

Image After Object



Christine Jeffs, *Mother*, 2019.

An object becomes an image through memory where it takes on a different relationship to time. What is remembered is a point during the life of an object, or perhaps more accurately a fiction made up of many of these points, that influences the way I might relate to it in a future encounter. I was thinking of an object recently whilst talking with Christine about the nature of her exhibition *Subject to Consent*. In trying to recall this object –a watch– to the forefront of my mind, I realise that its specific detail and form has blurred. The watch hasn't been worn for 6 years and sits beside a broken lamp on my dad's bedside table. Belonging to my late uncle, it now exists as a reminder, a collection or record of time. This is an object that has something of the before and after to it. I imagine that since Paul died, the watch wasn't kept in sync with daylight savings, and over the years its quartz crystal oscillator had surely fallen out of step. As the battery died it became a sealed object, a kind of object-photograph: entombed within a memory of its rotations. It struck me that a photograph might be an image-becoming-object, a trace pulled from the flow of time's arrow.

The desire to make photographic images and archives is perhaps a response to the instability of memory. The impulse to photograph – to trace around an object and thus freeze it in time – is a fraught one. Just as memory and perception fail to represent the complex nature of reality, photography fails to capture the event as it was experienced. As Eduardo Cadava says in "Words of Light":

Perception and photography are analogous to one another [...] not so much because perception works like a camera to seize reality but rather because, working like a camera, it fails to seize reality.¹

If the object of photography is the creation of images, it would be impossible for an image to fully represent the complexities and subtleties of an object or experience. Instead, an image is a translation. Like a shadow, it is cast from a fixed position within an experience. In making a photograph, Jeffs works intuitively with framing, composition, and the overall treatment of her images to reveal subtle qualities and aspects to her subjects. Her images are concerned with the representation of a poetic relationship between photographer and subject.

A portrait is a relational image, positioning the camera in relation to a subject. I like to think that subject-hood and subjectivity is co-created by some photographic desire to separate elements in the world: to step out of the flow of time. Viewing a photograph necessitates an objectification of the subject – for a photograph is also an object. Here, the photographer frames a corner of the world and isolates it for inspection. A photograph accrues a symbolic language that we take with us from image to image. A kind of bond exists between subject and photographer during the moment of exposure: activating the shutter creates a cut in the timeline, like a moment of unconsciousness that is still somehow recorded. Perhaps the idea of a photograph as an object is clearest with a photograph of a person. A portrait of a person is imbued with emotional subtexts by the viewer who might project their subjectivities into the image as if looking in the mirror. Once you have an image you begin to relate to it as an object in its own right. Not only a document, it is a material

¹ Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, 2nd ed., Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 92.

intervention in the world: a trace of the social contract between photographer and subject.

An image becomes an object over time. Although reproducible, a photograph can become an object of desire, representing more than just the image printed onto its surface. Even digital images are touched, as they stream into our houses like water and flow past us on a screen. The surface of an image is similar to the surface of a mirror, its skin is a plane of incidence that collects and distorts rays of light in a reflection/refraction loop. In taking a photograph, interruptions or distortions in the lens or film/sensor form a kind of veil over the image. Placing something in-between the camera and subject doubles this physical interruption within the image-space, alluding to the boundaries of representation inherent to photography. In Jeffs' work these interruptions take the form of a windshield, or a patterned fabric, or the jet-stream of a plane. Other times they are present in the psychological state in the sitter – during the moment when the sustained composure of a teenage boy falls away to vulnerability or when reluctance and defiance in the presence of the camera is projected from a man hours after leaving the hospital. These physical and psychological relationships explored between camera and subject reveal a mediated perception of the world, its objects, and people.

Subtle veils of matter interrupt and distort large areas of the images. Sepia toned clouds form great temporary landscapes drifting through the air, thin, lightheaded, air like swimming. Dust and smoke from some faraway place fills the air and our lungs. Here, a muted tonality and the digital snow blanketing the image of the flowers makes the image space feel thick and occupied. Something is captured in the space between flower and camera, a symbolic aether. This is not the invisible made visible through a science or special technique, it involves intuitions: a sitting with the unknowable. These interferences in the image allude to a field encompassing both photographer and subject – a field of affectual action and unseen transmissions. Perhaps a direct activity on the material level of the image. An emotional surface-text. An image becoming object.