Saint Augustine's Question

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"If the present were always present, it would not pass into the past: it would not be time but eternity."

Saint Augustine, *Confessions*[1]

Maurice Merleau Ponty remarked that the photograph keeps open the instants that the onrush of time closes up; it destroys the overtaking, the overlapping of time. The French philosopher put a phenomenological spin on the medium that made its first practitioners the most radical participants in a discussion as old, at least, as Saint Augustine. What is the nature of time? Both Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot made an almost identical photograph of different Paris boulevards that appeared empty because the photographers' emulsions and lenses could not register an image fast enough to capture moving things. There was only the single figure in Daguerre's picture, a stationary man having his boot polished while the world moved on around him, invisible to the camera. So photography's answer to Saint Augustine's question was a complicated one; time is that which can be stopped, and in being stopped is also held open, gathered.

Niko Luoma is the most recent and rigorous of photographers to propose an alternative answer to the question, a different description of time held and harvested. His language is that of the experimental investigator, with an emphasis on systematic repetition and methodical processes. Yet his goals are more far reaching, more open ended. They seek a picture of the relation between structure and incident, necessity and chance. Luoma's artistic attitude is contemplative; his results border on the mystical.

It goes without saying (because it has been said so often) that photography is the product of a time-dividing, time-apportioning culture, the same culture that articulated the paradox of light's nature as both continuous and discrete, wave and quantum. Quite apart from its memorializing function, the medium's most familiar metaphors are all temporal: Ansel Adams's *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico,* with its juxtaposition of human time and sidereal repetition; Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" in the Place de l'Europe of a man in mid-stride appearing to walk on water; or even August Sanders's portraits, timeless of course, yet conceptually temporal: this is how we look now (circa 1930). Above all, it was Roland Barthes who insisted on the memorial character of the medium. Likewise, photography's technological innovations have sprung from the dream of speed, the instantaneous image, the goal of dividing time into successively smaller increments with ever greater accuracy. Photographic time approaches zero; photographic information approaches infinity. Digital nirvana.

More recently artists have returned to the temporal implications of photography with a variety of motives, political and otherwise. The *Theaters* series of Hiroshi Sugimoto, whose blank screens glow with the evidence of a film's duration, suggests, among other things, that memory is held in cultural captivity. Atta Kim's *On Air* series, as well as his recent images made in various cities around the world, expose even longer stretches of time in single frames, showing action as a form of illusion, a

blur; in Buddhist terms a kind of nothing. In a different vein, we might also cite Christian Marclay's *The Clock,* a pastiche synecdoche that compresses a vast volume of cinematic history into twenty-four hours, the precise opposite of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho.* All these works reference time as a cultural artifact but none offers a new image of it. At best, they pursue a paradox; that time accumulated yields a picture of nothing—just as Daguerre discovered.

Luoma too, produces pictures of nothing, but nothing only in the sense that his images cannot be interpreted or read into another discourse. As he puts it, "The captivating thing about pictures of nothing has something to do with their exclusion from durational reality. I see my works as pictures of the process of their own making, where the act of exposing the negative becomes the content of the work and makes nothing into the presence of nothing."[2] This description, which requires further explanation, puts the artist in a different lineage from his peers. Of course Moholy-Nagy comes to mind, and the experimental tradition of the Bauhaus photographers with their faith in process as the road to unseen realities—the New Vision. Luoma himself issues from a profoundly experimental setting, the so-called Helsinki School. Among these artists, pictures of various sorts of nothing are common practice, as are highly conceptual pictures of something, that is, recognizable subjects. Missing is the utopianism of the Bauhaus, replaced by a contemporary commitment to visual precision and intellectual focus. Yet the most revealing comparison for Luoma's work is not to Finnish peers such as Mikko Sinervo or Pertti Kekarainen, but to the American process painters and conceptual artists of the nineteen-seventies.

Pictures that are a record of their own making recall Jackson Pollock of course, but more pertinent are post-Abstract Expressionist painters like Jeff Way, Chuck Close, and somewhat differently, Sol LeWitt, whose various approaches involved a regimen Close described as follows: "My solution was to figure out a process, create a problem to solve, then sign on and ship out, and see where the process took me."[3] This is essentially rule-based art, with known procedures but unpredictable outcomes: use only dry pigment, snap lines, and right angles. Use a gridded system based on Polaroids to make portraits. Paint a sixteen-foot painting in twenty-four hours. From manufactured occasions and self-imposed constraints, it is only a short step, or perhaps no step at all, to performance projects such as Vito Acconci's *Following Piece,* whose program—involving instructions rather than rules—demanded that Acconci follow a subject chosen at random until some barrier intervened. The most open-ended work of this conceptual performative art might have been Lee Lozano's infamous *Grass Piece.* Its instructions include the following: "Buy a lid. Smoke it 'up.' See what happens."

See what happens. The generation of uncertainty from certainty, the need to reaffirm the fundamentally open-ended character of unfolding time in the context of deep physical regularities are aims that shape Luoma's aesthetic agenda. In order to see what happens—that is, to produce revelatory objects—Luoma has adopted several challenging and fruitful procedures. Since the early two-thousands these have carried him further and further away from anecdotal content toward more complex visual records. In a series titled *Cronos* (**2006-07**) Luoma combined drawing and photography, randomness and system, soma and psyche. Each day for several months in the year he drew the shifting lines that light made over time as it fell on a piece of paper in his studio. When Luoma then decided to reproduce these patterns using multiple photographic exposures, the process of idle notation became a program of sorts. The result was a series of palimpsests that

negotiate between the arbitrary and the intentional. They reveal the unpatterened aspect of experience, closely connected to an aesthetic response.

It's fair to say that *Cronos* was transitional, opening a path to the more ambitious and organized formats of the *Symmetrium* series. We focus on it because it shows the intellectual milieu of photography after the millennium, a milieu in which the temporal insights of conceptual photographic pioneers like Jan Dibbets and Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd and Brice Marden, not to mention the artists already referenced, had been fully absorbed. The notion that photography might offer other kinds of insights about reality independent of its strictly denotative function, or by extending that function, had become obvious to an entire generation on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

The *Symmetrium* series **(2009–12**) provides images of time, metaphors (or a metaphor) for time, and a specific experience of time. The images are large-format color c-prints made from negatives created, once again, through a painstaking process of multiple re-exposure to lines of light. The images embody not an instant extended but many instants organized spatially in an intricate pattern, whose ultimate motivation is aesthetic: a previously unseen, even unimagined, emergent version of the beautiful. The metaphor is perhaps the labyrinth, because the Symmetria (the individual pieces) have centers, structured by Luoma's formats, and reaching them involves a journey through the dense lattice of light (absent, however, any encounter with a Minotaur). The experience of time is the act of looking, which is never complete with these pictures. The eye withdraws from them and returns to them to find them unchanged, as complex as before, labyrinths without a thread, their invitation undiminished. They do not offer anecdotes or groups of signifiers that can be read and exhausted, nor are they deliberately ambiguous. They do not depend on decontextualization or solicit psychological projections. They make no claims on our inner experience because they remain so intensely visual, so photo*graphic.* Even as records of a process they efface the steps of that process in finally being objects. They are *there* for us to *see*.

Given the complex social history of photography, Luoma's work would seem to embrace a reduced role for the medium, a retreat from its classic responsibilities, certainly from political ones. Instead, the artist seems to seek the recovery of a certain autonomy for photography's objects, to change the terms of engagement in the hope of expanding the response to photographic images, and by extension to experience itself, where a sense of freedom is embodied in aesthetic surprise; the unprecedented arising from pure precedent. For such desire no referential rendering is possible, only an undefinable abstract. We can think of Luoma as an apophatic or negative theologian of the image, promoting an intimacy with the invisible via an almost infinite complication of vision. In time, over time, the image yields to a sensation that is beyond time, comprehensive, expansive, and encompassing.

The beginning is always the same; the artist negates every element except light. Yet, he has written, "answers will probably be different each time."[4]

Notes

1 Saint Augustine, *Confessions,* trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1991), p. 231.

2 Interview with the artist via email, March 4, 2012.

3 Chuck Close, “Why I Make Daguerreotypes,” in Lyle Rexer, *Photography’s Antiquarian Avant-Garde* (New York, 2002), p. 37.

4 Interview with the artist via email, March 4, 2012.