
Too Drunk to Fuck (On the Anxiety of Photography)

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Photography can be a neurotic's worst nightmare. At least if the neurotic thinks about it, and the neurotic does. He thinks too much. The photographer/neurotic gets caught between his desire and his intellect, and therein lies the nightmare. It's not that desire and the intellect don't go together, they do.

This essay is about photography and repression. I will ultimately consider different modes of desire at play within photography, but to get there I must start by talking about two films, *The Perfect Human* and *The Five Obstructions*.

Here is the human. Here is the human. Here is the perfect human. We will see the perfect human functioning. We will see the perfect human functioning. How does such a number function? What kind of thing is it? We will look into that? We will investigate that.

So begins narrator Jorgen Leth as he puts descriptive yet puzzling words to his 1967 film, *Det Perfekte Menneske* (*The Perfect Human*). The short film takes place in an empty studio. No walls, no ceiling; only the actor Claus Nissen enveloped in emptiness while performing the most mundane actions—filling his pipe, turning to the left, turning to the right, cutting his nails, walking. As Nissen walks, Leth continues: “Look at the perfect human moving in a room. The perfect human can move in a room. The room is boundless and radiant with light. It is an empty room. Here are no boundaries.” And later the voice-over continues, “Yes, there he is. Who is he? What can he do? What does he want? Why does he move like that? How does he move like that? Look at him. Look at him now. And now. Look at him all the time.” *The Perfect Human* is a beautiful film but irritating to describe. Watching it, I feel split, disconnected, and absorbed in the gap between what I am watching and what I am feeling. *The Perfect Human* doesn't merely resist interpretation—it repels it.

It is exactly this surface that the filmmaker Lars von Trier seeks to rupture in his film *The Five Obstructions*. He feels that Leth is repressed, that he hides behind his films. Von Trier, in making

his film, wants to have Leth remake *The Perfect Human* according to Von Trier's obstructions. It is the obstructions that, in Von Trier's words, will help Leth “proceed from the perfect to the human.” Von Trier feels that Leth is protecting himself by creating distance between his intellect and his emotions. Von Trier wants to “get into where the scream is and let it out.” In true Von Trier fashion, he says to Leth, “*The Perfect Human* is a little gem that we are now going to ruin... We may be able to do so by finding things that hurt.”

In Freud's paper “Negation,” a person draws attention to their thoughts but then denies them. Such a negation translates: “The association came to my mind, but I am not inclined to let it count.” It draws attention to a conflict between the unconscious and the ego. The unconscious is responsible for introducing a content; the ego is responsible for the negation. The negation is critical to Freud because it points to the process of repression. Freud's first example, of course, involves the mother: “You ask who this person in the dream can be. It is not my mother.” Or: “Now you'll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I have no such intention.” But negations don't always, according to Freud, involve false statements. He gives the example, “How nice not to have had one of my headaches for so long.” The announcement is surely the first sign of a headache, the approach of which the person senses but is unable to believe. The interesting question is not whether the statement is true or false but, rather, Why is *this* person talking about *that* subject?

In *The Perfect Human*, Leth keeps drawing attention to what he sees—the human. He meditates on it, and what Leth sees, we see. He makes sure of it: “Look, look at him now. And now.” It is within this constant repetition of seeing, and of thinking about what we are seeing, that he prevents us from *feeling* the content of this repression. Leth is repressing the source of Claus Nissen's anxiety, but he is doing so in the form of presenting literal facts. And it is by being precisely literal, in the term's most concrete sense, that Leth prevents us from feeling the emotion of the wound that seems to inhabit Claus Nissen. Leth makes us think but doesn't allow us to feel. In so doing, he engages a rather perverse form of negation: a repression disguised as a truth that cannot be negated, but that nevertheless hides the source of anxiety. This is what drives Von Trier crazy—so much so that he has to make a film about it, an Oedipal dance between Von Trier and Leth that pits the instincts of the body against the intellect of the mind.

Desire permeates photography. Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortes-Rocca speak to this desire in their essay “Notes on Love and Photography.” They start by discussing Roland Barthes. “Barthes, in the first few pages of *Camera Lucida*, confesses that when he looks at a photograph he sees ‘only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body.’ It is precisely ‘love,’ he explains, ‘extreme love,’ that enables him to ‘erase the weight of the image’ to make the photograph ‘invisible’ and thereby to clear a path for him to see not the photograph, but the object of his desire, his beloved’s body.”

Nowhere could the divide between unfettered desire and intellectual savvy be more pronounced than in the work of Nan Goldin and Christopher Williams. A comparison of the two artists’ languages is telling. Goldin: “My desire is to preserve the sense of people’s lives, to endow them with the strength and beauty I see in them. I want the people in my pictures to stare back.” [*Devils Playground* 2003 (Phaidon Press)] Williams:

In total this concern with photographic production and distribution, as well as its materiality, amounts to a second-order of self-reflexivity, or proposes an expanded frame for thinking about photographic materiality. It is important, I think, to reflect on photography in this way, because as a result the emphasis shifts away from two concepts that are paramount in the critical discourse around photography: the idea of the photographer-author; and the importance of the decisive moment. [*Afterall* #16 2007]

Of course, both quotes are taken completely out of context, but I think one can get some sense of the distinction I am trying to make. For Nan Goldin, nothing is more urgent than the life unfolding before the camera. For Christopher Williams, nothing is more important than disclosing the conditions of the photograph’s making. Goldin represses the photograph as a material object and the conditions of its making, while Williams represses his own desire. But it is, of course, much more complicated than this.

Desire manifests itself in many ways.

The subjects of Nan Goldin’s photographs seem wrought with desire. In Elizabeth Sussman’s words [Nan Goldin: *I’ll Be Your Mirror* 1997], “Her camera freezes the comings and goings of the social experience of desire: love and hate in intimate relationships; moments of isolation, self-revelation, and adoration: the presentation of the sexual self

freed from the constraints of biological destiny.” I think it is reasonable to assume in Goldin’s work that it is not merely the subjects she photographs who are wrought with desire, but Goldin herself. She seems to be absorbed by her subjects and we are witness to her absorption.

With Christopher Williams, things are less transparent. In his work, thinking about the subjects *themselves* leads us astray. One is quickly perplexed looking at a woman with a yellow towel on her head standing next to a color chart in one photograph, a jellyfish in another, a camera, some corn, a bicycle, etc. It surely must feel *different* for Christopher Williams to look at one of his photographs than it does for Nan Goldin to look at one of hers. The question is, What is this relationship for Williams, and what is it for us?

Williams does a tremendous amount of research and thinking about the subjects he uses, the politics and histories of those subjects, and, most importantly, the context in which we understand both through their representations. In a recent issue of *Afterall* [*Afterall* #16 2007], he spoke with Mark Godfrey in relation to his series *For Example: Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle* (ongoing since 2002). They spoke on subjects as varied as sociology, the economics of the Cold War, Americanization of European popular culture, the European reception of Pop art, the Bush administration, Godard, potatoes, the history of the Kiev 88 camera, and extensively on corn. The amount of historical knowledge and the complexity of Williams’s interests is intimidating. I found his discussion of corn and its relationship to photography particularly intriguing:

Christopher Williams: Almost everything you come into contact with in your daily life has had some relationship to corn as a product. The lubricant used to grind the camera lenses in the photographic industry has a corn by-product in it; the material used to polish the steel has a corn by-product in it; the filmstrip itself has a corn by-product in it, and many of the chemicals associated with the production of a fine-art print also have corn in them.

Mark Godfrey: Perhaps the artificial corn in the photograph was made using a corn-by-product as well?

CW: Yes. It’s not real corn in the image, but artificial corn made for window displays or photographic shoots. The company that produced

it estimated that 75% of the material used to make the artificial corn is in fact with a corn by-product. One could say the photographic industry has as much to do with corn as it does with, for example, light.

This is what is so exciting about Williams's photographs. Does Nan Goldin think about corn in her photographs? The distance between the thought and the photograph as a reflection of that thought is at such a great divide in Williams's work that one can't help but wonder why.

In my eyes, Williams's work functions as an implicit, but not didactic, critique of how we conventionally experience and understand subjects depicted in photographs. In doing so, he questions the act of interpretation itself.

I use Nan Goldin's photographs in comparison here, but in no way do I see Williams's work to be a direct critique of Goldin's. My model, rather, is to examine desire and, specifically, how desire manifests itself in radically different ways through different practices.

In Goldin's work the subjects themselves are the content. Through photography, her subjects are depicted through—or rather bathed in—a light that seems to resonate with meaning. In this sense, looking at Goldin's photographs gives us a sense of how she feels about her subjects. To experience the meaning of Goldin's photographs is to accept or reject *her feelings toward her people*.

I imagine that for Williams the idea of either a subject or an author dictating so much meaning would be problematic, if not inadequate. I assume so because he so often severs the photograph's meaning from the meaning of the subject depicted. The photograph of corn isn't about corn but about photography itself: about the conditions of a photograph's making, about all photographs, and about how such conditions are never disclosed in a photograph. It is a reality check against the false transparency of photography.

In this sense, one can understand Williams's work in relation to an act of deconstruction: it seeks to expose that which is undisclosed. It draws attention to the photograph as a cultural and social construction. It destabilizes meaning by revealing multiple and conflicting meanings. It brings to light that which was previously hidden, overlooked, or suppressed.

Williams's practice exposes photography's repressions.

On the surface, this sounds cold, intellectual, analytical, and tedious. In Williams's practice, it is not. It leaks desire.

Interpretation is slippery, if not outright problematic. However, I am going to try to do my best with Williams's work. It seems that any deconstructive act begs its own deconstruction. My goal is not to get it *right*, but to get *somewhere*: to take pleasure in the act of interpretation itself. In this sense, we are a good pair. Williams's practice does everything to make interpretation not possible. I will do everything to make sense of that very practice.

In my attempt to understand the thinking behind Williams's work, I am bound to fail. Not only will I project meaning that isn't there; I will project my own desires and misunderstandings. This will inevitably prove Williams's point that interpretation is an impossible task. I still cannot resist, however, as I find meaning in the act of interpretation itself.

What Williams's practice has made evident in significant, compelling, and ravishing ways is that photographic meaning is never transparent. The idea that meaning is not transparent in photographs radically alters both our view and our experience of photographs. In Williams's work we shift from an understanding of photography as testimonial witness to the world, to a realization that photographs are byproducts of undisclosed forces that alter and determine our relationship to them. In doing so, desire seems to be at the forefront, because desire determines that which is disclosed and that which is hidden.

Williams is operating in a cultural time in which the author-witness has not only been dethroned, but the process itself no longer holds its implied objective veracity. For him, the only way to excavate truths is to look at how the process and ingredients of making an image impacts the world. He does so by making his practice a model of such an examination. It is not really a deconstruction; he uses his own photographs. Rather, it is a model of what a deconstruction might look like.

If desire is at the forefront of what is hidden and undisclosed, we need a photographer. Williams uses one, by hiring one. This distance is critical to an understanding of his process. In fact, the subject of Williams's practice is not just photography itself but "the photographer." In his current show, *For Example: Dix-Huit Leçons Sur La Société Industrielle (Revision 7)*, up now at David Zwirner,

there are seventeen photographs. There are four photographs of a man; in three of the photographs he holds a camera, and in one he is having his shoulder measured. There are four pictures of a woman wearing lingerie in what appears to be a commercial photo shoot. In two of the photographs, we see her in lingerie directly, and in one we see her breast depicted (upside down) in the ground glass of a 4 x 5 camera. In the other photograph, we see her high heels depicted (upside down) in the ground glass of a 4 x 5 camera. There are two photographs of tires at angles; one each of a jellyfish, a landscape at night, and a painted ceiling panel by Daniel Buren; two bisected lenses; one bisected Nikon camera; and 1 bisected Fuji 6 x 9 camera. Photography is on stage, and so is the commercial photographer with his model. In Williams's previous work, "photographic meaning" seemed to be the center of discourse, while in this show, desire. Of course, meaning has always had a conflicted relationship to desire, and in Williams's previous work—and to an extent in his current show—desire was often seen in the context of Modernism. In this new work, desire makes its way forward not so much through Modernism but in a much more overt way, as desire is contextualized with sexual desire (as implied by the presence of the photographer and his model).

The photographic act is an act like no other, and it carries the weight of desire with it. The photographer falls for his subject, his desire, his view. Williams distances himself. He restrains himself. By not exposing the photographs himself, by modeling his photographs after a "photographer" (in this case, the commercial photographer), Williams exposes the context of the photographic act: the photographer, the photographer's tools, the object of the photographer's desire, the photograph as object of our desire, and the gallery selling the objects of our desire.

If this still sounds cold and analytical, I assure you it is not.

The interesting question is, Why is *this* artist talking about *that* subject?

On the one hand, Williams's practice looks like a deconstructive act of photography itself, and this would of course answer why. On the other hand, his work *feels* like an intellectualized embrace of fetishistic photographic tropes. So, which is it? The two would seem to be in conflict with one another, but in Williams's practice they parallel each other. Williams has positioned his work in such a way that we cannot understand his desire in relationship to

his subject, because the one interpretation—that it is a deconstructive gesture towards the desires and context of the commercial photographer—cannot be negated. On the other hand, how can we claim that he is embracing fetishistic photographic tropes? Is Williams himself conflicted?

Far from it. Rather, Williams seems to have found a strategy for getting around the anxiety of confronting one's desires. The strategy is to engage an external reality that cannot be negated, but that does, simultaneously, engage one's desire. In this sense, one can shift between an external reality and an internal reality at whim. The external reality is the deconstructive model; the internal reality is the desire to engage the same activity that one is deconstructing. Thus, interpretation becomes impenetrable. In Williams's case, we don't know how he feels towards his subject. I can't decide if it is a critique or an embrace. With Nan Goldin we not only see her desire, but we *feel* her desire. It might help, in this sense, to distinguish between *meaning* and *desire*. Meaning is never contingent in relation to an author, but desire always is, even if desire is the desire not to express how one feels towards one's content. Williams not only situates his content in relation to us for our own projection; he also provides an excellent model of how the intellect works in relationship to desire. He contextualizes desire with its opposition, the intellect, and he makes juxtapositions that demand this conflict.

Leth is doing a similar thing in *The Perfect Human*, but to different effect. By meditating too tightly on a work's subject, one cannot penetrate beyond the subject to the psyche that gives meaning to it. Leth draws attention to everything Claus Nissen is doing. He presents facts: "Look, look at him now"; "He is walking through the room." But such facts are empty signifiers. They don't have any meaning in themselves. They do, however, seem to beg the question as to why Leth is using them. In this sense, we become witness to Leth and Nissen *feeling/creating* anxiety. They do not wish to go beyond the surface of their spoken thoughts.

Williams does not expose us to anxiety; he exposes us to an intellect in the act of restraining emotion. In Williams's practice, this is the solution to the anxiety of his photographic desire. But his solution is our experience. To engage the complexity and depth of Williams's work is to understand your relationship to your desire.

This is my experience of Christopher Williams's photographs. Beyond making photographs that are

very compelling in their own right while disclosing the undisclosed context of photography, he provides a model of an intellect confronting desire.

Photography has shifted from being a discourse on trying to understand the world to a discourse on trying to understand ourselves. This has always been the case, only now it is more transparent—or less so.

This is how the neurotic writes.

WORDS WITHOUT PICTURES

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