2016

Performing the Uncanny: An Exploration of Self Through Alternative Process Photography

Caroline Thomas
Scripps College

PERFORMING THE UNCANNY:
AN EXPLORATION OF SELF THROUGH ALTERNATE PROCESS PHOTOGRAPHY

by

CAROLINE GRACE THOMAS

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR SUSAN RANKAITIS
PROFESSOR KEN GONZALES-DAY

December 10, 2015

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of my professors at Scripps who have inspired me to keep asking questions and exploring the world. I am blessed to be surrounded by incredibly brilliant and kind mentors. To Susan Rankaitis and Ken Gonzales-Day, thank you for making all of this possible for me. I could not have done any of this without your constant support and guidance. It has been an absolute pleasure to spend the past two and a half years learning from both of you.

I would like to thank my wonderful, loving family. To my parents, thank you for encouraging me to explore all life has to offer. Ben, Haydn and Kate, thank you for being the best siblings I could have asked for, it has been a pleasure to be your baby sister.

I am incredibly grateful for all of my fabulous friends. To my Scripps ladies, you will never know how much your love and support have meant to me during my time here. I feel so blessed to have gotten to know each and every one of you. To my friends from home, thank you for all the long distance love. Finally, to my best friend, Alex, thank you for everything—all the late night FaceTime calls, for supporting all of my work and outlandish ideas, and for unconditionally loving me. Your friendship has shaped so much of who I am and I will never be able to fully explain to you how much you mean to me, so thank you.

I. Introduction

This semester has been full of experimentation and transformation in my work. After reading Tobin Seber's *Disability Aesthetic* this summer, I wanted to explore my disability through photography; my photographic work in this concept began back in July while I was still at home. I decided to take my formalistic style and apply it directly to struggles I have faced all my life. As it turns out, photographic formalism does not translate easily in a discussion of disability in academia. However, when I stepped away from the work, I realized it encapsulates a larger theoretical concept—displaying self-portraiture as a type of performance in front of and behind the camera.

Focusing on other artists' work in self-portraiture helped me structure my own process of self-exploration. Francesca Woodman's self-portraits have always spoken to me in their haunting, personal nature. She was masterful at portraying intimate emotion in a photographic format. Her work allowed me to open up a little bit more and expose unseen parts of my identity to the viewer. Being a very private, introverted person, I prefer to focus on others rather than myself. However, in my senior thesis I decided to challenge myself and get beyond my fear of vulnerability.

In my most recent photographic series, I explored forms of alternative processes, specifically multiple exposure. I use this technique in order to distort and complicate formalistic images of architecture and the human body. Following this series, I wanted to continue my use of alternative processes through the use of color films and Polaroids. This gave me additional outlets to explore the limits of photographic art. Examining both Robert Heinecken and Joyce Neimanas' work—who both have extensive bodies of work within the field of alternative process photography —I found inspiration in their varied use of photographic experimentation.

When reexamining my work in October, I began to see that it felt like a performance. Yes, a performance of my own identity but one a performance that gave even myself a sense of uneasiness. I realized my work was much more about photographic history and concepts than it was about my own personal struggle. Accidentally, I had used my self-portraiture and experimentation to confront the theoretical concept of the "uncanny." As someone who has always been interested in surrealist art and its theory, I think my work situated itself in this odd, experimental world—which in itself is certainly uncanny.

II. The Uncanny

The Freudian definition of the "uncanny" as defined in Hal Foster's essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle?" states that the "uncanny" is the return of the familiar "made strange by repression."[1] The uncanny is the uneasy feeling of seeing something one cannot quite describe because the object or event feels strangely familiar. Within the context of photographic artistic practice, the uncanny manifests itself within the surrealist tradition through alternative processes such as multiple exposure and solarization. Photographic manipulations distort a medium which is commonly thought to be the closest artistic representation of reality, and therefore, creates a distinct uncanny feeling. Krauss discusses this inherent uncanny quality of manipulated photography in her book ,*The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths,* saying, "surrealist photography exploits the special connection to reality with which all photography is endowed. For photography is an imprint or transfer off the real." Krauss goes on to draw a distinct difference between photography and other artistic mediums by saying, "drawings and paintings are icons, while photographs are indexes."[2] Therefore, surrealist and manipulated photography by definition must be uncanny.

More explicitly, the function of doubling is a primary example of the uncanny in both Freud and Krauss' texts. The Freudian discussion of the double is much broader than that of Krauss. Freud's discourse on doubling in his essay "The 'Uncanny'" connects this 'double' concept to facets of everyday life. He says the relation can be

---

[1] Foster, Hal, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle?," Compulsive Beauty. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 7.

[2] Krauss, "Photographic Conditions," 110.

two people who are “considered identical because they look alike.”[3] Or the doubling effect could stem from one person identifying with someone else to the point of merging the selves. “In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of self.”[4] This Freudian understanding of the ‘uncanny double’ is key to understanding how the double is considered in artistic spheres—especially in relation to photography. Krauss brings some of Freud’s ideas about doubling into an artistic context, discussing the notion that doubling within an artwork complicates the original image. She discusses how the duplicate of an image relies upon the original, “but in being seen in conjunction with the original, the double destroys the pure singularity of the first. Through duplication, it opens the original to the effect of difference, of deferral, of one-thing-after-another, or within another:of multiples burgeoning within the same.”[5]

Within this project, the uncanny functions through duplicity and multiplication, blurring the lines between real and imagined, animate and inanimate. Each piece has a very different take on the uncanny, yet they are all deeply intertwined. In *Blank//Shudder,* hyperrealism—created with scanogram portraits—convolutes the viewers ability to discern the animate from the inanimate.[6] A distant yet theatrically morbid facial expression promotes a sense of uneasiness in the viewer. Contrastingly, the partner image *Blink//Shutter* uses background images to create a painterly feel to

---

3 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 210.

4 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 210.

5 Krauss, Rosalind, “Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” Modernist Myths. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 109.

6 See fig. 6.

the overall piece.[7] The self-portraits, although still employing duplicity, are much more peaceful. However, the repetition of the eye in both pieces is there to make the viewer feel uncomfortable—aware of the information being withheld. These two pieces function as a pair, playing off of the multiplication of self as well as reflecting similar emotion.

[7] See fig. 7.

III. Alternate Process Photography

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, surrealist photographers such as Man Ray and Lee Miller were experimenting in the darkroom with techniques such as solarization and photograms, or as Ray called them, “rayograms.” These experimental processes gave a new artistic dimension to photography—which had long been associated as a science rather than an art. Many of these same artists worked with concepts of the uncanny and explored them through experimental processes. During the latter half of the twentieth century, surrealist tradition was revived and revamped. Similar to their predecessors, photographic artists continued to explore photographic processes in the surrealist vain. However, many of these new experimentations came out of the new technology of color and instant film. Robert Heinecken and Joyce Neimanas both experimented with photography during the 1970s and 80s. Although both artists work with similar materials, their work is drastically different. Heinecken uses his work to further his concept, asking the viewer to question what the image wants to portray. Whereas Neimanas’ work feels much more personal as she confronts her surroundings in a unique, fragmented way.

Robert Heinecken’s work blurred the boundaries of photography, employing mass media advertisements, polaroids, photo collages and multiple exposures. Due to this ever varying body of work, he does not identify himself as a photographer but rather a “paraphotographer” or a photographist. The term photographist was coined by art critic Arthur C. Danto, “who proposed a distinction between photographers, who produce ‘photography as art,’ and those he names ‘photographists,’ who are concerned with 'photography in art.'"[8] By stretching the bounds of photography, Heinecken's work certainly falls under the photographic tradition but it is all its own. In his own words, Heinecken discusses his work saying, "I have taken advantage very much of the photographic medium, and *photographers supply the ideas in my work. My ideas are photographic ideas*…."[9]

Focusing more explicitly on his multiple exposure work, it is clear Heinecken uses alternative processes to ground his concepts. In his *Recto/Verso* pieces, Heinecken highlights the disturbing parts of mass media such as the identical, repeated smiling female faces in #3.[10] This piece emphasizes how marketing manipulates the consumer by employing specific tropes such as the female model. Although originally quite beautiful, when this smiling woman is multiplied and overlaid upon herself, there is a sense of the uncanny—the viewer recognizes this trope and yet looking at Heinecken's image for too long creates a real sense of uneasiness. Just as Krauss outlined, this doubling effect complicates the original image. By those standards although the original advertisement does not make the consumer question anything, the doubling of that same image makes the viewer step back and wonder what the image means both singularly and in the artistic sense.

Joyce Neimanas' work primarily deals with instant film. Her work examines how the Polaroid SX-70 format can be manipulated through multiplication and collage. I find her Polaroid collages the most striking because of their attention to the most minute

---

8 A. D. Coleman, "'I Call it Teaching': Robert Heinecken's Analytical Facture," *Robert Heinecken: Photographist*, 3.

9 A. D. Coleman, 3.

10 See fig. 1

details within a larger image. In her piece *R at Table (#9)*, although the full image is just a simple framing of her husband, the individual images which make up the full picture tell a much more intimate story.[11] She includes close ups of her own coffee, the playing cards to the left and extremely thoughtful images of parts of Robert to make up his full body. All of these details allow the viewer into a scene between partners which otherwise would be quite private.

This use of Polaroids as a window into the private sphere influenced my decision to use this instant film in my piece *Process//Processing*. The multiplication of self juxtaposed with my living environment almost allows the viewer into my brain and how I perceive the world. Experimenting with alternative processes in all three of my final pieces helped me expose to create a more transparent identity and allowed me to express my thoughts without fear of vulnerability. Each different process I used served a function in facilitating a comfortable environment for me to confront my own identity and uncanny parts of my world. Working with polaroids and scanograms for self-portraits gave me some space from the viewer. Using multiple exposures allowed me to add some personal elements without fully disclosing this information to the viewer. Each component adds a layer to my work, functioning together to perform the uncanny.

[11] See fig. 3

IV. Self-Portraiture

Portraiture is one of the oldest art forms and as such has had many variations over the years, self-portraiture being one of the most prominent. In photographic work, self-portraiture began soon after photography itself was invented. As photography became more and more recognized as an art form, self-portraiture became more common. By the mid-twentieth century, most photographic artists created some form of self-portraiture. In the 1970s, Francesca Woodman began her large body of self-portrait work. In fact, Woodman's photography almost entirely consists of self-portraits. Even when she herself is not the model she continues to develop her perception of self, sometimes through the absence of self to explore a new facet of identity. In conjunction with my work, Woodman's exploration of self in front of the camera was very influential. Some of her work makes it feels as though her camera was an extension of herself.

Woodman's work is extremely personal, often showing her nude in her own living environments. Even in her most tumultuous time, Woodman was capturing her struggle in still frames where the absence of color feels almost metaphoric to her life. The square format pictures illustrates some of Woodman's intense inner struggles. Her image *On Being an Angel*, uses extreme contrast between subject and background as well as negative space to create a void around the figure.[12] There is a certain sense of purgatory in this image—it suffocates the viewer while pulling them into the formalistic framing and Woodman's blank stare. "The performances she staged for her own lens are rarely narrative; they are mysterious, suggestive, richly evocative, even allegorical. She often included objects—gloves,eels, mirrors—within the frame, thereby investing

[12] See fig. 5

them with a symbolic charge, and regularly made deliberate allusions to tropes from the surrealist and nineteenth-century fiction of which she was fond."[13] Pieces such as *Untitled* use blurred figures and haunting expressions to illustrate the oppressive feeling of life.[14] This use of the body as object and subject creates an uncanny—even supernatural—effect on the representation of life and death.

. A big part of my exploration into self-portraiture has required the manipulation and duplication of images. I convolute the original image, burying myself under layers of structures that pierce and reassemble the portraits into faint representations of self. One of my pieces consists of seven different frames, three of which are scanogram self-portraits. The figure most clearly seen is the cadaver-like portrait in the bottom left corner.[15] Not only does the scanogram process create a barrier between me and my viewer, but the uncanny discourse around animate vs. inanimate is very prevalent as my face remains vacant, yet so vivid. This creates a sense of uneasiness about the figure. I want the viewer to sit with the uncanny, feeling anxiety just by looking at the piece. Additionally, the multiple exposure images are printed life-size in hopes to intensify the uncomfortable aspects of the image. Similar to Woodman, my work in self-exploration has been a way to express a sense of hopelessness and oppression. However, through this artistic process, I have purposefully evoked the uncanny—developing three different approaches to uncanny imagery to make a cohesive set. Playing off of the melodrama of young adulthood, my self-portraiture is purposefully

---

[13] Corey Keller, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman," 169.

[14] See fig. 6

[15] See fig. 6.

exaggerated and duplicated to illustrate how identity can be developed through piecing together broken parts of the self.

V. Conclusion

From the beginning, I knew that alternative processes in conjunction with self-portraiture was going to give me the ability to explore new boundaries in my work. However, this project has turned out to be so much more. This series developed into not only a performance but a true exploration of self. Performing in front of my camera gave me a new sense of agency within my work. Although I still feel quite uncomfortable in front of the camera, photographic experimentation allowed me to examine myself through the lens without feeling overly vulnerable. Alternative processes put a certain amount of distance between me and the viewer.

For both *Blink//Shutter* and *Blank//Shudder,* I printed large scale—five feet by almost three feet—to force my viewer to confront every minute detail and also overwhelm them with the grandiose, dramatic size. By employing the same repetition of face and a similar color palette, I want to extend the uncanny past the single frame. I want the familiarity between certain images to pull the uncanny off the wall and into the space. The third piece in this set functions on its own through replication of space and form. Each Polaroid intersects the oversized digital image, complicating how the portrait functions. Within the smaller images, there was a process of duplication. To get a focused close-up portrait, I used digital self-portraits which I then projected onto a white screen. This projection is actually what the Polaroid images capture—it is an image within an image within an image. These three pieces have allowed me to explore how far I can push the limits of photography and ultimately gave me a space to examine photographic processes as well as myself.

Appendix

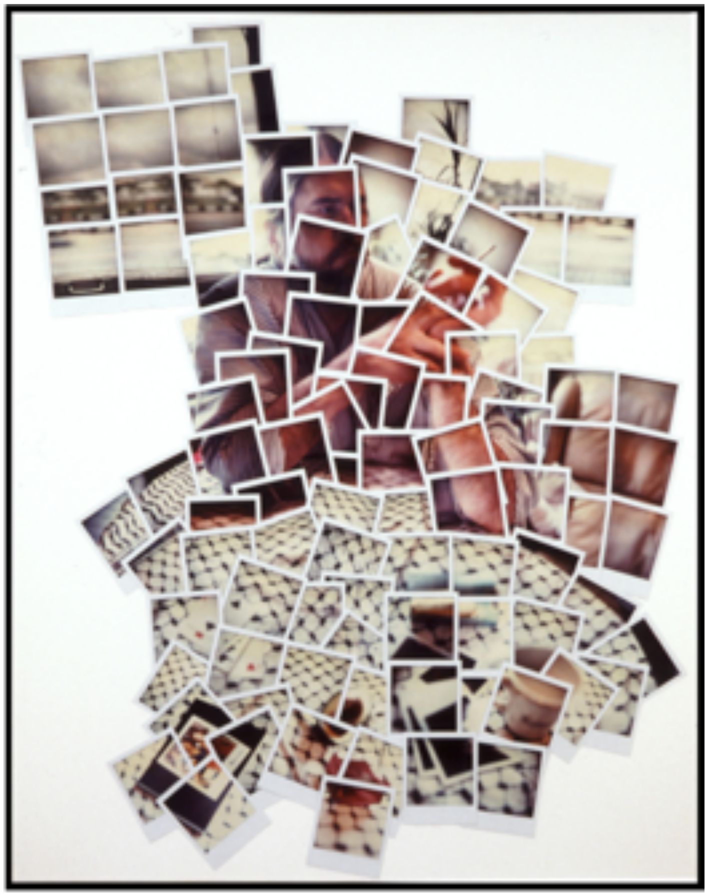
Figure 1.

Robert Heinecken, *Recto/Verso #3*. 1988. Silver dye bleach print.

Figure 2.

Robert Heinecken, *Recto/Verso #13*. 1988. Silver dye bleach print.

Figure 3



Joyce Neimanas, *R at the Table (#9)*. 1981. SX70 Polaroids, paint 32 x 40 in.

Figure 4.

Joyce Neimanas, *TV and Dog (#4).* 1981.SX70 Polaroids, paint 40 x 32 in.

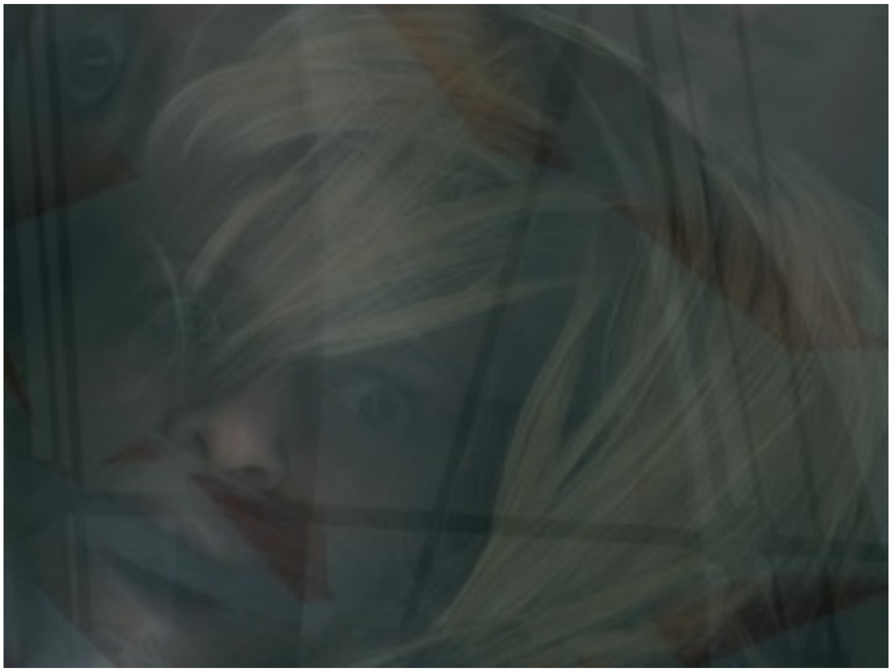
Figure 5.

Francesca Woodman, *On Being an Angel*. Providence, Rhode Island, 1977. Gelatin silver print. 13.3 x 13.7 cm.

Figure 6.

Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*. New York, 1979-80. Gelatin silver print, 14.6 x 14.6 cm.

Figure 7.



Caroline Thomas, *Blank//Shudder*. 2015. Ink jet print 60 x 44 in.

Figure 8.

Caroline Thomas, *Blink//Shutter.* 2015. Ink jet print 60 x 44 in.

Figure 9.

Caroline Thomas, *Process//Processing.* 2015. Ink jet print and Polaroid 600 film.

Bibliography.

Allmer, Patricia, ed. *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*. London: Manchester Art Gallery, 2009.

Cotton, Charlotte, Okwui Enwezor, Walter Guadagnini, Thomas Weski, and Francesco Zanot. *Photography: The Contemporary Era 1981-2013.* Edited by Walter Guadagnini. Milano: Skira, 2014.

Davis, Keith F. *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital.* New York: Hallmark Cards, in Association with H.N. Abrams, 1995.

Foster, Hal. *Compulsive Beauty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: Continuum, 2000

Freud, Sigmund. *On Art and Literature*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Gabhart, Ann, and Rosalind Krauss, eds. *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Work Exhibition.* Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum, 1986.

Heinecken, Robert. *Robert Heinecken: Recto/Verso*. Tucson, AZ: Nazraeli Press [u.a.], 2006.

Keller, Corey, ed. *Francesca Woodman*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2011.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985.

Lahs-Gonzales, Olivia, and Lucy R. Lippard. *Defining Eye: Women Photographers of the 20th Century.* St. Louis, MO: Saint Louis Art Museum, 1997.

Mundy, James, ed. T*he Polaroid Years: Instant Photography and Experimentation*. Poughkeepsie, NY: Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, 2013.

Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Warren, Lynne, ed. *Robert Heinecken Photographist: A Thirty-Five Year Retrospective*. Chicago, IL: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1999.