

# The Object of Photography

Jeffrey Fereday

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A fundament of photography is the material of residue; namely, the capacity to register photochemical trace, to develop a residual image of something exposed to the process of photography. Along with the capacity for image reproduction and the pictorial index, residuality has influenced the evolving poetics of the photographic medium and the way photography is broadly understood.

In Susan Fereday's installation, THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY, the notion of residuality extends beyond photography's intrinsic materiality. Recognising an ascendancy of the image over the material of photography, Fereday treats the photographic surface – the most pervasive signifying surface of the 20th century – as cultural residue.

THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY comprises several material elements. Firstly, the installation engages the physical and cultural space of the gallery: its lights, its walls, and its space form active, functional components of the material work. Objects and photographs are introduced into the space. Various black and white photographic prints show images of mirrors, shadows and reflections, light sources and illuminated surfaces, and fragments of unidentified objects. A common feature is the spherical or elliptical aspect of the imaged 'object' or its equivalent. Assorted serving vessels – bowls and plates, round or oval in shape with either translucent or reflective surfaces – are suspended mid-air in the gallery space. The objects, all 'designer readymades', include round shaving mirrors affixed to walls. Spot lighting variously illuminates, shades, or reflects upon the objects, the photographs, and the gallery space.

Fereday plays upon the accomplishment of photography, whereby the mechanism of the camera and the pervasiveness of photography not only frame the way we think but affect the mode and configuration of our thought. As Walter Benjamin wrote: "For it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye, other in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness

gives way to a space informed by the unconscious... It is through photography that we first discover this optical consciousness, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.”<sup>1</sup> By displacing the sign value of object and image, and framing the separation as a function of the gallery, Fereday activates the photographic language in a three-dimensional space of heightened optical consciousness, the referential domain of visual art.

The recurrence of spherical and elliptical shapes in the photographs is significant. The circle is a figure of unity, completion, and a symbol of closure. The elliptical shape recalls the circle, as seen from an indirect perspective in three-dimensional space. What are these pictures of? Overwhelmingly they evoke photographic images of UFOs, images distinguished by their luminosity and absence of clear visual definition.

Reference to the phenomenon of UFO photography has particular usefulness within Fereday’s critique of the image, for it demonstrates simultaneously the transcendent aspirations and material limitations of the photographic. The substance of the UFO image is apparitional – something is seen, but one knows not what. The phenomenon also reflects a culture of unfulfilled desire, where collectively we would prefer to embrace the illusory promise of the photographic image than lose faith in its veracity. We project our desire upon what we see, a desire to believe the substance of what is represented at the surface. What we see is what we see - before everything, and after all.

In his book *Flying Saucers*, Carl Jung describes the force of collective desire that these apparitions should exist in the popular imagination.<sup>2</sup> Understandably Jung professed ambivalence and anxiety in writing about the phenomenon of UFO sighting as a modern myth. His criticality would resound as mere whisper against the deafening roar of the popular desire to believe rather than critically analyse. Yet it was either that – to assert critically against the popular will – or abrogate his responsible recognition of the cultural moment and its necessity.

Contesting the representational basis of photography and the general belief in the image, Susan Fereday is not unfamiliar with such a dilemma. After all, the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin in the essay “A Small History of Photography”, (1931), published in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London, 1985 p.243

<sup>2</sup> C.G.Jung, *Flying Saucers - A Modern Myth of Things in the Sky*, (1959), ARK edition, London, 1987

myth of the image is the most pervasive of modern beliefs. Since first exhibiting in 1986, Susan Fereday has consistently used the camera to expose the condition of photography, to locate its points of exigency. Indeed, the title of this present installation, *THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY*, could fairly describe the thrust of artistic enquiry which she has sustained and developed over several years. Her evolving conceptual framework has consistently challenged received meanings of representational photography and has informed development of an abstract photographic aesthetic.

Often her rephotographed images centre around the photographic sublime, where the construction of likeness and the decomposition of its integrity as sign find equilibrium on the photographic surface. For example, a glint of light shines on the image of an object of commodity in a photograph: the shiny idea, the sparkle, a glimmer of glamour which connotes luxury through light and lustre and texture – it is glimpsed at a glance, and reflects both the way the object is seen and imaged. The light establishes the sense of perspective, a way of seeing the object, and illuminates the alignment of both object and image within a shared field of value, as equivalent surfaces. Yet it also exposes the material separation of image as a value and photography as a means, for observation of the photographic surface reveals the glimmer as an absence of detail – an area of white paper on the photographic print.

Progressively Fereday has shown the photographic as a functional surface. Its materiality is residual, secondary to the function of image within the economy of image exchange. While her photographs resist representational imagery, in proliferation as series and with the specificity of designed installation, her work achieves an insistent presence that is doubly engaging, doubly challenging.

In this installation, the aesthetic of photographic allure is reduced to a simple, enigmatic trace. Rather than imaging a world 'out there' – as if holding up a mirror to the world - the images reflect objects and phenomena present within the gallery space. Both installational arrangement and imagery work to dis-integrate the functional material of the photographic within the space of cultural analogy, the gallery. Using photographic and institutional reflexes as means of referral, a reciprocal equivalence is established between light, shadow, reflection, object, and trace. Within the space of controlled experiment that is the institution of modern art, Fereday reflects the dis-integrated functions of photography upon a specific field of cultural relations. The photographic

language is made object – but in a perpetually referential cultural space, a space where object is without substance and where reflection is without object.

In *THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY* the functional objective of the photographic image is made explicit – the object of photography is the illusion of the object, and therefore a function. Further, the object of photography is the functional relations which photography objectifies: the conflation of referent object and image; the subjective consumption and assimilation of image; and the desire to satisfy the ‘substance’ of image – the desire to see the image in oneself, and the necessity to conceive oneself in the image. The implications go beyond the white cube, reflecting on the extent of the culture of the image and suggesting structural atrophy as its residual cultural function.

One might also understand the object of photography as a reflection of the desire for the image. Through its endless deferral and ever-changing image, desire is continually occupied, never fulfilled. The eternal absence of the imaged object registers instead as a subjective lack, an inversion. This perpetuates control of the subject, upon whose apparent failure the objective quality of the image gains affirmation and replenishment of its ‘transformative’ status.

For Fereday, who in *THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY* extrapolates the process within the framework of the contemporary art space, this moment of subjection before the image occurs as a precognitive response. Revisiting the content of historical conceptual/perceptual art concerned with visibility and language, she draws the conundrum of seeing and believing, of image and object. We may understand that photography is surface, not essence, and not the object. Yet the paradox remains: it is precisely this absence, witnessed in the photographic trace and seen in our subjective inflection, that makes the surface so compelling.

What is most clearly revealed by the image is the absence of the object. What we see is the idea of the object, the image, and with it the sheer impossibility of image becoming the material object. And this we see, for there is no need to conceal its means, in the fluid forms and shifting moments, the images of desire. It is there, despite everything, in the vista of the future perfect, in the array of interchangeable choices of there and here, of then and now, of what will have been, alternatives, equivalences; for still it is here, even when not, an absence so full and all-embracing that it appears to anticipate every gesture, so that what is

and what it is not become confluent, of the one surface, no different. It is here, as there, that what it is not is truly the most tantalising.

As installation THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY returns a critical eye to the perceptual/conceptual art of the late '60s and early '70s. Fereday frames the radical moment of this period as historical, and ripe for renewal, by referring elements of Duchamp's pseudo-scientific method and theory as a precedent, and by representing the '80s development of a theoretically-driven, rephotography/text-based art practice (the social critique of the image in the function of representation) as a subsequent application of conceptualism's contestative ethic. Thus the critical effectiveness of installation, as a contemporary art practice in a post-object tradition, is drawn into question. The conceit of installation – its gesture of post-object criticality, its orthodoxy as contemporary institutional artform – is presented with the challenge: to reflect something other than the object of presence, to engage with something other than the reflected light of the gallery.

While evoking these ghosts of the white cube, Fereday's use of the photographic – with its referred attachment to 'the real' – introduces a degree of tension. The fundamental quality of gallery art is its separation from everyday life, yet THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY suggests points of linkage where a cross-exchange of referred effect is possible. On the basis of shared means, its critique includes the allurements of lighting, for example, which similarly informs the value of an object's presentation in photography, in the museum, in commodity display, and in everyday life. The positioning and status of the object as something floating, unattached, a thing itself, elevated in the world of desire, is common to 'art' and 'life', and Fereday's approach of suspension makes the relation explicit. Aside from the photographs, the only objects affixed to the walls are designer glassware and shaving mirrors, which not only reflect back the desire and the image of the viewer, but reflect, deflect, and project the light which is focused upon them.

Just as the notion of photographic residuality is punned in the dimensions of social space, the status of the object in THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY is also brought to the condition of paradox by punning the object from various perspectives. The shadows and reflections of suspended objects appear on the gallery wall as signs, traces of the image of the object writ in light and shade. In Duchamp's view the world is an endless tunnel comprised of mirrors, projections, and illusions. More recent cultural commentary has described the ascendancy of

reflective surface over the substance of 'the real', suggesting that the representational mirror effect redoubles the effect of the mirror on the object of remove, that the 'object' merely mirrors back the mirror, that there is no there there, nor here here. Fereday constructs the referential world of the cultural institution as an enclosed space comprised of mirrors, projections, and illusions. Here the image rebounds and recirculates and reflects artificial light – reflecting and deflecting, blurring distinctions, substantiating illusions. There the image engages a process of constant deferral – of meaning, of virtuality – and the object aspires to the condition of image.

Again her procedure recalls Duchamp, his Hatrack and shadow, and particularly his thought of the world as a projection problem:

"... if a shadow is the projection of a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface, then the three-dimensional object is the projection of a four-dimensional entity in the three-dimensional space. Everything that exists in the three-dimensional world is only the 'projection', the 'representation', the 'reflex' of invisible things existing in another world with a higher dimension."<sup>3</sup>

In recognising an ascendancy of image over the moment of photography, anticipating the transmutability of the imaging process from analogue to digital configurations, and herein the potential transformation of the spatial and temporal geometries of the image, Susan Fereday questions the transformative promise of 'new imaging technologies.'

Digital imagery derives not from the world of object relations, exposed of mimetic trace. It forms a perpetual abstraction of that world; without substantiative connection to physical (social, functional, object) relations, it is perpetually distanced, suspended, aurafied, removed from a consciousness of human experience. Yet, like photography, its potential is to permeate, extend, and reconfigure human consciousness, to develop new modes of perception.

Through the containment of the reflected space and its object lesson, Fereday alludes that this transformative potential is already anticipated, circumscribed, aurafied, and stabilised by the function of the image: fascination with the aura of the absent thing is sustained through its sign value and apparent substance in the economy of image exchange. While Fereday confronts the future with simple

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Molderings, "Objects of Modern Skepticism", in *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry De Duve, MIT Press, p.254

means and obsolete technology, the residue that is photography and the artefactual references of gallery art, her exposure is strategic. It illuminates the contiguous supports which bear upon the image as "a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be..." It is that distance which is established here, and reflected with infinite repercussion.



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