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Book Review

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A review of Lingis, A. (2010). *Wonders Seen in Forsaken Places: On photography and the photographs of Mark Coehn.* Chester Perkowski.

In Skjærven's article on the phenomenology of street photography, he describes the unique link between the practices as 'Being Almost There' (2014). With this in mind, I have viewed and read Alphonso Lingis' *Wonders Seen in Forsaken Places: On photography and the photographs of Mark Cohen* repeatedly to try to understand why I find each encounter with it disturbing. Both Cohen's photographic art and Lingis' curatorial and written framing of it produce experiences akin to an unsolicited approach, where a stranger intrudes into space, passing too close, but then moving on. While fascinating, in part, because of unexpected intimacy, with each page of this book I find myself jumping to a defensiveness regarding the demarcations and ethical responsibilities of the relationships between reader/viewer, writer/photographer and subject/object/participant. I entered this book anticipating an encounter with Mark Cohen's photography and left realizing that his images in this book were the vehicle for an encounter with Alphonso Lingis.

At first reading, I began moving like a reader; text to image, left to right, front to back for some pages, but found myself quarreling with Lingis' interpretations. His powerful, poetic language seemed to focus on his perceptions of darkness and desperation in the pictured subjects' lives that obscured other possibilities I was seeing. I didn't like being positioned as a viewer that way. Because of both the writing and the images, I found myself reflecting on aggressiveness as a concept, wondering how that is understood in phenomenology. Schrader (1973) divides the concept into two streams, encounter and conflict, suggesting that all encounters, a core of phenomenological understanding, involve simple acts of engagement that can be understood as aggressions. There is always an approach, contact and intrusion into the being of another in any encounter. Schrader (1973) does not see aggression understood as encounter carrying any ethical baggage. Instead he links that understanding to the less pejorative notion of "assertiveness" (p. 336) and the negotiation of territory that is evident in all animals. It just is. The more common connotations of aggression include notions of conflict, anger, and issues of territorial lines crossed. In a publication that merges the languages of text and image as fully as this one, there are many overlapping territories and opportunities to be in and reflect on aggression.

Lingis' brief opening reflection "Remote Control" articulates these two streams of aggression as they are complicated by photography and the balance between freedom and the coercion of perceptions that are negotiated by the viewer-- with the photographer-- of the photographed. *Wonders Seen in Forsaken Places: On photography and the photographs of Mark*

Cohen is comprised nearly throughout of Cohen's photographs on the right and brief poetic writings by Lingis on the left, with three more extended reflections interspersed. Interestingly, Lingis' opening thoughts prioritize the optical, suggesting that embodied vision is "the freest thing about us," (year, p. 6) and that photography, through its framing devices and choices "are snares for the eyes" (year, p. 6). This comment positions Cohen in a critical place, suggesting that the book may be the kind of hostile, ritualized negotiation of territory suggested by Schrader. In this case the territorial negotiation is between Cohen's images and Lingis' words.

As presented, this book of pairings (of text and image) is an opportunity to learn about yourself as a reader/viewer. Viewers scan fields of light and shadow in search of contrast and pattern, merging the physical movement of eyes with other, remembered, embodied movement; seeking familiar objects to be associated with recalled feelings of comfort or of threat. All of this activity exploits some of that ocular freedom that Lingis describe. In time, the snare that Lingis proposes, the photographer's framing in and framing out of larger experience and situation, might become apparent to the critical viewer, but at first, the images are their own experience and the viewer is driven by embodied desires and curiosities. The viewing experience is fully embodied, closer to the balance between the senses described by Vasseleu (1998) where vision serves as a metaphor for touch.

Readers, on the other hand, are cultured by the codes of their language. A lifetime of indoctrination to arbitrary signs and syntaxes strongly suggests the necessary first moves in a reading encounter. In English, that would be left-to-right, top-to-bottom, and front-to-back. It would involve linking scanned signs to inventories of connotation and denotation only then moving beyond abstraction to remembered feeling or experience. Because *Wonders Seen in Forsaken Places: On photography and the photographs of Mark Cohen* is printed on pages and bound as a book (not presented as a portfolio in a box, or an exhibit on a wall) it clearly signals that it is to be read in order. In fact, I would argue that this book offers the reader/viewer a double-bind. If the photograph snares visual perception (space), text snares narrative (time). The combination works somewhat like photographer, Duane Michals' (1974) *Alice's Mirror,* where 6 images (each a visual snare) are sequenced (the narrative snare) to depict camera (and viewer) movement that reveals that each of the previous full-frame images was in fact just a small part of a larger scene. This book can be experienced as a series of nested scenes, each with two snares, where Cohen's visuality is bait, leading us to his vision of the Wiles-Barre community and its people. Lingis' use of Cohen's images is also bait leading us to his narrative about Cohen and the community he visualizes.

I entered this book as a reader, left-to-right, top-to-bottom, front-to-back, but found myself resisting Lingis' descriptive language, which poetically frames and focuses both the intimacy and intrusion of Cohen's method and also the materiality and lived experiences of the photographic subjects. Lingis' 10-20 words with each image positions the bodies Cohen has taken as sensual and oppressed subjects in settings baroque with decay. The author's carefully crafted metaphor and analogy suggest what Stafford described as a merging of occult and rational tendencies (2001) to both conjure and observe. Despite agreeing with some of Lingis' captioning of Cohen's images, I felt frustrated by the overt manipulation of my viewing. In irritation, I found myself covering the text as I flipped to the next page so that I could start with the image. After a time, I chose that the rest of my first experience of this book would be visual. Moving to the last image in the book, I began reading 'backwards' (or viewing 'forwards' from right-to-left?). By gently (?) redefining book-time, I encountered Cohen's images before engaging with Lingis' writing. It wasn't until my second reading that I fully entered Lingis' text.

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'Intrusion' as he described it himself is Mark Cohen's (2005) method as a photographer. By combining wide angle lenses, that don't demand precise focusing, together with a hand-held flash and waist-level camera work, Cohen's street photography involves timing and close proximity in a 'drive by shooting' method (Engler, 2013). It produces what Jena Dykstra (2005), a reviewer of his first major monograph, *Grim Street,* (Cohen, Tucker, & Southhall, 2005) described as "off kilter [compositions, with] heads…cropped out of the frame, and hands, legs, arms and truncated bodies lurch[ing] drunk-enly into it" (p. 180). Many critics give Cohen credit for accepting rules of chance on his process, embracing risk, and perhaps, creating something closer to realism.

Lingis' second reflection titled "Guileless Manipulator" begins after 57 pairs of image/text and seems at first to reinforce this critical reading by describing Cohen's method and the fact that his eye was not up to the camera when these pictures were taken. As a photographer, I feel that reading gives the artist far less aesthetic credit for the construction of his images, but also imposes far less responsibility for the relational choices involved in creating his encounters with others – as if he was a mobile surveillance camera who only emerges as an artist later in deciding which images to share from those he has collected on the street. Most artists work as much with their hands as their eyes and recognize how important the communication across senses is to art practice. A brush stroke can be impressionistic without being accidental or unintentional. A waist-level photograph in the hands (literally) of a practiced artist is, by definition, manipulative (again, literally), but hardly guileless. I would argue that Cohen understands that we, as viewers, find the formally dynamic created by the anamorphic distortions created using close-up, wide-angle photography of his approach aesthetically compelling. Because the low angles often frame out faces, leaving bodies, gestures, clothes and setting available for our scrutiny, few of the images reveal the identities of the subjects. Their anonymity gives the viewer permissions to scrutinize the seemingly candid realities depicted. Dykstra describes the images as having a kind of propriety because of this. It suggests an 'aesthetic' distance (a safety for the viewer and photographer alike) in the presentation that masks the aggression of the photographed moment.

> Levinas finds the phenomenological power…in the encounter with the face of the other that makes an appeal to us. In the vulnerability of the face of the other, says Levinas, we experience an appeal: we are being called, addressed…And our response to the vulnerability of the other is experienced as a response-ability. This is an ethical experience, an ethical phenomenology. (Van Manen, 2016, p.232)

Like other photographers (e.g., Joel-Peter Witkin, Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin) who explore human dignity and loss at the edges of mainstream society, Cohen's images pose ethical questions that are heightened by the candid nature of some of his work. Like these other photographers, the aesthetic qualities of those images can both enthrall and implicate us in dilemmas as viewers. Like young children, we want to stare and touch, but as adults, we catch ourselves in embarrassment or horror at our momentary intrusions. Both impulses are important to understand which leads me to Alphonso Lingis' curation and final responses to and use of Cohen's work.

The images appear to be selected from across the 30+ years of Cohen's career, but there is no curatorial statement. Instead, Cohen's photographs are presented without titles or dates and printed as half-tone images in the book at approximately 3" x 4" each on buff paper that further reduces the tonal range of the images from grey to beige rather than the full tonality of a 16" x 20"

silver prints as they would be experienced in a gallery. Each image is juxtaposed to brief writings by Lingis that are printed in a large, sharp font. The publication's constraints are imposed on Cohen's photographs and Lingis' reflections so that they exist beside each other in a kind of tense suspension where the words on the left have nearly as much visual emphasis as the images on the right. In the context of this book, the images have clearly been diminished.

In the final, extended reflection titled "The Fear," Lingis' project in this book, as a critical provocateur, becomes evident in his full-bodied critique of Cohen's method and his creative project. Cohen positions us, as viewers, as more intrusive than he seemed in the moment. We are not with his eyes; we are with his hands. He was making eye contact while we were pushed toward bodies. He describes how viewing Cohen's images combine the fascinations of looking with an empathy for the safety of those others being depicted (a core insight in the discussion of subjectivity in the feminist film theory of the 1960s and 70s) (Mulvey, 1999). Much of Lingis' final critical reflection resonates with my sense of artistic ethics and human relations. In my alternative approach to reading the book, I skipped over this final essay, and I now know that my experience of the book would have been substantially different had my right-to-left reading included it. I am still puzzled by the author's choice to amplify the dark aspects of Cohen's images through most of the book before jarring that experience with his final critique. I cannot imagine many experiencing this book unemotionally (from left-to-right, right-to-left or unbound entirely), so in that sense, it is a meaningful journey. It illuminates many important questions about human relations that can be projected into the contemporary moment, where mediated polymedia communication means that we are all experiencing each other through layers of languages. In the end, though, I still feel the double-bind; that I am in a place full of snares and manipulators. The author and the artist are both fascinating, somewhat frightening uncles at a family party who are each trying to convince me (the only guileless one?) to act out a prank of their devising on the other.

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