

THE ABSENT PHOTOGRAPH GEORGE BAKER

Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them.

— Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

DUST

Moyra Davey's photographs seem to portray a spiraling series of obsolescent technologies and outmoded objects, a catalog of detritus and decay. Her earliest photographs began in the streets: typologies of decrepit pennies found on the sidewalk, lumpy newsstands with their lingering print media, improbable stores on City Island in the Bronx selling replacement buttons labeled "facockta" or "simcha." But then the artist appeared to turn away from the outside world, to become a prowler of her own domestic interior, shut off from the urban spaces that so

long nurtured the hopes of the photographic document.

In more recent images, we see yellowing books on overstuffed shelves, outsize dictionaries, and paper-strewn tables and desks. There are photographs of empty liquor bottles and VHS tapes;



naked light bulbs in their sockets and vinyl records grouped in series and in stacks; household appliances like refrigerators, microwaves, or clocks alongside outdated analog receivers, portable radios, and old-school stereo speakers. There are photographs of fluorescent light tubes and the widest variety of domestic products, piled up at random on kitchen counters. There are forgotten objects: an old toy behind the furniture, a two-year-old copy of a daily newspaper under the bed. There are destroyed objects: a photograph of the ragged shards of a plaster ceiling that has collapsed onto the floor.



Ceiling (2003), C-print, 24 × 20 inches

Disrepair, if not disaster, seems the subtext of such an image, and dust

spreads all around. It is there in almost every one of Davey's works, clinging to a dog's paw or to a turntable's needle glinting in the sun. In other photographs, we see the dust running rampant along a floorboard, or lurking on the backside of a shelf, or covering a pile of books, or hiding out beneath the bed.

With the broken shards and gathering dust, Davey signals an indirect, subterranean connection in her work to that of Marcel Duchamp, considering the fractured state of the artist's magnum opus, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23), and his notorious use of household dust in its making. Perhaps one might take this whispered evocation as a sign of Davey's emulation of Duchamp's particular brand of anti-productivity, an artistic model of laziness and extended languishing—one that started with the proclamation of the death of a medium, painting, and ended in the artist's disingenuous claim to have abandoned art altogether. For death and abandonment seem the central point of Davey's images: Here are photographs, we might say, that emerge as "last" photographs, pictures that turn inward, in melancholic self-absorption, away from the urban spaces of street photography; documents that relinquish all purchase on the social field in which photography once thrived. We thus face lingering images of obsolescent things that echo the increasingly attenuated existence of analog photography. In other words: The dust that has fallen on Davey's domestic spaces seems to have fallen on the traditional photographic image, too.

But with this reading, the artist would not agree. Davey has a different explanation for her melancholic images. When asked recently about the

motivations behind this body of work, the artist simply replied: "I'd say that these pictures are about the life of objects." As if to underscore this understated point, Davey clarifies in the same interview that the spreading dust in her domestic scenes is also "alive" for her: "Dust is made up of dead matter, but it's also totally alive in its entropic, inescapable fashion."¹ And so my initial argument can be reversed: The life that has fallen on Davey's domestic objects and spaces seems to have fallen on the traditional photographic image, too.

(My white-haired dog is blowing her winter coat. As I write, piles of dog hair lie in clumps around my desk, rivaling the worst you see in any of Davey's photographs. The hair is strewn under the dining table, where it mixes with assorted crumbs; attached to the fabric of ottoman and couch; and at its worst in the kitchen, which I haven't cleaned in a week. My dog prefers the house this way, I think, and shares her coat willingly with my socks and slacks, a gift from which they will never be free. This morning I quarrel with my wife over who will walk the dog, saying that I have to write. But as soon as they leave, I become convinced that I can no longer concentrate, and take a break from my work to vacuum the entire house, knowing that I will need to do it again in a day.)

COPPERHEADS

At the tail end of the 1980s, Davey began to photograph money. Produced during the crisis moment of a widespread economic recession, Davey's low-tech color images would

each be titled *Copperhead*.





64

Copperhead N° 28 (1990), C-print, 24 × 20 inches



65

Copperhead N° 18 (1990), C-print, 24 × 20 inches



Copperhead N° 77 (1990), C-print, 24 × 20 inches

The images focus on the profile of Abraham Lincoln engraved on the United States penny, the cheapest, most devalued piece of American currency. At the moment of the series's emergence, the "Copperheads" would have been safely ensconced within readings of postmodernism that stressed its "allegorical" procedures. The series announces its filiation, for example, to one of the earliest projects by artist Sherrie Levine, her "Presidents" series from the late 1970s, which also deployed the profiles of political patriarchs, fusing them with advertising images of women in a feminist allegorization of the linked but gendered spaces of consumption and political power.

Similarly, a longer historical and political dimension emerges within Davey's work: the title "Copperhead," we might observe, serves not just as a literal description of the profiles and the money before us, but also as a term used during the American Civil War, the historical event to which Lincoln's image directs us. "Copperhead" was the name given to the so-called Peace Democrats who opposed the North's use of war to reunite the sundered nation. While the Peace Democrats came to embrace the name, and began to wear copper coins as proud badges of their antiwar position, the label "Copperhead" originally made explicit reference to the so-named poisonous snake, and was thus an epithet of treason and betrayal (many Copperheads were forced into Canadian exile, as would occur to those Americans opposed to fighting in the Vietnam War a century later).

This allegorical dimension of Davey's work opens, however, onto another reading that was not immediately present in the artist's early

reception. This is what we might call the formal logic of the series, a medium logic, a rethinking of the photograph itself. Or, in other words, a first instance in which Davey found what she now often calls a new "way to work," and that I will understand here as a consistent drive to reconceive the practice and given models of photography. The series's flirtation with a notion of "betrayal" makes perfect sense on this level, for not only would Davey's work assert a transformation of the patriarchal image—a literal opening up of an image of the (symbolic) father to experiences that Oedipal law should not allow (an association with excrement, for example, or worthlessness, or utter and ceaseless fungibility)—it would twin this opening with another transgression, an expansion of the photograph itself.² Indeed, the medium logic of the series is simple to see: it is basic, almost primordial, for the "Copperheads" comprise an archive of silhouettes, a typology of portraits, pointing back to one of the origins of the photographic impulse itself, an *ur*-form of the medium. To return to the silhouette, to prioritize the portrait, to alight upon the typology: we face primordial forms of the technology of the photograph, as well as of its social usage. And yet, in the end, the kind of recursiveness that Davey seeks hardly seems self-reflexive or medium-specific; instead, betrayal or treason become her formal logic, for she locates photographic qualities in an analog outside of the photograph itself.

Basically worthless, the pennies that Davey depicts are "like" photographs in many different ways. They are objects of circulation and objects of use; they are objects kept close to the body, in wallets and pockets, and fingered by hands; they are tokens

stamped with their time and date. They are small objects, miniatures, enlarged by the photograph's innate habit of holding on tight to its object-world, progeny of the close-up and the zoom. They are obsolete, throwaway vestiges, but also keepsakes, collector's items, useless avatars of blind luck or cunning thrift simultaneously. The one hundred pennies that Davey photographed were found at random on city streets, like so much discarded garbage, and indeed, each *Copperhead* seems a memorial to analog photography's contemporary eradication, or—amounting to the same thing—its ceaseless dedication to that which is on the verge of disappearance. For ultimately, the works capture in the greatest detail the immeasurable variety of the decay of each cast profile on the penny's surface, embodying meditations on loss, erosion, and the slipping of a thing into the status of detritus.

And yet, in fixating on this image-loss, the "Copperheads" depict the penny (and the patriarch) as a receptor surface, a skin infinitely susceptible to wounds, gouges, and scratches—as, in other words, a site of contact, an object, like the photograph, endlessly open to receiving the marks of the world. The images also depict the penny as a reactive surface, the site of myriad eruptions and chemical "blooms." In recording this, Davey's "Copperheads" mirror photography in yet another way: they are images of serial objects, replicas, each given over to the condition of absolute chance and singularity. And if each photograph seems an image of disappearance, a cast or imprint fading away before our eyes—like the indexical properties of photography itself—the images' condition as "last" photographs can also be reversed. For it is as if we gaze upon photograph after photograph

of what seem to be "latent" images, an irreducibly unique but incomplete form at the point of its emergence, like a landmass surfacing from the ocean's depths, or an unknown object blanketed by deep but melting snow. The "Copperheads" are photographs of destruction and resurrection, loss and potential rebirth, at once. Their latency implies an opening, a potential becoming.

Almost twenty years after first producing the series, Davey recently published a book devoted to the one hundred images in her miniature archive. Previously displayed in a grid upon the wall, or in blown-up images arranged in smaller sequences in a row, the "Copperheads" would now appear in a seemingly never-ending series, one image to each and every page. Arranged in this way, the photographs are easy to set in motion with the flick of a finger. In effect, Davey has transformed the gridded typology into a kind of flipbook, a proto-cinematic device that carries the photograph and the image into other domains. No longer metaphorical, the image literally began to "move," to bloom—not along any narrative or directional axis, but with the anarchic force of infinite difference, an endless riot of texture and color, the full entropic beauty of the living processes of decay. Emerging on the back of what I have elsewhere called "Oedipal fatigue," Davey's "Copperheads" project opened up the image of the patriarch from rigidity to flux, the photograph from immobility to motion.³ With photography placed in relation to cinema, the work contemplates a sharing of form that converts the expanded photograph into a vehicle with, in the artist's words, an intense "potential for transformation and surprise."⁴

(Sometimes I simply open my apartment's front door and let the wind from the far windows blow the dog hair like tumbleweed out into the hall.)

COATS AND CHAIRS

Two more images of 19th-century patriachs need to be placed in dialog with Davey's photographs of Abraham Lincoln. They can be found in Walter Benjamin's 1931 essay "Little History of Photography." This essay wishes to explain the "charm of old photographs"; written during the initial moments of the Great Depression, it argues for a return to the earliest potentials of the photographic medium, glorifying the obsolescent achievements of the pictures made in the first decade of photography's history, before the onset of the medium's ruinous industrialization. In this, the essay shares much with Davey's regressive but optimistic vision for the photograph.

Although the images have rarely been noted or discussed, Benjamin offers descriptions of two photographs of philosophers—Arthur Schopenhauer and F. W. J. Schelling—during the extended flash of brilliance that is his text. Both images concern the philosophers' relationship to their daily environment, and in this the images provoke connections to Davey's obsessive reflection on photographs of domesticity and everyday objects. On a deeper level, however, these images allow Benjamin to open up a philosophical point of the greatest significance: the photograph's mediation of the split between subject and object, or rather, photography's role in crafting a potential new relationship of the one to the other.

Late in his text, Benjamin describes the photograph of Schopenhauer. He has just finished introducing the reader to the images of Eugène Atget, noting that they are empty of people: "The city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant." This photographic experience of a "salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings" emerges as the opposite of the qualities that Benjamin locates in the image of the philosopher. "To do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations," Benjamin observes. Another relation to one's environs can be imagined: "The generation that was not obsessed with going down to posterity in photographs," Benjamin writes, "rather shyly drawing back into their private space in the face of such proceedings—the way Schopenhauer withdrew into the depths of his chair in the Frankfurt picture, taken about 1850—for this very reason allowed that space, the space in which they lived, to get onto the plate with them."⁵ Before the full onset of the self-alienation that the photographic image came to represent, the "depths" of the philosopher's chair entered the photograph because the philosopher was *attached* to his objects, inseparable from them, immersed in them.

Benjamin presses further in an earlier passage on the photograph of Schelling. The passage is crucial, for in it Benjamin sets up the terms in which he will define the experience of "aura" that his text otherwise delineates. One of the most complex ideas in Benjamin's lexicon, aura seems to refer to the experiences of singularity that photography and its reproductive vocation come to betray, as well as to a temporal duration in experience that the photographic image also

eventually disallows (Benjamin: “to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch”).⁶ But Benjamin often reverts to fabric metaphors when attempting to define aura, calling it a “strange weave of space and time,” and praising an old photograph for capturing an “aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man’s frock coat or floppy cravat.”⁷ This is photography, it seems, prior to its own alienation from its innermost potential, as Benjamin describes this experience as one of “congruence” between the camera and the bourgeois subjects it initially represented (“subject and technique were as exactly congruent as they become incongruent in the period of decline that immediately followed”).⁸ But such congruence of photography and its subject emerges from a deeper congruence, a more intense escape from alienation: the photograph’s ability to imagine a form of connection between the realm of the subject and the object.

This is where Benjamin’s description of the photograph of Schelling becomes transformative. “Everything about these early pictures was built to last,” Benjamin asserts. “The very creases in people’s clothes have an air of permanence. Just consider Schelling’s coat: It will surely pass into immortality along with him: the shape it has borrowed from its wearer is not unworthy of the creases in his face.”⁹ The passage is breathtaking, for Benjamin here seems not only to describe an individual photograph, but to describe within Schelling’s image objects and qualities that are themselves “photographic.” Wrinkles, aging,

the passage of time: these are photographic attributes, and for Benjamin the “creases” in the philosopher’s coat are not unlike these, a second “skin.” But, even more, the philosopher’s coat itself is “like” a photograph, which Benjamin thus seems to define in the most extraordinary way: a photograph is a “shape” that is “borrowed” from its subject. Or to state this another way: as philosopher and coat, the old man and his wrinkled skin, or subject and object “borrow” form from one another, so too the photograph participates in this intimate connection of subjective life and objective form, like a coat filled out by the body of its wearer. At its origins, and at the height of its potential, the photograph emerged as a model that allowed one to “think” the communion of subject and object, a concrete example of the analogy between being and appearance.

It is with such a luminous passage in mind that we need to look again at Davey’s photographs of inert domestic objects, devoid for the most part of people, perhaps photographed like Atget’s city streets, which for Benjamin were images that address us like the “scene of a crime.”¹⁰ For if Davey’s images are instead about the “life of objects,” then we have to imagine the force of this animation, perhaps even the absent subject from which quotidian object and indexical photograph—analogs all—have borrowed their form.

(I don’t know what exactly Benjamin meant by the “Frankfurt picture” of Schopenhauer. The image of Schelling in his coat is reproduced in the English version of Benjamin’s text. But the Schopenhauer photograph isn’t there. My essay is by now a week late, and yet I spend hours googling Schopenhauer anyway.

I don’t find any images of him in a chair, but I do become interested in his book Studies in Pessimism. And I locate the following description of his daily routine: “From the age of 45 until his death 27 years later Schopenhauer lived in Frankfurt-am-Main. He lived alone, in ‘rooms’, and every day for 27 years he followed an identical routine. He rose every morning at seven and had a bath but no breakfast: he drank a cup of strong coffee before sitting down at his desk and writing until noon. At noon he ceased work for the day and spent half-an-hour practicing the flute, on which he became quite a skilled performer. Then he went out for lunch at the Englischer Hof. After lunch he returned home and read until four, when he left for his daily walk: he walked for two hours no matter what the weather. At six o’clock he visited the reading room of the library and read The Times. In the evening he attended the theater or a concert, after which he had dinner at a hotel or restaurant. He got back home between nine and ten and went early to bed. He was willing to deviate from this routine in order to receive visitors [R. J. Hollingdale, Introduction to Arthur Schopenhauer’s Essays and Aphorisms].”

READER

A critic in the *New York Times* once described Davey’s domestic photographs as presenting “disheveled living spaces,” most likely belonging to a “depressed and possibly dangerously alienated person.”¹¹ In these spaces, books seem to be everywhere—on every surface, table, or shelf. In the image

Dictionaries (1996), we see two immense and browning tomes, positioned like bookends, or like mouths gaping at a pile of smaller books that mounts between them.



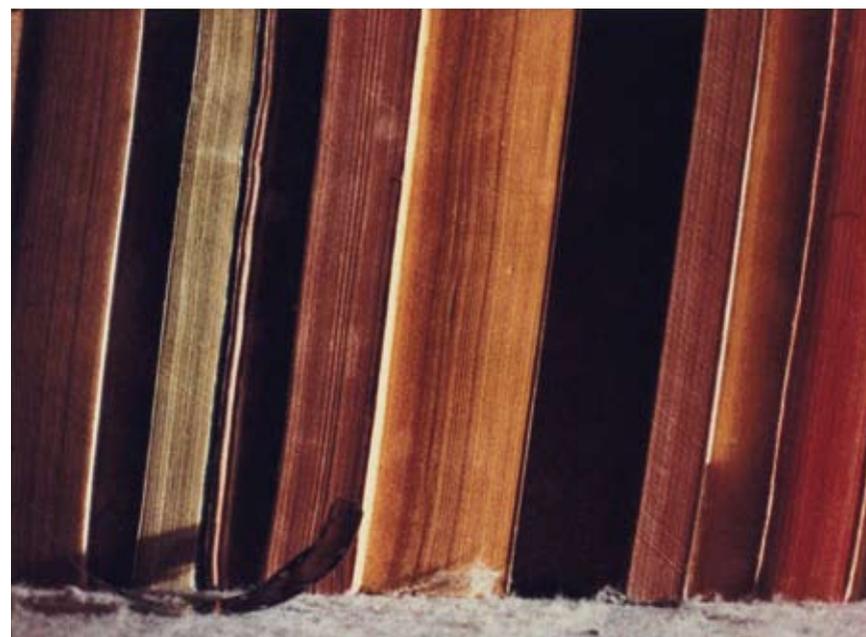
No spines can be seen, and the books display only their anonymous accumulation of pages, like so many sedimentary layers in an archeological dig. These layers culminate in a small clock that sits atop one of the dictionaries: a modern day *vanitas* image, it seems. All of this echoes the similarly infinite spread of vinyl records on a shelf below, a crooked series of sheaths that collect like wayward leaves, or like the pages of the books—or, perhaps, like an endless stream of photographs. Indeed, Davey's many images of books claim a singular model for the expansion of photography, and the comparison or analogy she constructs here aims to be anything but "depressed" or "alienated" in her conception. About this, she has again been explicit: In an interview, Davey admits to being motivated by a "wish or fantasy that writing and photography might be the same thing." And then she asserts: "I do think words and pictures together form a kind of ultimate happiness."¹²

What Davey means by this has very little to do with conventional models of the interrelationship of text and photograph, which—from Benjamin to Roland Barthes—seemed to call for the importance of the photograph's caption in directing meaning, culminating in postmodernism's ethos of the "constructed" image, a montage aesthetic of words and photographs interwoven (see: Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Mary Kelly). Davey's fantasy, by contrast, asserts that writing and photography might be the "same" thing; they might, in fact, be configured as analogs for one another, as extensions of the same

activity. We, as viewers, sense this in the manner in which Davey photographs books, her library, or her desk, the very sites of reading and writing.

Most often, in Davey's images, we see a group of books from behind, as if gazing at the back of the bookshelf. This position is all the better to wallow in the voluminous dust and grime, and the sometimes lost or forgotten objects that gather there. But, viewed in this way, the books appear without the identifying tags that run along their spines, and thus as open accumulations of unmoored pages. This "open" orientation compares the books to photography, for when seen in reverse they call up the notion of the camera's reversal, or the inversion of the photographic negative. Moreover, the images of books "do" with the tomes what photographs are themselves meant to do: they play with extreme contrasts of light and dark, with shadow and illumination (Davey is always peering with her camera into dark spaces, a search for the *camera obscura* in the everyday: the gloomiest recesses at the back of her library, the enigmatic frontier of the no-man's-land beneath the furniture). The illuminated books become literal examples of photography as "light writing," the root meaning of the word *photograph*. Davey's books also become receptive surfaces as, piled one atop the other, they support and capture a chalky skin of dust, a marker of passing time and long durations. This is what we witness emerging out of the darkness in Davey's image *Pile* (1999), books attached to and leading on to other books in an endless chain; books covered in dust like forgotten ruins. And the analogy of books and photographs becomes inescapable in *Film I* (1999), a picture of a desiccated strip of old film curled up like a dog in the

bed of dust at the back of a shelf, nestled against the shadowy tomes.



Books

and photographs travel together for Davey, and with this recording of the passing of time through dust and the intense refraction of light, the artist's photographs of books recapture two of the most primordial potentials of photography.¹³

If, for Davey, her collections of books are imaged in a way that allows them to behave "like" photographs, she has been at pains to outline how her love of the activity of reading books is an operation itself like photography. I have moved from writing to books to reading, but Davey—as befits her malleable vision for the photograph—doesn't herself seem to make a distinction among these domains. In fact, she has written a book on what she calls *The Problem of Reading* (2003), which includes a collection of photographs, and endlessly aligns the three spheres. Here, Davey treats reading as a form of "creative work," one "tied to productivity, to making something," which is part of a "generative creative cycle of taking in and putting out, with all the rewards [...] this process entails."¹⁴ And it is the "passivity" of reading that Davey thus transforms, as she begins to emphasize the role that "randomness and chance" play in the reading process, most importantly in the choice of what from the infinite sprawl of possibilities one decides to read.¹⁵ Again and again, Davey states variations on a theme: "I feel it was not so much a question of myself making choices as books choosing me"; "It is not just a question of which book will absorb her [Davey], for there are plenty that will do that, but rather, which book, in a nearly cosmic sense, will choose her, redeem her."¹⁶ Emphasizing, along with Proust, the "total absorption" of the

reading associated with childhood, Davey looks as well to Virginia Woolf, for whom what the writer calls "youthful reading" involved "moments in which the ego is completely eliminated."¹⁷ And yet in such moments of self-loss, the self, we could say, is "found." Davey thus reveals why books and reading are so crucial to her: "Just as a bookcase full of read and unread books conjures up a portrait of the owner over time [...] so the books that arrest us in the present constitute a reflection"—and here Davey cites a critic—"of 'what we are, or what we are becoming or desire.'" The book "chooses" the reader, Davey concludes, uncovering "a want or a need," and develops into a "sort of uncanny mirror held up to the reader, one that concretizes a desire in the process of becoming."¹⁸

And so it is with Davey's images of books without their owner, and more generally, of objects devoid of subjects. They are expanded photographs, durational "portraits," in a sense, of an absent subject "over time," or a subject that emerges everywhere. Indeed, Davey's photographs of books are the objects in her image repertoire that make the portraiture aspect of her project most evident. The analogy of photography with reading provides the support for this turn, a transformation of the photograph more specific than the general turn long ago announced as the "death of the author," the shift from production to reception. For, as Davey photographs her library and her domestic spaces, reading infiltrates the photograph, and becomes one with it. Light seems to fall from a window onto a portion of Davey's bookcase in *Eisenstein* (1996), and the *camera obscura* effect—light piercing the darkness—allies itself with Davey's

vision of books "choosing" their reader, as some volumes emerge with piercing clarity out of the crepuscular vista of shelves.¹⁹



Eisenstein (1996), C-print, 24 × 20 inches

The title of Davey's photograph, however, marks an even more specific eruption within the image, or, to use Barthes's term, a *punctum*, the acute detail that arises within the image due to its particular importance to the viewer. Named in her titles, these piercing details in Davey's case are words, and her work in many ways catalogs a series of objects and photographs erupting into language, like speaking in tongues the messages of deadpan oracles.

"But shouldn't a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate," Benjamin once asked. "Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph?"²⁰ Davey's inscriptions are not captions; they arise from within the substance of the photograph itself, from out of its warp and weave. They emerge from depictions of individual books or visible fragments of album titles—*Greed* (1994), *Nyro* (2003), and *Bird Songs* (1999)—or from brand names, the language of domestic objects: the cleaning product in *Pledge* (2000), the Cuban coffee in *Pilon* (1999), the maker of a turntable in *Shure* (2003), or the barely visible inscription on a fluorescent light tube in *Long Life Cool White* (1999). Most telling, perhaps, is Davey's image of her kitchen refrigerator, a surface repository for myriad postings, notes, and pictures, but also a support like a table or a shelf, upon which the artist's family has piled their household wares. Titled *Glad* (1999), Davey's image takes its name from the commonplace brand of garbage bags peaking out from behind the sugar, baking soda, and colon cleanser perched atop the large appliance.



From the realm of the quotidian, from the stuff of garbage, a word erupts—and for the reader, the inscription names an emotion as well, a subjective feeling, a psychic state.

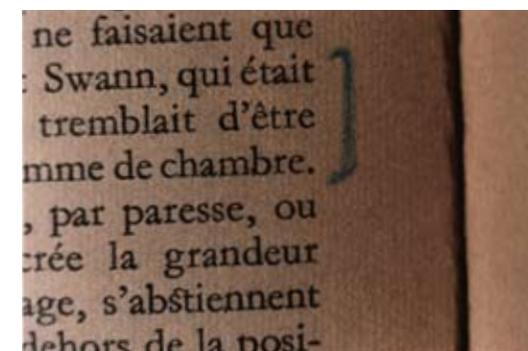
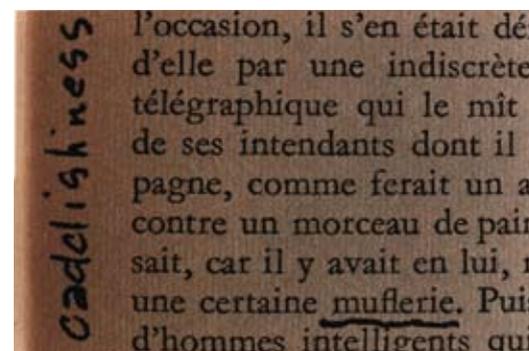
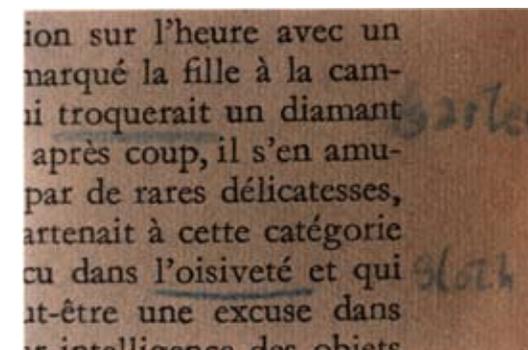
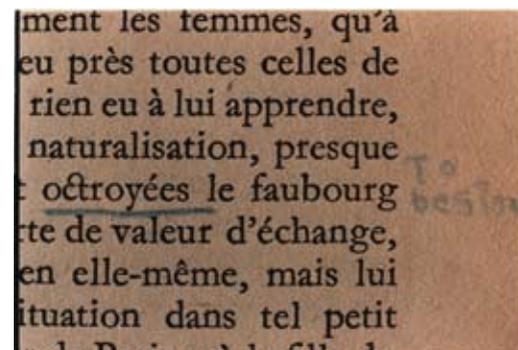
An “ultimate happiness” indeed: Reading and photography for Davey may not in the end be exactly the same, but their analogy or fusion expands the image, and in at least two ways. As reading, for Davey, “redeems” the subject, making available the recognition of a desire through the manner in which a book “chooses” its reader, so too the subject comes to enliven the photographic image, erupting within it—a redemption of the inert quotidian object and the potentially lifeless photograph both. “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us,” Davey quotes Franz Kafka as saying, and so it is for the summons of her photographs as well.²¹

(I feel a deep envy for Schopenhauer’s daily routine. The deadening repetition of it at first terrifies, but then I realize there is life in this rigor, a rhythm in which reading and writing have their balanced place. My work has no such balance. My essay is now almost two weeks late: If I wrote for just four hours in the morning, and then went about my life, this essay would never get done. I do nothing now but sit at my desk, or with my laptop on my couch, or in a chair, my back aching so much that I can barely sleep at night. I am surrounded by books, my only companions, and I’ve given up on personal hygiene, daily upkeep, my dog or my wife. My writing is about immobilization: I can do nothing else. I have to stop living, it seems, to loosen the flow of words. My only respite comes from moments of

procrastination, a writer’s potlatch, and recently I have been wasting time by googling writers and their libraries. I find a black-and-white image of Samuel Beckett’s bookshelves, which seem much sturdier than my own, and also more orderly. I feel some envy toward bookshelves filled with novels of similar size and shape, arranged in logical patterns, as opposed to the vain individualism of the supersized art catalogues and monographs that my shelves can barely contain. I vow to buy more novels from now on and less art books, and, when I next have some free time, to replace some of my sagging shelves.)

MOTHER

At one point in Davey’s book *The Problem of Reading*, we are shown four photographs of brittle, yellowed pages, each fragmented and close-up, the text in French. It is one of the few times in the publication that the photographs let us inside of the book as an object, suspending us within its open covers.²² An attentive reader has highlighted specific passages—the full extent of which we cannot see—and underlined certain words, penciling in the margins their English equivalents: “barter,” “sloth,” “caddishness.” The images appear again in Davey’s video *Fifty Minutes* (2006), in the plastic sleeves of an album that seems to contain the artist’s working prints of her myriad photographs, where they are paired with close-up images of the teats and belly of the artist’s female dog. Otherwise anomalous, the title of the group of images appears at the end of Davey’s book: *My Mother’s Copy of Swann’s Way* (1999).



the forces through which Davey has reconceived the photograph. Again, she has published a book on the subject, a collection she edited and titled *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood* (2001), which Davey describes as a series of “examinations of the creative life.”²³ If this statement explicitly links the creation that is writing with the creation involved in motherhood, we also find the signs of maternal care throughout her photographic images: toys scattered around a bookshelf, disposable bottles in the kitchen, a model train running along the studio floor, a child’s doodles proudly displayed on the refrigerator. Beyond this familiar iconography, Davey’s images allegorize the maternal in other, stranger ways, most often through an attraction to objects of a specific function and shape. Like stand-ins for the mother, we see a burgeoning series of receptacles in Davey’s work: containers, protective sheaths, womblike enclosures. The metaphor is essentialist, surely, but the photographs literalize this analogy everywhere, as if this “maternal holding” is something the photograph also, in its essence, shares: a series of empty liquor bottles, depicted as containers irradiated by and capturing light; the boxes and packages that hold domestic goods; the refrigerators storing and preserving the family’s sustenance; the towering shelves hugging their books like cradles; even the early, initiatory series Davey made of city newsstands, envisioned as encasements for the immigrant salespeople sitting within them.²⁴ It is a literal example of Davey’s later metaphorical move to divine the subject in a range of objects, but also a founding model for the open, womblike receptacle she seems to understand both the photograph and the maternal to be.

Paired with the notion of reading, the maternal has also been one of

“I want to make some photographs,” Davey wrote in her 2008 essay “Notes on Photography & Accident,” “but I want them to take seed in words.”²⁵ Here the actions of reading and mothering fuse; Davey often refers to the notion of “life” or “germination,” or of images that “take seed”—in words or other images—in her statements on photography. In this, she again seems preceded by Duchamp, who gave the title *Dust Breeding* to his 1920 photograph, made collaboratively with Man Ray, of dust accumulating on the dormant *Large Glass*. When the artist ceases work, Duchamp and Man Ray’s image implies, another kind of creation occurs, one associated with “breeding” or giving birth. When first published in a Dada journal, the photograph was in fact subtitled *The Domain of Rose Selavy*; the two names for the image bring the issues of the domestic and of germination together.

Davey often treats her domestic photographs as organic things, growing in accumulations like wayward maps or diagrams—a living spread of images. In *Calendar of Flowers, Gin Bottles, Steak Bones* (2008), Davey pins an accumulation of photographic prints to the walls; all different shapes and sizes, the prints are not arranged in a grid but abut and touch each other, pressing close to allow an image chain of loose associations to emerge. Configured in this way, the photograph appears literally “expanded,” placed into contact and dialog with a host of other images in an expansive spatial structure, each individual photograph’s boundaries exceeded. If this is also how Davey has described the maternal sphere—“much of life with small children,” she has written, “revolves around loss of control and disintegration of physical boundaries”—the artist takes up this

maternal valence in her individual titles for the three sub-groupings of her piece, called *Blow, Bloom, and Bone*, respectively.²⁶ The work obviously allegorizes the passing of time, with its images of wilting flowers alongside empty bottles, stacks of bills, and years of personal diaries, but the three sub-titles also name a kind of life cycle.

Blow, Bloom, and Bone: we move from germination or “taking seed,” to growth and efflorescence, and then to death, a life—and a life of the photograph—figured not just through its marking of passing time, but also through its dispersal like dust. That is to say, the photographs’ strange forward motion is shaped not through cinematic progression, but now through mechanisms of association and comparison, linkage and analogy spreading the images out along the walls. Davey has often talked about her attraction to Woolf’s metaphor of a “net of words” descending on the writer, and here she explores a net of photographs, an image chain of figural connections. That such expansion of the photograph might have maternal valence as well, Davey seems to signal in a passage describing her writing process. But it also describes her work on groups of photographic images like these: “Recently, on a frigid winter day,” Davey writes, “she found herself in her studio surrounded by layers of books and papers. From this mass of paper strewn all over the sunlit floor, she began to conjure up an image of it all coming together, the parts knitting themselves into a web or net capable of holding her in a sort of blissful suspension.” While Davey has moved characteristically from a description of reading and writing to an “image,” she then goes deeper: “This fantasy obviously points to metaphors of maternal holding.”²⁷

It is, in fact, the case that the most notorious association of photography and the mother enacts a similar dispersal along an image chain, as if the connection between such expansion and the maternal were much more intimate than it might at first appear. I refer to Barthes’s book *Camera Lucida* (1981), which focuses its entire meditation on the photographic medium around an image of the author’s recently deceased mother that the writer calls the “Winter Garden Photograph,” and which depicts his mother as a five-year-old child. Discovered among a pile of old photographs, the “Winter Garden Photograph” reveals to Barthes the “truth” of his mother that he could capture in no other image, and so he vows to take the maternal photograph as a measure of the medium more generally. But this is an image Barthes never shows us; it appears nowhere in his book. “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph,” Barthes proclaims. “It exists only for me.”²⁸ Instead, the image of Barthes’s mother occupies a place that links together the larger range of photographs that the writer chooses to speak about and to show; it grounds a series of associations and subterranean connections among images. “All the world’s photographs formed a Labyrinth,” Barthes concludes. “I know that at the center of this Labyrinth I would find nothing but this sole picture [...] The Winter Garden Photograph was my Ariadne, not because it would help me discover a secret thing (monster or treasure), but because it would tell me what constituted that thread which drew me toward Photography.”²⁹

This “thread” signals not just the linkage of the mother and photography. Barthes’s image of his mother seems to operate like Freud’s notion of the lost

object, which thrives on an attempt to reclaim or retrieve the first love that the relation to the mother represents, driving one on to ever-new objects and desires. Or in Barthes’s case, to new photographs: for in Barthes’s hands, the “Winter Garden Photograph” becomes a prototype of what Davey in her recent writing has called an “absent photograph,” an image that exists only in the mind or in memory, in a text or in descriptive language. Such is the life of Barthes’s image of his mother—a textual life, a written photograph—which has led some critics to conclude that the “Winter Garden Photograph,” in a physical sense, simply did not exist.³⁰ Indeed, the image seems cobbled together from the details of other photographs that we know or that Barthes shows us, a strange amalgamation of the image of Kafka in a winter garden as a child that Walter Benjamin describes (and again does not show) in his essay “Little History of Photography”; or the face and gesture of the young Barthes himself in an image from his childhood, reproduced in his earlier text *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975); or a gesture and stance taken by his mother in a different photograph in *Camera Lucida* that Barthes calls “The Stock.”

All of which is very similar to some of the most important descriptions that Barthes gives of his notion of the *punctum*, the singular, supposedly irreducible detail that he finds himself seized by in this or that photograph within his book. These details, however, *often do not exist*, or appear in different photographs than Barthes describes, as he traces an expanding set of linkages or affective associations between images. Most notoriously, this occurs with a James Van Der Zee photograph of an African-American family, in which

Barthes locates the *punctum* in one woman’s black strapped pumps, but then some pages later changes his mind, deciding that the *punctum* for him must be the woman’s necklace, a braided ribbon of gold. “Ultimately—or at its limit—in order to see a photograph well,” Barthes avers, “it is best to look away or close your eyes.”³¹ Having allowed the *punctum* to mount into his “affective consciousness,” in memory or desire, Barthes’s description of the previously viewed Van Der Zee image now substitutes gold chains for the pearl necklaces the women in the image actually wear. The gold chain, the photograph’s *punctum*, is nowhere to be found. But, as critics have observed, this gold chain does exist; it appears in a specific photograph of Barthes’s spinster aunt, again reproduced in another book, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.

The absent photograph, the displaced *punctum*: What we witness, in such passages in *Camera Lucida*, is hardly a set of innocent mistakes, nor even “lies” on the author’s part. The photograph, Barthes asserts, can only be approached as a “latency,” it can never handle “scrutiny.”³² The photograph should be considered as potential, as becoming, as germination, not as document, evidence, or index. Indeed, Barthes’s displacements, the chain of images his descriptions associate and link, constitute a model of desire; this is, in fact, what the maternal “means” for photography. Along this maternal model—which is that of the lost object and its incessant displacement of desire—the photograph truly becomes a growing, changing, expanding thing. No longer “merely” indexical, the photograph can become a composite image, a fusion of images, or a latent image; it is an “absent”

image finding itself again and again in other images, gathering to itself its progeny, its “children,” extending itself into other photographs and other domains. This is what the absent photograph, the “Winter Garden Photograph,” the maternal model of the photograph, does. It is another mode, for photography, of the medium’s expansion (into writing, into memory, into other images). It is, indeed, another mode of the photograph’s redemption.

(I realize that I haven’t had a haircut in months. I have needed one for at least the last three weeks, but I know that I won’t be able to get one until I finish writing this essay. I also need to shave. I resolve to stop going out until the essay is done, except to walk the dog, but that is impractical and I begin to wear a winter hat to cover my unruly hair, even at the dinner table at a friend’s house. By now, the writing has become painful, and I really just want some free moments and a haircut. I escape my writing desk in frustration, and walk to a neighborhood park. There, something extraordinary occurs: I spot three fledging owls perched in a nest at the top of a palm tree. I have never seen such a thing before, and return the next day and the next, delaying my essay even more. But I have discovered the baby owls just at the moment when they are preparing to leave the nest, and on the third day I encounter one on the ground, trying to learn how to fly. I feel renewed, and for a moment like I have escaped the difficulty of my work, but then it occurs to me that there might be some underground associations. I remember Benjamin’s comment, in his “Little History,” on the

photographer being the “descendant of the augurs and the haruspices.” The augurs read the flight of birds; the haruspices deciphered the entrails of sacrificed animals, sometimes birds and often sheep. I have been thinking too long about mobility and immobility, about life and death in photography, to fail to see the connection. I begin to think differently about the sparrow that flies into the screen of my study’s window, and remains there for upwards of an hour, staring at me at my writing desk; or the hummingbirds that visit the aloe plants along my terrace, and that my wife greets each time with exclamations of wonder and joy, calling them a good omen. The photograph as divination, as a vision of the future and not only the past: It is the kind of revelation one must sometimes leave the writing desk to encounter.)

RECEIVER

Along with the images of dust and domesticity, of books and desks, Davey’s photographs include a beautiful series of images of analog equipment: old receivers and stereo speakers, radios and vinyl LPs, VHS tapes and record players. A gender dynamic emerges surreptitiously in the images, as there is not only a kind of guy who typically revels in such outmoded stuff today (and here I include myself, I guess), but many of these objects presumably belong to Davey’s partner, the artist Jason Simon.³³ And yet this gender dynamic can also be transformed: *Speaker* (2003) positions the disassembled object of its title on a table, utterly saturated with raking light. There, in the crepuscular illumination, the round equipment evokes other things: the

speaker as eye, as orifice, as camera lens. And, in the far distance of the photograph, the speaker links up to a series of objects sitting behind it on the table: a glass half-filled with water, the ripped-open package of a box of photographic film, a bottle of prescription pills, and, behind it all, a copy of Davey’s book *The Mother Reader*.

Hooked up visually to both photography and the mother, to liquids and chemicals, to containers and to books, Davey’s *Speaker* proclaims that the analog equipment she carefully records also provides a conceptual model for her photography: the analog provokes a thinking of analogy, with the sound equipment and recording devices all compared to another analog, the photographic image. But to include the mother in this domain reaches further. It is another model of the photograph’s expansion; now a photograph like Davey’s *Receiver* or her image *Receivers* (both 2003), become talismanic.



Receivers (2003), C-print, 24 × 20 inches

For Davey transforms what might at first seem the essentialist metaphors of an image like *Speaker*—the analog equipment depicted as a hollow, an enclosure, an inviting cavity—into a conceptual operation; the artist’s images of analog devices show them all to be “receivers,” objects into which the world is invited, and on which the world can be inscribed, like so much accumulated dust. It seems that Davey has positioned her artistic practice quite close to the model of “authorial divestiture” that critic Kaja Silverman has recently named the “author as receiver.”³⁴

To be a “receiver,” an image or a photograph—an object or an author—needs to be configured as “open” to the world, seeking less to produce than to gather and bring the world (like Davey’s retreat into the home) “inside.” The manner in which this can be

achieved remains a desiring one, and, as Silverman has described this—her essay considers the late work of Jean-Luc Godard—the operation of the “receiver” is one that seeks to find “rhymes” between the self and the world, analogs in which a recognition of similarity and shared substance can be enfolded. The maternal logic of the “lost object” emerges as one of the prototypical examples of such acts of receiving; according to the psychoanalytic story, the subject is determined by a lost (maternal) object of desire, seeking impossibly to refind it in the world, but recognizes analogs for this love along the way, which can produce a constant renewal and transformation of the object of desire. With this idea in hand, we have a new way to understand the affect proclaimed in a signal image of Davey’s such as *Glad*. Her photograph of the domestic refrigerator proclaims her aesthetic: We face an object that is a container (that can be opened), and a machine for storage, both aspects that attracted Davey’s camera to this image, for photography is such a thing as well. But, as depicted here, Davey’s refrigerator is also a literal base for the support of other objects—themselves so many containers, canisters, and plastic sacs—and, even more, it functions as a site of collection, or surface of inscription for the notes and images and even photographs that cling to it like flypaper, or like so many affirmations of love. Davey’s photograph depicts the refrigerator as a site of maternal and domestic care, but it is also another model of the photograph finding itself in a new form in the world, or in a new domain. The photograph recognizes itself in Davey’s image of the refrigerator as a “receiver,” the machine’s creamy whiteness glimmering quietly with all the promise of a

blank page—a place, finally, where the world might be inscribed.³⁵

In this moment of recognition, we sense that the author as receiver doesn't "choose," but rather is chosen by her subjects. Such is how Davey has described the problem of reading, which she has compared to her photography. But it is also how she understands the task of writing, again comparing this to the act of photography. In "Notes on Photography & Accident," Davey describes waiting for "what wells up when we make space" for accident as more than just a chance occurrence, for example "when we lie on the bed in morning sunlight and bring laptop to lap. I've often heard it said, most recently by novelist Monica Ali, that as writers 'we're not at liberty to choose the material, the material chooses us.'" And then Davey compares this openness to photography: "Geoff Dyer has noted parallel statements by photographers: 'It is the photo that takes you' (Henri Cartier-Bresson), 'I don't press the shutter, the image does' (Arbus), and one from Paul Strand on choosing his subjects: 'I don't [...] They choose me.'" Davey concludes: "I've always intuited this about pictures."³⁶ This description makes explicit Davey's understanding of her activity as a model of receiving, and, more specifically, that photography should only be approached in this way. Her attempt to figure this photographic model on the level of artistic authorship is the task of her major work, the video *Fifty Minutes*.

Described by the artist as a work of "autofiction," *Fifty Minutes* could be understood as Davey's most radical "expanded" photograph, a literally extended work presented in the form of video, a durational image encompassing the full fifty minutes that the work's title names. During the video, Davey

shows the viewer her working process, as we see her filming her domestic spaces, and speaking directly to the camera, sometimes confessing private thoughts and experiences, but often reading from novels and critical texts dealing with the issue of homesickness and nostalgia. She films individual prints of her domestic photographs, holding the still images for long moments on the screen; conversely, since making the piece, she has printed moving images captured from her video as photographic prints. But what comes together in *Fifty Minutes* is not just photography and video, the still and the moving image; the work's claims for expansion are much more radical than that. Playing upon the connotations of a title that is both literal (describing the actual length of the video) and figural (referring to the "fifty-minute" hour of a conventional psychoanalytic session), Davey's confessional video imbricates in every way her "self" and her photographic images. Presented in analogy to a psychoanalytic session—about which Davey often speaks—*Fifty Minutes* thus proclaims subjectivity to be its stake. Mixing photographs and reading, images and words, but also domestic objects and the authorial subject, the video presents us with another version of Schelling and his frock coat, or Schopenhauer and his chair.

Throughout *Fifty Minutes*, the imbrication of subject and object finds itself presented in the mode of receiving. Davey's camera, for example, repeatedly displays her photographs grouped into an album or book—not so much images seized as images received—which move past our eyes as the artist flips the pages, a stream of what we could call "photographs for reading." We watch Davey as filmmaker

browsing with her family in a second-hand shop, or listening to the television. We see her gathering her notes and critical texts, or commenting on a film seen or a novel read. We witness her gazing on her husband reading on a couch, or watching her dog watching the luminous scene outside a bedroom window. Most often, we follow Davey's camera as she films herself reading aloud, often about the subject of nostalgia—the camera switching from the lines on the printed page to the artist's face, or to her mouth, caught in the midst of recitation.

Reading, writing, photography; domesticity, everyday objects, the maternal sphere: the author as receiver finds her place in all of this. And at the center of *Fifty Minutes*, the artist locates what I have called—after Davey's own words—an absent photograph, a memory image that, like Barthes, she otherwise refuses to show, but that exists in the form of words, in recited text, as an evocation. Not coincidentally, this recitation describes a maternal scene: "As I write and think about [...] nostalgia," Davey the narrator asserts, "a particular landscape always presents itself. It involves a summer day, a park in Montreal, '60s-era architecture, my mother, and a scene from an Antonioni film. But I can't say more than that. To do so would be to kill off the memory and all the generative power it holds in my imagination. I keep it perpetually in reserve, with the fantasy that someday I may land there, in what is by now a fictional mirage of time and place."³⁷ Described in this way, Davey's image takes its place alongside other absent photographs that well up in her various writings—her description, for example, of an Annie Leibovitz image of Susan Sontag ("I don't have the photo before me—it's another absent picture—but

perhaps I can conjure it from memory: Susan in jeans, white shirt, and dirty white sneakers, reclining on the left, her hair thick and wiry, black with white stripe; and, spread out over more than half the bed, a complex patchwork of ruled pads with half their bulk folded over, typescript pages crossed out and annotated, and oddly shaped scraps of paper with handwritten notes").³⁸ Or, even more striking, a whole series of Zoe Leonard photographs that exist only in Davey's mind: "Zoe gives a lecture on Agnes Martin, but doesn't show any paintings. With her characteristic flair for storytelling, she describes photographing the paintings over and over, and the difficulty of it all: all she can see is the dust in her viewfinder." And then Davey concludes: "No paintings, no photographs [...] Yet I leave the lecture with an incredibly vivid image of the absent, unseen photographs." They are "classic, vintage, black-and-white Leonard, signature black frame lines enclosing Martin's pale, gray, pencil-lined grids." The meeting of mediums, the expansion of forms, seems to strike Davey: "Photographs of pencil marks [...] But wait, did Agnes Martin even use pencil? I realize, rereading this, that I don't actually know, and may have invented these pencil lines, fantasizing photographs to suit my own desire."³⁹

It is this "fantasizing" of photographs to suit one's "own desire" that the absent photograph envisions, the receiving that it enables. It is hardly a coincidence that each of Davey's absent images connects to a mother or to a mother figure, whether the role model of the famous woman intellectual or the heroic woman artist. And in line with these maternal lost objects, each "absent photograph" that Davey describes reconfigures the temporality

of the photograph. From the past tense—an image, as Barthes described it, of the “that has been”—the photograph in Davey’s hands becomes a latent image, a proleptic force, a mode of divination: the photograph as what once was and may be again, or, most powerfully, the photograph as a “that will be,” even if only in fantasy or in desire. In all of these ways, the author as receiver has transformed the photographic image. No longer dedicated to an object “out there,” nor in the past, the photograph emerges from within, and travels toward the future. A photograph to suit one’s own desire would be a photograph of (and from) the subject, as much as the object; a photograph in which we read the lineaments of the subject who imagines it, who calls it into being, from the “reserve” of memory and desire. And this is the “photograph” that the varied acts of receiving in *Fifty Minutes* envision.

As Helen Molesworth has asserted: “In *Fifty Minutes* reading is nothing less than the search for, and performance of, the self. The video shows us that we are all acts of ‘autofiction’ and that we come to know and invent ourselves through and in the pages of books, and through and in our recitation of them for others.”⁴⁰ Such is the message of Davey’s video. We are receivers, *Fifty Minutes* seems to assert. And if this is also what a photograph is, or can be thought to be, then another analogy, the most foundational one for Davey, comes into play. We—human beings, subjects, consciousness—are receivers, and thus we are “like” photography. Which is a formula, of course, that can be reversed: Photographs are like us, and, because of this—and with a revelation that remains profound—we can recognize ourselves in them. This, for me, is the lesson of Moyra Davey’s photographs.

(The immobilization, the waiting, sitting at my desk until it hurts: All of this fades the moment a revelation arrives. I still don’t understand how it happens, and I know that I never will, but writing art criticism for me is in large part a setting up of the conditions in which this revelation can occur, a preparation for some kind of communion between my thoughts and the art before me. Euphoria then most often sets in; anything seems possible. It is all “worth” it: the pain, the silence, the loneliness, the life I’ve given up. I’ve just had the revelation of the “absent photograph” and the connections between Davey and Barthes on this. An hour or so later, I flip open my copy of Davey’s book Long Life Cool White at random. Now chance becomes my friend, and, at these moments, everything seems to connect. I have landed on a passage in Davey’s essay, “Notes on Photography & Accident,” a section that she calls “Lost,” and just before it, a diary-like entry dated October 13: “For Sontag and Malcolm, accident is the vitality of the snapshot, to which they oppose the turgidity and pretentiousness of art. For Barthes accident is wholly subjective; it is what interpolates him into any given photograph. It’s becoming clear to me that my own relation to accident is also extremely subjective, that accident is to be located outside the frame somehow, in the way we apprehend images. I shun the formal encounter via the institutions of galleries and museums, and gravitate to books and journals.”⁴¹ Where, one assumes, the absent photograph lives, and indeed lives on. But of course this is the “mode” of the absent photograph: living on,

survival, reanimation. It is not a question today of the loss or “death” of photography, not even of the persistence of the analog image or the resurrection of obsolescent technologies. What lives on in the absent photograph is the way in which images determine us. The paradox is heartrending, and also beautiful: the absent photograph is not there, and yet it is all we ever seek. It is the image we will only “see” if we allow its latency to develop elsewhere in the world, in other images, practices, and modes. Photography, in this conception, is always already lost. And we will not relinquish it, for the absent photograph remains the image that, for all of us, quite simply means the most.)

- 1 Jess T. Dugan, “Conversation with Moyra Davey,” *Big Red & Shiny* 79 (April 1, 2008), online journal, www.bigredandshiny.com, n.p.
- 2 Helen Molesworth stresses the “excremental” reading of the “Copperheads” in “Long Life Cool White: An Introduction to Moyra Davey,” *Long Life Cool White: Photographs & Essays by Moyra Davey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2008), pp. 11–12.
- 3 I define “Oedipal fatigue” in relation to the old men represented in artist Tacita Dean’s recent films in my essay “Lateness and Longing,” in Daniel Birnbaum, ed., *50 Moons of Saturn: T2 Torino Triennale* (Milan: Skira, 2008), pp. 74–75: “In Oedipal fatigue one does not return to the father as origin and as progenitor; instead Oedipal fatigue gives witness to the running down and the old age of subjectivity. Now, the father abdicates his role and is no longer a patriarch, nor a symbolic avatar of ‘patria’—nation or homeland. Instead, Oedipal fatigue emerges like a Deleuzian ‘line of flight,’ an evacuation of symbolic authority,

and with it the father becomes—through sheer exhaustion—an exile and a wanderer, displaced from a symbolic domain. Often occasioned by the softening of age, and even more by the confrontation with one’s mortality, Oedipal fatigue transforms the father from a figure of Law and renunciation, of punishment and retribution, into something else: a repository, perhaps; a ‘human treasure,’ at times; a ruin, ultimately, like Walter Benjamin’s vision of the same, ‘merging with the setting’ or with nature. Oedipal fatigue presents us with the ruins of the father, and these ruins can be wonderfully capacious, giving, and open.”

- 4 Moyra Davey, artist’s statement in *Copperheads* (Toronto: Bywater Bros. Editions, 2010), n.p. On the interplay of photography and cinema in contemporary art, see my essay “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October* 114 (Fall 2005), pp. 120–140.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 519.
- 6 Benjamin, p. 518.
- 7 Benjamin, p. 518 and p. 517.
- 8 Benjamin, p. 517.
- 9 Benjamin, p. 514.
- 10 Benjamin, p. 527.
- 11 Ken Johnson, “Moyra Davey, American Fine Arts,” *New York Times* (December 19, 2003).
- 12 Dugan, “Conversation with Moyra Davey,” n.p.
- 13 This connection is not random or willful, of course, on Davey’s part; it is part of the longer history of the photograph, the book being an origin point for its initial display. On this origin, see, for example, Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843–1875* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
- 14 Moyra Davey, *The Problem of Reading* (Los Angeles: Documents, 2003), p. 7.
- 15 Davey, *The Problem of Reading*, p. 16.
- 16 Davey, *The Problem of Reading*, pp. 5 and 16.
- 17 Davey, *The Problem of Reading*, p. 29.
- 18 Davey, *The Problem of Reading*, p. 38.
- 19 One should beware of assuming that Davey’s images of light falling on objects

in darkened spaces is a “natural” or realistic effect; that it can be constructed cinematographically, through scrims and artificial lighting, seems to be asserted in one of the recent films, titled *Horizontal and Vertical Biography* (2006), that Davey has made for the annual One Minute Film & Video Festival that she organizes with her partner Jason Simon each summer in upstate New York.

20 Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” p. 527.

21 Davey, *The Problem of Reading*, p. 33.

22 It is not the only time, however; Davey also includes several now-canonical photographs by James Welling of the inside of a diary from his series “Diary of Elizabeth and James Dixon (1840–41) Connecticut Landscapes, 1977–1986,” another family heirloom. In other works, like her video *Fifty Minutes* (2006), or photographic installations like the *Calendar of Flowers*, *Gin Bottles*, *Steak Bones* (2008), Davey often depicts the act of reading itself: the open book, a reader flipping pages.

23 Moyra Davey, ed., *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), p. xvi.

24 In the first image from this series, *Newsstand N° 1* (1994), Davey photographs a newsstand that has been closed up, its opening sealed shut by a quantity of tape. This is an exception within the series, in which we usually peer into the open enclosure, filled with its magazines and some lone salesperson. Sealed up in this way, the first newsstand appears more decrepit and ruinous than those that follow, but it also bears an unmistakable resemblance to the human body, resembling indeed the shape of a distended or pregnant belly.

25 Moyra Davey, “Notes on Photography & Accident,” *Long Life Cool White*, p. 81.

26 Davey, *Mother Reader*, p. xviii.

27 Davey, *The Problem of Reading*, p. 41.

28 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 73. That Barthes explores a “maternal” model of photography has been asserted most forcefully by the recent essays of Carol Armstrong; see, for example, “Cupid’s Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography,” *October* 76 (Spring 1996), pp. 114–141.

29 Barthes, p. 73.

30 I am relying here most directly on the brilliant reading by Margaret Olin, “Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’s ‘Mistaken’ Identification,” *Representations* 80 (Autumn 2002), pp. 99–118. On the connections between Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* and Benjamin’s “Little History,” see Geoffrey Batchen, “*Camera Lucida*: Another Little History of Photography,” in Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, eds., *The Meaning of Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 76–91.

31 Barthes, p. 53.

32 Barthes, p. 53.

33 Or, in the case of the image of the VHS tapes, titled *Barney’s Collection* (1999), we seem to be shown objects passed down from another paternal figure, Jason Simon’s uncle, the South African playwright and director Barney Simon (Barney is also the name of Davey’s son, but we are shown a drawer full of keepsakes belonging to Simon’s uncle in Davey’s video *Fifty Minutes*, and the old tapes—which include Alfred Hitchcock, Woody Allen, and John Cassavetes movies—are not likely to belong to a young boy, no matter how extraordinary).

34 Kaja Silverman, “The Author as Receiver,” *October* 96 (Spring 2001), pp. 17–34. Throughout this essay, I am also indebted to Silverman’s reflections on analogy in her recent text *Flesh of My Flesh* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

35 Davey has herself stressed the talismanic value of the photograph *Glad*; see Dugan, “Conversation with Moyra Davey,” n.p.: “I had a funny revelation recently [...] that my *Fridge* picture [*sic*] is very similar to Edward Weston’s toilet. In his diaries and notebooks, which I read in my early 20’s, and loved, he talks about photographing his toilet over and over, each time refining the composition until he attained a formalist perfection. And he writes about his exaltation at finally getting it right. Perhaps it’s odd to be identifying with Weston at this point in my life, but I have to admit that my process with the fridge was strangely similar. It involved a slow, methodical deliberation, a stalking of light, of waiting for the precise moment of solar illumination in an otherwise dim room.”

36 Davey, “Notes on Photography & Accident,” pp. 118–119.

37 Davey, “Fifty Minutes: Video Transcript,” *Long Life Cool White*, p. 130.

38 Davey, “Notes on Photography & Accident,” p. 119.

39 Davey, “Notes on Photography & Accident,” pp. 115–116.

40 Molesworth, “Long Life Cool White: Introduction to Moyra Davey,” p. 17.

41 Davey, “Notes on Photography & Accident,” pp. 106–107.

