

The Right Density of Abandonment (in homage to Roland Barthes)

written by Doug Rice | July 28, 2014



Gilles Deleuze was wrong when he claimed that we no longer live in the society of the spectacle. When he claimed, before leaping to his death in Paris, that we now live in the society of the cliché. Language itself has given up. We now live in the society of distraction. Seeing has been destroyed by looking. Words have been erased under the pressure of being repeated, mindlessly, for no reason but to disturb silence. What hope remains to experience the world in uncanny ways? How is it possible to defamiliarize the familiar when the familiar itself cannot be seen?



Imagine living in a world where words expired or simply became worn out after being used a certain number of times. That is, you knew there were limits on how often you could say any given word, but you did not know what your own personal limit for each word was. One person could say a word a thousand times, while another person might only be able to say the same word five times. (In much the same way that each of us at the beginning of our lives are given time, but are not told how much time we have been given to create our lives.) Imagine what it would mean to not know how often you could say a word before it disappeared from you; imagine how not knowing would affect your memory, your desire, your daily life.

Imagine you can only say the word “love” or “beauty” four times in your life. Remember, you are not aware that you can only say it four times. You just know that there is a limit to the number of times you can say any word before that word is no longer part of your vocabulary. Then, imagine overhearing your neighbor using the word “love” repeatedly, carelessly professing his or her love for milkshakes, for football, for spring flowers, for the other person, on and on, day after day after day. Saying the word as if he would never tire of saying it or saying the word as if he did not care if he did wear the word out, while you stood at the kitchen sink silently looking into the eyes of the woman you love so deeply. Breathing near to her without speaking. Not fearful of saying, “love,” but being fully conscious of the devotion that saying such a word takes, knowing that it might be the only time or the last time in your life that you are ever able to use the word “love.” While looking at your loved one, imagine what your body and your soul would experience without words, how you would look at her, how you would see her. Imagine all that might become visible instead of all that remains invisible, covered over by words made dusty with misuse, when we say “love” without being present enough to devote ourselves to the moment of being with

our loved one. All those times that we say “love” because it is expected of us. Imagine what such limitations on language would do to how we see and experience our daily lives and our memories. Then, imagine what becoming precise with words would do to language itself, to the meaning of our memories and of our being in the world.

Finally, imagine arriving at the threshold of saying the word for the first time, while simultaneously wondering if the word will ever be there for you to say again. Think of what your body would feel like, your lips, your tongue, your ribs. Think of this moment of saying that word and of all that could become true and possible.

Gilles Deleuze insists we must all be bilingual, even, or perhaps especially, inside our own language. Deleuze calls on us to create a minor use of language inside our own language. We must unnerve our language in order to see what needs to be unveiled.

No theory ever articulates what intimacy does to seeing.



In Wong Kar-Wai's *In The Mood for Love*, his camera wants to see what cannot possibly be seen. His camera wants to articulate what can never be spoken, or what can only be whispered as a secret into a hole in a tree, then, once whispered, covered over with mud. His camera is exploring, not recording, the mood for love. Wong's camera caresses time. It knows how to wait without any intention aside from seeing. His camera holds time still in ways that are rare in contemporary cinema. Most editing rushes to the end of the narrative as quickly as possible, destroying the viewers' experience of time and, along with it, the hope to make visible all that must remain invisible. Wong's camera adores (brings light to) everyday moments that in other films remain in darkness.

At the top of narrow stone stairs leading up from a noodle shop, Wong's camera waits, quietly, for Maggie Cheung's character, Lai-chen, the female protagonist of the film. The frames per second have been slowed and Cheung's movements are burdened by years of keeping a secret locked so deeply inside her soul that even she cannot know what that secret might reveal to her if light were brought to it. After Lai-chen has climbed the stairs and walked out of the frame, the camera disobeys conventional narrative design and refuses to follow her. Instead, it remains focused on the wall that she has just walked past, as if the camera cannot understand what it is supposed to do next. Love does this. It confuses narrative, unsettles desire. But it also changes how we experience an everyday moment. And the camera gives us this moment by stilling cinematic time, and, in doing so, it stills our own experience of time as well. We sit in the dark of the theater. Breathing. Aware of our skin. Aware we are seeing this simple corner of a wall differently than we have seen any other wall in cinematic history. This

moment sticks with us.

The brilliance of the shot is that it does not become a long take. It only startles the narrative time enough to allow us to see what we never thought to see before, in a way that we were never capable of seeing prior to Wong's camera teaching us to be patient. Eventually, Tony Leung's character, Chow, enters the empty frame and walks past the wall still marked by Lei-chen's absence, her beauty, and he walks down the stairs to the noodle shop, waking the camera from its private reverie.

Later in the film the camera revisits this place, this moment. Instead of two one-shots and a pause, there is a two-shot followed by a pause. That is, Lei-chen and Chow are in the frame of the shot and move through the space at the top of the stairs at the same time. They pass each other. Lei-chen's hand nearly brushes against Chow's; they each long to look into the eyes of the other. But they can only look down, away from the eyes of the other. Lai-chen and Chow remain secret to each other. Secret to their own souls. After they have moved through the frame, once again the camera lingers. Wanting. A breath, not a long shot. A holding. The wall becomes a dream space where time becomes something other than what time was, other than what time is. Time becomes other to itself, and, even in her absence, Lai-chen's beauty remains. Nothing disappears after Lai-chen and Chow leave the frame. The trace of their secret, of their not-looking, is visible and present.

Every sentence I have ever written has been written before a knowledge of something else arrived.



In William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, a moment comes when Benjy screams and screams at the wall. He howls. He sees only what is not there, what can never return. The absent mirror. The missing reflection of Caddie. Benjy wants to see the mirror that has disappeared, the image of his virginal sister, but all that remains of desire is the stain. Memory tangled and rooted like Caddie's soiled drawers. Benjy is unloosed from time. What happens happened. What happened happens. Still. Benjy sees only what is no longer there to be seen. But, in seeing what remains of what cannot be seen, shadows are turned into transient photographs, the kinds of photographs that can only capture the sensation of the just missed. The same can be said of writing any sentence: a desire accidentally caught while another desire escapes.

I am convinced, as a theorist, that we must break into what we do everyday.



Marcel Duchamp is dead. And his death put an end to moments of being that were astonishing and that could have been even more astonishing had he not become an artist, had he just remained silly, standing on New York City street corners in winter handing out snow shovels in advance of broken arms, had Duchamp done it there instead of in galleries. For certain classes of people, Duchamp woke up the everyday, toyed with it, teased the everyday into new configurations. But now Duchamp is dead. In my wildest dreams, Duchamp never became an artist. He refused his ego. He lived a simple life, worked in a hardware store in Etna, Pennsylvania, disturbing people's everyday misconceptions of all that they simply walked past without seeing, without thinking about, so that life, for anyone who entered Duchamp's Hardware Store, was never the same as it ever was.

R. Mutt, on the other hand, was never truly alive. R. Mutt was always only a name, merely letters defacing a urinal. R. Mutt was not even fury signifying nothing. At best, the signature R. Mutt provided a sort of parody for an artist who had not yet been recognized as an artist, whose 15 minutes waited. R. Mutt's original *Fountain* has been lost, perhaps recycled by an environmentalist or by an inappropriate postmodern artist. A copy of the original readymade is kept out of sight, protected more than enshrined, in the San Francisco MOMA. Harmless. Men still stand at urinals in public bathrooms and do about the same thing they did before 1913. Nothing much has changed. People can still open a can of Campbell's Tomato Soup without thinking too much, without becoming aware of much of anything.

A few years ago, normal people (i.e., not artists) began taking photographs of their food and posting them on social networks. Perhaps they were trying to prove that their food was real. The worst of them were (are) simply being crazed narcissists. "Look at what I am eating. You know you wish you were me." More likely, these people were doing all they could to disappear or to disguise who they were becoming. Some, I am convinced, ordered food in order to take a photograph of the food, more so than to eat it. None of them signed their food R. Mutt; none of them transformed their food into new ways for seeing food.

One of the most radical actions my grandmother taught me had to do with eating. Once upon a time, she caught me eating an apple too quickly while watching cartoons on television, and she told me I was being careless. She told me that both the cartoon and the apple had every right to destroy me, to do things to me, unspeakable things that would damage my soul and make it impossible for me to safely cross the street. She said I was eating the apple as if, just because apples were here yesterday, I believed they would still be here tomorrow.

"You have to have reverence for what you put into your body," she told me. "Apples aren't from the grocery store. When you bite into an apple, you're biting into sunshine, you're biting into rain. You're swallowing dirt and roots. Some man or woman pulled that apple off a tree somewhere. You're eating their touch. When you bite into that apple, you remember this: You remember you're biting into God. And you think about that. You need to be grateful, son." She looked into my eyes like I was a hopeless child and like every other child of my age was hopeless. She shook her head, and turned her

back to me. "Why do you feel like you have to hurry that apple into your stomach? You're eating a little bit of God's imagination with each bite. You can't rush thankfulness. You have to cherish that apple. You don't know when it's not going to be here anymore. And," she turned back to look into me, "only a sinner watches television while eating."

All words descend from other words. They fall from trees. They rot. They turn to dust.



Every word I have ever written or spoken is bruised. They have been injured by teeth, by tongues, by lips, by pencils, and by pens. Words have always already been elsewhere. *A priori*. In the mouths of others. No word is ever like a virgin, let alone a true virgin. And every word is a farewell. It is what makes a word a word. And, like a photograph, words always remain trapped in mourning. The word, like the photograph, is here because what we desire to be here is no longer here, and, once uttered or written, the word carries with it all our wounds that have never healed. Language is born out of absence. A man tells stories for the not-here, for those who have vanished, for the emotions that have been destroyed. A man says the word "love"—maybe he even whispers it—like that word is more than that, more than a hole, more than something that's not here any longer.

Thuy told me of her maternal great-grandmother who bit her tongue and poisoned herself. This blood of her ancestors survived in the breath of each of Thuy's words. When she taught me Vietnamese, she said she was doing so because she wanted me to experience my tongue in new ways. She said that knowing this, becoming conscious of my tongue and teeth and saliva, would remind me that my body was speaking. Words are born. "The slightest touch of a syllable in your mouth should always have a mythological power and should always awaken your skin." Along with the sounds of her ancestors in the tenor of her own voice, dry, and wanting water, she carried shadows of Vietnam in her hair.

I still search for traces of Thuy on the skin of my fingers, on the palms of my hands. On my tongue. Traces from touching.

A man most fears the unseen power of words and images locked inside his memory. The half-stripped trees of winter. Floating ice in the Monongahela River in late February. A woman disappearing in the rain. Streets are made of memory and flesh, of passion desperate to stay alive. The longer a man lives the more he dies. Buildings vanish. Men grow tired of their wives. Wives become more silent. Children disappear. Rivers weaken, become tranquil, like they have outlived their usefulness. Ghosts haunt the windows of abandoned homes. Words replace people. Only their names remain in the world. You say their names thinking that saying a name can make the person appear. Praying that a name has some magic in it. The word made flesh. So you repeat aloud

the name of some woman who abandoned you, but most times a word isn't much more than a shape to fill a lack.

But it is a beautiful thing, the reinvention of a word.



(letter from Kathy Acker)

The most revolutionary gesture humans can make is to love differently. To transform love into a gift, instead of using love as an action. To give someone love and to be patient and curious while the person creates something out of the love that she or he has been given. To replace "I love you" (where the subject, "I," acts on the object, "you," and waits for an equal reaction, a confirmation, a repetition, where the subject stands and demands that the object mirror back the subject's "I love you" with an "I love you" of their own, an "I love you" that is rarely ever of their own, but, more often, is merely a reflection of what is expected and demanded), to replace this way for expressing love with Luce Irigaray's "I love to you." This epistemology of touch that creates a *you* and an *I* and that keeps this *you* and this *I* separated by the demands of grammar. *You* given to *I*. The *I* that desires, the *you* that receives the desire in wanting, until this *you* and this *I* fold into one another.

When someone tells us they love us, perhaps we should simply say, "Thank you." Receive their gift and show them our gratitude for it by creating something new with it. Giving love as a gift rather than as an action destroys narrative traditions and invents patience, the way faith is born out of moments that had been unknown. We become amateurs. Curiouser and curiouser.

Kathy Acker in her search for love, for true love, for pure love, used words that risked offending and unnerving readers, and she gave us images that have power and depth and that make many readers feel uncomfortable. Because she desired to escape the narrative of romance, Acker had the courage to look directly into desire and need without flinching (Akira Kurosawa's definition of a true artist). Acker, as a person and as an artist, wanted to escape the narrative of romance that allows capital to continue to use and control women. Narratives of romance simplify women and coerce women into weakness. (They perpetuate a myth that allows capital to continue to operate on our daughters and on all of us. They continue to create the myth of a daughter only wanting to need.)

Acker's writing, say in *Don Quixote*, is an honest and painful quest for love, the love that escapes these narratives of romance. Acker believes in love, not romance. I, too, still believe in love, not romance. (There is a difference: Romance kills, Love awakens.) Romance as a narrative is not simply a lie; it is more pernicious than that. Romance is a carefully crafted narrative to destroy love, to make you fear the intimacy of love. The

narrator of Acker's Don Quixote says: "What I wanted most was love. What I want most, even as I am dying, is love. ...I would have this love which is neither control nor being controlled...She conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love." Acker gave our daughters pirate maps of desire, of hope, of dreams and of ways for making this real.

It should take a man as long to cut down a tree as it took the tree to grow.



When one edge touches another edge, both edges become uncertain. The fragile tip of a finger presses into skin, erasing the difference that separates. This is just as true of a pencil touching paper as it is of flesh coming to flesh. The skin I live in waits for her to break into me.

I begin each sentence in the same way that I begin each prayer. I stop time to be with my beliefs, and I write each sentence to be with each word. I do not write with an intention of coming to an end, just as I do not pray to be done with prayer. Rather than writing with an intention, guided by the already known, I write with intensity that breaks open the seams of seeing. The writing of each sentence becomes an experiment in thinking, not a grammatical cage of death and despair. Sentences should flirt with the impossible and should always be on the verge of becoming lost in a wilderness. And the writing of each sentence is forever a mystery, not to be mastered and explained away in a fearful handful of dust, but to be experienced.

Time does not heal all wounds; if a man is not careful, time erases wounds.



A few years ago I saw a wedding ring lightly covered by dust in the window of a pawnshop. I couldn't shake away the seeing of it. What seeing it did to my heart. You see a wedding ring in the window of a pawnshop, and it changes how you tell a woman you love her; it changes what you feel capable of promising to a woman. I walked into that pawnshop, and I asked to see the ring. I held it in my hand, turned it over, looking at it, feeling it. Holding that ring scarred my heart deeper than I imagined anything ever could. Then, I read the inscription on the inside of that wedding band, like reading it wouldn't do anything to me. There are times when a man realizes there are words in this world that are not meant to be seen by anyone other than by the person the words had been written for. Seeing those words saddened me in ways that no other story ever saddened me before, and I have taken on that sadness. That man's sadness is inside me. What that man wrote on that ring for that woman has come to be part of who I am. I felt his words, his hope, his promises, on

my fingertips, felt it in the palm of my hand when I touched that ring. I can't do anything about it now. I'm going to live the rest of my life knowing that man's sadness. I live it when I'm about to fall asleep. I live it when I'm at a ballgame and a mosquito is biting into my skin. I live it when I am teaching my classes. People go to movies and cry over some made-up story of failed romance. These same people most likely have walked past that wedding ring in that pawnshop on East Ohio Street and didn't feel a damn thing, and you want to know what's wrong with this world?

To make visible all that resists visibility requires that we see beyond time, into time. We must enter *becoming* to escape past and future.



We live in a world where all printed matter looks like identical. Writing by hand, instead of typing on a keyboard, releases our bodies into each word. We give our signature to each word in the very act of writing. Handwriting creates an echo in the fabric of time. A man sits in Stuttgart writing a letter by hand in a tiny, nearly illegible script to a woman in San Francisco. The crossed-out words, the smudges, the nearly indecipherable words, words scribbled in the margins, the scent of the woman or man who wrote the letter, all invite us to be more intimate with the letter than a letter or email typed on a keyboard. The slow journey of the letter. This man remembers the thrill, when, as a child, he saw his own handwriting for the first time. He wondered what he could do with it, with writing as intimate as any fingerprint. Now, he worries his children will never know themselves through their own hand. "Je est un autre," as Rimbaud would say.

I only ever have one window open when I write. That one window has always been a single piece of paper in a notebook. I write longhand with a pencil, as I did when I was a child. I write this way so that I can slow down. That one piece of paper is my window, my one screen into the world. (How many windows do you keep open on your computer screen? More than one? As long as capital keeps us distracted from realizing that we are distracted, the creeps win, and we live the life they design for us, not one that we create for ourselves.) Having only this one window open allows artists not only to focus and concentrate, but also to contemplate what they are creating, and, most importantly, it allows artists to see, to tend to the scene that is being explored, to pay attention to it in a visceral way. (Remember that seeing means to forget the name of the thing seen.) Cultivating solitude and sensuality quiets the noise that pulls us away from seeing.

People (especially artists) repeatedly quote Samuel Becket's: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Think of the hours of each day, the days of each week, the weeks of each month, the months of each year, the years of your life that you must devote to this practice of failure in order for your failure to lead you somewhere. It is difficult and time-consuming enough to fail once; imagine how much more demanding it is and

how much more time it takes to fail better. Boredom and frustration are important elements of failure. Too often, though, distraction sabotages boredom and prevents a person from using boredom to surprise the conventions of seeing. (Failure demands a mindful discipline, not casual mistake-making.)

Years ago, I made my way down into the basement of the English Department of Binghamton University, John Gardner's lair, for a conference with John. He was banging away on a manual typewriter. I asked him why he wasn't using an electric one. He looked up at me and asked me if I was crazy. He said an electric typewriter would speed his writing up too much. It would risk making writing careless, that a man could probably write without giving much thought to the sentence, to the word. Then he said, "You don't use an electric typewriter, do you, Rice?" I said, "No, hell no, John. Hell no." I still remember seeing that one piece of paper in John's manual typewriter. Now, imagine if John were to have had five pages of paper, five windows, in his manual typewriter (as perhaps some of you may have five windows open on your computer screen). How could he see into all five windows? How could he concentrate on all five windows? How could he avoid being distracted by all five windows?



And is not your desire at present for an unveiling? A desire to undo blindness?



Women should give their daughters names that are nearly impossible to say by a man unless the man is patient. A man should need time and breath to say the names that mothers give their daughters. These names should act as talismans to protect their daughters from those who do not understand the truth of cherishing the moment for the saying of their name. A man should feel all of who he is when he is saying the name of a daughter. Time should stop.

Have you ever tried to see a moment before it disappeared?



A photograph, even more than a sentence, becomes the far near, the *here* of the *there*. The remembrance of the past renewed in this moment of looking into a time no longer here, no longer there. As soon as I take a photograph, it becomes something else. The challenge is to become curious about what is becoming, instead of nostalgic for what it no longer is.

Inside each photograph there is another photograph that is hidden. The hidden photograph is timeless, like Caravaggio's *pentimenti*. Waiting. Wanting. And

this true photograph tells us what we already know, but do not know we know, in an unintelligible language flirting with ambiguity. To see you before you slip into nowhere. Out of time. To see you inside this photograph, while sitting here in a café, in Stuttgart, while you are there, in San Francisco, you cannot be closer, cannot be farther.



Seeing only begins once you have begun forgetting what you have seen.

The one who takes the photograph disappears from the photograph, escaping behind the photograph, leaving only a trace of their absence. The photograph becomes a broken narrative. Searching. Photographs are merely the remains of a time that once was and of a time that now is. A time that can never be. A photograph silences time, disappears time while inventing another sense of time, of place, a stillness within movement. This photograph of absence opens a space that waits for time to appear, to reappear. For time to slip. The photograph creates a space to make time visible.

Time is. Time was. Time will be again.

Photographs collapse stories before they begin to reveal too much, before they accidentally articulate the unsaid. A photograph in the past, of the past, becomes the past even in the present. Truth is transformed into myth, a nostalgia of desire that creates a fracture in seeing.

This photograph that I am remembering is a moment of desire. Was.

Anything you have photographed has already disappeared.



She whispered sentences that were tiny mysteries, subtle orgasms of memory. Rarely will a ghost break a silence. They just appear to give you something, an insight into a memory that was fading away into the white of dreams, a way to see into your life differently, a way you'd rather not know about. Memories that whisper to each other in a language that has disappeared, that some say never existed.

Only the truth is true. Photographs are merely the remains of some truth. Living mirrors. They tend to be promiscuous. Have you ever thought of what is really going on when someone takes a photograph of someone looking at a photograph? Am I the witness, or is the photograph witnessing me? I once saw a photograph that appeared to be real, authentic. I experienced the present moment of my seeing this photograph for the first time, simultaneously with

remembering the moment of the past when it had been taken, a time nearly forgotten. A time that had fallen out of joint. "I try to. Remember. You." But every sentence is a conspiracy of silence.

There are memories that even photographs refuse to reveal. Photographs that wait in silence the way a sentence waits, patiently, longing for a touch, a breath, a word. She always feared seeing herself suffer inside a photograph, to be trapped. After such pain is exposed, what forgiveness is possible?

Most photographs become little more than architectural accidents of time.



Nothing in a photograph can ever become sacred. One night, as we were falling asleep, I confessed to her that my scarred tongue had been everywhere my fingers had been, and for longer. Later, she woke in the dark, reaching for my hand. The quiet streets of San Francisco seemed to be miles away. She said she could still hear snow falling from her childhood, even though she had not seen snow for years. Her voice torn and thin. In the morning, every morning we shared together, she held a mirror in her hands like an open book.

A requiem to mark the moment.



Some photographs you only imagine you are seeing. Like this one. The true photograph remains invisible inside the photograph you imagine. This photograph, the authentic one you long to see, is of my memory of having taken the photograph that appears to appear before your eyes. I was walking with Amber through narrow streets in San Francisco when she began to dream. She said that she desired to go further than her heart could bear, to write ambiguous shadow sentences in languages that have disappeared, to love by violent fragments, by splinters. The photographs I took of her, quite often, merely became self-portraits of my desire. She remained outside.



Sometimes a photograph is a memory meant to be forgiven.

We were walking up Leavenworth Avenue when it began to rain. Amber looked at me and smiled. We did not have an umbrella with us and we did not want to hurry home. We were never much afraid of rain, of getting wet. Amber always

looked more beautiful in the rain. Her hair kinked and wild. It seemed like raindrops meditated on her skin. If our bodies are made up mostly of water, I wonder what is truly happening to our bodies when it rains? I wonder if our ancestors are in the raindrops, if we are being carried home.

You learned how to bury memories of a little girl inside mirrors and photographs.



I think this is what the word invisible means.

What if laughter and weeping were the only ways we could express our understanding of philosophy? Of desire? Of touch?