this landscape but also, and perhaps more so, the fact that they transform the relationship between vision and textuality from a border (line) into a land (scape). In doing this they merge historical and traditional (disciplinary) distinctions, forcing the conceptualization of a new discursive arena that does not rely on a singular exclusionary line to identify itself — a line that forms a clear distinction between outside and inside, between here and there, between I and you. Instead, they conceptualize a land(scape) that is itself made up of many interchanging and interacting lines of 'between,' that is to say a land(scape/scope) that turns the notion of 'between' as a gap — that is empty and redundant — into a notion of 'between' as a mesh or weave of intersections — positive, live and most importantly traceable. What this implies is that it is possible to, as they put it "follow the lines of these [their] intersections" — or in the case of photo-text work that it is possible, through apprehension of the dynamics within the work itself, to identify or to become part of the (discursive) 'land' in which the work exists.

In this text I wish to pick up the idea of Melville and Readings' map,' so to speak, and explore the 'between' of photo-text work. By exploring the inherent dynamics of writing and photographic representation alone and overlapping these characteristics and traditions within descriptive analysis of three photo-text works, I hope to articulate the discursive scape/scope of this kind of work as a space that refuses to sustain the traditional distinctions between image and text or art and literature but instead situates a subject-[ive] [in this] between in such a way that s/he negotiates its surface — from a position or set of positions — "a location or set of locations"² — that is constantly changing and interchanging and so offers different and divergent perspectives, as well as repeatedly new, and yet rupturing, readings.

By describing in detail some photo-text work I hope to articulate the subtleties of these dynamics and the inevitable ruptures they necessitate. And through this to suggest that these subtleties of movement, of formulation but

also of time and in(ter)ference, interference are a positive struggle, that reflects the nature of the discourse. These struggles are not only between the photograph and writing but (to refer back to Melville and Readings) between vision and textuality, between seeing and reading. Our conception or contextualization of images and writing has implications for how we occupy the space of representation, for how we conceive of our subjectivity in relation to others and the world we live in and for how we communicate within the increasing flux that culture is.

In the opening pages of “Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing”³ Helene Cixous describes writing as a “passageway between two shores.” These two shores are the two standing bars of the capital letter H. “This is what writing is,” she says, “I, one language and I another language and between the two, the line that makes them vibrate.” The line between vibrates because it carries the breath/breadth of H. In English, unlike in French, when I speak H at the beginning of a word, I breathe out. I exhale, “there’s breath, she says, lets keep it.” So what is it that writing is to Cixous? Two I’s and a line that joins them, a passage of exhalation between two shores and a step on a ladder. She says “the ladder is writing.” And then, “The ladder is neither immobile nor empty. It is animated. It incorporates the movement it arouses and inscribes.” She says, (My)Her ladder is frequented.” Cixous *speaks* in Her, capital H, text. She speaks to you, to me, the reader, the listener, from a place, a shore, that she calls I. She occupies that place of the writing as Hers and in doing so she lets me/you/us in. She writes Her articulation as writing; speaking to another I, I (you) who reads. She reaches across from I to I with a line that joins us. Her step — the movement from where I was to where I will be — vibrates. But neither I can hold Her. Being frequented, only the line between is a place to be — a step to step onto and off from. “This is what writing is,” she says. And is this what writing is? I say, stepping in.

Cixous opens up writing as a place to be. It’s where I am now, while writing this for you. It’s where you are as you read. What’s more, it’s where you were when I wrote this. Because it’s writing we can both/all be in it simultaneously. Our time is its time. This is a text I am composing; this is a text /am composing for *you*, so we are straddling writing. This intersubjective dynamic of language is central to any exploration of photographic and text-based work because it distinguishes, at the same time as connecting, the presence, the position and the time of writing, (which is not speech but which draws (on) its signs) from the presence, the position and the time of the photograph. When the two come together, juggling space, their axes — the positions from which they orientate themselves — struggle. And that is what I want to articulate.

In this text, you will read writings of the process of reading/viewing some photo-text works that I have chosen, some well known, some not known at all. It is my process of reading/viewing that I am writing. Not to forward it as the only reading or viewing that the work can have, but rather to assert that an I is present when the work acts/performs. I, or you, or someone else, activates the work by receiving it. Even before interpretation, I start where the relationships are internal to the form and because of this the work's work — its performance — relies on my reception of it. Or in other words, this work relies on discourse, one subject speaking to another. As such, it cannot fall back into a visual frame that has as its legacy a construction of I, in the Cartesian subject, as utterly sealed or as Kathleen Kirby puts it "an 'individual' [that] might be pictured as a closed circle."⁴ I will bring out those relationships regarding what the work is as possible ways of refiguring a context or contexts for the photo-text work.

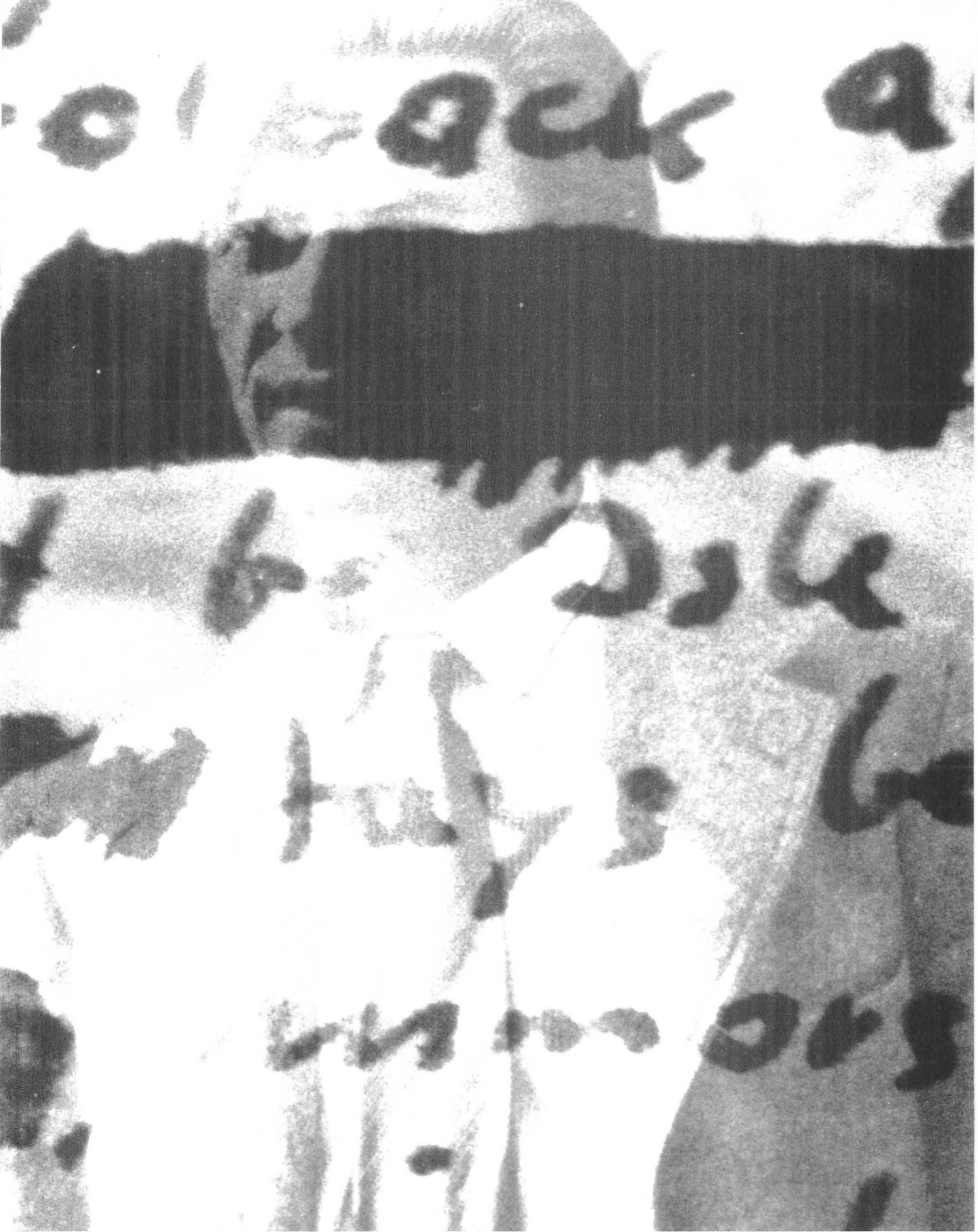
The works that will be discussed make apparent many of the aspects of the photo-text work I am considering in this text and that lead me to consider their structure as a reason to attempt to situate this work within a context characterized by rupture, discontinuity, elision, joining and fluid relationships. That context can be understood within contemporary (linguistic, psychoanalytic, cultural) theory, within theories of the postmodern, but it can also reflect on the histories of the traditional disciplines whose borders it challenges and transgresses and as Jessica Prinz writes, it "*demand[s] a modified notion of literature even as it requires a modified notion of art.*"⁵ It must find its rationale, one that brings the various discursive positions that relate to this work together, in the structure and ideology of the work itself.

Soukoup: Helen Ford and Dave Morrell

This is the image of a man, head and upper body, already cropped. He looks like he is walking, going towards a position to the left of the frame of the photograph. He is looking that way, not at the camera, not at the viewer. He looks as if he might be about to speak, to call someone perhaps. I see him voyeuristically. He doesn't know I am looking at him. The image is grainy, breaking up as if it has been blown-up, as if I was being given a detail of some more expansive picture. He is focused on and his unawareness is focused on.

Imposed across the image is some handwriting. It is also cropped. It extends into a space beyond the photograph which we cannot see/read. That exterior space is both visual and textual containing the rest of the photograph the rest of the writing. But the scale of this writing suggests a space very

Axis — a line about which a body Contextualizing photo-text work



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different from the photograph's space. The writing occupies this image at a distance, not from the image itself but from its own expected space and scale. It has also been blown-up, enlarged. The intimacy of the handwriting — possibly a letter — and the enforced intimacy of the image, is focused in on so much that it becomes intrusive, crude, manipulative. I take all this in — in a second. The rapidity of these complex movements, entirely visual at this stage form an impression, not unlike the literal impression of light upon the surface of the photographic plate again. This is not yet part of my reading of the work, at least not part of any narrative that I might construct from it, but it has registered. I also register resistance in this image, some struggle in the formal relationships. My reception of the work is troubled. And drawn in, I continue. I slow my viewing down and begin to read. The eye has no clear directive in terms of where to go. It wanders, in and out, up, around, over. The writing which is semi-transparent in some places, opaque in others, supplements this viewing in its visual movement across the image. Taken in as one plane it wafts in front of the standing man, like something he is about to walk through. But looked at in detail, the writing sinks into the image, exchanging the grey and grain of the image surface in a traversing that settles in in places, in other places it lifts off the shoulder or the lapel, other times taking a grey from the hairline or the neck and inscribing the forehead with it. It scratches out definition too, blackening the line of the jacket against the muted background — in effect it reads and registers the image surface, toying with contours and textures of light and dark. It rewrites the image visually, telling it again by layering another exposure onto it — it seems to hover. But simultaneously, the gap between the image and the writing fills in like it is water and the substance of the photograph undulates in shifting relationships, pouring around and about itself, liquefying its own presence. When the eye rises to the surface again, it jars against the suddenly solid words.

And reading comes into play. I read, 'pack,' 'be isle,' 'days,' 'rumours.' I make up the rest of the words that are cut off by the photographic frame, 'days' becomes 'days begin,' 'pack' becomes 'to pack again.' I begin to construct a message in the writing. And the man in the photograph becomes the conveyor of that message. Not at that moment. Not at the moment of the snap, but at this moment, the moment where the snap opens up again, in this new formulation, through, literally, this writing. But still the work is not finished. Because in the upper middle distance of the photograph there is a large gash of transparent black. I have seen it all along. I have seen how it shows me the face of the man, how it reverses the contrast of the image and in the meandering of the eye through the text I have even seen that it is of writing, that it erases some part of the imposed text. But at this moment, where the juncture between the hidden text and writing hits another turn —

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that of the image — the viewing, reading and conceptualizing of this work goes into a spin. There is increased visibility because of erasure, but the writing is doubly erased. Erased once through the textual crossing out and again through the substitution of the man's face for the opacity of the mark of erasure. In this sense I cannot read that I cannot read because I can see instead. It is a work that is full of elision and contraction and loss. And what maintains its presence as a readable photograph is the slipperiness of its relationships. In this way as viewer/reader of the work I am finding it in its own elisions, in the substance of its discontinuity.

I have chosen to look particularly at work that uses photographic images. When writing intervenes in the space of the photograph, it not only breaks the continuity and unity of the image plane it also retells, often differently, what the photograph says, while also subverting the play of time in it. How the photograph articulates its presence is ruptured. The writing splits and opens it, if only to cause it to cohere even more.

The frame of an image is where the image stops and starts. It is temporal in that sense as much as it is spatial. Images tend to fill their frames and as Suren Lalvani says, "enframing requires total visibility and surveillance,"⁶ unlike the frame of the page which identifies a putatively empty space, into which writing then goes. The frame of the photograph is both arbitrary and constructed. The viewfinder of the camera finds an appropriate position at which to stage its edit and the cut that the frame then makes is fixed within the possibilities of that mechanism and the photographer's eye. When writing becomes part of this frame and the image that it contains, it disrupts this visual fixture, either through literally breaking the frame or through setting up other delineated spaces that the image must now also respond to. It also can lay other spatial planes onto the apparently singular plane of the photograph. This kind of layering exposes the surface of the image as image as much as it enforces the depth of the photographic illusion.

Whatever way these interventions take place, they effect a change on the conceptual frame of the image and of the writing. In the last photo-text work and the next one, it is writing that is intervening on the photographic space and subject. In this sense the writing changes the reading of the photograph (as well as changing the relationship the reader has to that work). It changes it because it forces the viewer to read and also because in that reading other associations and connotations are set up. In the sense in which Barthes uses the terms in his essay "Rhetoric of the Image,"⁷ the denotative quality of the

photograph remains unchanged but the connotative quality of it is rewritten through the explicit presence of the text.

Writing occupies or treats the image space in a variety of ways. Often, as in the first photo/text work discussed, it becomes embedded in the photograph itself. Reiterating the image, while at the same time mutating its presence. But frequently writing serves to stand apart from the photograph, calling into a discursive space that is in fact a space of language. This is not to suggest that the photograph does not already operate within a discursive space, it is rather to emphasize the way in which photographic representations are determined both before and after their 'creation' by a number of subjective positions outside, but in relation to, the frame of the image event.⁸ This occurs most obviously when we find the photo-text supplementing the figure with a sign that directly addresses the space or the viewer/reader outside the frame of the image. These signs are known as 'shifters.'⁹ The shifters are signs which require the presence of their referent for meaning, such as the pronouns 'I,' 'you,' 'he,' 'she' etc., but also words such as 'here' or 'there.' Without an inherent referent themselves, they function only as a reality of discourse. When writing in the photograph uses the shifters, it re-joins the historically detached observer to the articulations of the image itself. Once placed in the photograph, that photograph reiterates a direct engagement with its reader and consequently situates itself within a specific aspect of social discourse — the activity of time and language that posits the speaking/reading subject in relation to other subjects. A conception of the work and of representation is constructed, as relational. Intersubjective.

However despite its location within discursive space, by itself the photograph cannot address the viewer. It can remind, invoke, show but not address. Because it has no empty signs, it has no pronominal function, it is an anti-shifter. It can neither say 'I' nor 'you.' It can only include me, as a discursive part of its presence, through reflection, through recognition of 'my face' or 'your face' or 'that place where we were,' that is through entering into the domain of spoken and shared discourse, of anecdotal evidence. Considering the photograph as evidence then, calls on the viewer to relate to the photographic representation as residue or trace of something that has already taken place. In this sense the position of the viewer, the 'I' that now regards the image from this space and time, collides with the position of the eye of the camera lens. However, photographic subjects always regard their viewer, anticipating in the instance of being 'shot' the discursive and open space to which their gaze will be directed. And in the action of the shutter's blink, the camera lens detaches the gaze of its subjects (in 'reality') from that of the photographer's. Halting the exchange of 'views,' by catching light onto photosensitive film, the space behind the lens

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(that is the space where the photographer assumed the position of 'I') is emptied out or voided and so makes way for the reciprocal viewing taken up by any 'I/eye' that then sees the photograph. This sets the viewer up in a discursive relationship to the image, urging the referent of the 'I/eye' that views to identify that which returns his/her gaze. This can only be done through a discursive exchange that names and locates the subject of the photograph, that de-scribes what has already been in-scribed.

The case of the self-portrait may be an exception, yet even then recognition is mediated. As Peggy Phelan describes it, this recognition (from the perspective of psychoanalysis) is a process that involves the viewer imitating "the image one imagines the other sees."¹⁰ And she goes on to say that this "imitative reproduction of the self-image always involves a detour through the eye of the other."¹¹ This location of the subject's self-recognition within, and through, the agency of the other, reiterates the intersubjective dynamic within which photographic re-presentation operates. Placing the shifters into this exchange then, activates a multiplicity of possible subjective positions, addressing, by turn(s) both the viewer and the figure within the photograph itself.

Yet added to this, what differentiates the photograph from other forms of visual representation is what Rosalind Krauss refers to as the photo's 'indexicality.' In her essay "Notes on the Index Part 1,"¹² Krauss describes the photograph as being an 'indexical' sign, 'indexical' referring to signs that, "establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents"¹³ and she cites examples of indexes as physical traces such as footprints, medical symptoms, shadows and the actual referents of linguistic shifters. In this sense there is a physicality of connection between sign and referent, (similar to that of the 'shifters') which articulates the presence — by virtue of a kind of emptiness — of the photograph, not only within a discursive and intersubjective dynamic but within the physicality of its surface.

Consequently, the way in which the photograph acts as an agent for the past creates a space which records in a way that is not (de) pictive — in that it forms a 'trace' rather than a 'picture' of its subject. In this sense although the photograph can be read within contexts of visual codification, its presence as signifier placing it within discourse outside its own frame, it also works against this, forcing reading inward and back toward the signified, the conceptual resonance of the image itself. In this way, it fights against what could be called its 'representativity,' by subsuming representation into the absolute presence of its surface yet at the same time allowing image(s) (a 'real') to form on that surface that were once 'real-ly' elsewhere. As a result, even with the sophistication of photographic techniques and imaging, I still

read this space as some kind of real. So when writing enters into this space it becomes a kind of event inside (inlaid into) the photographic 'real.' It becomes writing firstly. Evident as if it had been written on the eye itself. Like a chair, or a road, or a half-turned face, it evokes a materiality that confounds time as much as it coerces space. In the photograph then, this writing slips into the lived world, not merely as representative code, telling about the world through its medium, but also as trace and action, as a mode of scoring/scarring that precedes and outlives its own articulable meaning.

But at the same time, writing still exposes the illusion of photographic 'reality,' by exposing the surface (of what is represented) as surface. So I, as viewer and subject, am caught in the paradoxical spin of these multiple presences. And this discursive position prefaces the photograph's originary connection, dis- and re-connecting it to (my) actual present. It also invokes linguistic slippage, always prefacing and inscribing presence with traces and connotations. Consequently, these paradoxical aspects of photography and writing open up a context for this work and its relationship to representation and subjectivity, that is characterized by multiplicity, discontinuity and rupture, and constantly interchanging subjective positions.

Collaborative work by Paul O'Neill, with a group of survivors of sexual abuse

This work frames itself and elides framing in both the photographic space and the space of the page. However the page is also photographed and the writing on it, which is a personal letter, is as much a facsimile or record of its condition as a letter, as it is a device for placing the letter into and onto the photograph. This work is full of layers of concealment and disruption. The conceptual structure of the work is that of revealing, but the formal structure requires a multiplicity of overlay, of obfuscation, in order to rewrite and to speak the image in this new way. In this piece I see first of all a black and white, (landscape) photograph of a group of people sitting on the grass. It looks sunny. There is a man leaning forward on one arm surrounded by four children. All except one of these children looks out of the image towards the viewing space beyond. The group looks happy, settled into a pleasant summer afternoon picnic. This is the first photograph. Overlaying this image is another photograph of a handwritten letter, written on lined paper and signed. Both the text and the lines of the page remain visible across the photograph as well as existing in their own textual space above and below the image itself. The letter moves between a transparency across the image to an opacity and stronger visibility of its original page space above and below it. In this way it suggests a plane that is both behind and in front of the image.

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This image then is sealed between these layers. It also appears to have been slid in to the writing's space, like a plate in a camera is slid in to catch the imprint of the light, and like this plate the first photograph catches the screen of the text and registers its presence on its surface. At the same time the presence of the first photograph pushes through the transparency of the text and the people within the image look out through this writing, visually attempting to hold their own space and the viewer's gaze, despite the blind of writing that is inscribed onto them. There is a struggle in this. This struggle is reiterated in the content of the work. The apparent struggle and resistance in the work is again a feature of how it constructs and articulates itself as dynamic.

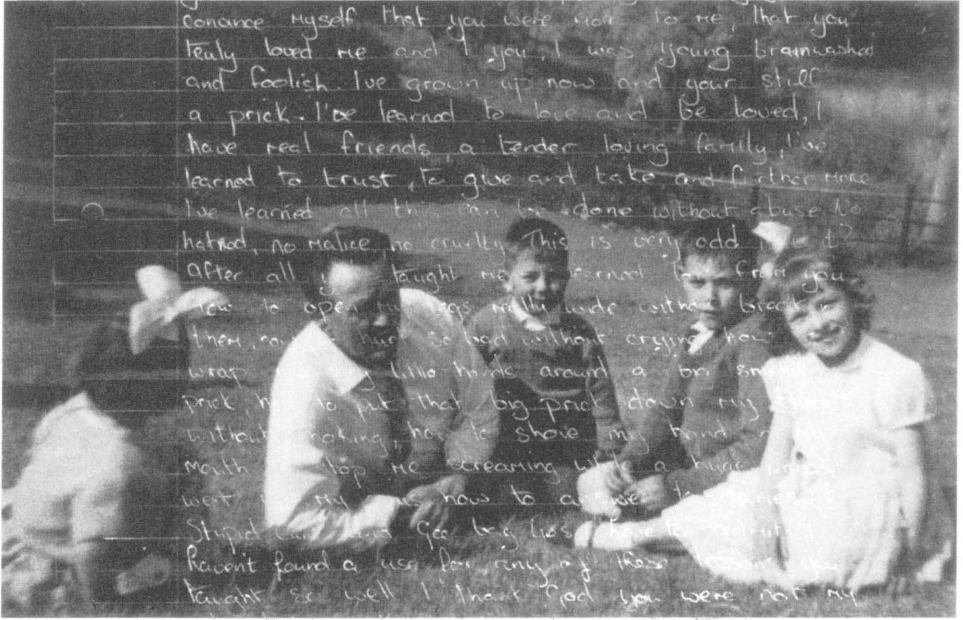
The eye views first, then it reads. Viewing has a capacity to deceive the eye, the brain, into a belief in instantaneous reception. Viewing does involve a 'reading' process, in that it does take time, but it is after it has registered the whole, in a second, in another snap shot. This viewing sees first a family group sitting contented on the grass in summer. Then it moves around the group, it isolates the man, the little girl on the right who smiles out at the camera, it notices the two boys, their puzzled expressions, the bow of the little girl's ribbon who has her back turned, maybe even the man's fist, the boy's fiddling, the girl's shoe. Once satisfied in this registration, the eye returns to the writing, which it has seen but has slipped through. It runs up to the top of the page. Notices the page, complies then with a convention of reading, moves to the top left hand corner. Reads the words "Dear Prick..."

Immediately my perception of the work changes. Rupture slices the unity of visual illusion and its inevitable connotations. A gap is created. The 'original' photograph recedes behind the text. It becomes part of a perceptual memory. It still looks the same but now I see it differently. I read on. "I've chosen that name for you as I feel it is very fitting, if you think about it that's all you ever were to me. I spent years trying to..." I skip the image. And read on from where the image stops. "I sometimes dream of tearing your prick off and raming [sic] it up your ass and down your throat but to be honest most of my life is spent peacefully I hardly ever think of you at all. May God help you. Joyce."

I see it differently now. The eye returns to the image, taking into account the writing that coats it. This time the eye settles on some of the words there, doesn't slip through, tries to read what is there. I find more of the letter. I find Joyce in the photograph. I find the subject of her letter. I am back again with the image. A different image now. Its hidden meaning displayed across it in writing. And where the writing crosses the image I am forced to locate this 'text' with the figures it inscribes in the photograph — from a distance and in detail. The work not only rewrites the denotative reading I take from the

Dear Prick,
 I've chosen that name for you as I feel
 it is very fitting, if you think about it that is all
 you ever were to me I spent years trying to
 convince myself that you were nice to me, that you
 truly loved me and I, you, I was young brainwashed
 and foolish. I've grown up now and you're still
 a prick. I've learned to love and be loved, I
 have real friends, a tender loving family, I've
 learned to trust, to give and take and further more
 I've learned all this can be done without abuse no
 hatred, no malice, no cruelty. This is very odd
 after all I taught me to turn to you for
 you in open my legs with my wide with my
 then my little hands so hard without crying how
 wrap my little hands around a big
 prick me to put that big prick down my
 without noting how to shove my hand
 mouth top he screaming with a huge
 went to my how to answer to
 Stupid little girl for big his
 Haven't found a use for any of these
 taught so well I thank God you were not my
 only teacher. I sometimes dream of tearing your
 prick off with my bear hands and raving it
 up your ass and down your throat, but to
 be honest most of my life is spent peacefully
 I hardly ever think of you at all. May
 God help you

J. Lee



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image, but it also writes, for the first time, the implicit silence that a photograph holds. In this sense it is an act of writing that is subversive, not only because in itself it writes experience long held in silence, but also because it (de)faces the apparently innocuous surface of the image.

As a letter written by hand, the materiality of this writing redresses — through its subversion — as it addresses, old wounds with new ones, literally scarring a representation of the past with what it does. Daring in this case to touch and mark a 'face' held in the illusion of photographic truth, with a hand(writing) whose turn it is to sign, rather than be signed and re-signed (resigned) in the persistence of the photograph's indexicality. "Joyce" breaks the dependency and the anonymity of the photographic 'deixis,' that is, of the way in which the photograph situates her. She writes 'her here and now' onto the image's 'there,' articulating the gap between 'here' and 'there,' between 'him' and 'her' (and in publication between 'you' and 'I') with a correspondence that returns [her] to the scene of [her] mar(k)ing and fills the space where she [herself] was blanked into silence — replaced by a representation that acts like a mark of erasure (a wound that doubles as a shield) — with [her] story and [her] name, a presence that locates Joyce in and beyond the intransigent seizure of the photographic shutter.

Consequently the power of the photographic representation is destabilized and opened up to a struggle of relationships — between the implicit and the said — between the touched and the untouched — between writing and photography. And the work is done now. I stop reading even though I haven't read the entire letter. It is redundant once the image has been articulated. The writing that crosses the surface of the image plane remains largely visual. Read and read as text but not read in full. It sustains the meaning of the piece overall, acting as a visor through which the figures in the photograph must attempt to look. It breaks their benign gaze, even before I know why. And it connects the writing that I read with the image that I have seen and see again. In doing this the work is dis/re-located within a contextual space that is not wholly visual. My relationship with the viewing of the work, is as a reader. I enter into it through the reading of the letter. I become part of that correspondence — as a witness perhaps — however witness not to a scene but to a sign(ing). As such the discourse of (Joyce's) relationships is what I engage with in the work. Joints and articulations. I move along the ladder of writing. I break through Kirby's "closed circle" and unlike the Cartesian space she describes where the closed circle around the individual "ensures its clear division from its location" and where

"outside lies a vacuum,"¹⁴ I enter into a space of the work that is full of variance and contiguity. A world, as John Roberts describes it, "that is not a seamless unity but that [it] is made in and through language and as such not just subject to interpretation but to rupture and change."¹⁵

The visual tradition that preceded the invention of photography was dominated by the invention of Renaissance perspective in the arts and Descartes ideas of 'subjective rationality' in philosophy. Recently much writing analyzes this tradition, both elucidating and questioning the hegemony of this particular "scopic regime," as Martin Jay describes it.¹⁶ What these writings reveal is that the particular ideals of Cartesian perspectivalism, combined with a scientific world view that relied on an increasing belief in observation and in the truth of empirical scientific evidence, produced a cultural epistemology that posited sight as the most important of the senses. Vision became an epistemological ground, serving to construct and rationalize cultural understandings of knowledge and subjectivity well into the nineteenth century. The emergence of psychoanalysis, "the talking cure," the invention of photography and in the twentieth century the increased interest in "the determinative role of language in all the human sciences"¹⁷ — have all been argued to have effected a shift away from the dominant role of vision culturally. This shift from modernist ideals of unity, authenticity and disciplinarity to postmodern readings that situate a linguistic and semiotic analysis of culture and identity at the core of much contemporary discourse, required what Martin Jay has called the "denigration" of vision.¹⁸ This "cutting down" of the omnipotent status of vision involved the material and temporal deconstruction of Cartesian space and ideology, through its re-incorporation into the body and the insertion of what Norman Bryson describes as a "screen of signs"¹⁹ into the transparent window frame of Cartesian perspective.

Cartesian perspectivalism itself was characterized by the belief in the transcendence of materiality through the objectivity of pure visual form and the construction of the 'individual' subject, manifested in an absolute, untouched essence, that remained unaffected by history or culture. This conception of vision as primary was supported through perspective drawing and painting by a centralizing of the position of the viewing subject. The point to which all the lines of depth in perspective recede is on a level with the 'eye' of the viewer. This "vanishing point," as it is known, forms the apex of a viewing triangle that is a mirror image of the supposed optical triangle of the viewing eye. Consequently, all the space, optical and pictorial that fills the plane of the image is determined by the position of the viewing subject. This position

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is fixed, isolated and passive. It stands apart from reality, while at the same time maintaining full control over it due to its position at the center of this 'optical consciousness.' This consciousness, this singular eye, is also a disincarnated eye — apart from the body and other senses. It is not a living, active or empowered eye; it is merely witness to what is seen. Its consciousness can only receive reality, it cannot act upon it.

It was the re-incorporation of this singular and detached viewing eye back into the body — the shift away from what Norman Bryson describes as the 'Medusan Gaze' toward the 'temporal glance'²⁰ — and the recognition of the construction of that body within the world and consequently within and through language, that leads me to conflate the 'eye' of vision with the 'I' of language. In postmodern theories of writing and language we see the same shift towards materiality and temporality. The ideas of contemporary linguistics lay a ground for this conception of interrelating but distinct entities, for notions of presence that are not motivated by the desire for on the one hand transcendence and on the other hand immanent and self-reflexive corporeality. Instead it becomes possible to conceptualize the presence of eye/I and by consequence, all other inde(l)ixical positions as dynamic and contingent, characterized much more by a sense of fluid deferral — residual and accretive — than by fixed and static unities. Consequently "the eternal moment of disclosed presence"²¹ as Bryson describes it, that characterized Cartesian thinking becomes a presence populated in the first place with absences and later with virtualities or potentialities.

In all of the work that I am discussing this 'presence' is intervened on or scored into by a writing that is literally of the body. In its scoring or inscribing of a surface, its tracing of physical presence — its literal indexicality — handwriting becomes a record of a physical and temporal action that marks and implicates the body in and as the discourse of the work. It also reinforces the material quality of writing as mark and as trace (score and scar). This materiality, central to contemporary linguistic and semiotic theory²² — the opacity of writing and its endless referentiality on the level of the sign — arises from the idea of writing as a play of difference,²³ where the signifier refers not only to the signified but also to the absence of all other signifieds, that is to the presence of what is not there but deferred. In this sense the unity of the sign is preceded by multiplicity²⁴ and in work that places writing into/onto the photographic plane, this multiplicity inf(lects) the singularity and unity of the photograph's surface. In *Sauf le Nom*²⁵ Derrida describes this persistent slippage of language by saying:

“there is only the edge in language... that is reference and at the edge of language in the same and double movement, withdrawing and overflowing. But as the moment and the force, as the movements of the injunction take place over the edge they draw their energy from already having taken place.”

This is the same slippage, the same deferral of *absolute* presence, of absolute visibility that can be identified in the photo-text work. This conception of writing and actual writing, introduced into the visual/photographic frame — through overlay, inscription, trace, indentation, scoring, scarring and signing — reveals the contingency of the photographic illusion. An illusion contingent on the silencing capacity of seizure, on the snapping-shut of time in the photographic eye. In these works that eye is opened, its lids pried apart by the temporal movement of the nib. It invokes Freud’s mystic writing pad, the making visible of the unconscious as symptomatic trace²⁶ — tracing up/back from a time and a place unknown residues of what was once experienced. But this is also a writing that comes to know, through a physical touching and negotiation of a surface. Like Luce Irigaray’s call for a feminine touching within psychoanalysis, that breaks the wall of representations and configurations that surround the female subject,²⁷ this writing interferes with the seal of the photograph’s skin — touches its untouchable time, employing a proximity that replaces and recalls, again conflating the distant eye of viewing with writing’s I, seeing by touching, knowing by retracing where knowing left its marks.

The ‘land’ within which this work is articulated then, is a ‘land’ acting between the persistence of visuality and the resistance of language — a fluid scape, ‘*between and overflowing*’²⁸ — a place of discourse, a place that reads, that sees, that breathes, that contains and emits, that attempts to know, that writes. A place of multiplicities, paying “attention to [their] circumstances.”²⁹

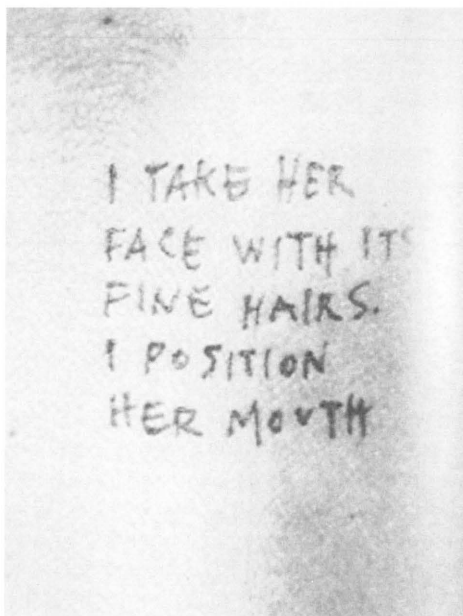
Jenny Holzer’s Lustmord series — specifically;

“I take her face with its fine hairs. I position her mouth.”

The photograph that I see is of writing. My immediate perceptual experience tells me that writing is there and to read the photograph I must engage with a textual reading also. Unlike most photo-text works where the image tends to dominate the text, in these works although the eye acknowledges the image frame and event, it is quickly brought to a textual engagement that surpasses the fact of the writing as both occupying an image frame and being imaged in itself through this. And so I read. “I TAKE HER/FACE WITH ITS/FINE HAIRS./ I POSITION/ HER MOUTH.” This is the first reading which takes in the sentences. Hears them. Places them into the mind’s recognition. Registers them. The

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first reading does little more than this. And so a second reading begins to verify the text, to perhaps begin to negotiate its meaning beyond the deciphering of a code. This time the reading is slower. I purposely trace the letters with my eyes, attempting to find their location not only in a larger semantic, but also (although unconsciously) in the image space itself. This time I find two sentences. And I distinguish them. Each one carrying its own resonance. This time also because I have taken more time, because I have slowed down the reading, because I have located a gap between one sentence and another, I have also entered into a visual reception of the text — by registering the space in which the text is situated. By finding the full stop among all these capital letters I have been drawn to recognizing the line endings of the sentences. I can see now that the space in which this writing exists is a vertical space, the orientation of the portrait. And the writing which is now a figure, doesn't fill that space but lies in it through its inscription onto the image ground, which I now see is the surface of skin.



Only now does the writing occupy the space of the photograph. And once this happens its meta-presence as a transparent code condenses, solidifies, transforms into the recorded presence of marks on skin — tangible scrapings that write words only after they have scored a surface. This is a simple transformation, but it effects a radical change on these oblique and uncontextualized sentences. Figure and ground are components of any viewing experience. “To perceive is first of all to perceive a figure against a ground”³⁰ and in this work the figure and ground multiply and invert themselves. Once I recognize that the ground for the image is skin, I immediately situate that skin within a body. I also then notice the color of the writing, its texture, the quality of its material. In some cases it is red and viscous. It is on a body’s skin, it is about a body; is it of a body also? Is it blood? Without having an answer yes or no, the interference, the interference, is there. The event described in the writing takes on new connotations. The photograph fills in its own absent continuity. Together the writing and the image push into a space that neither of them can occupy alone. The text itself draws us in with its partiality, with its intimacy — and the photographed text is itself the record of an event — the event of texting, of writing. Because writing has taken place, it has a material signification. Because writing has taken place not only has something been said, but something has also been done.

But it is its use of the body as site of inscription and means of inscription — without face, without identity — that increases the resonance of what has been done. The pronouns that make intimate and humanize the subject of the photo also refuse any identification. Their presence contains an emptiness that my subjectivity (as referent) can enter into. This begins to break down the anonymity of the writing and the image. I read the text again and find its ‘I’ is no longer a distant, potential ‘I’ (eye), the ‘I’ is now also that of the writer’s, that is the one who has inscribed the body. And having located this ‘I’ within an event more discursive than rhetorical, having therefore filled the empty sign of the pronoun, I turn to similarly fill the ‘her’ of the text. I read ‘her face,’ ‘her mouth,’ so I see ‘her skin,’ ‘her body.’ But the body is not identifiable, its subjectivity is inscribed (literally and discursively) by the pronouns on its surface. The pronominal exchange cannot be stabilized.

So, I fill her ‘I’ too, taking the presence of ‘her’ writing, its present tense, to position ‘me,’ not only in relation to ‘her,’ but as ‘her’ also. Then ‘her face,’ not the ‘her’ that is ‘I,’ but another ‘her,’ elsewhere, yet still here, is taken. I take ‘her face’ — just like the snapshot takes, I capture, I have ‘her face’ now, here with me, with its fine hairs. But what I have is not

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what I see. This, that skin, written on by 'her,' not 'me.' 'Her skin,' 'her own skin'? 'She' positions 'her' mouth. Ready. But 'her mouth' is elsewhere, 'her face' is not here. Yet still, 'I take her face,' 'with its fine hairs,' 'I position her mouth'?

The possible subjective positions multiply and interchange and yet no-one is present, except I and the photograph. So we struggle, shifting in and out of position, agency and subjectivity. And because the photograph presents us with its subject — its skin, the past already there — it fills all the gaps the shifters make. Always surfacing and re-surfacing presence with its absolute skin, it repairs the scars of writing, joining with fine pores, only to find those pores punctured again by (H)air. The breadth and breath of H, writing's line, body's sensor, breaking, repairing and growing — still fixes nothing. It is inter- and anti-disciplinarity. Struggling as form and context.

The discursive place within which photo-text work can be located is not a new place, it is rather — to return to Melville and Readings quote — a place that is reforming and refiguring sites that were once borders as 'betweens' that are full of resonant and potential presence. It is a place that is inherent in the actual materiality and form of the work itself. And the theories that are invoked to describe and articulate this place are not new either. They are, however, being opened up and re-used, re-situated, in order to enter into what Julia Kristeva would describe as the work's 'unknowability.' Exploring this quality of the work and its discursive place, I think I can see that it is occurring "at the place where it escapes definition"³¹ and repairing its between with yet another ground, another discourse. And as both a feature of a land(scape) and a position within that land(scape), I can see the multifaceted quality of discourse and representation, in the constant pre-facing, de-facing, sur-facing and simple facing, of its own light sensitive 'face.' And I can read the reiteration of subjectivity, in the hyphen that connects this 'face' to that which describes the action of relationship 'I' can have to it.

In the photo-text work this hyphen, this axis, joins as it ruptures — dry to wet, Cartesian rationality to the incorporated visual, the transparency of language to its materiality and temporality, narrative to dialogue, the unified and instantaneous image to its dissemination in time by writing, the observer to the participant. And through a line between shores exerting pressure and about which a body, "I (eye), one language, to I (eye), another language."³²

End notes

- 1 Melville, Stephen and Bill Readings, editors. 1995.
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- 2 Melville, *Readings, Vision and Textuality*, 7.
- 3 Cixous, Helene. 1993.
Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing. New York: Columbia University Press, 3-4.
- 4 Kirby, Kathleen. 1996.
Body Space. London: Routledge, 45.
- 5 Prinz, Jessica. 1991.
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- 6 Lalvani, Suren. 1996.
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New York: State University of New York Press.
- 7 Barthes, Roland. 1977.
Image, Music, Text. Fontana Collins, 42-46.
- 8 In relation to this idea, see Peggy Phelan's discussion in *Unmarked*, where she quotes Lacan. "Is it not true to say that the photographic apparatus is a subjective apparatus constructed entirely through the assistance of x and y which inhabit the domain in which the subject lives, that is the domain of language?"
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- 9 The term was adopted by Jakobson, from Jespersen and is discussed in Jakobson, Roman. 1990/95. *On Language*.
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This is later elaborated on by Beneveniste, Emile. 1971.
Problems in General Linguistics. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press.
- 10 Phelan, *Unmarked*.
- 11 Phelan, *Unmarked*.
- 12 Krauss, Rosalind. 1986.
The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.
Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, Notes on the Index, Part 1, 198.
- 13 Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*.
- 14 Kirby, *Body Space*.
- 15 Roberts, John. "Lucid Dreams." In Susan Hiller Catalog, "The Muse My Sister."
- 16 Jay, Martin. 1988. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity."
In Foster, Hal, editor. *Vision and Visuality*. Dia Art Foundation, 3-23.
- 17 Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Desire in Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

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- 19 Bryson, Norman. 1988. "The Gaze in the Expanded Field." In Foster, Hal, editor. *Vision and Visuality*. Seattle: Bay Press, 92.
- 20 Bryson, Norman. 1983. *Vision in Painting*. (Quoted by Jay in *Downcast Eyes*.)
- 21 Bryson, *Vision in Painting*, The Logic of the Gaze.
- 22 These ideas are discussed particularly in the work of the French post-structuralists, so central to Martin Jay's book *Downcast Eyes*, on the 'denigration of vision.' [See previous reference to Bryson, *Vision in Painting*.]
- 23 Derrida, Jacques. 1978. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 202-203. Also in the translators introduction xvi, see reference under 'Derrida's terms.'
- 24 Krauss, Rosalind. 1993. *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- 25 Derrida, Jacques. 1995. *Sauf le Nom*. Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press.
- 26 For a further discussion of writing and the unconscious in contemporary video work, see Lowry, Joanna. 1998. "Intimate Distance, Art in a Confessional Culture." *Contemporary Visual Arts Magazine*, 18:34-37.
- 27 Irigary, Luce. 1985. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 192-193.
- 28 Derrida, *Sauf le Nom*.
- 29 Melville, *Vision and Textuality*.
- 30 Yves Alain-Bois as quoted in Nancy Spero essay by Jon Bird in 1996. *Nancy Spero Catalog*. London: Phaidon.
- 31 Silverman, Hugo. 1994. *Textualities*. London: Routledge, 80-86.
- 32 Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*.

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