11-1-2010

From then until now

Nick Marshall

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from then until now

by

Nick Marshall

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
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November 2010

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to my thesis committee members Patti Ambrogi, Roberley Bell, and Alex Miokovic for providing me with the opportunity to work with them and constantly challenging me to think about my work in new ways. You never let me settle for anything but the best and for that I am eternally grateful. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Angela Kelly, Oscar Palacio, Gregory Halpern, and Suzanne Szucs for their thoughtful insights and studio visits. To my fellow peer’s Lisa Adamucci, Sarah Hearn, Manuel Pena, Carly Miller, Christin Boggs, Emma Powell, Fiona Wilson, and Maria Providencia Casanovas, I appreciate your friendship and advice along the way.

Thank you to Tim Avery for his meticulous edits on the written portion of the thesis and to Travis Johansen for his help with the exhibition as well as hosting Sunday brunch every week. Those days with friends have made my time in Rochester worth every minute.

To my mother and father, I could not be where I am today without your unending generosity and patience. Thank you for the photographs.
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ABSTRACT

from then until now

Thesis by

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B.F.A., Still-Based Media Studies, Columbus College of Art and Design, 2007
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The photograph may create a sense of nostalgia and longing for the past, but that past is not an authentic one. It is a past that has been mediated through a lens and by a photographer who is already mediated by cultural and societal norms and beliefs. Yet this past is both familiar and foreign at the same time.

From Then Until Now is a series of visual investigations and physical manipulations of the photograph—particularly the snapshot. I utilize the photograph for its dual role as an objective index and as an aid for the subjective nature of memories. In this way the snapshot allows one to hold onto a physical object as well as construct an imagined past.

By employing techniques of removal, erasure, and alteration, this exhibition addresses and complicates the snapshots ability to transcend its own objectness and materiality while simultaneously staging its disappearance as subject back to object.
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from then until now
INTRODUCTION

Western society has been photographing and collecting images for over a century as a means to record significant events as well as daily life. For many, the act of taking and accumulating pictures has become ritualistic. They produce albums, display them on mantles, or put them away in drawers and boxes. A photograph depicting family members or loved ones can be an irreplaceable reminder of their absence, but to anyone else it may be just another portrait amongst the millions circulating. I am fascinated by this desire to capture and hold onto images, despite for most, the inevitability of them being destroyed, forgotten, or becoming someone else’s property.

From Then Until Now is a series of visual investigations and physical manipulations of the photograph—particularly the snapshot. I utilize the photograph for its dual role as an objective index and as an aid for the subjective nature of memories. In this way the snapshot allows one to hold onto a physical object as well as construct an imagined past. By employing techniques of removal, erasure, and alteration, this exhibition addresses and complicates the snapshots ability to transcend its own objectness and materiality while simultaneously staging its disappearance as subject back to object.

The photograph may create a sense of nostalgia and longing for the past, but that past is not an authentic one. It is a past that has been mediated through a lens and by a photographer who is already mediated by cultural and societal norms and beliefs. Yet this past is both familiar and foreign at the same time. I share this obsession with the past, yet I reject it, creating a perpetual battle with the nostalgic, an emotion generally met with cynicism. As I began working on this thesis my aim
was to disregard these romantic impulses because of their sentimentality. However, I have come to accept them as integral parts of the written and visual work.

Fundamental to my practice as an artist are the works of Bas Jan Ader and Christian Boltanski. Using a range of mediums, they often incorporate what Melvyn Bragg refers to as “the debris of everyday life”. Though their works address different subject matter, I find their approach to be humanistic, heavily sentimental, often comedic, bordering on absurd. It is my intention to embody many of these same characteristics, creating works that allow not only myself, but also the viewer to engage on a personal and intimate level.

The announcement cards—bearing the title, *From Then Until Now*, in white lettering—double as reminders for dates and times while acting as a piece that operates as part of the exhibition. They were run as an edition of 250 unfixed, silver gelatin prints that were exposed, developed, stamped, hand-numbered, and packaged in black envelopes in the darkroom. When the recipient opens the envelope they have exposed the image to light for the first time. The life span of the print is determined by its exposure to light and the conditions under which it is stored. The more it is viewed and handled, the faster the text will disappear. Influenced by John Cage’s usage of ambiguity and non-measurement, the title suggests a length of time that has no beginning and no end. The snapshot often lingers in this liminal state; it’s history and tactility defined by the marks of time.
from then until now

(Figure 1) From Then Until Now (Postcard), 2010. Silver gelatin print, 4 x 6 in
A FAMILY OF STRANGERS

One afternoon while visiting my childhood home in Canton, Ohio, I found nine 2”x3” headshots of a woman in her early 20's. Each image had a similar composition but differed slightly: the tilt of her head; the hair falling over a shoulder blade; the subtle shift of her body. I gathered the photos and took them back to my apartment in Columbus, Ohio. I then burnt the images into a silk-screen and dragged ink over each transferred photo onto a small series of canvases. The resulting images contained all the inconsistencies associated with the printmaking process: blotched ink from an unclean screen, blank spots where the screen had not made contact with the canvas, and miscalculated registrations.

The serigraphs, titled, Stranger (2005), were part of the group exhibition, Material Reverie (2006), at the MPX Gallery in Columbus. I invited my family to attend the opening; upon arrival my father immediately asked me, “Why are there pictures of your mother hanging up?” In this moment, when I was unable to recognize my own mother, I realized the photograph’s ability to distort identity and withhold information about our personal and cultural pasts. Likewise, as a subject viewing the photograph I imposed my own misconceptions and bias’ that led to my inability to recognize.
(Figure 2) *Stranger*, 2008. Serigraphs on canvas – Fourteen Parts; Each 3.5 x 5 in
I began to investigate this phenomenon. My goal became to determine what the photographic snapshot is and how it functions within Western culture. I started this process by researching the history of photography and throughout I grew enamored with the anecdotes that gave birth to pictorial representation such as Plato’s Cave and Tiphaigne de La Roche’s dream about chemicals that could permanently fix an image. But of all the stories it was Pliny the Elder’s tale of The Corinthian Maid that resonated most deeply with me. The story is of a potter’s daughter who wanted to have a permanent reminder of her lover who was going off to war, so she traced his shadow projected on the wall by candlelight. The young woman was left with “a representation of a representation or a copy of a copy.”¹ Like the trace of the shadow, the photograph acts as an extension of the body: the body that is soon to be absent. In Geoffrey Batchen’s, Burning With Desire, he states, “Representation of any kind is born of a perennial desire to substitute an image for an anticipated loss.”²

(Figure 3) Joseph Wright of Derby, *The Corinthian Maid*, 1783-84. Oil on canvas
During one of my many visits to a local second-hand shop in Rochester, I was sitting in the corner of the store sorting through bins of old Kodachromes when a woman approached me and asked what I was doing. I explained to her that I work with discarded images, so she told me about her husband’s second cousin who had recently passed away. Since she and her husband were the only family members left on the cousin’s side of the family, they inherited the photographs of him from his youth into his adulthood. She went on to explain that they were running out of storage room, and she wasn’t sure of what to do with this recent acquisition. On one hand, she didn’t have space to keep them, but on the other she couldn’t simply throw them away. Her proposed resolution was to take them to the lake and bury them. She felt that by discarding the images, whether in the trash—or selling them at a flea market—she would be desecrating the body of the subject. This seemed to me a similar reaction to the way in which one might have feelings of guilt after discarding religious memorabilia because of its implied transcendental nature. So, to her, the logical response was to give them a proper burial service. After speaking with this woman, it became increasingly clear that photographs have the ability to hold a strange and unyielding power over their viewer. I felt that in order to experience this stigma, I needed to address my own family’s archive.

I have spent the past few years of my life looking at the collection of photographs I amassed from my family. I live with them. They hang on my walls; pile up in albums, shoeboxes, and an old bowling ball bag. I sift through them, sometimes separating them into categorical piles: portraits, military, seascapes, etc. The photographs do not concern themselves with exposure, composition, or lighting. They are amateur snapshots, intimate in scale, reaffirming the existence of an individual, a family, an event, or a time. More often than not, the subjects depicted
are unrecognizable to me. Relatives and family friends seem unfamiliar, while a calendar card with a picture of Elvis on the front is immediately identifiable. The works exhibited in *From Then Until Now* (2010) depict subjects that may or may not have been a part of my family. Some photographs may be of distant relatives of whom I have no recollection, while others may have been found photographs that someone felt partial to and, over time, made their way into the collection of family photos. In this regard, family is extended beyond bloodline.

But these are not my photographs. They belong to my mother. For it is typically the mother’s duty to collect and maintain a family’s visual history. Before they made their way into my hands, they were in her basement. Packed in boxes. Folded, torn, scratched, and fading; they were hers. When I walked up the basement stairs with a small grocery bag of photos, she cautioned me against taking them. “I know what you are going to do with those,” she said. “You better not ruin them.”

The photographs that were carelessly thrown on top of one another and, for the most part, neglected over the past few decades suddenly become significant when their existence is threatened outside of their cardboard box stored in the underbelly of the house. It is as though the destruction of the photograph marked the disappearance of memories; in turn, the loss of history. In her book, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart writes,

> The actual locale of the souvenir is often commensurate with its material worthlessness: the attic and the cellar, contexts away from the business and engagement of everyday life. Other rooms are tied to function (kitchen, bath) and presentation (parlor, hall) in such a way that they exist within the temporality of everyday life, but the attic and the cellar are tied to the temporality of the past, and they scramble the past into a simultaneous order which memory is invited to rearrange: heaven and hell, tool and ornament, ancestor and heir, decay and preservation. The souvenir is destined to be

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forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography and the simultaneous erasure of the autograph.\(^4\)

With advancements in digital technology, encountering contemporary photographs in this manner is no longer possible. I can’t find photos tucked away inside of an envelope. The tactile object does not exist, so my point of reference is removed from the cultural context. Therefore, my relationship to it becomes one of nostalgia.

Occasionally, when looking, I come across an image that strikes me. Perhaps this is what Roland Barthes referred to in his canonical text, *Camera Lucida*, as the punctum,

It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me… for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).\(^5\)

The punctum is not apparent on the surface of the photograph. You cannot point to it. Those visual cues are reserved for the studium. The punctum, then, may be something that strikes you as an afterthought; ‘an unexplainable wound’. After setting aside these photos of particular interest, I began seeing what had ‘pricked’ me. All of my family’s snapshots began to speak to the inherent temporality of the photographic object and, in turn, of life itself.

Photography has had an extensive and unique relationship with impermanence, whether dealing with it in the physical sense or the metaphorical use of the term. From mid 19\(^{th}\) Century post-mortem images to contemporary debates as to whether or not photography is ‘over’, the medium always seems to allude to an


end. In nearly all literature on the subject, there seems to be a reference to this ‘end’ or ‘death’ in some manifestation. For Barthes, it was the crux of Camera Lucida, the book written after his mother’s death and, coincidentally, published right before his own. Commenting on having his picture taken, Barthes notes:

Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself into an image.6

This reflection by Barthes reminds us of the theatrical nature of the still image and one’s heightened sense of awareness when confronted with the lens.

As society was flooded with images of celebrity and the like, photography gave people the opportunity to perform an identity. A casual family portrait in front of the house, a couple lovingly embracing, or a single subject posed against a backdrop become stages for people to project an image of themselves. Garb, facial expressions, and bodily gestures were tested and proven to be social indicators of class, race, and gender. But it is impossible to ever completely know someone from a photograph and equally as hard to understand a time in which we are not alive or have no recollection.

Cast in shadow, folded over, cropped, or removed from the image, the identities of the figures in From Then Until Now have been rendered anonymous. In his essay, Erasure In Art: Destruction, Deconstruction, and Palimpsest, Richard Galpin states,

This fiction of an erasure, is like the theatrical staging of a death, where it is not the obliteration of that character or thing that is the aim, but rather that it is a

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means of gaining new knowledge about that character or thing which is (fictionally) killed or erased, and gaining new knowledge about the process of death or erasure itself.⁷

Relevant to the discussion of temporality is the concept of erasure. To erase is a form of negation. It says something that once was is no longer. Yet it also points to that which is the target of the erasure, re-emphasizing and drawing attention to it. Conversely, erasure can be an act of liberation, a way of letting go or disposing of. By taking something that already exists and altering it, turning it on itself, and putting it in a new dialogue with its former state, it allows us to see beyond the surface, revealing aspects of the ‘original’ form that may not have been apparent.

When working in the studio, I ask myself, “What are the ramifications if I erase this photograph? Should I scan it first and make a digital copy so that it can serve as a reminder? Or, by deleting the hard copy, am I robbing the image of its aura?”⁸ If this were the case, any computer-generated copy would not suffice. So, I work intuitively and consider the photograph for what Susan Stewart referred to as its ‘material worthlessness’.

In my series *Unknown Portraits* (2009-2010), I attempt to detach myself from these sentimental associations and begin scratching the surface with drill bits, wire brushes, and safety pins. A 4”x6” photograph can take me hours to completely ‘erase’, and the process becomes incredibly ritualistic. The end product is a thin, semi-translucent, sheet of paper that reveals the photograph’s surface as fragile and susceptible to obliteration. Collected in the middle of the gallery floor are the remnants from the removal of the surface. The detritus, colored bluish-grey,

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seemingly blends with the floor, and the exhibition’s viewers unknowingly walk through and scatter it in all directions.

Similar to Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, I see my *Unknown Portraits* as a form of mark making. Of course, the gesture of Rauschenberg’s erasure is more than just a practice in mark making. By erasing the master, he challenges de Kooning’s patriarchal authority and abstract expressionism’s dominance in the art world. The erasure I make challenges and re-establishes the photograph’s identity and its state of being an object of desire.
(Figure 4) *Unknown Portrait I*, 2009. Altered C-Print, 4 x 6 in
Not only have the subjects depicted in photographs been at odds with their own identities, the medium itself cannot avoid this paradox. Is it a tool for science? Is it an artistic representation? Is it a form of communication? Is it a lens-based image? Is it on paper? Does it have a certain size or scale? Is it a reference to a subject? Is it a truth?

*From Then Until Now* interrogates these paradoxes by pushing the photograph to the point that the audience is invited to inquire, “When does a photograph not become a photograph?” *Disposition VI* (2010), speaks obliquely to the questioning of the object’s identity. Through enlargement, the image depicting a burial site overgrown with foliage becomes nearly indistinguishable. What was once a 2”x3” snapshot is now a 28”x42” inkjet print resembling a charcoal drawing more so than a photograph. Placing the image on the floor, propped up against the wall further removes it from its origin as photograph. The image is malleable: when it is taken out of one context and placed in another the reading shifts.

Captured in time, the photo is past, present, and future. Henri-Cartier Bresson coined the term for this photographic pause as the “decisive moment”\(^9\), the instance that seems to stop time at the critical precipice. In *Disposition II* (2010), a female figure is caught in this stasis. She is suspended in the air; she was diving, she is diving, and she will be diving. The photograph is further obscured by being turned upside down. Water appears to be the sky; the laws of gravity tell us she will fall, but that fall is impossible.

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\(^9\) This designation derives from the title of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s book *Images à la sauvette*, whose English edition was titled *The Decisive Moment*. 
(Figure 5) *Disposition II*, 2010. Inkjet print, 18 x 24 in
Like the photographic pause, the installation of the exhibition becomes a temporary paralysis of time, heightening the viewer’s sense of awareness of the space. The gallery becomes my canvas; the floor, the ceiling, and each wall are parts to a whole. Installed in the bottom corner where two walls converge, *Unknown Black Portrait*, activates both walls as well as the floor and the paint dripping over the molding. In the corner, the viewer becomes aware of where the two walls come together and the objects proximity to the floor as well as the proximity of their body to the work in relationship to its positioning. My intention is to place the viewer in the position of witness, to engage them in the act of looking, akin to the photographer’s role behind the lens.

In my series of digital C-Prints, *Rememory* (2009-2010), I re-photographed snapshots that have been refolded along their preexisting tears and creases. The photograph is printed on a highly reflective glossy surface and the snapshot appears to be suspended in a black void, reflecting the viewer onto the surface. This mirroring creates a sense of hyperawareness of the viewer’s body and space by looking at the photograph, which is looking back at them.
(Figure 6) *from then until now*, 2010. Installation View.
(Figure 7) Rememory I, 2009. Digital C-Print, 18 x 24 in
The modernist impulse was to make all things new. Postmodernity relieved itself of this attitude and returned to previous forms, embracing the pastiche and using appropriation as a mode of deconstructing cultural symbols and codes. It was a way of rethinking what already existed. In Simon Morris’s 2007 film *Sucking on Words: Kenneth Goldsmith*, author Robert Fitterman said of contemporary art practice,

As a post-millennial gesture, there is a kind of inventory in the air, instead of ‘make it new’, how do we collect what we have already been making new for a hundred years?"10

Instead of trying to answer questions, postmodernism posed questions, dismantling any notion of a grand narrative.11 Those associated with the movement believed that a universal truth was impossible; rather they espoused that suppositions of truth were contingent on the context of the subject(ed), s/he who is subjected to culture.

Coming out of a postmodernist trajectory, this thesis calls into question the role of the photograph in forming historical truths.

History was just another narrative, whose paradigm structures were no better than fictional, and was a slave to its own (often unconsciously used) unrealized myths, metaphors, and stereotypes.12

If history fails at creating a universal truth, then by extension, the photograph fails as well because of its usage as historical document and representation of the real.

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The snapshot is oftentimes put in a family album where someone at some point made an (un)conscious decision of sequencing, perhaps suggesting a span of time, from birth to death. But the majority of the photographs that resided in the basement of my childhood home were singular images removed from an album’s presumed context. I was able to use my own authorial language to reconfigure the photos, but my interpretation of these images is not right or wrong. As Massimilliano Gioni wrote in his essay *Ask The Dust*, for the *Unmonumental* (2007-2008) exhibition at the New Museum, “It is not a celebration of the past but rather a form of borrowing that opens up new forms of sampling in a continuous rewriting and questioning of history.”

*This is what you liked…*, is a series consisting of three unfinished proofs found in a small yellow envelope that was used for ordering prints and selecting yearbook photos. Unfolding the envelope, I discovered a mirror-like surface tucked behind the folds of the order form. I lifted the flap and pulled out three unfinished proofs that had been completely solarized. Behind the proofs, printed on the envelope, there was a text that read, “This is what you liked…”. But, ‘what I liked’ no longer existed. Or, at least it existed in a new form, a form of disappearance that reflected myself onto the surface as if to say, “this is you”. “This is what you were looking for.” This is my punctum! And so, the autobiography began to write itself.

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(Figure 8) *This is what you liked...*, 2010. (Installation View) Unfinished proofs with envelope displayed with flowers in vase on pedestal, each proof 3.5 x 5 in
**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**


