Temporal Photography

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Since its invention, photography has functioned as a production medium and also as a meta-medium for reproduction, particularly within the printing trades. Both aspects of the medium have depended on the static character of the photographic image. Film and video (whether analogue or digital) pushed photographic imagery in a different direction, stressing narrative that unfolds over time through cuts and editing techniques. Can we imagine another kind of temporal intervention into the photographic image that would change our sense of the medium in a radically different way? Could it shift our understanding of the identity of photography from an ontological foundation to an epistemological one? The examples I will describe here both engage temporality as an internal dimension, a feature that changes what we have long understood as a static image into one that has a temporal axis. Some people might just call these videos, but their relation to the photographic image and commitment to an interrogation of its conventions seems to justify calling them temporal photographs.

In 2007 artist Scott Kildall produced a series of video portraits that records the facial gestures of people getting ready to have their picture taken. Between two and three minutes each, the segments expose the frozen moment of the photograph as a fiction. The very notion of a moment–as a discrete entity, removed from the continuum of time, fixed, static, and complete–disappears as a concept as the photographic record changes radically. Instead of being an entity, a thing, an image of a single snapshot within a continuum, the photograph becomes an event. The image is not just a cut across the continuing sequence of unfolding events—but a demonstration of the radical incompleteness of the photographic image.

This shift from entity to event is crucial to the new ontology of photographic imagery, but is also new photography's contribution to an altered foundation for epistemology—for knowledge as *knowing*. Temporal photographs are no longer the sign of a single instant, the new dimension changes the image. Temporality destroys the fiction of singularity and bounded-ness on which our idea of an entity, of an

image-thing that acts as if it were complete, depends. Temporality makes certain conventional conceits and deceits very difficult to maintain. Not only can we see more, since the extension and duration show much more than any single image could, but the character of what we see is different. The image is no longer defined on an ontological plane, but is part of an epistemological field. This transformation is reflected and refracted in Kidall's series.

The uncomfortable process of waiting for a photograph to be taken is all over his subjects' faces and in their body language. Their expressions change and flickers of mood—anxiety, annoyance, frustration, question, flirtation—show dramatically that they have internalized the idea of "the photograph" as a final event, a flash, a quick slice through ongoing life, a record, an instant. They dodge toward and lunge away from the camera, waiting for the moment, the snap, the action of the shutter. Their movements are always anticipating immobility, and as Kidall stretches out the clock in an unspecified stretch of time, they begin to exhibit a restless uncertainty about exactly how to define what it is that the photograph is. Have they missed it? Is it coming? What is the *it*, the phenomenon, the photograph? The photograph is defined by a limited frame, a time frame, cut, held, fixed. And Kidall refuses to fix the frame, take the picture. Instead, he takes apart the picture. Meanwhile, his struggling subjects come and go from their "pose" – that self-constructed projection of self into image that is the awkward frozen expression seen in most amateur portrait photographs. Pose, of course, is an effect of photographic imagery and our idea about how to compose ourselves for it. Pose is the outward expression of an internalized notion of a cultural phenomenon we call the photograph. The painful non-delimited extension of his process prolongs anticipation for an event that does not arrive.

Every photograph has temporal dimensions, of course. The time of exposure, historical time, time of development, cropping, the time of reception and circulation—like any other cultural artifact, photographs are caught up in a web of varying temporalities. In that sense, a photograph, like any artifact or cultural document, is never fixed, but made in each viewing circumstance. But the myths of temporality specific to photography –the frozen moment, the window and mirror

imagery, the language of the gaze, of the look, the glance – are all attached to the singularity photographic time. That moment is central to our critical understanding of the ontological character of a photograph. The exposure of a receptive material substrate, light-sensitive film or a pixel-generating optical device, at a particular moment in phenomenal time, makes a photograph what it is–an indexical sign that is a bounded, discrete entity. The photograph has multiple relations to the realm outside the frame, to be sure. But the fixed moment of the photograph defines it as a kind of image and as a way of seeing and thinking.

By stretching that temporal instant along its own banal but familiar continuum, Kidall exposes the event character of any and all photographs. Even if photographs inscribe their own recording process in relation to temporality of perceived phenomena, the moment of exposure provides instant repleteness. In a conventional photograph, every part of the surface area of the receptive substrate (photo emulsion or pixel file) is immediately filled, registering a value, color, tone. That immediate repleteness meant that the photographic image, unlike a hand drawn image, did not distribute its time of production across the surface, as part of the trace of its making. The instantaneity of repleteness provided the ontological foundation, the terms on which we understand that photography *is* an indexical sign of light, a moment, exposed, captured. But when temporality intervenes, much of that apparent repleteness dissolves into banality, incidental detail that does not hold. Literally and figuratively, these recorded details blur. The subject of the portrait, shifting and moving towards or away from the moment of exposure, transforms the image into a record of something known, shows us (viewer, photographer, photographed subjects) in the process of knowing. Knowing what? That a photograph is to be taken. The image becomes an event, an epistemological event, in which what it is to know that a photograph is going to be taken is recorded, shown, given form.

Including a temporal dimension in a photograph also alters its ability to work as a meta-medium. How would we abstract the temporal dimension into a template of production. What would that temporal abstraction look like? How would it act? Taking the histogram of a moving image, a temporal photograph, and reusing it for

another image sequence is hard to imagine. The extra "noise" of shifts and changes, subtle nuances that are part of the image across its temporal axis are all revealed and recorded. A new meta-language – degrees of difference, relative values of change, and so on – would be needed to articulate the meta-dimension of moving photographs. Photography was a versatile meta-medium because of the way photographic equipment and materials could be manipulated and used to pass images from one domain of production to another. Details, composition, outlines and shadows, passages and tones, color or contrast were all qualities that could be reworked in ink, etching, silkscreen, and offset or scaled to spectacular proportions. The time dimension of the temporal photography takes away the stability on which meta-media fluidity was enabled. Too much information is present and that new information is locked into a sequence of differences – of changes that register in relation to each other, creating a field of values that are always other than each other – a little more smile, a tilt of the head, a raised eyebrow. In any single image these would simply be the trace and mark. But can differences become part of a remediation. Could these temporal shifts become part of aspect of a print image? Unlikely and unnecessary, since for the most part, embedded video clips and segments perform in digital contexts in many of the ways print images worked in analogue media.

But I want to insist on the difference between temporal photography and video or film. Kidall's project was not to make video portraits of his subjects, but to take apart the still portrait by introducing a temporal dimension into it. What makes temporal photography distinct from video is its relation to conventions of photographic imagery and direct recognition of these as part of its production. It turns the conception of a photographic image as an entity into the realization that a photograph is always an image-event.

Another example of temporal photography and its effects complements Kidall's project, but exhibits a different affect and effect. This project, by Jamie Diamond, whom I met when she was finishing her MFA at University of Pennsylvania in 2008, was called *Constructed Family Portraits*. The piece consisted of formally composed family portraits, static, well-organized group images. They

were actually groups of strangers she had met and invited to be photographed as a family in a hotel room. She exhibited the formal photographs and the videos of the role-playing at familiarity and intimacy that lead up to the photographs side by side. The talk and interactions of the "family" members, the peculiar and idiosyncratic behaviors of the family system, the weird freezing of faces, limbs, features as each person composed themselves to produce the image of themselves they wanted to project. All these things were recorded up to the final moment of the portrait, and then, its aftermath. The two media were in dialogue – formal portrait and video of its temporal continuum. The videos were photographs whose temporal dimension had been extended. Their very existence was predicated on <u>documenting the fictions of the photographic moment.</u>

The fictions on which photographic imagery are based, the conception of its ontological status, have consequences in the culture. For instance, much of our sense of self as a bounded entity comes from photographic processes that transform the fragmented phenomenological sensorium of the embodied, fragmented, distributed perceiving self into a reified image. The simulacrum of the Google map passes itself off as an image of "real" space—as if space were not a construction of human emotions, experiences, politics, tensions, and other forces. Photographic reification constantly imposes an entity-based transcription of lived phenomena onto our perception of these experiences—turning relations and events into places and things. By introducing a temporal axis into the image, its capacity to reify dissolves. The image won't compose, won't stand still, won't self-reference as a reification, refuses to be resolved into an entity.

The temporal image is necessarily an event, with duration, uncertain boundaries, arbitrary beginnings and endings, filled with all kinds of possible moves and changes. Something happens, is happening, goes on happening, in the temporal photograph. This was true of the static photograph, but its momentary-ness often deceived us into thinking it was a complete image of a bounded moment, finite, done. The <u>event-based approach to imagery</u> brings with it the *continuum* as an operative concept. And that continuum is situated and circumstantial, refuses to transcend history and specificity, location and point of view. The camera records the

dialogue of photographic situation and photographed situation, but the partial and embodied quality of that activity is strikingly revealed. The temporal image demonstrates the unfinished-ness of photography—at the level of the image and as an aesthetic process, one, that like all aesthetic activity, demonstrates a way of knowing, a fundamental epistemological method, in which the ontological category of knowledge gets replaced by a constructed event of knowing.