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Photography *en abyme*

CRAIG OWENS

Brassaï's portrait of a group of young Parisians at the *Bal des Quatre Saisons* may at first appear, like most photographs, to be a straightforward transcription of an observed reality, as if the image had already existed in the world before it was suspended in the photograph. We might therefore be tempted to raid it for clues to the inner lives of its sitters, or for memories of a long-since vanished Parisian milieu. However, the longer we contemplate the image, the more remote that kind of information becomes. A complex web of internal reduplications deflects attention away from that which, despite the status of photographs as imprints of the real, remains external to the image: the reality it depicts. Psychological and sociological details are thus displaced by the network of internal relationships between subject, mirror, and other, which structures the image.

Two groups of two couples each are the ostensible subjects of the photograph. The first occupy what reads as the "real" space of the image and are doubled by their own mirror images, while the second, except for the fragmentary detail of a bare arm cropped below the elbow, are present *only* in reflection. Doubled and yet, paradoxically, represented but once, the latter appear to have been dispossessed of their corporeal beings. Their reflections, severed from any physical connection with an object, attach themselves to the first group, so that each of the figures seated on the banquette finds a second, virtual double in the mirror reflection of the other. Details of costume, pose, and gesture reinforce this impression: the young man flanked by two women drapes one arm over the shoulder of the woman to his left, a gesture that is reiterated by his mirror counterpart, who wears an identical hat. The blank expression of the woman to his left is repeated by her counterpart; further, both seem to use the same coiffeur. On the right, two other women demonstrate the same oblique gaze, one in apparent flirtation, the other to observe the making of the photograph. (This gaze also reiterates the angle of Brassaï's shot, thus implicating the photographer within the scene, as both witness and flirt.) The sequence of duplications is brought to closure on the right by two men who wear identical tweed caps and echo each other's distraction. (Brassaï cropped the figure on the extreme right out

Brassaï. Group in a Dance Hall. 1932. © Brassaï.



of subsequent prints, thereby eliminating this, the weakest link in the reduplicative chain.)

Because of the absolute symmetry of the two groups, the couples seated on the banquette appear as if poised between parallel mirrors mounted in series, so that the distance—both physical and psychological—that separates them in reality is collapsed. Space thus drained from the image, the effects of doubling may no longer be located within the space of the world, but only within the flatness of the photograph. The double image appears to have been generated by an act of internal duplication, a literal folding back of the photograph upon itself—the mirror suggests not only reflection, but also a literal crease in the surface of the print. To double by folding, however, also implies the leaving of a deposit or trace on the surface thus manipulated, as in those familiar symmetrical imprints of blotted ink. Thus, the duplication that occurs within this image suggests the specifics of the photographic process itself.

The image includes yet another, more obvious depiction of photography. It suggests the analogical definition of the photograph as a mirror image, that

informs a great deal of the criticism of photography, especially that dating from the nineteenth century.¹ Because the mirror image doubles the subjects—which is exactly what the photograph itself does—it functions here as a reduced, internal image of the photograph. The mirror reflects not only the subjects depicted, but also the entire photograph itself. It tells us in a photograph what a photograph is—*en abyme*.

In the vocabulary of literary criticism, the phrase “*en abyme*” describes any fragment of a text that reproduces in miniature the structure of the text in its entirety. Introduced by Gide in a passage of his *Journal* from 1892, the phrase originally described the reduplicative strategy of his own work—like the “supplement” in Rousseau, it tells us in a text what a text is:

It pleases me to find, in a work of art, the very subject of the work transposed to the scale of its characters. Nothing illuminates the work better, or establishes its proportions more clearly. Thus, in some paintings by Memling or Quentin Metsys a small, somber convex mirror reflects the interior of the room in which the depicted scene is set. Also, Velasquez’ *Las Meninas* (but in a slightly different way).²

Not only are Gide’s initial examples of this textual device drawn from painting; all of them implicate the optical properties of mirror reflection. In painting, however, mirrors rarely function as analogues for the painting itself and Gide, sensing this—“none of these examples is absolutely accurate”—substituted another analogy drawn from heraldry. The perfect emblem for the procedure was itself already an emblem:

What would be more accurate, what would state better what I wanted in my *Notebooks*, my *Narcissus* and in *La Tentative*, is a comparison with that procedure in heraldry which consists of placing a second shield within the first—“*en abyme*”.³

The necessity of coining a new critical term marks the radical break with the past signified by construction *en abyme*. Gide’s intention was not to describe a textual device that had a historical existence, but to dissociate his own texts from all previous literary production.⁴ Thus, the use of a visual device of ancient standing—that of a miniature blason suspended within another blason, whose

1. Photography, in its earliest manifestations, was frequently referred to as “Daguerre’s mirror.” Certainly the silvered surfaces and lateral reversals of early Daguerreotypes supported this analogy. As early as 1839, Jules Janin, introducing the invention, urged his reader to “imagine that the mirror has retained the imprint of every object it reflects, then you will have a more complete idea of the Daguerreotype.” Quoted from Heinz Buddemeier, *Panorama, Diorama, Photographie*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1970, p. 207. Richard Rudisill’s *Mirror Image* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico, 1971) contains, as its title suggests, copious documentation for the photo-mirror analogy.

2. André Gide, *Journal 1889–1939*, “Pléiade,” Paris, Gallimard, 1951, p. 41.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Gide did cite *Hamlet*, *Wilhelm Meister*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher* as texts employing the device, but only to immediately disqualify their candidacy.

external contour and internal divisions it replicates exactly. If, in subsequent commentaries, the heraldic metaphor has fallen into disuse, the phrase which designates it has gained currency, in spite of an unconscious reversion. Perhaps because it suggests the familiar case of mirrors mounted in series to produce an infinite suite of specular effects, the *mise en abyme* and the internal mirror have become synonymous. So that it is defined, at least in its literary manifestations, as any internal mirror reflecting the totality of the work that contains it, either by simple reduplication (a fragment of a work demonstrating a relationship of similitude with the work that includes it), by reduplication to infinity (a fragment demonstrating a relationship of similitude with the work that includes it and which itself includes a fragment demonstrating . . .), or aporistic reduplication (a fragment supposedly including the work which includes it).⁵

One reason for Gide's desire to distinguish the *mise en abyme* from classical examples of reduplication may have been the resistance to the concept which many of those texts demonstrate. Classical reduplication—in paintings as well as written texts—is rarely infinite, but almost always brought to closure, suspended. The classical attitude towards the possibility of infinite reduplication is perhaps best exemplified by Husserl in a passage from his *Ideas* which also relies upon a visual demonstration:

A name on being mentioned reminds us of the Dresden Gallery and of our last visit there: we wander through the rooms, and stand before a picture of Teniers which represents a picture gallery. When we consider that pictures of the latter would in their turn portray pictures which on their part exhibited readable inscriptions and so forth, we can measure what interweaving of presentations, and what links of connexion between the discernible features in the series of pictures, can really be set up.⁶

The philosopher would, however, reduce this experience to a specific case of representation. For Husserl, every representation is a representation of: representations “present themselves as the modification of something, which apart from this modification would be there in its corporeal or represented selfhood.”⁷ In the case of potentially infinite reduplication, Husserl claims that we can penetrate through the series of levels until we arrive at a final one, at which the seemingly infinite play of reduplications is arrested: “the glance penetrates through the noemata of the series of levels, reaching the object of the last level, and there holding it steady, whilst no longer penetrating through and beyond it.”⁸ It is this “last level” that classical theories of representation attempt to locate. They ground the representa-

5. For a historical treatment of the *mise en abyme* in literary theory, see Lucien Dallenbach, *Le récit speculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme*, Paris, Seuil, 1977.

6. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*, trans. W. R. B. Gibson, New York, Collier, 1962, p. 270.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

tion in its object; multiple reduplications are simply a smoke screen which may blur the outlines of the object, but can never obliterate it entirely.

Gide, however, described a textual phenomenon that is closer to the infinite play of substitution of the Derridean *mise en abyme*, as it informs the philosophy of *differance*, supplementarity. . . . In an early text (*Speech and Phenomena*), Derrida cited Husserl's Dresden Gallery passage, commenting:

Certainly nothing has preceded this situation. Assuredly nothing will suspend it. It is not comprehended, as Husserl would want it, by intuitions or presentations. Of the broad daylight of presence, outside the gallery, no perception is given us or assuredly promised us. The gallery is the labyrinth which includes in itself its own exits: we have never come upon it as upon a particular case of experience—that which Husserl believes he is describing.⁹

For Derrida, the *mise en abyme* describes a fundamental operation of the text—it is synonymous with textuality. It can therefore have no existence outside of texts. Since it cannot be ascribed as a property to objects, it cannot be grounded in them. The Derridean abyss—"when one can read a book within a book, an origin within the origin, a center within the center"¹⁰ and, we might add, a photograph within a photograph—underlies the techniques of deconstructive reading, which describes, among other things, the way in which representation is staged within the text.

An entire theory of the structural necessity of the abyss will be gradually constituted in our reading: the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already infiltrated presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self. Representation in the abyss of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation, etc.¹¹

The effects of the abyss—the indefinite play of substitution, repetition, the splitting of the self—are evident in Brassaï's photograph. The mirror accomplishes both the identification with the Other and the specular dispossession which simultaneously institutes and deconstitutes the subject as such. What is more, the implicit analogy between mirror and photograph ascribes these functions to photography as well. (The splitting of the subject by its photographic doubling was also depicted by Lartigue in a photograph, contemporary with Brassaï's, of the *demi-mondaine* Renée Perle in the intimacy of her dressing room.

9. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, Northwestern, 1973, p. 104.

10. Quoted in Dallenbach, *Le récit speculaire*, p. 216.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1976, p. 163.

In this image, the subject turns her back upon the camera and inclines narcissistically towards her mirror image. Beside her on the dressing table is a fashion photograph for which she once posed. That photograph within the photograph functions as a second mirror which reflects, in turn, Renée herself, her mirror image, and Lartigue's photograph of her. The caption that accompanies this photograph in *Diary of a Century*, "Renée Perle contemplating the face of the most beautiful woman in the world," underscores the subject's narcissism. Through the use of a transitive verb to describe a reflexive action, it also literally describes the structure of the photograph.)

The abyss resonates throughout Brassaï's oeuvre. In his photograph of a gala soirée at Maxim's, in which an ornate Art Nouveau mirror frames exactly the same scene as Brassaï's viewfinder and is reiterated by a second mirror in the depths of reflected space, we encounter infinite reduplication. In another image, a wedge is driven through the intimacy of a lovers' embrace by two mirrors that abut one another at right angles—the two are alienated by their reflections, consigned to two separate, self-enclosed realms. Still another image, depicting the aftermath of a quarrel, shows exactly the same location as the *Group in a Dance Hall* and reiterates the three species of doubling—by the photograph, the mirror, and the other—which structure that photograph. Here, a man is doubled by his own reflection in the mirror, while his female companion is doubled by another woman's reflection which floats nebulously in the mirror above her. A small square glass cleat that marks the intersection of mirror panels obliterates one of the reflected woman's eyes, suggesting a possible psychological reading (mutilation, male fantasy, etc.). However, it is the internal structure of the image—the network of relationships that constitutes it as double—that makes any such interpretation possible. Meaning, therefore, does not reside in details of expression or gesture that are simply registered by the photograph. Rather, it is a property of the photograph itself.

Brassaï's fascination with mirrors has been explained as a derivative from painting, from Cubism in particular; and biographical data—his friendship with Picasso, his early aspirations to a painting career, and his obvious absorption of the Parisian milieu into which he was transplanted—has been mustered in support of this claim.¹² However, no appeal to painting is sufficient to unravel the photographer's predilection for reflective surfaces and complex mirror duplication. Not only does an appeal to Cubism reduce the mirror effects to a multiplication of perspectives and thus deny these images their specifically photographic character, it also ignores the frequent recurrence of the mirror in photographs throughout the history of the medium. Its first appearance as a self-conscious device coincides with that moment at which photography began to depict its own possibilities and conditions in its images.

The work of the Victorian photographer, Lady Clementina Hawarden,

12. See Colin J. Westerbeck, Jr., "Night Life: Brassaï and Weegee," *Artforum*, XV (December, 1976), 34-45.

Brassaï. *Lovers' Quarrel*. c. 1932. © Brassaï.



represents one of the earliest such attempts. (Most of Hawarden's work may be dated to the late 1850s, and the first half of the '60s.) Her obsession was the double portrait; as frequently as not, however, these images are constituted by a single subject doubled in reflection, as in a photograph that has been posthumously captioned "At the window." Here the subject seems to be suspended between two possible objects of contemplation—the view out the window and her own image in a mirror. She seems to incline towards the latter; the reticence of the image reinforces this impression. Thus, what is depicted is the process of becoming self-reflexive. The tension in the image between the different spectacles offered by the



Lady Clementina Hawarden. At the Window. c. 1864.

window and the mirror restates a structural tension within the medium—between photography as extrovert, a view onto the material world, and the photograph as a self-enclosed image of its own process. The inclinations of the subject depicted in this image are those of the photograph itself.

The mirror functions not only to reflect the subject; it also quite consciously pictures that metaphor which defines photography as a mirror image. The mirror reads as an image *en abyme*. The cropping of the print to echo the profile of the mirror firmly establishes this intention. This visual identification of mirror and photograph establishes a complex play between subject, mirror, and camera: not

only is the subject doubled twice (by mirror and camera), but the mirror image, itself a double, is redoubled by the photograph itself.

If we speak of this image, and of others like it, as reduplicative, it is because *reduplication* signifies “to reproduce in reflection” and thus describes that kind of mechanical reproduction by analogy we impute to both mirror and photograph. Ordinary usage, however, does not register differences of degree between *duplication* and *reduplication*. The latter might be expected to be contingent upon a previous act of duplication, and thus to result in what is actually a tri- or quadruplication of an original object or quantity (the ambiguity results from the possibility of taking either the original or its double as the object of the second doubling). However, the excess implicit in the concept of reduplication has been sublimated. *Duplicate* and *reduplicate* have been reduced to synonymy; both refer to a single signified: “to double.” The reduction to doubling fails not only to account for the “pli” or fold implicit in both; it also strips the prefix in *reduplication* of its signifying function. Its relationship with its stem is now that of a mirror to its object—a doubling without any corresponding semantic increment. So that *reduplication* harbors within its semantic folds the concepts of tautology, of redundancy.

However, in those disciplines which take language as their object—philology, rhetoric, and structural linguistics—*reduplication* is a technical term that describes a specific phenomenon. In classical rhetoric, *reduplication* was a species of *repetition*, distinguished by the reiteration of a word or phrase within the same part of a sentence or clause. Its function, like all forms of rhetorical repetition, was emphatic. *Reduplication* has at times been identified with the etymologically parallel figure *anadiplosis* (*ana*, again + *diplooun*, to double) in which the final word of a phrase is repeated at the beginning of the next. *Anadiplosis* thus establishes a mirror relationship between two segments of a text, the classic example being Voltaire’s

*Il aperçoit de loin le jeune Téligny,
Téligny, dont l’amour a mérité sa fille.*

in which the second line stands as a mirror reversal of the first. That such a figure should have been designated as a *redoubling* suggests the classical view of language as a mirror of the real; hence the repetition of a word or phrase doubles that which is itself already double.

Classical philology describes a similar phenomenon, occurring not at the level of the sentence, but at that of the word. Linguistic, as opposed to rhetorical, reduplication (the term is again a technical one) involves the repetition of identical or quasi-identical syllables, commonly at the beginning of a word; the English *murmur* and the French *bonbon* are two examples. Such reduplications have been explained as motivated signs, originally expressing repeated or intensive action or, in some languages, plurality. In the analysis of structural linguistics, however, reduplication does not demonstrate motivation (a relationship of

analogy between a sign and its referent); on the contrary, it indicates, if not arbitrariness, at least the conventional nature of an utterance.

Roman Jakobson, discussing the frequent occurrence of reduplication in infantile language, suggests that it may well be the sign of the subject's entry into a symbolic order:

At the transition from babbling to verbal behaviour, the reduplication may even serve as a compulsory process, signalling that the uttered sounds do not represent a babble, but a senseful semantic entity. The patently linguistic essence of such a duplication is quite explicable. In contradistinction to the "wild sounds" of babbling exercises, the phonemes are to be recognized, distinguishable, identifiable; and in accordance with these requirements, they must be deliberately repeatable. The repetitiveness finds its most concise and succinct expression in, e.g., *papa*. The successive presentations of the same consonantal phonemes repeatedly supported by the same vowel, improve their legibility and contribute to the correctness of message reception.¹³

If repeatability is a necessary condition of those units out of which language constructs sense, then reduplication is, at its most fundamental level, the very sign of that repeatability. It signifies that an utterance is not simply a "wild sound," but that it is emitted according to a code, and thus conveys an intention to signify. Although repetition does not guarantee semiosis, it does suggest its presence and thus becomes, for Lévi-Strauss at least, the "signifier of signification":

Even at the babbling stage the phoneme group /pa/ can be heard. But the difference between /pa/ and /papa/ does not reside simply in reduplication: /pa/ is a noise, /papa/ is a word. The reduplication indicates intent on the part of the speaker; it endows the second syllable with a function different from that which would have been performed by the first separately, or in the form of a potentially limitless series of identical sounds /papapapapapa/ produced by mere babbling. Therefore the second /pa/ is not a repetition of the first, nor has it the same signification. It is a sign that, like itself, the first /pa/ too was a sign, and that as a pair they fall into the category of signifiers, not of things signified.¹⁴

Reduplication first occurs at the transition from babbling to linguistic performance, at the moment of the infant's entry into the symbolic order, which is contemporaneous with the mirror stage. Thus the dispossession of the subject by the mirror is also a law of language, and linguistic reduplication might also be a sign of the capture of the subject by an image.

13. Roman Jakobson, "Why Mama and Papa?" *Selected Writings*, I, The Hague, Mouton, 1962, p. 542.

14. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. J. and D. Weightman, New York, Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 339-40.

In the concluding paragraphs of *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss extended Jakobson's observation to onomatopoeic words; in this instance, reduplication functions to distinguish purely imitative sounds from signs. If the arbitrary character of most words is sufficient to indicate their status as signs, "onomatopoeic terms, on the other hand, are always ambiguous in nature because, being founded on a resemblance, they do not clearly indicate whether the speaker, in pronouncing them, is trying to reproduce a noise or to express a meaning."¹⁵ Reduplication, then, functions to indicate that such utterances are indeed signs, and not gratuitous or merely imitative noises. Linguistic reduplication, the anthropologist concludes, may be used as an explanatory model for the structure of myths. Just as language chooses its phonemes from a practically unlimited range of natural sounds, so too myths draw upon the whole realm of natural phenomena for their subject matter. These phenomena are not the object of myths, rather, they are their instruments of signification. The multiple isomorphisms that constitute myths function like linguistic reduplication: "the distinctive character of myths . . . is precisely emphasis, resulting from the multiplication of one level by another or several others, and which, as in language, functions to signify signification."¹⁶

While the linguistic character of myths has been amply demonstrated by structural anthropology, it may legitimately be asked what relevance linguistic reduplication might possibly have to photographs, if the photograph is, following Roland Barthes's "common sense" definition, a message without a code, that is, nonlinguistic. However, the terms in which Lévi-Strauss discusses the phenomenon of linguistic reduplication suggest that it may indeed function as an explanatory model for photographic reduplication as well. Both Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss distinguish the sound emitted randomly or in imitation of another sound from that emitted as language, that is, according to a code. Photography, then, at least as Barthes distinguishes it from other semiotic systems, would seem to correspond to the purely imitated sound:

What is the content of the photographic message? What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality. . . . In order to move from the reality to the photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image. Certainly the image is not the reality but at least its perfect *analagon* and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph.¹⁷

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.* I have substituted my own translation from the French original.

17. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, pp. 16-7.

Walker Evans. Cary Ross's Bedroom, New York. 1932.



What then might reduplication signify within such an image? Does it not, as in language and myth, signify the existence of an underlying intention to signify *through the image*, and thus to the possibility of a photographic language? Might it not indicate, like the reduplicated syllable in the vocable /papa/, that the photograph itself was already a sign? Might it not also contest any reading of photographs according to their subject matter or captions, the reality presented by the photograph being no longer the object of the image, but an instrument of signification? Does it not indeed suggest that we may be able to speak of a *genuine* rhetoric of the image?

The argument that the properties of the photographic image are derived not from the characteristics of the medium itself but from the structure of the real, registered mechanically on a light-sensitive surface, may describe the technical procedures of photography. But it does not account for the photograph's capacity to internally generate and organize meaning. However, it does seem to describe accurately the strategy according to which some photographs procure their authoritative status, those photographs in which a carefully calculated *mise en scène* mutely insists that the image is wholly dependent upon, since derived from, the external. Thus, the radical symmetry of Walker Evans's photograph of Carey Ross's bedroom (made in the same year as Brassaï's *Group in a Dance Hall*).



Walker Evans. Penny Picture Display, Savannah, Georgia. 1936.

Everything about the image is symmetrical—twin beds, a pair of identically framed impressions of the same Picasso print—everything, that is, except the photograph itself. The oblique angle of Evans's shot works to exteriorize those symmetries, to present them as properties of the real rather than the image. Had these paired objects been photographed head-on, the image would have appeared artificial, staged. Seen obliquely, however, they impute to the material world the capacity to independently create its own symmetries, to mirror itself.

Still, what we recognize in this photograph, despite its claim to transparency, is an image of the photographic process. If the camera angle works to exteriorize symmetry, it also encourages the illusion of a room divided by a mirror, and thus of a single bed and a graphic each doubled in reflection. That mirror is located by a virtual fold in the surface of the photograph along which reality is reduplicated according to the properties of the image. The paired graphics, in addition to contributing to the illusion of a mirror, suggest the duplicability of the photographic print, the theoretically unlimited number of copies that may be engendered by a single negative. Photographs are but one link in a potentially endless chain of reduplication; themselves duplicates (of both their objects and, in a sense, their negatives), they are also subject to further duplication, either through the procedures of printing or as objects of still other photographs, such as

Evans's *Penny Picture Display, Savannah*, 1936. While the illusion of a mirror may be inhibited by the night table and lamp—the only supposedly single objects in the image—these, however, are also doubled by the shadows they cast on the wall. The cast shadows are an additional analogue for photography. Thus, if Evans's photograph depicts a reality outside of the photograph, that reality is nonetheless wholly conditioned by the properties of the image. This scene must have appeared as a photograph even before Evans exposed it.

An experience of the real as if it were a photograph is described by Robert Smithson in his text, "The Monuments of Passaic," in which the artist narrates the events of a day-long photographic excursion to the New Jersey suburbs. Of photographing an ordinary wood-and-steel bridge, Smithson remarks:

Noonday sunshine cinema-sized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed *picture*. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of "stills" through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.¹⁸

This narrative inverts the terms of a familiar argument about the photograph: that the vicariousness of the image is frequently overlooked, so that the photograph is mistaken for the reality for which it is nevertheless only a substitute. Smithson, standing that argument on its head, calls its bluff. If reality itself appears to be already constituted as image, then the hierarchy of object and representation—the first being the source of the authority and prestige of the second—is collapsed. The representation can no longer be grounded, as Husserl wanted, in presence. For Smithson, the real assumes the contingency traditionally ascribed to the copy; the landscape appeared to him, not as Nature, but as a "particular kind of heliotype."¹⁹ The result is an overwhelming experience of absence: the abyss.

To some extent, Smithson recapitulates that passage in Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* in which the pioneer photographer recounts his realization that, in Hollis Frampton's paraphrase, "the 'image' he had sought to make is already there."²⁰ The invention of photography was thus simply a discovery of a physical or chemical means for fixing the discontinuous images of herself that Nature freely offered up. But Fox Talbot was looking into a camera lucida. Smithson confronts not an image, but an object *as if it were an image*. What does it mean, then, to take a photograph of a photograph?

This question is also raised in a series of photographs Smithson made in 1969, and which seem to derive, at least in part, from the experience described in

18. Robert Smithson, "The Monuments of Passaic," *Artforum*, VI (December, 1967), 49.

19. *Ibid.*, 50.

20. Hollis Frampton, "Incisions in History/Segments of Eternity," *Artforum*, XIII (October, 1974), 41.

Robert Smithson. Untitled (first stop of Six Stops on a Section, Bergen Hill, New Jersey). 1969.



“The Monuments of Passaic.” Within the space of these double images, a site and its own photographic likeness are juxtaposed. This *mise en abyme* endows these photographs with an apparatus for self-interpretation; their structure, defined by the juxtaposition of two images of the same motif, gives rise to commentary on the conditions of the photograph itself. Through them, Smithson deflates the myth that photographs are a means of gaining mastery and control over objects, of rendering them more accessible to consciousness. The internal photograph reduces the landscape and distances it from us. Moreover, what is true of the internal image holds for the photograph as a whole. In a photograph, Smithson casts a shadow over the presumed transparency of photographs; he raises serious doubts about their capacity to *convey* anything but a sense of loss, of absence.

What redeems the photograph, however, is its ability to generate and organize meaning *independently of its object*. Smithson frequently published and exhibited photographs of his projects; but after an experience of his double photographs, can we seriously regard *any* Smithson photograph simply as documentation? It is impossible to experience these double images as such. We are wrong to presume that the “work” in this case consists of an action performed (the placing of the photograph in the landscape) and that the photograph is transparent to that action, which it preserves in the tense peculiar to photography, the “having-been-there.”²¹ However, these photographs are distinguished from documents by the relationship of the internal photograph to the photograph that contains it. Not only does this relationship exist at present only in the photograph, it has *never* existed elsewhere. So that the action Smithson performed was simply an instrument, and not the object, of signification. The photograph *is* the work.

In 1969, Smithson executed a series of “mirror displacements” in the Yucatan peninsula; nine color photographs “document” that project. Although location and materials have changed—Smithson substituted mirrors for the photograph—these images reiterate the photo displacements produced that same year in a New Jersey quarry: a motif and its reflection are juxtaposed within a photograph. Of these displacements, Smithson wrote:

If you visit the sites (a doubtful probability) you find nothing but memory-traces, for the mirror displacements were dismantled right after they were photographed. The mirrors are somewhere in New York. The reflected light has been erased. Remembrances are but numbers on a map, vacant memories constellating the intangible terrains in deleted vicinities. It is the dimension of absence that remains to be found. The expunged color that remains to be seen. The fictive voices of the totems have exhausted their arguments. Yucatan is elsewhere.²²

21. Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” *Image, Music, Text*, p. 44.

22. Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” *Artforum*, VIII (September, 1969), 33.