Helmut Newton, *Big Nude II, Paris*, 1980. Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable. © The Helmut Newton Estate.

TO BE BLUNT

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On January 23, 2004, the eighty-three-year-old photographer Helmut Newton was leaving his temporary residence at the Chateau Marmont hotel in Los Angeles when he suddenly lost control of his car and careened into a wall. Apparently having suffered a heart attack and badly hurt in the crash, Newton would succumb to his injuries a few hours later. The accident did not seem of great significance for me at the time; I had never paid particularly close attention to Newton's vast œuvre, relegating his photographs (and the controversies surrounding them) to a separate domain of image production. Yet today, perhaps for precisely this reason, I can't help being struck by his dramatic and fittingly Ballardian ending. A collision of body and technology—in all its simultaneous flight and stoppage—Newton's death, I want to suggest, might offer an opening through which to rethink contemporary photography, both as a practice and as a medium. At the risk of appearing counterintuitive, then, I'd like to set aside the debates surrounding the subject matter of Newton's photographs and instead use him to consider another form of perversion altogether.

Born in Berlin in 1920 to bourgeois Jewish-German and American parents, the young Newton—then known as Helmut Neustädter—came of age during the waning years of the Weimar Republic and at the dawn of the Third Reich. Famously apprenticed to photographer Elsie Neulander Simon (who would later die at Auschwitz), Newton would flee to Singapore in 1938—his parents had already left for Chile after the events of Kristallnacht the same year—and embark on the peripatetic existence that would come to define his life. By the close of the war, Newton found himself in Australia, where he became a citizen, legally changed his name, and set up a photography studio. With his wife, actress and photographer June Brunell (who worked under the pseudonym Alice Springs), Newton developed his practice in a variety of locations, traveling and living between Paris, Monte Carlo, Los Angeles, and eventually Berlin. He became famous for his sensational photographs that often depicted the female body as the site of dark, fetishistic desires that he maintained were not the stuff of fantasy alone but were equally inspired by memories of his youth in Nazi Germany as well as by items from the daily newspaper. Primarily producing work for the pages of glossy magazines such as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Playboy*, Newton entangled the languages of fashion, celebrity portraiture, and soft-core pornography until they became almost indistinguishable, barking orders to an international array of models in a fluid mixture of English, German, and French. Over time, just as Newton would insist he did not feel an allegiance to any particular nationality or place, so would his practice begin moving across established lines, with his work variously appearing in advertising, fine-art books, and museums and galleries. It is precisely these slippages of identity, format, and context that interest me, particularly at a moment when, I think, it is the "frame" that determines the reception of the photograph as never before.

In this light, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on Newton, first in relation to the figure of the refugee in twentieth-century cultural production and, more specifically, to the central role of exile and displacement for any discussion of the avant-garde. In his recent work on Marcel Duchamp, scholar T.J. Demos considers the way in which the artist's iconic work *Boîte-en-valise* (1935–41), can be read not just as a mobile museum filled with replicas of his productions but as a suitcase literally packed and ready to go at a moment's notice. In effect, Duchamp absorbed the technological means of reproducibility found in photography and thereby repurposed the structure of the museum, creating an artistic model that posed a genuine threat to the hegemonic order. Reproduction and institutionalization could, of course, be used to reinforce societal norms and power structures, but, as Demos continues, Duchamp recognized how the former could also be used "both to reconstitute a self against its complete loss in the face of dislocation and to pose its decentered status against nationalism's fanatical attempts to secure a unified subject and collective identity."[1]

Although it is certainly not my intention to equate the projects of Newton and Duchamp, it is compelling to think through the examples of these two artists and the contextual problems they underscore for photography as it emerged after the war, both as an increasingly pervasive and dispersed medium and as representative of a newly formed itinerant self. Indeed, such a formulation seems all the more pertinent given that the question of how exactly we define photography in artistic production seems as pressing as ever. Not only are there different lineages and schools within the history of the medium, but also strong connotations that arise even now from its mass application and personal use. (For this reason, I think, many artists who work almost exclusively with photography nevertheless insist on being called "artists" as opposed to "photographers.") Today we simply cannot assume that we are all talking about the same thing when we say "photography." And if the alliance of the medium with other arenas of image production is part of its appeal, the question for many artists remains how to embrace such mutability, both physically and conceptually.

I suspect that one reason for the recent reemergence of Vilém Flusser's 1983 *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* as an important text for a younger generation of practitioners is precisely his emphasis on photography as it is bound to its dissemination and its crucial role in understanding a post-industrial society reoriented by "technical images." In this regard, one might note that Flusser, like Newton, was born in 1920 to a Jewish family of intellectuals and was forced to flee the Nazis in the late 1930s. (He would ultimately lose all his immediate relatives to the concentration camps.) Multilingual and ideationally stateless, he lived and published be-

tween England, Brazil, France, and Germany until he, too, died tragically in a car accident in 1991 following a lecture in his hometown of Prague. Describing a pervasive sense of "groundlessness" as the root of much of his work, Flusser consistently critiqued authoritarian regimes and nationalist perspectives. As a result, it is hard to read Flusser's writings outside the long shadow cast by postwar trauma. Similar to its theorist, photography, in this instance, has no real place to call home.

For Flusser, a photograph, unlike film or television, is in part so powerful precisely because it travels. Although a photographer's intent is certainly encoded in an image's immediate reception, a photograph takes on other significances once it is distributed in the world. (The example Flusser provides is a photograph of the moon that is reported in the newspaper, used for scientific study, and then exhibited in an art gallery.) In this respect, a photograph is flexible insofar as it is defined by its context. As he writes, "[T]he division of photographs into channels is in no way simply a mechanical process but rather an encoding one: The distribution apparatuses impregnate the photograph with the decisive significance for its reception."[2] Furthermore, Flusser insists, in order for a photograph to be a *photograph*, it must be material, even if only in vestigial form: "As long as the photograph is not yet electromagnetic, it remains the first of all post-industrial objects. Even though the last vestiges of materiality are attached to photographs, their value does not lie in the thing but in the information on their surface."[3] Thus, no matter how much an image may be transformed, it remains theoretically intact, so long as it maintains its information and exists in the world.

But, to complicate Flusser's claims within a contemporary register, what if the agency of the image lies not on its surface per se, but in the multiple material conditions that convey it? Here, I am not calling for a strategy that reduces photography solely to its photochemical or pixilated properties—perhaps that is not the material we are really after. Rather, from our current vantage point there is much confusion when it comes to the object of photography, which is seemingly located everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Although Flusser clearly refutes the screen, one can only begin to conjecture what he might have thought about the way images travel today. For example, when we encounter an image of a sculpture online we intuitively understand we are being shown a poor, one-dimensional representation, whereas an image of a photograph encountered online all but dissolves into itself, conforming to the conditions of an endless blog roll of interchangeable images in which JPEG is mistaken for object and juxtaposition is taken for meaning.[4]

Far from dematerialization, there are, as artist and critic Hito Steyerl reminds us, new and specific properties to be found in the online JPEG and lo-res cell-phone image. Even more relevant for the present discussion, Steyerl urges us to think beyond image as representation and invites us instead to *participate* in the image as a new material position, imperfections and all:

> It is a complete mystification to think of the digital image as a shiny immortal clone of itself. On the contrary, not even the digital image is outside of history. It bears the bruises of its crashes with politics and violence.... The bruises of images are its glitches and artifacts, the traces of its rips and transfers. Images are violated, ripped apart, subjected to interrogation and probing. They are stolen, cropped, edited, and re-appropriated. They are bought, sold, leased. Manipulated and adulated. Reviled and revered. To participate in the image means to take part in all of this.[5]

For Steyerl, submitting oneself to a material process of brutalization and abjection, instead of fantasizing about authentic representation, proposes a position from which singular identarian notions of subjecthood are refuted in favor of a more malleable position of "objecthood." Thus, we find our images liberated to a kind of purgatory in which they are endlessly repurposed; free to roam, all while being cut up, blown up, distorted, recaptioned, and recirculated.

Today, this space of reproduction, distribution, and circulation is, one could argue, the native space of the photograph. Notably, in his 2002 essay "Dispersion," artist Seth Price asks whether this is in fact the great unfinished project of Conceptual practice and perhaps the space with the greatest possibility for contemporary artistic production. "New strategies are needed to keep up with commercial distribution, decentralization, and dispersion," Price writes, calling for "the intimation of a categorically ambiguous art, one in which the synthesis of multiple circuits of reading carries emancipatory potential."[6] Yet within this utopian space the problem of context arises yet again; that is, a painting is clearly understood to inhabit the space of the art institution, whereas objects that exist in multiple domains require a contextual armature to lend them value and agency within art discourse.[7] Even Duchamp encountered this problem, as Price notes, when he failed to sell his *Rotoreliefs* at an inventor's fair where they were of no value as works of art.

This question of context is an increasingly urgent one for photography. Unless we decide that the medium itself is on its way out, we must conclude that photography is not hinged to any particular technology or material support, despite the little deaths it continually experiences with the ongoing elimination of photographic papers, film stocks, and camera formats. If the recent pervasiveness of photographic abstraction in galleries at once signaled nostalgia for the analogue and an anxiety around the digital, both in terms of perceived immateriality and a barrage of information, it also emerged at a moment of global financial crisis and the photograph's full maturation in the art market. Cameraless photographs thus serve to remind us not only of the medium's photochemical underpinnings but also that something is missing.

These recent developments do not solve the "problem" of photography, however, but what they do well is to remind us that bodies are

behind all images. Perhaps photography is not a dead corpse, as some would have it, but a wandering figure. So, if we agree that photography soldiers on, and furthermore that it cannot be reduced to its material or technological supports, then how do we proceed? If, at the end of the day, the idea of photography within the context of art is insisted upon regardless of whether the work in question shows the physical traces of its circulation on its skin, records a subject on the street, is part of a multimedia assemblage, is projected, streamed online, or constructs an elaborate fantastical tableau, we are left with no other option than to define it discursively.

In Rosalind Krauss's 1982 essay "Photography's Discursive Spaces," she makes the seemingly self-evident claim that a photograph should be considered within the context for which it was produced—that is, a photograph's meaning can be manipulated through the discursive space it occupies. We can't always assume that a photograph is what it looks like on the surface. Using examples such as Eugène Atget and the nineteenth-century topographic photography that has been absorbed by the museum into the tradition of the landscape, she calls for a scholarship that looks at the historical conditions of production rather than blindly assimilating works into the modern canon. For Krauss, we do a photograph injustice whenever we subsume it within categories for which it was not produced—for example, a history of modern "exhibitionality" versus the organizing principles of the card catalogue or the archive. In our present moment, however, we might add yet another category: the convention of the analog that examines a process attached to a body versus a veneer achieved through a screen. For example, in an age of digital printing we might begin to think critically about why we hold on to the conventions of standard cut photographic paper sizes or apply film grain to HD video.

Aside from questions that now arise about how photographs are produced or represented online, we might also begin to think through the implications of physical works that are made specifically with the Internet in mind. One could argue that one of the greatest tasks for the contemporary artist in our current flurry of gallery announcements—and when artist monographs are being produced at an exponential rate—is to produce polished documentation and sexy, emailable JPEGs. Keeping in mind that some curators will only look at photography online, what is meant by "exhibitionality" when an artist must be cognizant of both the gallery wall and the gallery homepage? If we've learned from Krauss that the reception of a photograph should be considered in line with its context of production and intended venue, our situation is complicated when these conventions and material conditions are inherently multiple. Surely there must be a way both to open ourselves up to new forms of circulation while also momentarily pulling our images out of the flow in order to allow associative potential to be realized.

In Newton's case, the context was not always clear, even though most of his photographs were created by way of commission, whether as editorial fashion spreads or advertising.[8] Despite his assertion that his photographs were first and foremost dealing in "propaganda," many of his well-known images were produced after the official commissioned picture had been executed, and while the photographer was still working with the same setup and on the client's dime. Newton recounted:

> Early in my career I learned to use the resources of my commercial assignments a) to follow their brief and b) to keep on shooting for a "Newton version." I always hoped that my client might be seduced into using my version for their needs, but if not, at least I had the photos in my archives. Models, make-up artists, hairdressers are all expensive people to employ and I did not have the means to pay them, so an extra two hours of shooting would enrich me without hurting the client and in the end perhaps be beneficial for both of us.[9]

Although the "Newton version" was rarely published, here he begins to think of the magazine both as an intended platform for commissioned work and as an avenue by which to produce personal work. In this way, Newton anticipates an artist like Wolfgang Tillmans, who has stated that he always conceived of his early editorial work for *i-D* magazine as part of his art practice; instead of a small edition intended for collectors he was able to reach 20,000 subscribers.

While Newton is perhaps a more ambiguous case, it is also worth thinking through the other presentational modes he utilized. It could of course be argued that to assert a photograph's "objectness" is to also declare that it has value. Thingness, in this instance, also correlates with a kind of concreteness that can be bought and sold. For example, we might think of Newton's *SUMO*—supposedly the largest, most expensive, and most valuable book ever produced. Edited by his wife, the book was originally published by Taschen in 1999 and collected many of Newton's most famous images. Weighing more than 75 pounds, the book was unwieldy to peruse and came complete with its own custom stand designed by Philippe Starck. An autographed copy of the first edition of *SUMO* sold at auction in 2000 for a record $430,000.

In this sense, one might also say that Newton's work participates in a kind of pornography of form. His bodies are large and imposing, sculpted, twisted, and manipulated.[10] But beyond the fetishistic we are also confronted with a certain heaviness. If, in the now classic postmodern reading, we find that "underneath each picture there is always another picture," in our present moment we might twist if not invert this critical process to find an accumulative condition of excess. As Victor Burgin has remarked, "Sooner or later, as in Newton's image, we open our eyes, come back to a tangible reality: here, that of the woman's body. That which is physical, that which reflects light—which has here left its trace in the photosensitive emulsion."[11]

Nowhere is this perhaps more striking than in Newton's series *The Big Nudes*. Begun in 1980 while on assignment for *Italian Vogue*, *The Big Nudes* are the only project Newton ever shot in a conventional photography studio. Although many of the images were published in the context of fashion spreads, Newton would go on to exhibit the photographs as larger-than-life, black-and-white prints installed on individual architectural displays in a manner that left no doubt as to his intentions. Given his inspiration for *The Big Nudes*, the "German police photographs of the Baader-Meinhof gang which showed full-length identity shots of gang members as displayed in the offices of the German Police 'Fahndungs' Squad (Search Squad),"[12] we are reminded once again of the legacy of postwar trauma from which Newton's project was initially born. And, in a strange twist of fate, when *The Big Nudes* exhibition opened in Berlin Newton was surprised to find large banners announcing the show hanging in the same train station where he had fled the Nazis several decades prior. Doubled back as an advertisement, the "surface" of Newton's image is thus subsumed within a complex narrative of mediation, retaliation, and flight.

But here again, I do not mean to make an example of his work but rather of its form. In this regard, to mistake scale, high-production costs, seductive surface, or auction sales as the answer would also be off the mark. Yet we might learn from Newton's extreme example that when a photograph can mean any number of things, and may be interpreted in any number of ways, it is through a declaration of context—through excess, heft, bluntness—that the image still maintains its hold. Despite Price's caution that to pin a work down and extract it altogether from mass dissemination (if even possible) runs the risk of tipping into the monumental, we might instead think of this as a form of stoppage. As Price himself also insists, there is a time and a place for "slowness."

Perhaps to remove for a moment the photograph from the overwhelming flow of images, to permit it to assert itself, is also to inhabit an embodied position—a state of bluntness.[13] And so, if we allow ourselves to let our images go, we must also insist on their presence. In this respect, now more than ever, we must declare where we want our exile images to belong, where we want them to stand. And through this material configuration we must also, as Krauss reminds us, consider the contextual, the discursive. For as much as a photograph may be a wanderer, seamlessly disseminated and recirculated, it may also be given weight and concretized. Against the backdrop of Los Angeles, then, where Duchamp famously had his first museum retrospective, and where Adorno, Man Ray, and Brecht took refuge during the war, we find ourselves once more amidst the wreckage, Helmut Newton's white SUV smoldering on Sunset Boulevard.

NOTES

1. See T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 3–4
2. See Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 2007), 54.
3. Ibid., 51.
4. This is why I suspect so many artists often include the framing supports in the documentation of their work online, so that there is no doubt that a viewer is looking at a physical artwork meant to hang on a wall and occupy three-dimensional space.
5. Hito Steyerl writes, "Of course identification is always with an image. But ask anybody whether they'd actually like to be a JPEG file. And this is precisely my point: if identification is to go anywhere, it has to be with this material aspect of the image, with the image as thing, not as representation. And then perhaps it ceases to be identification, and instead becomes participation." Quoted in "A Thing Like You and Me," *e-flux journal* 15 (April 2010).
6. See Seth Price, "Dispersion," 2002–present <http://www.distributedhistory.com/Disperzone.html/> (accessed August 9, 2011).
7. Ibid.: "A painting is manifestly art whether on the wall or on the street, but avant-garde work is often illegible without institutional framing and the work of the curator or historian. More than anyone else, artists of the last one hundred years have wrestled with this trauma of context, but theirs is a struggle which fundamentally takes place within the art system."
8. "If any of these photographs ends up on gallery or museum walls or in the possession of collectors, well, all the better, and I am delighted, but primarily these pictures are taken for a very definite purpose: to influence, to sell a product, in short, for propaganda." See Helmut Newton, *Helmut Newton—Pages from the Glossies*, ed. June Newton and Walter Keller (Göttingen: Steidl, 1998), 1.
9. Ibid., 335.
10. Newton's wife once remarked, "He loves big women, statues, paintings, sculptures, live ones—especially live ones because he can manipulate them, he can control every muscle in their bodies." See June Newton's documentary *Helmut by June*, 2007. For a critical reading of the ramifications of Newton's objectification of his female subjects refer to Jane Caputi's "Seeing Elephants: The Myths of Phallotechnology," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988), 486–524.
11. Victor Burgin, "Perverse Space," in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina and Jennifer Bloomer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 240.
12. Newton in *SUMO*, ed. June Newton (Cologne: Taschen, 1999/2009), 8.
13. A similar sentiment is echoed in a statement by artist Walead Beshty in the press release accompanying the exhibition he curated at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, in the summer of 2010, *Picture Industry (Goodbye to All That)*. He concludes, "It could be said that it is the seemingly invisible and ephemeral aspects—the means of distribution, the contextual frame, the vicissitudes of taste, and an object's ability to 'pass'—which serve as the most robust material of the contemporary work, an embrace of convention that produces an endless sequence of provisional 'meanings.' Perhaps the only solution available to us is to allow pictures to be concrete, to reclaim their moments of heaviness, instead of pretending that they are endlessly able to float listlessly in the breeze."