

Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction

The index asserts nothing;
it only says “There!”
—Peirce

Cultural production today seems to be haunted by anxieties surrounding the status of representation in what has been described as our “post-medium condition.” With the advent of digital media, photography, in particular, has seemingly lost its credibility as a trace of the real, and it could be argued that the media in general face a certain crisis of legitimation. The digital offers an ease of manipulation and distance from any referential grounding that seem to threaten the immediacy and certainty of referentiality we have come to associate with photography (Roland Barthes’s association of the photograph with the “absolutely, irrefutably present” [*Camera* 77]). The photograph has been perceived as a direct emanation from the real, an assurance of a ground in an era of massive mediation. The project of this issue is to reexamine the very concept of indexicality and its role in mass culture and modernity, to interrogate the “desire for referentiality” associated with technological media, and to analyze the notion of a “medium” and its usefulness within a range of disciplines.

The index, as defined by Charles Sanders Peirce, occupies an uncomfortable position in the complex taxonomy of signs he elaborated in

the latter half of the nineteenth century. In contrast to the icon's relatively straightforward resemblance and the symbol's conventionality or arbitrariness, the index sustains a less clear-cut "physical" or "existential" relation to its object. Given the fact that Peirce applied the term "index" to such diverse signs as a footprint, a weathervane, thunder, the word "this," a pointing finger, and a photographic image, it is not difficult to see why the concept has occasioned confusion. On the one hand, the term seems to specify signs on the order of the trace—the footprint, the death mask, the photograph (where the object leaves its imprint on a light-sensitive surface). This type of index partakes of the iconic because the sign resembles the object. On the other hand, Peirce emphasizes that the shifter in language—a category including pronouns such as "this," "now," "I," "here"—is an exemplary form of the index. In this case, the index partakes of the symbolic. In both these instances, the index is defined by a physical, material connection to its object. In its iconicity, the index as trace has, unfortunately, suggested for many theorists an alliance with realism as both style and ideology. In its intimacy with the symbolic, the index as shifter (or *deixis*) forces language to adhere to the spatiotemporal frame of its articulation. As photographic trace or impression, the index seems to harbor a fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention. Yet, the index as *deixis* implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations. It is this dialectic of the empty and the full that lends the index an eeriness and uncanniness not associated with the realms of the icon or symbol. At times, the disconcerting closeness of the index to its object raises doubts as to whether it is indeed a sign, suggesting instead that the index is perched precariously on the very edge of semiosis.

Although such ancient tokens as relics have been situated as indices, the emergence of photography and cinema in the nineteenth century as the dominant media of mass culture gives a different trajectory to the notion of indexicality. The imprint of a moment, a person, an object, a movement could now be detached and circulated, repeated without perceptible difference far from its original time and place. Both the intimacy of that relation to a unique and contingent reality and the detachability and circulation of its representation have had enormous cultural consequences. Recently, there has been a return to the concept of "indexicality" in an attempt to delineate the specificity of the photochemical era—an era that seems to be displaced or, at a minimum, radically redefined, by the emergence of digital media. Because the digital appropriates and deploys

all earlier media, a phenomenon often labeled convergence, and because it translates and stores all information as numbers, it is frequently located as the cause of our current “post-medium condition.”

Thirty years ago, Rosalind Krauss wrote a two-part essay on American art of the seventies titled “Notes on the Index,” which was one of the first attempts to think through the implications of the concept of indexicality for artistic representation. Aiming to specify what was different and unique about seventies art in relation to previous projects of abstraction, Krauss, in a brilliantly intuitive gesture, pointed to the dominance of a photographic logic in that art working to suggest “the mute presence of an uncoded event” (“Notes” 2: 60). Citing Barthes’s analysis of the photograph as a “message without a code” (“Rhetoric” 36), Krauss stressed the abrupt and striking meaninglessness of the indexical trace or mold, its sole proposition that of “thereness,” irrefutable presence. What seventies art contested in this embrace of indexicality was the very concept of style that had ruled modernist abstraction. In the trace, things speak themselves; they are not spoken. A whole history of aesthetic conventions concerning style and expressivity (as well as a certain conception of the “I” of representation) collapses. The function of the artist is to simply—in the manner of the camera operator—select or frame an object. For Krauss, Marcel Duchamp’s work, particularly the ready-made, formed the seminal early-twentieth-century precedent for this seventies strategy because its process mimicked that of photography. The ready-made involved “the physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection” (“Notes” 1: 78). Hence, the ready-made (and by association, the photograph) are affiliated with the performative dimension of signification, the pointing finger of the index, and of the shifter in language. In Krauss’s argument, there is no tension between the index as trace and the deictic index; both involve the sheer affirmation of an existence, the emptiness of a “meaningless meaning.”

What is striking about Krauss’s analysis is the isolation of a formal logic of the index—that of indication and connectivity. Her privileged example is an exhibit of contemporary work (“Rooms”) that took place in May 1976 in p.s. 1 (a public school building in Long Island City leased to the Institute of Art and Urban Resources)—work that is indissociable from the space of its exhibition (an opening carved through three stories thus revealing the building’s structure; panels aligning themselves with the colors of their surroundings). The works, like the photograph, simply register their world, taking on the form of performative evidence rather than constative

statement. Thirty years ago, Krauss attempted to describe the reverberations of a photographic imaginary in the domain of abstract art, thus extricating indexicality from the problematic terrain of realism. While realism claims to build a mimetic copy, an illusion of an inhabitable world, the index only purports to point, to connect, to touch, to make language and representation adhere to the world as tangent—to reference a real without realism.

While a great deal has changed since the 1970s, one can still trace the persistence of a photographic logic in art and theory. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the desire for a photographic logic has only been intensified by the emergence of the digital. And in the spirit of Krauss's initial reading, much of the current work on the photographic image stresses not realism, but performativity and trace. David Green and Joanna Lowry stress that indexicality does not simply have to do with the trace-like property of the photograph but also with the sheer fact that it was taken. The specific engagement of photography with the real lies in its recourse to performativity. It points to what is *there*: “[These photographs] point to the real while reminding us that photography can never represent it” (60). For Laura Mulvey, the photographic base of cinema determines its relation to time, death, and stasis as well as movement. Indexicality, here, is in the service of memory and the historicity of the medium, and viewing old movies is associated with the “fascination of time fossilized” (31).

The project of extricating the real from the business of realism can be aligned with what might be called a “politics of the index.” Because the index is sutured to its object by a physical cause, a material connection, it is often invoked in resistance to the fever of metonymic slippage and disengagement encouraged by postmodernism, theories of the simulacrum and the virtual, and discourses of digital utopia. Georges Didi-Huberman, in his recent book *Images malgré tout*, engages with the debates on the “unrepresentability,” the “unspeakability,” of the holocaust through an examination of four photographs, taken surreptitiously and at great risk by anonymous members of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz, of women herded toward the gas chamber and gassed bodies delivered to the crematorium. His polemic is directed against Claude Lanzmann, who views photographs of dead bodies and skeletal concentration camp survivors as a kind of scandal, stressing the insufficiency or inadequacy of the photographic image in the face of the horror (and consequent unrepresentability) of the Shoah. For Didi-Huberman, the survival of these four images in spite of everything (*malgré tout*) forces the historian to acknowledge the necessity of remembering, of imagining the holocaust—in spite of everything. Capitulation

to the discourse of horror's unrepresentability is complicit with the Nazi project of making the tools of the extermination disappear, of "leaving no trace" (32). In this argument, the photograph is neither a deficient simulacrum nor a transparent document, but an index, a trace. Although one of the photographs has been labeled "historically useless," given its illegibility and disorientation, Didi-Huberman claims that it does indeed bear witness to an event—that of the urgency, the risk, the difficulty of aiming the camera in the act by which these images were "torn from the hell of Auschwitz." This image is "breathless: pure 'enunciation,' pure *geste*, pure photographic act without aim" (54).

This *deictic* aspect of the index, particularly in its photographic incarnation, is a crucial dimension when attempting to deal with the saturation of images characterizing contemporary culture—images of pain, of suffering, of the catastrophes of wars, of famines, of floods, of September 11, of Abu Ghraib. These are images that, indeed, point to the persistence and strength of an indexical imaginary even in the realm of digital photography. In a sense, the digital has not annihilated the logic of the photochemical, but incorporated it. To take up the index today, as a theoretical concept, is to insist that the complexities of the issue of referentiality should not deter us from investigating and analyzing its force.

This issue brings together scholars from a range of different disciplines—art history, science studies, film studies, and analysts of digital media—who confront the various questions raised by the notion of indexicality: Why is the rhetoric of crisis so frequently deployed in discussions of the digital? What is the place of contingency (intimately linked to indexicality and the trace) in photographic representation? Why is the index so insistently associated with death (e.g., in André Bazin's discussion of the death mask, Roland Barthes's discussion of photography in *Camera Lucida*)? Does the alleged "death of the index" announce a transformation in modern attitudes toward death? Is it true that the digital heralds a "post-medium condition"? What is a medium and how has the concept of medium specificity functioned in the history of art and the history of mass media? What is the relation between the index as trace or impression and the index as pointing, *deixis* (Peirce's insistence that the word "this" is the most telling example of the index)? Are digital media indexical, and if so, what are the terms of that indexicality? What is the status of indexicality in language, a medium usually described as purely symbolic? How can we analyze the vicissitudes of the "I" in language, as the preeminent instance of self-pointing, and hence a form of indexicality? What is the relation between the index and the icon

in photographically based forms of representation? If the index is an empty sign, indicating only an existence, how do recognition and recognizability come into play? Are the terms “index” and “indexicality” the most appropriate or accurate terms in gauging the impact of photographic and cinematic representation in modernity?

At the heart of all of these questions is the vexed issue of referentiality in representation, a concept subjected to a massive attack from the 1960s on—by structuralism in its centering of Saussurian linguistics, poststructuralism in its emphasis upon textuality, and cultural studies with its notions of social or cultural constructivism. This structuring absence was only possible through an enormous reduction of the concept. The relegation of indexicality to the myth, illusion, and ideology of realism has left critical problems in an impenetrable obscurity. *Indexicality: Trace and Sign* explores the viability of indexicality as a concept, an expectation, and a crucial cultural and semiotic *force*.

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