

## PHOTOGRAPHIC INDEX, THE "SPIRITUAL IN ART," AND THE ETHICS OF "DOWNCAST EYES"

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Seeking a place somewhere "Between Swooners and Cynics," Edith Wyschogrod asks if "the gasp of the swooner before the beauty of the artwork can be recovered in an age of suspicion? Or does the challenge of the cynic call the swooner's vision of art to order by recalling the world 'outside,' that of the iniquities and atrocities of the present age?"<sup>1</sup> Probing the relation between ethics, aesthetics, and theology, Wyschogrod's trenchant analysis in this and in other essays mostly from the late 1990s and early 2000s collected in *Crossover Queries* (2006) trade upon the tensions between presence, absence, transcendence, and corporeality.<sup>2</sup> Written after her three most consequential books (*Spirit in Ashes* [1990], *Saints and Postmodernism* [1990], and *Ethics of Remembering* [1998]), these essays indicate what might have been future directions in this important theorist's life-work. What proves remarkable about these essays is the consistent stance by which an author remains sensitive to aesthetic sensation, but can do so always only under ethical erasure. Cracks left open to sensation, especially visual experience, are always closed back down, transformed into non-predicative forms of imperative, ethical discourse. The phenomenon of "swooning," or what I will instead be calling "enthusiasm," the name of another eighteenth century trope, would seem to be hopelessly mired as an act of bad ethical faith, which is precisely not the point in Wyschogrod's late turn to aesthetics.

In my own attempt in this essay to make sense of the query posed by Wyschogrod ("Is enthusiasm still a condition of possible aesthetic experience?"), it is important first to identify two strands in her work that from the start will have slanted her own answer towards the negative ("No, enthusiasm is not really possible at all at this juncture in contemporary culture"). One

strand is composed by the legacy in twentieth century French philosophy of an irredeemably anti-ocular habit of thought, the one identified by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*. The other strand of her reflections on the relation between ethics and aesthetics is the critique of images, or rather the idea of the critique of images, in Hebrew monotheism and Jewish aniconism. These are the two cross-hatched, theoretical fields rising out from the ruins of the collapsed Cartesian picture-world of clear ideas and objects subsisting in geometrically ordered space.<sup>3</sup> For all its philosophical force, the combination of continental and Hebrew tendencies could only have worked to force back the aesthetic, ethical, and theological possibilities of visual experience, the suspicion of which extends all the way to sensibility *tout court*.<sup>4</sup>

An alternative and affirmative approach to Wyschogrod's question about aesthetic enthusiasm and postmodernism would be to bracket the twentieth century preoccupation with Cartesian rationalism as well as philosophical claims regarding the Hebrew Bible and aniconic Judaism. Yes, enthusiasm is possible at this juncture of contemporary culture. The line of thought pursued in this essay is to gauge theorists deeply invested in visual experience writing about photography and photographic images in order to consider critically the combination of enthusiasm and cynicism at the interface between postmodern aesthetics and ethics.

Wyschogrod's turn to aesthetics in *Crossover Queries* underscores that the theoretical apparatus undergirding her reflections has grown so complicated and cumbersome that it actually works against itself, even at the level of affect. Reading along with Jay, one wonders about the dread haunting the phenomenological and post-phenomenological tradition. Wyschogrod's attri-

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bution of fear to Jewish monotheism in the face of the visual image would seem to be symptomatic of her own philosophical anxieties. I have argued elsewhere that the privileging of word over image and the notion of biblical aniconism are German theoretical clichés with roots in Lessing and Kant (you will not find them in the writings of Moses Mendelssohn), which have been almost completely undone in the last decade or so of Jewish textual and cultural studies.<sup>5</sup> As for twentieth century French philosophy, one cannot help but suspect the presence of an overshadowing fear of Cartesian bogeymen—the disembodied eye dissecting the world through the prism of clear and distinct ideas, the gaze by which a distant and dominating subject subjects the other to the same. Descartes much more than Moses would be the specter who continues to spook the critique of vision in this variant of continental philosophy.

The reasons informing my own to turn to photography and photography-theory in order to pursue the relation between aesthetics and ethics, and the possibility of enthusiasm in postmodern times are three. (1) Photo-theorists have for a long time resisted the simple equation of photography with mechanical reproduction, scopic regimes of mere copy, loss of aura, and other ills attributed to scientific technology. Since the 1970s, photography has easily taken its place against painting as the most advanced art-form for the creation of still-images. (2) The philosophical implications of photography exploited by critics such as Benjamin, Barthes, Cavell, and Krauss are motivated by ontological investments that are unique to the photograph. No matter how intensely mediated, photography maintains a most special indexical relation to quotidian reality. (3) Not just an index to quotidian, material reality, it will be my contention here that photography lends itself to the religious imagination and to “religious criticism.”<sup>6</sup> Related to time and anti-realist notions, the index signed by the photograph would seem to bear the impact of a “something” that “transcends” the material picture plane and the physical realities denoted therein, a surplus or supplement more real than optical reality and its mimetic inscriptions. Resisting real-

ist suppositions, flights of fancy in photo-theory reveal in postmodern art and aesthetic theory the lingering force of “the spiritual in art,” Kandinsky’s old saw from 1912.

And yet, no matter how far they tug away from “the real world,” because the photograph and photo-theory always bring the discussion back to a material index, the look that marks the enthusiasm that continues to crop up in contemporary art will show itself in more clear images. A less complicated, less ocularphobic, less cynical approach to the relation between ethics and aesthetics might actually produce the combination of ethical and theo-poetic effects that Wyschogrod wants to recoup in her essay on cynicism and “enthusiasm” and in other essays that mark her late work.

Part of the argument in “Between Swooners and Cynics” builds on Wyschogrod’s claim that the world is forgotten in the image, that artists and spectators are inundated by pure sensation. It is for this reason that Wyschogrod insists on the cynic calling aesthetic enthusiasm back to the world of suffering. To an extent, her view of postmodern cynicism inverts Peter Sloterdijk’s analysis of “enlightened false consciousness” in *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983). Sloterdijk argued that cynicism characterizes the contemporary world, pocked as it is by the collapse of ideology and by the ironization of ethics, whereas Wyschogrod’s cynic is the one who calls contemporary consciousness back to the world and to ethics.<sup>7</sup> However, Wyschogrod, no less than Sloterdijk, maintains that a diffuse, socially integrated cynicism is the default condition of late twentieth century cultural consciousness. With a critical eye on Warhol, Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, and Baudrillard, Wyschogrod sees postmodern culture as composed of “assemblages of found objects,” the “detritus of the past,” and “culture-collages that unsay one another.” In this view, “the creation of innumerable copies of a work” in itself “constitutes a cynical gesture.”<sup>8</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss this critique of postmodernism as philosophically heavy-handed. I refrain from immediately doing so in light of the weighty theoretical and ethical stakes

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that surface in relation to realism, anti-realism, and the problem of human suffering brought to bear in Wyschogrod's writings on aesthetics and ethics, and in her interest in an art "schooled" by ethics (although I have never understood why ethics can't sometimes go to art for school).<sup>9</sup> Instead of autonomous art, Wyschogrod wants, with reference to Augustine, an art that directs attention away from itself, in which one looks past the beauty of the work itself so as to "look in fondness at him who made it."<sup>10</sup> I want to contest Wyschogrod's lachrymose understanding of postmodernism because I believe that she did not recognize the combinations of enthusiasm and ethical cynicism, of anti-realism and real-world attention in the one art that modern and postmodern culture makes possible, namely, the art of photography and the type of theory attending it.

### Critique of Realism

Wyschogrod's hesitation before visual phenomena has as its cause the misapplication of the anti-realist orientation pervading her philosophical writings, a hesitation that trips up the essays in *Crossover Queries*. In the introduction to this collection, Wyschogrod explains wanting to negotiate "the unstable concatenations of the contemporary thought," the "transitory ties joining images, sound bytes, and fragmentary messages."<sup>11</sup> In these introductory thoughts, Hegel, who seeks to "tarry with the negative," is combined with Ecclesiastes, the most wise of biblical wisdom writers who never imagined it possible to sublimate the negativity he named "vanity." Wittgenstein, too, makes an appearance in Wyschogrod's introduction to convey the skeptical thought undermining the realist view that "so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena . . . as though everything were explained."<sup>12</sup> And as always for Wyschogrod, Levinas maintains pride of place as the presiding genius of the anti-realism in these queries. As all of Wyschogrod's readers and readers of Levinas know by now, the demands of the face stand over against the individual factum, over against any concept, image, or sense datum. Its status is

"beyond being, unrepresentable, dazzling in his excellence."<sup>13</sup>

At the visual level in this evocation of the face is the problem of aesthetics and ethics caught up in the tension between abstraction and figuration. The parsing of Levinas evokes abstract art, the dazzling apotheosis of painting, the final sublation-negation of physical objects and realist metaphysics. Many readers of both Levinas and Maimonides will find this both familiar and highly satisfying—philosophically, theologically, and aesthetically. It recalls the excellence of color in any one of Mark Rothko's paintings. Less familiar to those very same readers is the image by neoexpressionist painter Francesco Clemente, *Self-Portrait: Inside Outside*, with which Wyschogrod closes the essay "Intending Transcendence." In this version, the frontal figure of the naked painter, viewed from the torso up, caught behind green bars, reaches for the hand of an otherwise invisible figure reaching towards him from outside the picture frame. For Wyschogrod, this is the "gesture of primordial generosity." It is unclear if the more or less invisible other will draw the painter out of the picture frame or if the painter will draw the other in.<sup>14</sup>

I have no idea if Wyschogrod knew about another version of *Inside Outside*, which is just as emblematic of Wyschogrod's late thought on aesthetics, ethics, and corporeality. In this version, two naked figures appear in a bifurcated picture frame overlaid by a grid. The profile of one figure and the backdrop he inhabits are presented in full "primitive" color; the other, white-washed outline suggests an enlightenment era line drawing (we see more of this figure's back and his bottom than his face). Their arms circling around each other, each seeks to draw the other over into his world on his side of the picture plane. The arm of the figure in color loops under, about to poke his companion in the anus, while the more ghostly figure in washed-out white sticks the other in the eye with his finger. In this playful but less than generous image, we find the phenomena of corporeality, chiasmic touching, and blindness that are so central to an entire range of essays about aesthetics, ethics, and religion included in *Crossover Queries*.

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The criticism of realism is a long standing commitment in Wyschogrod's philosophical project. It animates *Saints and Postmodernism*, which stands out still as one of the first and most persuasive studies relating to the complex philosophical intersections between postmodernism, ethics, and religion. In line with the French continental tradition, Wyschogrod picks up the cudgel against the hoary binary radically sundering the Cartesian knowing-subject from the known-object. As will be commonly understood, the Cartesian subject is identified as the subject of internal consciousness before which the world, including the subject's "own" body, presents itself in the form of objects laid out side by side.<sup>15</sup> What is unique to *Saints and Postmodernism* is the author's theory of saintly life in which the reflection on sensation is presented not in terms of realist sense data but rather as vulnerability, perviousness, pain, and pleasure. Saints do not communicate propositionally, but rather through "concrete interactions with others" that "disclose a sphere of responsibility prior to propositional language or moral action."<sup>16</sup> Following Donald Davidson, what matters philosophically in saintly life is the notion upholding language as an indicator of imperative mood, not as a mode of realist description.<sup>17</sup>

To read or re-read *Saints and Postmodernism* in light of the later perspectives provided in *Crossover Queries* is to understand something about the problems that bedevil the relation between a certain kind of anti-realism or anti-cognitivism vis-à-vis aesthetic phenomena. In his own shift from *the Phenomenology of Perception* to *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty gave up a phenomenology of human embodiment based primarily on visual experience to consider a more radical form of human embodiment manifested by touch. A graceful logic arcs this transition from the visible to the invisible. In the case of Wyschogrod, we see the opposite movement: from the intense attention to the viscera of tactile sensation in *Saints and Postmodernism* to the exploration of visual phenomena in *An Ethics of Remembering* and the essays on aesthetics under consideration here. What we can now see in hindsight is how the microscopic

or sub-scopic emphasis previously placed on tactile experience kept Wyschogrod from considering the place of visual sensation and imagination in saintly life. In *Saints and Postmodernism*, the visual image is associated with "reflective or mirroring" and other discourses of representation, the very visual conditions the postmodern philosophical articulation of saintly life is intended to overcome, but with which it has such trouble coming to terms.<sup>18</sup>

### Images

In contrast to the tactility of *Saints and Postmodernism*, the visual imagination occupies the central aesthetic concern in *An Ethics of Remembering*. Wyschogrod takes up the ethical responsibility of the historian to speak in the name of suffering people in hyper-mediated visual environments, as thematized by Baudrillard. For Wyschogrod, this responsibility for the pain of other people both enters into and limits the hyper-reality of specular imaging. The critique of realism is picked up in this text as well. Wyschogrod rejects the realist chronicling of discrete factual events, which are unable to yield any thick description or to identify value or significance, without which there can be no such thing as historical understanding. Accounting for the interplay between real life and imagination (memory and fiction), the way that the past can only appear as word and as image, and the fact that statements about the past lend themselves to multiple possibilities, the reality that is given expression in *An Ethics of Memory* is configured by a loose and minimal set of propositions and claims, especially in the form of counterfactuals, not the propositions that we can verify with apodictic certainty as true, but the counterfactuals that we know for certain could not have ever been true.<sup>19</sup>

For all the importance given to visual phenomena in *An Ethics of Remembering*, especially documentary evidence, Wyschogrod makes sure to argue against the view (misidentified, I believe, as the one advanced by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*), that a photograph is a self-identifying image of an object offering a direct, unmediated access to its referent (this might be an accurate

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description of Barthes's position, except that, for him, the essential referent of the punctum of a photograph is nothing less than time itself, not the realistic representation of a person or object). Wyschogrod insists here that pictures require discourse, that "comprehension cannot be identified with apprehending the world as it looks," that the interpretation of a photograph is always dependent on language and narrative. At the same time, she also understands with Barthes that what remains compelling about photographs is "the extra-discursive verisimilitude to that which is seen," the being there or the having been there of the referent.<sup>20</sup> But the main thing has to be the way in which ethical responsibility takes shape inside what Wyschogrod calls the "specular absolute." Represented by the interface between Hegel and Baudrillard, this refers to the dissolution of unity into the ephemera of spectacular images, their re-constitution into the one-and-all, and the freedom in the image from the thralldom to natural objects.<sup>21</sup>

This notion that an image might free one from objects is an important mark in Wyschogrod's text. Surfacing in *An Ethics of Remembering*, the bringing together of aesthetics, anti-realism, and ethics is even more pronounced in *Crossover Queries*. Now Wyschogrod will look to the generative power of images, which for her is twofold, epistemological and ethical. Epistemologically, the image is brought under an anti-realist conception. The image is now seen to be free from the constraint of notions of "truth as verification through an encounter with the real," enabling a perspectival view with a reality that transcends any single view.<sup>22</sup> The image in Hebrew Scripture (in "Eating the Text, Defiling the Hand" [1999]) is understood as part of a "panoply of living theophanic images," in contrast to the type of image represented by the Golden Calf, whose object is to staunch the flow of images into a fixed view of reality.<sup>23</sup> While insisting that the fear of idolatry is central to Jewish belief, she goes on to acknowledge that aniconism itself rests on a grouping of images (golden figures, dancing virgins, the ire of Moses).<sup>24</sup> The generative power ascribed by Wyschogrod to the image is ethical as well.

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Reading Levinas along with Gaston Bachelard, Wyschogrod holds up the world of the Talmud as a miniature. Understood to constitute "the world of the very small," a miniature is that image-place in which values are condensed and enriched, part of dream-like dynamics that make room for the visualization, multiplication, and co-existence of images, words or things into compact, associative nexuses rather than their subordination according to sequential logics.<sup>25</sup>

But these tentative openings to the visual imagination will always fall under erasure, even in Wyschogrod's later writings. Looking into visual phenomena would seem to have only intensified the ambivalence and tension in her thinking between aesthetics and ethics. As the image begins to exercise its own compelling power, it must be checked, and checked again by ethical rigor.

Instead of proceeding into the rabbinic miniature, Wyschogrod remains in the more familiar terrain of French anti-ocularism and negative theology. Most references in *Crossover Queries* to visual images are negative—visual experience is identified with the exercise of violent power over objects; an image can never stand up to the face of the other, because the face is never a simple sense datum and will always transcend images and concepts alike, etc.<sup>26</sup> Touch, not sight, dominates Wyschogrod's exploration of aesthetics and physical sensation. Quoting Derrida on Milton, the blind poet, in "Blind Man Seeing: From Chiasm to Hyperreality" (2000), she insists that the "exchange of outer for inner light brings to the fore what transcends sight and cognition, the act of weeping."<sup>27</sup> The transcending of sight is mystical gnosis.<sup>28</sup> The upshot is that even when Wyschogrod engages sensation, the telos remains aniconic and ethical, because "only touch requires contact, the proximity of feeling to what is felt," and only touch can secure the "feeling-acts" of empathy and sympathy.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding sensibility in general, bodies and images, touch and vision, Wyschogrod will either embrace or concede is their presence in order then to disavow, disfigure, or negate them. So she says the face gives itself phenomenally yet remains exterior to experience; or the other is given

in "expression, the sensible, still graspable" even as it resists that very grasp;<sup>30</sup> or citing Levinas, "the presence [of the other] consists in his *divesting* himself of the form which nevertheless manifests him"; or with Aquinas, "that which is at once not known by sense, but at once together with sense;"<sup>31</sup> or "the face yields itself to sensibility as a powerlessness that fissures the sensible."<sup>32</sup> In short, Wyschogrod wants simultaneously to sustain and to erase the materiality of the face.

But the tension between them is never equal in as much as the value placed on aesthetics and sensation, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other hand, does not oscillate freely back and forth. Holding with Levinas that ethics is first philosophy, Wyschogrod posits a resolution to the tension between aesthetics and ethics by transforming image into discourse.<sup>33</sup> To retain transcendence without noumenality, one "must have recourse to phenomena that, as it were, erase their own phenomenality, images given empirically yet apprehended discursively in a non-predicative fashion."<sup>34</sup> The same transition from image to word appears in her conception of Judaism, in which rejecting the idolatry of images is said to condition the turn to "the primordial language of saying or command that precedes what is said in actual speech."<sup>35</sup> The imperative mood sketched out in *Saints and Postmodernism* and the control by language of the photographic image in *An Ethics of Remembering* have been sustained in these late writings. Ironically, Wyschogrod's dis/avowal of physical sensation bears a striking resemblance to an anti-aesthetic aesthetic that is part and parcel of the very postmodernism she finds too cynical.

### Theology

From an anti-aesthetic phenomenology it is one short step to a form of negative theology built upon saintly imperatives, the dis/avowal of material sensation, and the memory of catastrophic suffering. About aesthetics, Wyschogrod remains coy; about God much less so, except that the God who appears in *Crossover Queries* is an a/phenomenal God who cannot appear. Under the eye of a canny God, Wyschogrod begins to

address the possibility of aesthetic enthusiasm in the postmodern world. These enthusiasms, however, are not visual, which means that for Wyschogrod, art has been taken out of the picture at the very instant in which she sets it up. In the tension between phenomenality and non-phenomenality, Wyschogrod come downs on the side of the latter. Reading Husserl at the start of "Intending Transcendence," she argues against concluding that a phenomenological theology would have to be immanent. One might have expected this given that phenomenology upholds the primacy of human consciousness. Turning to the few scattered remarks about God by Husserl in *Ideas*, Wyschogrod has him make the opposite case: only a God who never appears preserves divine transcendence.<sup>36</sup> With Husserl, Wyschogrod rejects the "world God," a God who is subject to appearance and perspectival change.<sup>37</sup> Quoting Derrida again, Wyschogrod seeks to say God's name beyond the image of "him," beyond experience, the God who cannot be made present.<sup>38</sup> Hanging by a thread, the a/phenomenal infinite is brought back into a phenomenal frame as the trace that negates its own indexical character.<sup>39</sup>

Combined with philosophical commitments to anti-ocularism, it is a lachrymose understanding of postmodernism that ultimately prevents Wyschogrod from fully being able to see the possibility of postmodern aesthetic enthusiasm. The postmodernism from which Wyschogrod seeks to distance contemporary philosophy is Baudrillard, Merce Cunningham, Deleuze, Sloterdijk, Oliver Stone, and Warhol. Without entering into the fairness of her readings of these thinkers and artists, it is enough simply to say here that for Wyschogrod postmodernism is cynical and/or ecstatic, never ethical. Writing on the heels of the Holocaust and its first impact in the 1970s on its cultural memory in the West, Wyschogrod represents postmodern culture as nothing but loss—the loss of resemblance, reality, slowness, tragedy, and affect.<sup>40</sup> To understand the problem with this construal of postmodernism is to understand that Wyschogrod's thought belongs just as much to the postmodern moment as do the tendencies disparaged by her. To turn away from her ethics of downcast eyes and to in-

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investigate aesthetic and spiritual enthusiasm in photography, that allegedly mechanical aura-destroying art in which copies destroy originality, is to show the possibilities opened up in the photographic image that she herself wants to explore.

Imbedded in the French anti-ocular tradition, Wyschogrod's critique of visual images and postmodernism replays the suspicions against photography and modernity voiced by Baudelaire at the beginning of modernism. Against mimetic realism, Baudelaire had raised the cry in his classic essay "The Modern Public and Photography," promoting the belief that photography's investment in realist representation constituted nothing less than a modern form of idolatry, the belief in nature and only in nature, a belief whose messiah was Daguerre. Its stakes in "truth," the "trivial image on the metallic plate," "a form of lunacy," a sacrilege and obscenity, marked for Baudelaire a heavy blow against beauty, the imagination, and the intangible.<sup>41</sup> Without doubting for a moment both the problems and the wonder that attend the photographic capacity to record the physical impression of an external world, I think it is still right to say that what Baudelaire was not able to see from his vantage point nor Wyschogrod from hers was the contribution of photography to an anti-mimetic approach to lived, phenomenal consciousness. In that the photographic index signals a more complex interaction between reality and the unreal, especially as time begins to tug at the realist impression of the optical image, it lends itself to the intangible in art, the spiritual in art, without ever disavowing the physical eye.

### Index

One might have naturally thought that the enthusiasm of mystery and wonder have no place in what is arguably a cynical, image-saturated milieu of postmodernism. Take for instance the seminal essays by Rosalind Krauss about photographic index, "Notes on the Index: Part 1" and "Notes on the Index: Part 2." With her eye on Benjamin's analysis of mechanical reproduction, Krauss hoped to contribute to the end of all of the old modernist myths: the myth of the avant-

garde, the myth of originality, and certainly the "spiritual in art," that northern romantic tradition traced by Robert Rosenblum from Caspar David Friedrich and the German Romantics up through the apotheosis of art in the postwar Abstract Expressionism of Rothko, Pollock, and Newman.<sup>42</sup> A closer look at Krauss shows a more complicated picture in which, with no small amount of ambivalence and against the grain of her own analysis, the spiritual in art subsists after the ruins of modernism as the curious amalgam of enthusiasm and cynicism about which Wyschogrod asks.

I am not sure there is anyone on the scene today who can match Krauss's chic brilliance. Critic and theorist, a contributor to *Artforum* in the 1960s, a co-founder of *October* in 1976, her work is defined by the immersion of art into French theory. In the essays collected in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985), Krauss argued the central thesis that the myth and cult of originality that drove modernist art are ultimately undermined in the deluge of copies. The argument, so conducive to photography, was based on how already at the turn of the nineteenth century Rodin's work in sculpture "was continually moving between production . . . and reproduction."<sup>43</sup> The myth of Rodin as a singular form creator of singular objects is said by Krauss to be undone by the reality of Rodin as proliferator of multiple copies, from the multiplication of copies of works down to the multiplication of individual figures within a single work.<sup>44</sup> The argument against originality is encapsulated in the re-telling of the story of the Argonauts. As told by Roland Barthes, Krauss describes how the Argonauts replaced over time each and every part of their ship *Argo* without altering the name or shape-form of the ship. Citing Barthes, she describes how "nothing is left of the origin: *Argo* is an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form."<sup>45</sup>

In her oft cited, two-part "Notes on the Index," Krauss traces the connection between index and photograph back to Duchamp's *Large Glass* and to Man Ray's development of the "rayograph" in the 1920s. The latter is particularly instructive. By placing objects (everyday objects like feath-

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ers or combs, needles, buttons, and other industrially produced things) on light-sensitive paper and then exposing it to light, Man Ray produced photograms whose ghost-like appearance highlights for Krauss "photography's existence as an index." By index, Krauss meant "that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples." An index suggests the way a weather vane manifests the presence of wind, which remains fundamentally uncoded and therefore requires the interpretative intervention of a spoken or written text or caption.<sup>46</sup> According to Krauss, "Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface." Unlike the "symbolic intervention[s]" in painting (the operation of human consciousness "behind" the pictorial form), the trace of a departed object, not symbolic, is an impression made by the thing or object itself. Pre-symbolic, it "[cedes] the language of art back to the imposition of things."<sup>47</sup>

While Krauss writes in the cool detached style of an iconoclast reading against the modernist grain, a Dadaist *après la lettre*, her readings are never cynical. The enthusiasms in her own writing are indicated the more she lets thought about photography and art slip into an un-real register that would only appear to depart from her interest in indexicality. Again citing Barthes, she wants to make sense of the photograph's "real unreality." She has Barthes explain that, "Its unreality is that of the here . . . it is nothing but a *presence* (one must continually keep in mind the magical character of the photographic image). Its reality is that of a *having-been-there*, because in all photographs there is the constantly amazing evidence: *this took place in this way*."<sup>48</sup> In my view, Krauss reading Barthes comes very close to viewing the impact of the physical index as "spiritual," understood as the experience and ontology of objects free from time and space. About Duchamp, Krauss writes, "This language of rapid exposure which produces a state of rest, an isolated sign is, of course, the language of photography. It describes the isolation of something from within the succession of temporality." Here the image is

"suspended" as a physical substance, which obscures pictorial meaning.<sup>49</sup>

Images, despite their indexical relation to things, begin to lose their status as physical substance in the language of photography. In this, Krauss's writing begins to approach the kind of enthusiasms signaled by the dematerialization of physical objects in Kandinsky's abstract paintings and in his own thoughts in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Unlike Kandinsky, Krauss is deeply ambivalent about this. One observes it in an essay on grids in modern art. Like the photograph as described in "Notes on the Index," the grid in works by Mondrian or by the postwar American artist Agnes Martin is described by Krauss as conjuring supercharged stasis, an imperviousness to time that is anti-narrative, anti-mimetic, and anti-real.<sup>50</sup> About her own skepticism, Krauss writes quite bluntly that any mention of the spiritual is a Pandora's Box.<sup>51</sup> For her, an absolute rift between spirit and matter is the legacy of modern art and science (evolution). One has to choose between the sacred and the secular. But is that rift ever absolute? Krauss observes "our" late twentieth century embarrassment with linking art and religion, before going on to discuss the art of Martin and Ad Reinhardt who were not embarrassed at all by the topic. Indeed, Krauss herself writes so convincingly of the grid as a myth that allows two contradictions to subsist by masking the true tension, that one could just as reasonably conclude that the grid *is* both spiritual and scientific at the same time.<sup>52</sup>

Krauss seeks to resolve the tension by deciding against the spiritual, but it is by no means clear how helpful her use of the term "schizophrenic" is to describe attempts to square or hold on to both sets of value—namely, the spiritual-dematerialized-centrifugal-transcendent direction in which the meaning of a grid is pushed beyond the material frame versus the scientific-materialist-centripetal-immanent reading of the same grid-form. Krauss understands myth as "repression," in this case repressing what is seen as an irreducible tension between the spiritual and the scientific. There is something strangely hard headed and regressive in appealing to this structuralist account of myth by Levi-Strauss. At

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any rate, the artists about whom Krauss writes with such obvious power do not force these kinds of choices. The confusion or paradox is that she would deny or disavow the persuasive readings that she herself makes marking out the strange, mystical moves made in modern art and photography. An alternative stance would have been the one sought out by Wyschogrod, holding on to both sides of the tension between enthusiasm and skeptical cynicism while keeping a careful watch at the interstice between values that are materialist and spiritual.

### “Stupid” Metaphysics, “Probably the True Metaphysics”

[The lama] Marpa was very upset when his son was killed and one of his disciples said, “You used to tell us that everything is illusion. How about the death of your son? Isn’t it illusion? And Marpa replied, “True, but my son’s death is a super-illusion.

—attributed to Chögyam Trungpa

The mysticism in *Camera Lucida* immediately indicated to the Francophone readers of *La chambre claire* by the Trungpa epigraph on the book’s back cover was left unavailable to readers of the English translation.<sup>53</sup> But maybe there was no reason to have been surprised by this gentle allusion to the super-natural in Barthes’s last major work. In early texts such as *Writing Degree Zero* and *Mythologies*, Barthes had already argued against the idea that signs are “natural.” In these early works, the effect of anti-naturalism was to highlight the social and ideological function of an image. Now, the anti-naturalism has slipped into a meta-physical mode of writing. Writing about *Camera Lucida*, Jay Prosser observes in his essay on “Buddha Barthes” the desire for naïve, childish relation to images, the abolition of sign, and contact with the real.<sup>54</sup> Unapologetically confessional, Barthes explained, “Always the Photograph *astonishes* me, with an astonishment which endures and renews itself, inexhaustibly. Perhaps this astonishment, this persistence reaches down into the religious substance of which I am molded.”<sup>55</sup>

For Barthes also, time constitutes the major component feature of the photographic index. To

be sure, he has to be arch about the affect that he, in contradistinction to Krauss, allows into the picture. He refers to his “vague, cynical phenomenology” in a phenomenology that appears to convey no cynicism whatsoever (assuming that the whole text is *not* some elaborate joke). The rhetorical parry carried by the word “cynical” allows him to express himself with a stylized, neo-classical “naivety,” the one that looks simple only because it pretends to be simple. Refusing to bracket affect, he knowingly stands apart from the phenomenological tradition which, in his view, does not desire or mourn.<sup>56</sup> In his self-presentation he shows himself to be a spectator of photos, not the alienated spectator à la Sartre, but as one who animates the photographic index and is animated by it. Claiming to be a “realist,” he moves away from constructivists who understand the photograph to be nothing other than a social or mental artifice. This is a weird realism in which the genuine photographic referent is *time*, not an object. As an “emanation” of a past reality, the image is not supposed to represent a copy of the world.<sup>57</sup>

A first hint of the metaphysics threading like a filament through *Camera Lucida* can already be found in the famous distinction between the “studium” versus the “punctum” of certain photographs. In its consideration of two discontinuous elements, the distinction contains a dualism that comes close to the dualism between matter and spirit. They don’t belong to the same world. The studium is the field of historical or social interest or the photographer’s intentions. For Barthes, the essence of a photograph is not reduced to this stuff of social constraints and rites or to psychological interest. Barthes argues that the issue at hand is his mother, a soul, not The Mother, a psychoanalytic figure.<sup>58</sup> The punctum in a picture is defined as an accidental prick or point disrupting the studium, signaled by the chance detail or curious element that strikes and pains the viewer. Neither purely objective nor purely subjective, the punctum is that element which the viewer adds to the image and which is nonetheless already there, “a kind of subtle beyond,” “the excellence of a being, body and soul together.”<sup>59</sup> As should be obvious to almost any

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reader, the language of desire and transcendence is almost always already the language of mystical encounter. As per Barthes, "Of course, more than other arts, Photography offers an immediate presence to the world—a co-presence; but this co-presence is not only of a political order . . . it is also of a metaphysical order. Flaubert derided (but did he really deride?) Bouvard and Pécuchet investigating the sky, the stars, time, infinity, etc. It is the kind of question Photography raises for me: questions which derive from a 'stupid' or simple metaphysics (it is the answers that are complicated): probably the true metaphysics."<sup>60</sup>

Pointing beyond hedonistic *jouissance*, the essential element in photographic index is temporal. The photograph's referent or reality is not a mimetic copy or presence of a person or object but something more intangible. As an emanation of the this-that-has-been into luminous presence, a photograph may lie about this or that detail, but it can never deny in a meaningful way that the thing presented in the image has been there.<sup>61</sup> In this case, it is Barthes's mother (the picture of her is never shown; in a book about photography, this absence remains an aniconic surd; does the picture even exist? or is this an elaborate metaphysical story?). All we know for certain about her is not this or that physical feature realistically reproduced, only the simple fact that she is going to die.<sup>62</sup> There is the clear co-presence of metaphysical order, in which the air of a face is revealed.<sup>63</sup> There she is, the discovery of the being whom I love, the true image, the truth for me. The animation brought to a dead referent is inevitably supernatural. As Derrida comments, the return of the now absent referent is the return of the dead as spectral haunting.<sup>64</sup>

With her focus on eros and eroticism, Jane Gallop's contribution to the critical essays about Barthes edited by Geoffrey Batchen in *Photography Degree Zero* gets to the heart of my own argument about the spiritual in art, postmodernism, and photography. Noting the piercing quality of the punctum, Gallop welcomes Barthes' rejection of film theory's critique of voyeurism. Against the anti-ocular critique that the subject-viewer is active and the object-image is passive, Gallop remarks that while the studium is indeed

passive, the punctum in the image is aggressive enough to bring us close to certain mystical, ecstatic alterities. The act of placing out the viewer-subject, who no longer remains in his or her own frame, suggests a life outside of the picture frame. Against truncating vision from touch, Gallop sees in Barthes an eros in which the subject seeks the physical contact in an encounter with the real of the other beyond one's own fantasies and projections.<sup>65</sup> The paradox at work in photography and eros (and religion) is that the intended object depends on our desire and imagination and framing, while remaining real and independent of us.<sup>66</sup>

As with Krauss, Gallop claims to be embarrassed by the metaphysics in *Camera Lucida*. Or at least that is what she says. Maybe she's dissembling or maybe not. The excellence of a being, the mingling of body and soul, certainly all this does not sit well, she says, with the postmodern, antihumanist circles in which Barthes is read; so much so that both Victor Burgin and Margaret Iverson, in their contributions to Batchen's collection, read *Camera Lucida* as a work of fiction.<sup>67</sup> Batchen also notes the hostile reception of *Camera Lucida*, wondering himself if in the age of digital photography it is still possible to feel the affect transporting Barthes.<sup>68</sup>

Had I had more time and space, I would have discussed works by Andreas Gursky or Sally Mann, blue chip art-photographers whose work is immersed, respectively, in the postmodern sublime and the viscera of corporeal experience; or the work of Fred Ritchin, whose enthusiasm for the quantum possibilities opened out by digital photography is tempered by the recognition that we need filters and other controls to maintain the documentary value of the photograph precisely at this point when it is so easy to disseminate fraudulent images whose purpose is to deceive. Needless to say, as Gallop contends, intellectuals (more so than artists) get into trouble talking about that which is beyond the frame, and here she obviously means the physical, material frame. She refuses to posit anything relating to God, soul, or noumenal reality, about which I am not sure what to conclude.<sup>69</sup> At the very least,

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contemporary critics and scholars almost always feel the need to be circumspect with the aesthetic enthusiasms they allow themselves, especially when these step into "stupid" metaphysics.

Unlike Krauss and Gallop, art historian Michael Fried is unapologetic about the metaphysical residue in *Camera Lucida*, although he is not sure if Barthes was even ever aware of the anti-subjectivist implications of his own argument. Much is made by Fried of a moment in the text in which Barthes claims that the photographer is not responsible for the punctum. This would mean that the punctual detail is not an object of an intending consciousness. Nor can the isolation of a punctum be ascribed solely to the activity of the viewer insofar as the viewer adds something to the image which is already there.<sup>70</sup> More to the point is a footnote that contains the full force of Fried's interpretation. In the English translation, we read that the punctum "occurs in field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful."<sup>71</sup> The word translated as delightful is *gracieux*. According to Barthes according to Fried's reading of the French, the punctum is at once inevitable and "given as an act of grace."<sup>72</sup> The metaphysical implications in this interpretation of Barthes's original text could not be more clear.<sup>73</sup> That Barthes and readers of Barthes such as Fried or Gallop continue to express in this day and age a metaphysical astonishment about photography, long upheld as the realist art par excellence, is itself nothing less than astonishing, an index to the way spiritual values continue to haunt the arts as they enter into what would have once been perceived as new and unfamiliar cultural and theoretical frames.

The tradition of anti-ocular discourse to which Wyschogrod is beholden exemplifies the tendency by which philosophers frequently turn a historical condition into a theoretical principle. Prior to its philosophical conceptualization, from Baudelaire through Sartre in the 1940s, the discourse should be seen as stamped by the first disorienting effects of the modern urban landscape. Jay recounts the impact of modern urbanization in nineteenth century Paris on "the visual experience of everyday life," how the spectacles of "in-

comparable variety and stimulation," the way in which dirt, haze, and other "phantasmagoric confusion[s]" upended perspectival depth and Cartesian clarity. The efforts made by Haussmann to redesign the city and to subject it to a more rational structure, the blinding shock of indoor and outdoor artificial illumination, the invention and dissemination of photography, the speed of modern life only intensified the sense of confusion, disruption and alienation felt by artists and intellectuals.<sup>74</sup> The affect of a generalized disequilibrium gets revisited with the explosion of images, and new technologies and modes of living in postmodern and contemporary culture as registered by theorists in the 1970s. Surely, though, these first disorientations are no longer "ours," not for a generation of readers who are more and mostly at home in these vast and volatile image worlds, and for whom the sense of disorientation described by Jay or at work in Wyschogrod's writings can be looked upon as a period-affect. For writers writing after postmodernism disorientation would be just another aesthetic choice or game.

From a later perspective into the postmodern condition than the one available to Wyschogrod, there should be no reason to privilege touch over sight or word over image, or to always set out to transform or convert the other into the one. Sympathy, proximity, the sense of coming into contact with an other all remain very much at work in contemporary visual experience, which one can no longer really reduce to values of distance and domination. Consider Stanley Cavell, who looks to the photographic image in *The World Viewed* as an attempt to "escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation—a wish for the power to reach this world, having for so long tried, at last hopelessly, to manifest fidelity to another."<sup>75</sup> These are the values central to Levinas and to Wyschogrod, the allusion in the word "reach" to sympathetic touch and fidelity, which Cavell already in 1979 finds in the photographic image. Cavell makes the point made by Jay that visuality can also be critical and intersubjective.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, there is no reason why one might think that touch is more ethically sympathetic or any less possessive than vision, given that touch presupposes a

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proximity that damages the spacing that is constitutive of the difference between the one and an Other. Jay's solution to the problem of ocularcentrism is a more "ocular-eccentric" pansensualism in which the senses are all bound up with each other, redeemed from the hierarchies that blind Cartesian forms of rationalism to bigger and more complex world-pictures.<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps Wyschogrod was too caught up in the first moments of postmodern culture and poststructuralist theory to have seen what can happen in the culture of images. Even more to the point, I am not sure that she saw herself in the mirror, her own presence and keen sensitivity to the problem of ethics in the culture and theories of postmodernism. Perhaps she was too modest. While readers of Badiou, Negri, and Žižek will certainly demur, I do not believe it is possible to understand the postmodern or contemporary

condition except in a one-sided way without considering the co-presence of Levinas and Wyschogrod, her most important disciple. With her own critical, vigilant eye at work over entire fields of western philosophy, I do not believe that Wyschogrod saw herself being seen by others, by her readers and especially by her students and by those of us who consider ourselves to be her students even though we never studied with her. An integral part of her conceptual brilliance is the very image of herself, the picture of a thinker. Thought takes time. In Wyschogrod's thought and in the image of her memory, I see the best argument against her own lachrymose lament about postmodernism, as well as evidence that modes of aesthetic and religious enthusiasm, no matter how canny and coy, and not always so, still play out in the "society of spectacle" where she least expected to find them.

#### NOTES

1. Edith Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy's Others* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 341.
2. *Ibid.*, 1.
3. On the ocularcentrism in Cartesian rationalism, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 189, 80–81. See also Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 15.
4. On Wyschogrod's critique of visual experience, see Martin Kava and Eric Boynton's introduction to Martin Kava and Eric Boynton, *Saintly Influence: Edith Wyschogrod and the Possibilities of Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 4–5.
5. Zachary Braiterman, *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern Jewish Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), xxv–xxx.
6. The term "religious criticism" is Harold Bloom's. Harold Bloom, *American Religion: The Emergence of The Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 21, 27–28, 35–38, 42–44.
7. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 4.
8. Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 342.
9. *Ibid.*, 341.
10. *Ibid.*, 344.
11. *Ibid.*, 1.
12. *Ibid.*, 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 19, 24, 26.
14. *Ibid.*, 28.
15. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, 15.
16. *Ibid.*, 49.
17. *Ibid.*, 166–67.
18. *Ibid.*, 53.
19. See Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 166–69.
20. *Ibid.*, 77–81.
21. *Ibid.*, 114–15.
22. Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 65–66.
23. *Ibid.*, 364–66.
24. *Ibid.*, 311.
25. *Ibid.*, 63–66. For a similar conception of legal *nomoi*, see Robert Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," *The Harvard Law Review* 97:4 (1983): 4–68.
26. Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 23, 24–25.
27. *Ibid.*, 120.
28. *Ibid.*, 118–19.
29. *Ibid.*, 157.
30. *Ibid.*, 3–36.

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31. Ibid., 36.
32. Ibid., 25.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 30.
35. Ibid., 312.
36. Ibid., 14.
37. Ibid., 17.
38. Ibid., 21, 23, 29, 40. Cf. 299.
39. Ibid., 40.
40. Ibid., 120.
41. Charles Baudelaire, "The Modern Public and Photography" in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Islands Books, 1980), 83–89.
42. Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: From Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975). On the importance of Benjamin for Krauss, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 152.
43. Krauss, *Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 187.
44. Ibid., 151–55.
45. Ibid., 2.
46. Ibid., 211.
47. Ibid., 203.
48. Ibid., 217 (emphasis in the original by Barthes).
49. Ibid., 205.
50. Ibid., 158.
51. Ibid., 10.
52. For a similar instance in which Krauss writes with tremendous verve and insight about the spiritual in art which she herself rejects, see Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 6–8. In this case, the reference is to Michael Fried's commentary on baseball and "the metaphysics of grace."
53. See Jay Prosser, "Buddha Barthes: What Barthes Saw in Photography (That He Didn't in Literature)," in Geoffrey Batchen, ed., *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 91–103.
54. Ibid., 100.
55. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 82 (emphasis in the original).
56. Ibid., 16–21.
57. Ibid., 88.
58. Ibid., 74.
59. Ibid., 44, 55, 59.
60. Ibid., 84–85.
61. Ibid., 94–96.
62. Ibid., 82.
63. Ibid., 107.
64. Jacques Derrida, "Barthes's voice," in Diana Knight, ed., *Critical Essays on Roland Barthes* (New York: G. K. Hall, 2000), 134.
65. Jane Gallop, "The Pleasure of the Phototext," in *Photography Degree Zero*, 49–52.
66. Ibid., 54.
67. Victor Burgin, "Re-Reading *Camera Lucida*," and Margaret Iverson "What is a Photograph," in *Photography Degree Zero*, 43, 57.
68. Geoffrey Batchen, "Palinode: An Introduction" to *Photography Degree Zero*, 18–21.
69. Gallop, "The Pleasure of the Phototext," 56.
70. Michael Fried, "Barthes's *Punctum*," in *Photography Degree Zero*, 145 (the reference is to *Camera Lucida*, 47).
71. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 47.
72. Fried, "Barthes's *Punctum*," 166n35.
73. Fried's reading of the punctum as an anti-subjectivist figure is not unique to him. Cf. James Elkins, "What do We Want a Photograph to Be? A Response to Michael Fried," in *Photography Degree Zero*, 171–72, 176–81. Elkins also insists that the punctum is not subjectivistic, while criticizing both Fried and Barthes for their focus on the human figure. Cf. Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortéz-Rocca, "Notes on Love and Photography," in *Photography Degree Zero*, 105–40. Cadava and Cortéz-Rocca also speak to the destabilization of a prior, unified Cartesian subject, as do Burgin and Iverson.
74. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 113–24.
75. Stanley Cavell *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 21.
76. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 413–16, 540.
77. Ibid., 591; cf. 194, 285, 306–07, 310, 511.

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