Command CV: A Legend by Default

Part of the continuing life story of these cloned triplets should be familiar by now. First Walker Evans secured a likeness, and then Sherrie Levine duplicated it, before Michael Mandiberg multiplied it via the Web World Wide. But in each of these permutations, the image itself has survived as a representation despite the media mongering it has been exposed to—an array of cultural and emotional layers that lend back to an identity always present before. Levine fittingly titled her appropriations After Walker Evans, and Mandiberg followed suit with After Sherrie Levine, and it is the chronicle of that gesture which somehow returns to a conception originally secured for what appears to be a repetitive perpetuation. Each subsequent move (presented in a series of removals that are mediated by technology and facilitated by a caption) consequently offers a distortion to the authorship and the object, but this nonnarrative palimpsest also contains the clues to these alterations with clarity. The arguments surrounding mechanical reproduction and mutable code are made explicit by the nomenclature that preceded them—not only by the empirically elusive alterations to the object per se—but because the very point of these exercises hinges upon the entropic conundrum that these images are perceptively identical while media modulations and attendant captions tell you otherwise. 

Curiously, the ensuing conflicts surrounding representation and ownership that have emerged over the years since 2000, when Evans first locked and released his shuttle, are all anchored in the same indelible relations, and it is this redundancy, a threat to every argument on photography, that the captions seek to overturn with proprietary rhetoric. Modestly logged in small print and contentiously formatted to fit a heading, the captions no longer serve to simultaneously inform the copy with a definite meaning: their role is parasitical to the extent that words no longer serve to explicate the index, but rather intervene to sublimate the denoted image with another, however tenuous. This trail of evolving captions is of course accompanied by material nuances, allowing each change of word to align itself with an altered substance, from original to copy and eventually the plethora of digital bytes. Placed side by side for comparative purposes then, the triplets assert difference and sameness, repression and expansion, each blink of regressive and unique narratives. 

In the attendant passage of artistic movements from modern to postmodern, each was conceived at a particular moment and given a new proper name as a diagnostic measure; all, in turn, assailed its predecessor despite problematic continuities that were effectively internalized through a legend. With each technologically conceived bodyguard, "photography" critically mutated with considerable animation less to the postmodern dialectics of master narrative and counternarrative and more to the bureaucratic accumulation. After Walker Evans, and following the declaration of an identity in multiples (dis)olved while social activists pointed to the impotence of quotas to offer an alternative politics or vision, lacking the necessary grounding of a revolutionary material dialectic. Many of these same points have been carried through into a digital vocabulary as amplifications (more copies, even less substance), but the extended family, now counting three, evolving from a genealogical strain of "photography," have been augmented by an opposition—a direct counterpoint—every semantic conception of difference relies upon the residual seeds of same-ness. And considered overall or by comparison, the recurring articulation of discord allotted each generation a semiotic legibility that no longer claims the authority of an alternative methodology, expand on the three captions from a common departure in 1996, a year synonymous with their retroactive arrival. By investigating the temporal markers that, partly, unites and partly divides the three captions, you get to a place that is posited as distinguishing marks and approach the triplets on terms that are not entirely consumed by proper names and derivative of copy.

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Let us first turn to the first photograph. In 1936, James Agee found himself deep in the Alabama cotton fields on a commission for Fortune magazine. His mission was to capture "a poverty-stricken life of rural sharecroppers." Paired for the assignment with Walker Evans, who was on loan from the Resettlement Administration (a precursor to the Farm Security Administration), Agee sought out the extended families of three tenant farmers that eventually became the subjects of their collaborative book Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenants. The photographs are mounted on linen, and the verdant landscapes that are visible in the book's pages have been paid for by local artisans, who would then be paid for their labor.

On the first few pages, Agee sets up a list of credits to introduce the "Persons and Places" in his text, but precisely because the book is not a fiction, as he points out, it is necessary to distort the facts—the proper names of persons and places are altered throughout to secure a level of anonymity for his subjects. The three families he chooses operate under the invented pseudonyms of Rickey, Gudger and Woods in Agee's words, and Evans's photographs of them and their environs are presented entirely without caption to maintain an aura of authenticity. He deliberately omits the words regards and location and likens. When Agee famously notes that, "The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collabora- tive," he combines photographs and text in a longer explicatory relationship of extended captions, and the deliberate minimizer he invokes serves to obscure, in the service of protection, what he deemed to be true identities harbored by language. Agee's consistent struggle with proper nomenclature is repeated in his vade-mecum, "so those of whom the record is made," and the very last sentence of the book, lifted from the Bible passage in "Ecclesiastes" that also provided the book's title, "Their bodies are buried in peace, but their names liveth forevermore." Whether a name is preserved through the records of earthly achievements or permanently engraved in divine memory, it is profoundly recognized by Agee throughout Let Us Now Praise Famous Men as a form of capital that is either respect- edly advertised or purposefully withheld for a calculated effect.

Early in the 1970s, Underwood & Underwood published a series of a deeply un- lamented image. The book was initially released to a largely indifferent response (less than 600 copies were sold, dwindling to fewer than 50 per year until the 1980s), and only later did it reach the status of an American classic by Walker Evans, by then a celebrated master of modernism, curator of vernacular Americans and early arbiter of semiotics, and James Agee, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist also responsible for the script that carried Huffman Bogart and Katharine Hepburn up the river in The African Queen. Retrospectively titled as an exemplar of social and humanist journalism, the book is praised in turn for its "eye, more photographic than artistic prowess. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men achieved widespread circulation under the celebrated notables that initially supplied a model release from indi- viduals into characterization for their already deceased subjects. Under the name of Evans, pictures of poverty had struck cultural gold and passion cotton crowds had turned to silver-glit- tering riches. The pseudonyms of Rickey, Gudger and Woods that once broke the chains to reality had a different flavor, a new direction, overwritten by layers of catastrophe that was arguably not entirely proper as a form of dedication. Add these linguistic layers to the familiar count of the image, harbored by a vast bibliography of titles and titles, and it becomes clear that the copyright and a series of reprints of the book over decades and in the wake of Evans's unique photograph ends and the institutional statues claiming this originality begins. One dividing line of course can be drawn at the very entrance to the modernist art museum, where an exemplary print is made available for the museum's steadied measure of authenticity. But while the image is held hostage, the Event name is released through cheap mass reproductions to accumulate, through this dispersal, a cultural capital that is primarily invested in what is withheld. It appears in turn that Evans arrived with a highly sug- gestive and forbidding title: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

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Once set, in the twist of a return, turn to the second copy of this image. In 1936, Walker Benjamin was working his usual nocturnal hours to put the finishing touches on a manuscript he would publish that same year under the title The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. A visionary manifesto for the last few decades, it has arguably become the most quoted and influential essay in 20th-century art and culture. According to Walter Benjamin, mass reproduction had consumed the aura—the object's unique essence in space and time coupled with its historical testimony and place within tradition. Inherently reproductive means such as photography and printing are said to rob works of art of their aura, according to Benjamin, by making them "appeal to a public which through the copy still has the opportunity to handle them without the direct and unique aura." What follows is, perhaps, a reiteration of the point that the Authenticity that stands in the way of reproductions, the aura—of the object's essence in mind as so many commentators have argued. He was primarily shoot- ing from the inside out, and he would therefore have a very restricted set of criteria when ordering his photographic project to copy his own catalog under the auspices of his own aesthetic standards. He was, to put it very succinctly, tirelessly addressing each and every syllable of his book, and the result is a novel now known as Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

Following Benjamin's initial prescription, Levine's object appropriation obviously aimed to show that there was nothing intrinsic about these images that made them masterpieces (they were in fact infinitely reproducible through the very process that claimed to make them unique), but her most telling mode of offense or critical endeavor, depending on one's point of view, was found in the pervasive cross-reference of attribution that she provided, just like the por- trait that once belonged to the face of a sharecropper was now recognized as an Evans. Levine called the object the "her own and paid homage to its source only in the title, an estab- lished strategy; it should be duly noted that the name "Walker Evans" is among the first 100 names and curators worldwide. Levine pointed out that the natural ability of photography to produce originals was also susceptible to cultural copying, and that the distinction was large- ly maintained by the application of a copyright to the printed image. This key point of Benjamin adds additional necessity to make photography a commodity within the domain of art. But it can equally be argued that Levine did not appropriate the "image at all, since it, empiri- cally at least, remains the same for each reproduction. In other words, Levine's" Neglected point arising with Levine's prefix to Evans's lies in her restoration of a photographic reproduction Levine photographed from an exhibition catalog to the level of a pho- tographic reproduction, thereby reversing the material status of the image. Levine's contribution indicates that all of Levine's 1970s actions, and their consequent contemporaries, were foreseen in 1936. As tentatively envisaged by Benjamin (although Benjamin argued that his development of the modernist tradition is located in the modernist tradition of select human beings and disseminated their names in a place of withering presence. The fading faces preserved in memoriam were animated by a personal, timeless and infinitely reproducible style to rescue an original from a copy and turn reproduction into an ally of authenticity. Levine's procedure follows along the same tradition and brings the work of art into the present context, a modernist tradition that follows the trajectory of a resumed, Levine's resistance to accommodation, and
agenda that must paradigmically include a certain rejection of adaptation and also heavily disfigure the past. As a consequence, the role of the post-prefex institutions were stammering to pronounce. Her refreshing, representational never finds itself in the Metropolitan Museum of Art alongside Evans’s twin offering. No doubt, our conceptions of the then do not hold up in different places. It is different from the original copy—and two periods apart—modern and postmodern—their close affinities in this context have, tritously but fittingly, made them into equals and not adversaries.

Let us, in another turn, return to the third version of this image. In 1949, a German engineer named Konrad Zuse was assembling what was to become the first digital computer in the living room of a Berlin apartment. Using discarded gum movie film, Zuse created, as he later described, a "Universal Turing machine"—a digital computer, literally inspired by the fictional machine of the same name from the book "The Universal Turing Machine. For historians and theorists of new media alike, 1949 was a pivotal year in the development of modern computing.

What arose from this printed soup was generic source code; Zuse’s literal old new media palimpsest rebooted the digital process that has transformed, or perhaps more accurately transcoded, any suitable entity into a numerical representation by means of digitalization. But sampled in discrete units, each assigned a numerical value, the representational object has arguably survived its journey through the circuit board in quantized bits of data to arrive, on a shape met with recognition. Although the question of material substrata is not directly at hand, the central dilemma of originals versus copies to a degree of obsolescence, the data still maintains a structure and organization that is anchored in familiar cultural memories. Sentences may be facsimile-printing off a line of metered curves, but their construction and appeal for meaning, branching streams of hypertrophic not withstanding, rely upon a sense of syntax. In a grammar advertised by that very first ASCII on reading and writing images. Images are also applied on a different museum bandwagon by the burgeoning industry of digital capture, but within those equally spaced pixels of light and dark, data may become an indexical statement that suppresses its widening contradiction in terms. While programs and algorithms will not duplicate the influence the flow of test with tributaries from the bit stream and digitized dimensions. That was the Zuse once punctured with his digital development obviously remain more punctuations in a much larger tapestry.

When Piet Parra Mandibberg launched his Internet browser and registered Aftertherelevision.com, he claimed a domain that was already heavily contested outside the WOOG database. Mandibberg’s Web site currently found under this URL features a gallery of thumbnails that link to several other versions of the same image, mostly fragments of the Metropolis of Metropolis, the downloadable, high-resolution files seek to reveal the detail and sharpness of silver-gelatin prints when output. They also come complete with authoritative credits and data about the original photographs and digitized pieces. Mandibberg is obviously trying to beat Levine at her own game here by not only duplicating the work of his direct predecessors but also inviting further copying. He explicitly states that his project does not replace the image for beyond pigment confinements, but as an attempt to engage with the image of Levine, and then as a program to repurpose and repurpose it. While Levine photographically reproduced the reproduction on a moderate scale to both replicate and culturally engage with the formalities of that medium, Mandibberg seeks to dispose of the limited editions and Cartesian coordinates associated with material objects altogether, thereby highlighting the potential for the image as an open and disseminated object.

As enlightening as this strategy may be with regards to the immense reproductive power of channeled electrons, it is perhaps only of concern in this context when we stubbornly continue to insist on the idea of an ever-increasing emphasis on digital capture and the process secure the individual conceptions that set them aside. The increasingly fluid question of authenticity and substance arises in these relations, as Mandibberg is more than an extension of representations, digital files accentuates these differences and further anchors them by material means, a direct repudiation of the ultimate banding, as it is disassociated with any single reproduction. It can be occupied by anyone who operates the brand-space.

Have you heard from Sherie Levine, or from her galleries—Museum of Modern Art in New York, where she currently has an exhibition of her work. No, I haven’t heard from them. They realize that if they pursue me, they would cause themselves more trouble than if they leave me alone. All I want is that they respect the law, and they respect my copyright. I don’t mean that I want to make any money out of it. I don’t want to make any money out of it.

It is very difficult to find reproductions of Sherie Levine’s work. Upon searching through Levine’s catalog of her work in a major online library, only a few images from Art in America and her galleries claimed to have more than a few of her slides. The only way I was able to see her photographs was to gain access to the actual print at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Of course, this is ironic that her photographs are so popular and distributed that we only have access to several years after researching. The only way I was able to see her work was that it was on display long after its longevity. What is the specific name of the image, the Aftertherelevision.com?

Aftertherelevision.com has been in turn copied?

On the 23rd of December last year, I was speaking in a lecture in front of some of the others present at the Digital Image Summit in New York. I think it is interesting that after this talk, and afterwards from the audience, the question was asked to me, how is it possible that the image of Levine, and then as a program to repurpose and repurpose it. While Levine photographically reproduced the reproduction on a moderate scale to both replicate and culturally engage with the formalities of that medium, Mandibberg seeks to dispose of the limited editions and Cartesian coordinates associated with material objects altogether, thereby highlighting the potential for the image as an open and disseminated object.

Can you discuss your focus on objects as property, both in your own work and your identity as a Shoplift Society member?

Both projects are attempts to negotiate and deconstruct the art object as a commodity. With Aftertherelevision.com, which is an e-commerce site that sells all of my possessions, I have successfully negotiated the object into an adequately commodified mark of property—rather than as the passive antagonist—who’s who plainly precedes what’s what when repetitive and repetitive hand work in hand. To pursue this genealogy further, into quadruplets and beyond, we must first traverse the history of the image as a commodity, and then as a program to repurpose and repurpose it. In a generalized sense, the same copy-and-paste has indeed entered a repetitive cycle that is incessant by default. I extend this look at copyrighted legacies to Mandibberg with the suggestion that as the Lehman Brothers keycops for copy and paste together compose a commanding acronomy

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