



Still, Even, Maybe
A Parallel Text for *Candid*

August 15

Dear Diary,

It is 5 am and I have been awake for hours. I got out of bed to close the window — it's the first cold night of the summer. I am reluctant to record it — the dream. I am afraid of it being reified, sooner or later. It was the kind of dream that introduces itself abruptly, before I even realize I am unconscious.

I was standing in the doorway of a gallery filled with people. The atmosphere in the room was still, anxious, very cold, as though outside at dusk. Several photographs were on the walls, and everything was still. The air tasted like metal.

I try to step forward but my feet are stuck beneath the floorboards. I sense the gravity of this stone warehouse.

In front of me I see a strange arrangement of people. One woman holds a glass of wine. Another poses with a man in a suit. A couple stands with a friend. They seem entertained, or at least well dressed. But there is something contrived about the typical scene, something that betrays narrative, and movement: it is as though the people are suspended in the middle of the room, their fleeting expressions caught in one colour, their drained complexions restored with paint. Their lit faces seem brighter, even, in front of the amber-glowing walls behind them.

A woman is looking at a photograph, transfixed. She looks familiar. Her face is blushing (she has blood, a pulse), but still, she is still.

I can move again.

I float along the wall, approaching the particular photo. The people, still still, smile and glance, they notice and gossip . . . , pretend and nod, laugh and drink. They seem unaware of my presence.

The photo that drew the woman: there are two people, or three; they are holding a canvas. Maybe it is painted. As I strain to see more clearly, I feel a breath on my neck and turn to see who it is. There is no one. I am pushed against the wall or the window, which apprehends me and begins to integrate me into its matter. I sink backward into its fibres, hearing voices from concentric outsidings: the street, the festival, the round dance, the cinema, and the man without a face whispers into my ear, " . . . "

I breathe in, my lungs fill with silver, my skin . . . is paper, my body, glass. A medium, I record every feeling (this, at least, is my own private affliction).

I realize this dream is a snapshot, a latent history of photography in one image. Everything is composed of silver crystals. Everything is sensitive to light.

And then I woke.

Dreams — how boring it is to describe them! To hear them described. Are dreams not like art, best left uninterpreted? Do they not speak for themselves, or with a universal language? There is in any case a certain violence to interpretation, as Freud made clear. And Sontag, differently so. Even still, I am suffocating in these lucid images, they keep piercing these early hours, illuminating my vision, vivid and still.

This is clearly about September, when the exhibition will open. Why is it such a concern? It's an honour and a privilege to be invited to write for this show, really. I believe that the artists each have a distinct photographic vision and Derek is perceptive in his ways of relating their art. Yet for some reason I sense that the public has changed, and I am no expert historian or professional analyst. I have even decided not to research the artists' practices beyond what I have seen. Is this irresponsible? Sometimes my uninformed impressions, with my own awareness, experience, and madness, are already enough or too much to work with. Or what if the dream is a warning? Maybe if I write some notes

I didn't know that Laura L worked with black-and-white candid photography. I knew only of her colour still life work of dishevelled table settings after a meal — subtly-framed and carefully-lit stacked plates, strewn cutlery, rinds, peels, and wine stains. Those are beautiful depictions of what is normally cleared away, the obscene (the *off stage*), whereas these are higher contrast but somewhat toned down — merely off kilter in ways that still draw attention to the photographic frame.

If the relation I see between these photos and the questionable curiosity of Diane Arbus is lazy, I will blame my insomnia but nonetheless stop looking. There is an implicit theme of scopophobia that cuts at an angle across this work; how often we are subjected to seeing things we don't want to see, as privatization deprives us of privacy. I value these images because they show me how animate her still lives really are.

Maya approaches the private as the domestic and interpersonal with a gentle gaze . . . I see her as honouring her relative, creating a cumulative portrait of a person who gave her life without relying on the formal conventions that usually signify the dignity owed to represented family members. Studio portraits, deliberately included in one scene, appear more evidently forced or calculated, false, compared to her thoughtfully composed scenarios.

It's probably impossible for me to know how much agency the woman in these photographs had in the process of their creation, and I believe this question is implied within. Has she found a last refuge?

Her expression, if vulnerable, is far from blank, as she shapes the sense of concise spontaneity. The photos suggest such a subtle knowledge that they trace a poetics of being in intergenerational relation.

Of course I am more familiar with Karen's work. I attended her first solo show at the same gallery, and as with her other work, these synchronic images portray figures captured in awkward interaction and artificial light against specific backgrounds. The photographs sustain an evocative ambiguity even while abandoning both context and the middle ground.

While they reject the superficiality of mere flattery, the photos become disturbing, even, when I recall the photographer's own presence within these published relations. She is almost aligned with her ambient sources as a source of light herself, as a subject herself, and it is unclear whether the artist's fourth-wall presence makes things less or more consequential.

Since she draws her mostly witting subjects from a close community of people who often share her field, her work becomes a kind of alter-tabloid for the somewhat-public who are relatively intimate with their paparazzi. Unlike celebrity spies, there is grace to Karen's approach.

Elaine's intermedia art — her use of colour, shadow, and composition, her sense of time, and her methods — makes me think about photography . . . what it has been, how it has worked, who it has been for. I've rarely seen photos so unravelling of entrenched histories. She seems to work as though she knows that it is her subjects who allow her to create photographs.

The image that appeared, almost, in my dream . . . it was Elaine's . . . *Nudes Moving an Abstract Painting I*. I might consider it funny — feminist satire — if I didn't see it as true to the biopolitical violence foundational to abstraction.

I think this image witnesses a history of the nude, who, having descended the staircase and stepped out of the painting that was excluded by Marcel's brothers because she was not properly reclining, might as well now be called naked. They are naked after performance art and its fevered documentation. They are becoming image, but as they must labour for the creation of, likely, the white cis man, they and Elaine nonetheless challenge the banal ubiquity of photographs as surveillance and spectacle and also performance art's institutionalization.

Maybe *Candid* will address the heart of something. From this island, the exhibition seems like a cold offering, and very real. When I first left that island I realized it is actually colder, and more real, than almost anywhere else (they weren't lying, not about that, at least). To Derek's credit, I don't expect the show to be a welcoming experience, a mirror of proud, collective identification wishing to frame us as we might frame portraits of those we love, to display on the piano. In Paris.

Here the mirror has been smashed. Amid the shards of silver glass and glances, it seems that everyone will be stripped bare — the brides, and even the bachelors. Everyone is cold, even . . . everyone is multiply-faced with the Lacanian real. Is every instant of decision madness?

I feel that contending with the real — that elusive object desired by the candid photograph, the substance and aporia of emancipation — is an ethical dilemma at the heart of photography, a dangerous and impossible undertaking. Some countries protect the right to photograph people in public without their consent, appealing to the value of candid photographs for shared cultures, but there are oppressive histories of imagetaking on this land. How should we respond as we are faced with those moments when people have no recourse, when humanity is at its most vulnerable because humans are so susceptible to each other?

Social movements need images of strength and dignity: the subaltern subject as whole and sovereign, beautiful with distinct lines of intelligible and coherent identity. I need these images. Even still, identification — a medium and measure for people — is also for the police, who protect the violent privilege to name, to know, to categorize, and to recognize.

How often we are (how often are we?) differently deprived of our autonomies. How often we hear denials that this is normal, pervasive, paradigmatic, and not only exceptional (over there, not here; them, not us). The humanist (read: Eurocentric man) who fears those of us who don't deny the ways we are human and animal, cyborg, in-between, irrational, beautiful, or abject . . . strong, weak, queer, both, neither, or complicated . . . is most capable of dehumanization, of forgetting our most human connections.

Maybe ours is not always a photogenic family. Maybe there is illness, boredom, competition, Pride, and indifference; ugliness, exploitation, struggle, and awkward love. Is there value in presenting broken mirrors, in offering the possibility of strange ambiguity and disidentification?

And maybe this is why I believe this project called art is dangerous and yet necessary — not for the sake of realism, but because it shows us where we might be caught between life and spectacle in the becoming-image of the real.

Capitalism, on its linear path to ruin every life-world, frames its population in order to force upon it a false choice between enfranchisement and exclusion, complicity and alienation, reification and oblivion, repeatedly entrenching its realist regime called crime to suppress relatedness, whereas art that is worthy of the name can offer something else — the conditions, still ephemeral, within which we will respond to the real so we can create the conditions for choice proper to everyone's existence: freedom. (Even if it is the death drive that leads one there.)

As choice is situated within a dialectic between agency and circumstance, art is situated within a dialectic between the candid and the staged. While it is simple to police the formal border between the street and the studio, the public and the private, the spontaneous and the planned, in *Candid* I think there will be an instant of decision at stake with every view, complicating the binary such that we each have to ask: who decides what this difference is between madness and reason? (Is the gallery Winnicott's womb? Is art Bataille's spit? Is "women's art" a critique? Is the artist naked? Is the Museum a prison?)

To reduce art to the staged is to deny time and space, structure. To reduce art to the candid is to deny life. And what will they think? And what could I possibly have to say about this? I do not wish to translate. If I try to tell how I am affected, why would that matter enough for it to be recorded and then published in some decided instant of madness or reason?

I think I read somewhere that Francesca said she wanted words to have the same relation to her work as the photographs have to the text in Breton's *Nadja*. (What *did* Francesca Woodman want?) And I suppose I wish, even in my cold, female hysteria, to create something for the images, to see them find ways beyond, at least for a moment, the positivist will to accumulate too soon for the sake of the market, for a Sovereign historical narrative, or the Museum.

In some ways Elaine's image, the one of which I dreamed, reminds me of Ming Hon's work, and Dayna Danger's, and something Ariana Reines once wrote about Francesca. Maybe they are differently asking, what does a nude do?

In Elaine's photo, the nude, that recurring object in white art, does not stand for the Classical project as a symbol of state-nationalist myth, for a Golden era, in order forever to turn the particular into the universal, to glue the shards into a single frame. Still, I believe that Elaine could identify with the subjectivities of her subjects in this image, *that she would resent analyzing them as she would resent mere praise or critique, that she would identify with their despair*, as I also could. I believe that we might glimpse ourselves in this particular glass fragment.

And maybe it is because a white cis woman can be both subject and object within the patriarchy of her dominant cultures, the only "proper victim of crime" registering in the conservative ideology, that she would take some responsibility for this sharp mess. And maybe it is because I can never know what a world is really like for someone else, for Laura or Maya, Karen, Elaine, or Derek, or for those who appear in or beside their work, even, that I choose to believe in the aesthetic value of the photographic vision proper to each of them. That I choose to write so that someone might ask whether they agree.

As I write I am visited by flashbacks to my dream, reminded of a woman sinking into the glass, the silver replacing her breath. It makes me ask: how is a woman a medium? Is she insofar as she is an artist? Insofar as she is a woman? A human? A subject of photography? Mad or sane?

And the man without a face, recurring in my sleep, indistinct from the white neutrality of the gallery: he is Creon, whose power is never named, who is protected by silence, facelessness, always exaggerating Antigone's strength in order to degrade and punish her, to isolate her and restore conformity and his own coherence. Antigone, for whom the good is located beyond the limits of the Polis.

I am cold, still, and I can't decide whether to fall back asleep or make coffee . . . If an anxious dream is a manifestation of capitalism maybe it is also a photograph — a latent image. And maybe a gallery is a horizon (a way of seeing, an illusion, a curve) along which the spirits of our artist-ancestors attempt to change cultural relationships, hoping that we will hear them. An exhibition is a way to reorganize the coordinates, throwing the glass shards into the sky as constellations. Caliginous lucidity, then, is a way to act, countering reification with performance. In this strange historiography, these scattered notes, a nude would prefer not to.

Kendra Place
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Karen Asher
Maya de Forest
Laura Letinsky
Elaine Stocki

CURATOR | Derek Dunlop
GUEST WRITER | Kendra Place

IMAGE | *Nudes Moving Abstract Painting 1*, part of triptych, 2013. Silver Gelatin Print, 20x25Inches. Elaine Stocki