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Longing and Belonging: Alienation and Anxiety in Domestic Photography

The interpretation of photographs is inextricably tied to nostalgia; it presents us with concretized memories. However, nostalgia functions as an aporia—a gap or absence around which meaning shapes itself, because these memories of the past are never truly present. The practice of photography displaces day-to-day lived experience into a simulated reality that seems incredibly real. The experience of looking at childhood photographs—of ourselves, our family, or our friends—is bizarre because it prompts cognitive dissonance, that time has been reversed, stopped, or made irrelevant. Although photographs allow us to access the past, this access is dubious. Instead of presence as it seems to promise, photographs offer traces, fragments of lived reality. In the same fashion as memory, photographs can only tell us so much—they are impersonal artifacts that contain their subject without words. Meaning is impressed upon a photograph rather than acting as self-evident. The Marxist critic, Mark Fisher, explains the condition “hysterical paramnesia” in his book, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016): “Patients confabulate a whole ‘remembered’ world on the basis of a few fragments” (Fisher 72). This psychological reckoning with amnesia is instantiated in modern subjectivity, that one is always reconstructing, attempting to (re)discover what they have lost. In other words, the past is unified through the curation of images. This cataloguing is seen in glossy representations of the decades of the fifties and sixties, particularly in the motif of the house with the white picket fence. The motif of amnesia displays the impasse of modern subjectivity. Perpetual dissatisfaction drives to constant destruction and reinvention—as a consequence, even the most recent history is quickly forgotten. This disappearance of the past haunts the present. The contemporary obsession with photography, through its silent immortalization of experience, unconsciously attempts to quell anxiety over

the disappearance of what we understand as essentially “me” but rather supplants (and displaces) any sense of reality.

Roland Barthes opens *Camera Lucida* (1980) by explaining his own fascination with an old photograph of Napoleon’s youngest brother. He states, “I am looking at eyes that looked at the emperor” (Barthes 3). For Barthes, the making and viewing of photographs is inextricable from absence, particularly its suspension of death and time. Photographs always wrestle with (im)mortality, extending human presence, deferring/suspending death indefinitely through the material displacement of lived experience. In other words, the doubled reality of photography is an attempt to immortalize and preserve human life through objectification. Integration into a symbolic order functions as a kind of death or stasis, however mimetic symbolization and (re) presentation (as seen in photography) functions as a weird undeath. Fisher explains, “The place beyond the mortifications of the symbolic is not only the space of an obscene, non-linguistic ‘life,’ but also where everything deadened and dead goes, once it has been expelled from civilization” (Fisher 102). The undead subject of photography is a weird haunting of utterly non-linguistic representation. The unease brought about by photographs is that they merely *exist* without obvious explanation. Because they communicate without an objectively interpretable language, every attempt at interpretation is an inadequate, external assignment of meaning. Susan Sontag in her landmark work of photographic criticism, *On Photography* (1973), explains, “Photography is the medium of what is lost [...] transmuting, in an instant, present into past, life into death” (Sontag 70). Black and white tonality as seen in Adams’ “Summer Nights #18”¹ charges photographs with a wistfulness that illustrates this transformation. The motif of black and white is a shorthand for nostalgia. Furthermore, photographers that choose the domestic as their subject often locate themselves on the outside looking in, reinforcing a sense of aimless, nostalgic longing. The human quest for preservation through images deconstructs the present, suspending it as the “reanimated” past.

1 See Figure 1



Figure 1: "Summer Nights #18" by Robert Adams

The very medium of photography is based in a tension between materiality and immateriality. The material sense is the literal object, the artifact created through the photographic process.² The immaterial essence is contained in the subject photographed—the absent-present agent; a presence that points to absence. The photograph as an object, however, heightens the indication of presence. Vision in this context connotes knowledge: to see

2 For the sake of this paper, I am discussing analog photography which literally creates objects and obviously displays this dichotomy.

something is to know that it is or has been. Obviously, this creates problems in the grotesque twists of “reality” such as seen in photographic manipulation that has become sophisticated enough to make anything seem real. Barthes explains, “Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not what we see” (Barthes 6). When we talk about photographs, we are often talking about the immaterial aspect, the thing that is represented; however, Barthes points back to the “frame,” the object that contains the subject. He explains further, “The photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both” (Barthes 6). A photograph presents a frozen fragment of reality that is materially composed from silver crystals or colored pixels. Barthes explains that the reality contained in photographs cannot be understood apart from its construction. The proposition that photographs are a direct line to the truth has always seemed dubious to viewers because they are so narrow in scope. They are constrained by technology. The belief is not that the medium is incapable of producing truth, merely that it cannot capture *all* of it. For this reason, photographic technology has historically moved in the direction of clarity and ease of access. This ease of access, the creation of smaller, faster, and cheaper cameras,³ launched vernacular photography, what is often referred to as the snapshot, seemingly off the cuff, unmanufactured glimpses at daily life. In the 1970s and 80s, professional photographers turned to this style of photography—a focus on the ordinary as it is (rather than as a project to elevate the ordinary). Peter Galassi, the curator of the landmark exhibition “The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort,” explains the strangeness of the snapshot,

Perhaps the most ubiquitous of all photographs, snapshots are also the most hermetic. To the insider, to the member of the family, snapshots are keys that open reservoirs of memory and feeling. To the outsider, who does not recognize the faces or know the stories, they are forever opaque. At the same time, because we all have snapshots of our own, and thus know the habit of understanding them, we

³ The historical development of cameras for simplicity is marked by an effacement of the mediation process, that photographs appeared to come more and more directly from the camera. This impulse culminated in digital technology.

all are equipped to imagine ourselves into the snapshots of others, into the dramas and passions they conceal. (Galassi 11)

Galassi explains that the interpretation of photographs is complicated by their insularity. The typical method of interpretation requires one to use their own personal photographs to imagine themselves as a part of someone else's photographs. Furthermore, Galassi explains that the significance of these photographs comes less from aesthetics and more from the perceived relationship between subject and photographer, that we can connect to the experiential quality of the vernacular photograph. The question of photography is whether it at all lives up to its seeming promise of reproducing reality exactly or reproducing reality in a way that can be meaningfully accessed. Photography is a ubiquitous and daily practice—one that everyone, not merely artists participates in to memorialize their own lives. Photographs that foreground the process—the constructive and chemical qualities and the materiality of the object, “photograph”—emphasize the inherent fragmentation of the medium. Photographers such as Ellen Brooks, James Casebere, Robert Adams, and Todd Hido emphasize “the frame” through their fragmentary and evocative photographs of the domestic. Their work points to the uncanny nature of photography. The attempts to solidify humanities’ location in the world through photographs results in alienation—a persistent longing for the empty promise of connection.

The domestic as a location is a powerful metonym, containing innumerable unspoken symbols within its four walls. The central motif of the home is the idea of the nuclear family, the structure that develops cultural narratives and creates what seems “normal.” Thus, the power of the symbol of the home is that it represents *something* to nearly everyone, that it contains both personal and public meanings. The “homely” is the root of the alienating power of Freud’s *unheimlich*. Fisher describes, “the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange [...] the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself” (Fisher 10). Photographs of domestic spaces, the constant and plural re-presentation of domestic space as seen in the landmark MOMA exhibition, “The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort,” illustrate a struggle with the instability of modern conception of self as defined through the

construction of the home. Galassi explains the importance of the choice of subject for the exhibition, “There is room to argue that domestic life is a subject of broad importance. In the 1980s the political right and left rediscovered the bitterness of their mutual antipathy, nowhere more deeply than in their shared conviction that the home is a major battleground of social struggle” (Galassi 13). The home represents the “norm,” what is conventionally acceptable, both socially and economically. Every different kind of living space, a single-family home, a town house, an apartment, etc., represents how a person understands themselves as part of the social structure. Also, the idea of “home” has shifted to an immaterial and internal sense. It is less of a location and more of an amorphous collection of feelings or people. It psychologically codes and symbolizes crucial markers of identity and belonging such as class, race, and sexual orientation. Thus, “home” as a concept is “who I am” loosely chained to a brick and mortar structure.

Representations of domestic spaces are rooted in nostalgia, a longing for the past or for something unified and meaningful. Obviously, a home is a place in which one lives; however, the concept “home” also contains a specter of pastness. The Derridian concept of hauntology, a pun on ontology, posits that emptiness, a haunting, or a trace of meaning exists at the basis of structures rather than an ontological stability. Fisher explains that hauntology is concerned not only with the hauntings of the past, but, “the failure of the future” (Fisher 16). Ellen Brooks “Front Entry”⁴ and Todd Hido’s “1941”⁵ illustrate this instability through the representation of lit windows. This portal promises that there might be life; it implies presence, that there is something inside. However, the window merely suggests life. These photographs then question the humanity often attached to inanimate domestic structures. The photographic catalog, the surfeit of representations of the domestic illustrate the futility of any unified understanding of the domestic. A sense of the self created through representations of the domestic is displaced and remains inscrutable. This displacement of the self into an unsatisfied longing illustrates the unheimlich, the failure of the domestic to coincide with interpretive expectations. Photographs externalize and dissociate the self. This traumatic split renders photographic representation of

4 See Figure 2

5 See Figure 3



Figure 2: "#1941" by Todd Hido

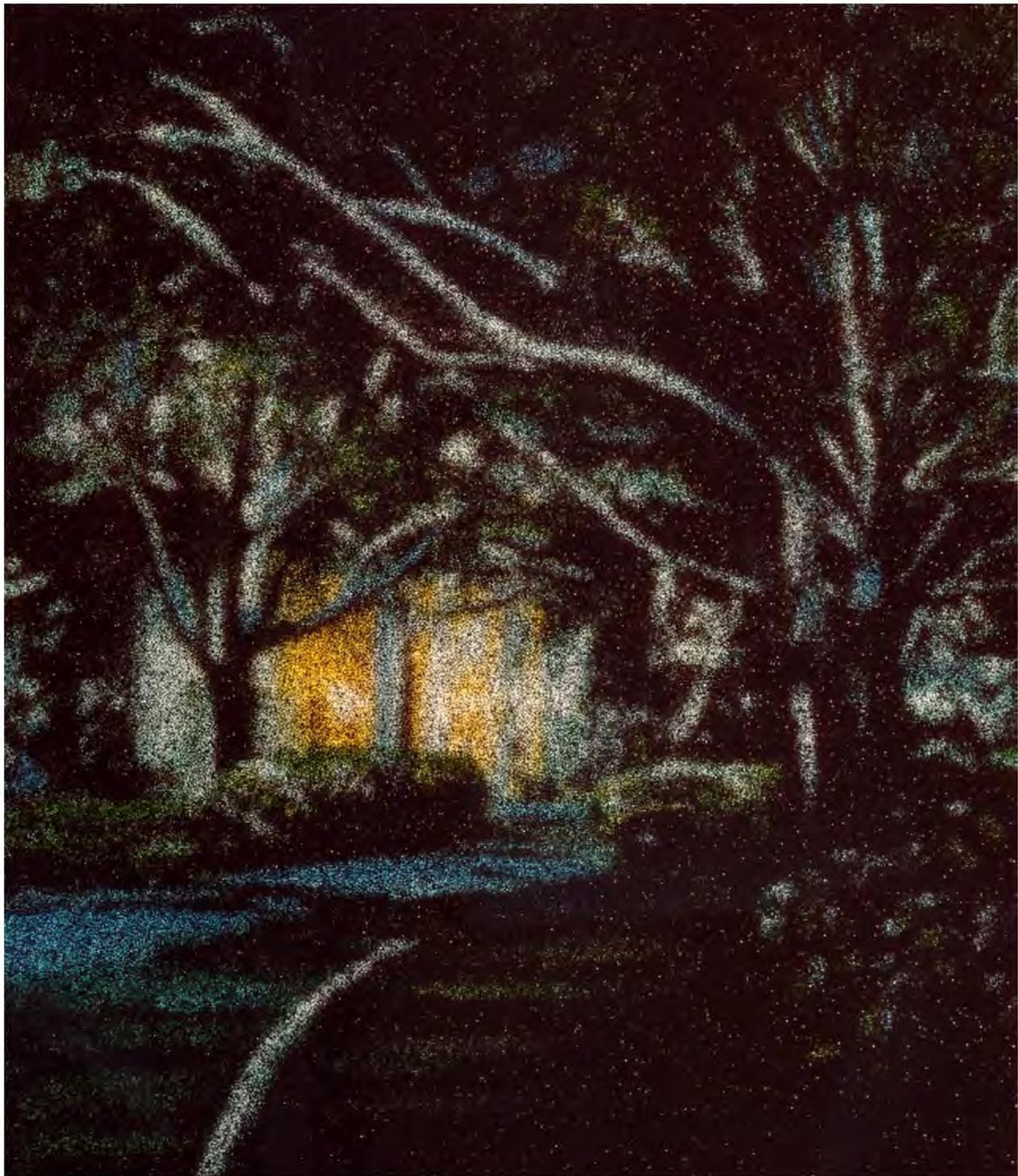


Figure 3: "Front Entry" by Ellen Brooks

reality alienating, that the subject that one sees in a photograph is unfamiliar rather than familiar. Fisher explains, “Physical spaces condition perception [...] particular terrains are stained by traumatic events” (Fisher 97). Attempts to represent the “real” domestic are driven by a desire to capture “my experience,” the fleeting moment-by-moment history of the self. However, these photographs present a perpetual sense of loss, a constant melancholy.

Photography then teaches modern subjects how to see, how to look. As I have already expressed, the relationship between the photograph and reality is complicated. Barthes explains that looking at photographs is such an extraordinary experience because the photograph freezes literal emanations of the Real. David Macey in the *Dictionary of Critical Theory* states, “The real is described as that which resists symbolization and signification” (Macey 324). The photograph freezes exact experience that cannot be meaningfully understood through language. Barthes explains the importance of this concept for photographs,

What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the
 Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially [...]
 [The Photograph] is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and
 somehow stupid, the This (this photograph and not photography), in short, what
 Lacan calls the Tuché, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable
 expression (Barthes 4).

Barthes’ contrast between mechanical and existential knowledge is crucial to the alienation of photographic reality. The idea that an encounter with a photograph is an encounter with a mechanized version of reality reshapes the legitimacy of the experience. Its inorganic quality renders it insufficiently real, insufficiently personal. The photographic object is an eerily present reproduction of a singular fragment of the Real. It presents itself to be seen, but it lacks self-evident or a unifiable interpretation. Thus, the fragment of the Real in photographs remains inscrutable, because without clear explanation of that fragment, there is simply no way to access it in a meaningful way. Therefore, looking at photographs becomes far less about the actual object represented and more about the linguistic framing of the photograph. The idea of

negative hallucination illustrates the ramifications of this editing process. Fisher defines this as, “Failure to see, the involuntary process of overlooking material which contradicts—or simply does not fit with—the dominant stories which we tell ourselves” (Fisher 75). The photograph is then the ideal medium of a nostalgic culture, one that speaks without ever saying anything decisively. Vernacular photography has no clear generic framework and is thus particularly open to interpretation. In other words, because these photographs are often personal and thus insular, the only guide for interpretation is one’s own personal photographs. The photograph is a blank slate whose subjective interpretation renders it endlessly capable of consistently narrating and internalizing whatever the dominant culture requires.

The medium of photography is the culmination of a long history of attempts to exactly reproduce the world through visual media. Through the impersonal machine of the camera, photographs promise an unbiased, unaltered, and authoritative reality. Though the mechanization in photography cheapens the experience of reality, the very same mechanical quality emphasizes its capability to reproduce what and how the world actually *is*. Sontag explains, “The camera [...] is a device that captures it all, that seduces subjects into disclosing their secrets [...] In the fairy tale of photography the magic box ensures veracity and banishes error” (Sontag 41, 53). Particularly in portrait photography, artists believe that they are able to capture something authentic about the subject that they might not normally or openly express. However, photography *produces* the truth about its subject rather than capturing it. This distinction is important as it points to the fact that photographs create a fetish of the Real, a consumable object. The crucial factor in this displacement is the frame, the object to which the fragment of the Real is laminated. Sontag explains that photography as a medium is more indebted to the project of surrealism than to realism, “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. The less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naïve—the more authoritative the photograph was likely to be” (Sontag 52). The doubling of the Real through photography contains authority precisely because the objectification renders

its reality narrow and reduced, easily digestible. These pieces of reality in photographs cut through contradictions and represent the world simply. Sontag explains, “Photography—and quotations—seem, because they are taken to be pieces of reality, more authentic than extended literary narratives. The only prose that seems credible to more and more readers is [...] the raw record—edited or unedited talk into tape recorders; fragments or the integral texts of sub-literary documents” (Sontag 74). The authority in fragmentation comes from its lack. It refuses to express itself clearly. Because the photograph (particularly vernacular photographs) appears to come without pretensions we feel that it lacks a certain contingent human element that contributes to error. Furthermore, the power of photographs is that they not only present information—they also elicit intense emotion. Barthes explains the appeal of photographs through a pair of terms, the studium and the punctum. Studium, from the Latin word study, refers to a sort of impartial, nominally invested interest in the subject that the viewer impresses on the photograph. The punctum refers to the deep almost inexplicable emotional appeal of certain photographs, “This time it is not I who seek it out, [...] it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (Barthes 26). Robert Adam’s “Summer Nights #18”⁶ is an appeal to nostalgic emotion. The one-point perspective of this house at night partially obscured by the shadow of tree limbs mimics the viewpoint of walking through suburbia. The lack of specific symbols, because the home remains vague, the viewer must feel the photograph. The book from which this photograph comes is called *Summer Nights, Walking*, emphasizing this nostalgic mode of seeing. However, because the memories contained in Adams’ photograph are not the viewer’s, there is a bizarre disparity, suggesting that the realism and concomitant authority of photographs is always a veiled appeal to pathos. Thus, the devolution of photographic authority into nostalgia renders interpretation slippery and difficult to grasp as photographic truth impresses itself on the viewer as evocation of emotion.

The most notable difference between photography and other visual arts is its relationship with clarity or sharpness. The power of the photograph is that through its mechanical capture of

6 See Figure 1

light, it can reproduce the world exactly. The semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce used the term index to refer to an object or image that is or claims to be continuous with reality. David Macey in the *Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* uses the example that smoke is the index of fire (Macey 201). Photographs then are the fulfillment of the drive to preserve and catalog reality. However, the photograph is an index of reality; it is only a trace of the Real. Sontag explains the subjectivity of the photograph, “A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading” (Sontag 71). Context is the external constellation of personal and public meaning that shapes the interpretation of photographs and promises access to intentions. Because the very history that context relies on is contingent on meaning-making in media such as photography, this desire results in a feedback loop, dissolving the solidity of context into abstraction. The irony of Sontag’s explanation is the adjective “soft,” because the central aesthetic feature of the photograph is sharp reproduction.⁷ The complexity of clarity and reality/indexicality and photographic authority is heightened by Ellen Brooks’ photograph, “Front Entry.”⁸ This photograph presents the exterior of a house with a lit front window in a pointillist style. Massive, easily-visible colored grain composes the image (rather than sharp detailed forms). Adams’ and Brooks’ photographs in conversation express the same sensation of nostalgia for the feeling of home, a searching for something lost. However, Brooks’ piece is particularly strange because it requires us to fill in the blanks and construct the image. The recognition of the subject despite a lack of clarity speaks to the power of Barthes’ punctum, the puncturing emotion in photographs, that this pathos cuts through blurred forms and creates the continuity with reality. If we consider the way that photographs functionally (re)create the world through emotional appeals (the surreal double of the world despite their seeming realism), the seeming objectivity and indexicality of photography as a medium seems dubious. Perhaps what must be reconsidered is what photographs are an index of. Brooks’ photograph indicates through its grainy texture that the

⁷ Even blurring in photographs gestures back toward the idea of sharpness and clarity, that sharpness was rejected.

⁸ See Figure 2

material elements of the photograph are the index of the immaterial element of the photograph. Photographs create an insular and tautological reality, illustrated by the positive/negative process of photographs, that the print refers to the negative and vice versa. In other words, photographs refer back to themselves and their catalog of the world. Sontag explains, “Photographers [...] suggest the vanity of even trying to understand the world and instead propose that we collect it” (Sontag 82). If photographs are then taken to be a catalog, a documentary of the world as it is, it seems that photographs such as Brooks’ that foreground the process point to their surreal nature, their (re)creation of reality. Pauline Vermare quotes Michelangelo Antionini in the exhibition catalog for “Public, Private, Secret: On Photography & the Configuration of the Self”: “I’m really questioning the nature of reality... I always mistrust everything which I see, which an image shows me, because I imagine what is behind it. And what is beyond an image cannot be known” (Cotton 113). The sense of evocation, the “beyond an image” is critical to the surrealism of photographs. Photographs often breed dissatisfaction because, upon looking at a photograph, one wants to see different angles, what is obscured—namely, to find what a photograph lacks. The outer edge of the frame in a photograph always evokes “the outside”—what is not included. The photograph always lacks, as seen in Adam’s and Brooks’ photographs that emphasize windows: evocations of the inside; reminders that photographs can only ever present the viewer with a lack.

We understand the world through photographs. The camera eye mechanizes memory supplanting the organic eye. Sontag explains, “The photographer’s insistence that everything is real also implies that the real is not enough [...] In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce this one [...] From being “out there,” the world comes to be “inside” photographs” (Sontag 80). Because the photograph presents itself as reality, reality becomes accessible only through photographs. Barthes explains that showing someone photographs almost always prompts them, in turn, to show their own photographs. Photographs are the proof of our existence. Todd Hido’s representations of suburban America at night illustrate that the photographer is a flaneur/salvager

that aimlessly wanders, looking for worthwhile scraps. Just as in the condition of hysterical paramnesia as described by Fisher, the modern subject uses the fragments of reality in images to reconstruct their identity. The self as understood through photographs is the unification of fragments, a cobbling together of the Real. Sontag explains, “The true modernism is not austerity but a garbage strewn plenitude [...] extolling the liberation offered by a society whose consciousness is built, ad hoc, out of scraps and junk. America, that surreal country, is full of found objects. Our junk has become art. Our junk has become history” (Sontag 68-9). As seen in Hido’s gritty vision of suburbia, the surreal double world of photographs attempts to reconstitute these scraps in an effort to create something meaningful. His work instead proposes that the tidy visions of idyllic suburban life are both alienating and incomplete. Todd Hido’s “#3510”⁹ locates the viewer looking at a house, a duplex or apartment, obscured behind a fence and overgrown, pale, and skeletal trees. The cold colors, even the pale glow of the window, clash with the expectation of what a home is believed to be (a place of belonging). The foreground of the frame is literally strewn with domestic detritus. These photographs present the remnants of the domestic, what fails to be useful, and suggest that the glossy, nostalgic photographic catalog is incomplete. Personal photographs strip away this alterity and unify one’s history. The camera, through this homogenization, displaces history into a double. We are always on the outside looking in, even at photographs of ourselves. Sontag explains further, “Essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s reality, and eventually in one’s own” (Sontag 57). Rather than functioning as an extension or augmentation of the organic self, the camera creates the very absence and longing for the self.

The rejection of straightforward representation in the photography of Ellen Brooks and James Casebere illustrates the paradox of the photographic obsession with preserving a “vanishing past.” Temporal strangeness suffuses postmodernity—constant reference and reconstruction of the motifs of the past render it impossible to establish clear demarcations between the present and the hauntings of the past. Hauntology is inextricably connected to

9 See Figure 4



Figure 4: "#3510" by Todd Hido

the failure of the future, a future that is nothing more than a re-dredging of the scrap heap of capitalist and consumer culture. Fisher asks the question, “Is there, then, no now because the past has consumed the present, reduced it to a series of compulsive repetitions?” (Fisher 93). As has been expressed, photography is a medium rooted in nostalgia that, as Sontag explains, makes the present into the past. However, the contradictory nature of this process lies in the fact that the

supposed purpose of the photograph is to preserve what is disappearing. The present vanishes through the action of photography. The supplanting of memory with photography proposes that the modern subject has learned to understand themselves in terms of loss. The reification of late capitalism extends to the fetishization and commodification of memory. Memory must be made material to be meaningful and useful. Ellen Brooks' photograph, "Front Entry"¹⁰ mimics the ubiquitous documentary photographs with which families fill boxes. However, the strangeness of the photograph is its rejection of clarity; it illustrates the similarity between the fuzziness of organic and machine memorialization. The granular processing of the photograph points to this fragmentation: the half-formed and inchoate fragments of memory mirror the individual dots of the silver-chemical process (meaningless outside of a constructed symbolic arrangement). This photograph, as a material object, is meaningless outside of a constellation of domestic photographs that foreground nostalgia, a longing for "home." However, this longing is a Lacanian death drive—the photographic catalog of home is something that we long for but never somewhere that we arrive. Brook's photograph locates her audience on the exterior of the home, at the threshold of desire—suspended on the outside. Photographs, rather than preserving, mark disappearance—a disappearance that allows for the commodification of nostalgia. Furthermore, as accessible experience is relocated inside photographs, the sense of identification and familiarity in its symbols becomes less human and personal and increasingly alien through its homogeneity.

James Casebere's photograph of a manufactured model of a subdivision, "Subdivision with Spotlight,"¹¹ illustrates the alienation of photographic representation. The simplified construction of the houses illustrates the barest elements necessary to represent the thing that we call a home—a roof, four walls, windows, and a door. The dense grayness of the photograph illustrates the deep haze of sameness in the photographic catalog. The photograph lacks anything personal. The smooth and unmarked surface of the houses in the model also illustrates the effacement of the individual in photographs. This paring away of symbols that attach us to the idea of home renders them *unheimlich*, familiar, recognizable but unfamiliar, alienating.

10 See Figure 2

11 See Figure 5



Figure 5: "Subdivision with Spotlight" by James Casebere

Barthes describes the photograph as the absolute particular, as a singular instance of pure reality. The reality in photographs is uninterpretable because it blindly reproduces a blink of an eye, without explanation. Brooks' and Casebere's photographs both point backwards to the photographic process, illustrating that the attempt to preserve the Real in photographs results in an impersonal and manufactured collection of light sensitive silver crystals aligned in recognizable patterns. Sontag states, "The photographer both loots and preserves, denounces and consecrates. Photography expresses the American impatience with reality, the taste for activities whose instrumentality is a machine" (Sontag 64-5). The past is a fragmented and inconsistent amalgamation that media reproduces and purports to be a logical and unified story. The difference between "reality" and reality-in-itself is the former's sense of unity, that it is created to be consumed, because reality-in-itself is complex and contradictory. Photographs without interpretation and context reproduce this contradiction; at the same time, this uneasy sensation drives the urge to dispel the inconsistency. Casebere's model cul-de-sac is neat and orderly, mimicking the impulse to revise the past into a consistent and unified reality. The photograph

attempts to smooth out the messiness of the Real, creating a connecting and unifying narrative through its fragments; instead, it doubles and displaces reality into an absent, nostalgic reality.

The central oddity of photographs is that their presentation of agency, which is to say, their relationship with presence and absence, is complicated. The subject photographed is neither totally present (because it is static, contained inside the image) nor totally absent (because we can see a kind of representation of the subject in the photograph). Mark Fisher uses the terms weird, excessive presence, and eerie, failures of presence and absence, to describe issues of agency that complicate interpretation. Fisher explains, “The weird is marked by an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it” (Fisher 61). The weird quality of photography is located in its wrangling with existence and dissolution. It immortalizes the subject, but suspends it between life and death. The photographs that continually interests Barthes is a photograph of his deceased mother as a child, because it is an uneasy re-presentation of the past. The concept of the weird explains the (sometimes implicit) uneasiness that we feel about the medium of photography itself. The persistent existence of the photographic object and its subversion of linear time parodies any understanding of “actual experience.” The sensation that photographs more explicitly evoke—uncertainty about agency—Fisher describes as eerie: “The eerie [...] is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present where there should be something” (Fisher 61). The subject of a photograph exhibits an absent presence—a presence that simultaneously fulfills all of Fisher’s descriptors of the eerie. The windows in Hido’s photographs, particularly “#1941,”¹² present the viewer with a concrete example of this failure of absence, an evocation of human existence without any actual human presence. Furthermore, the authorship of photographs is an eerie phenomenon. The photographer is a missing agent, a failure of presence that renders a photograph strange, plagued by persistent absence.

12 See Figure 3

In an attempt to reckon with anxieties about loss, photographs displace and suspend their subject into stasis. The subject of a photograph is eerie, neither present nor absent, rather, existing in the middle, a haunting of nostalgia. Sontag explains further, “What renders a photograph surreal is its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past” (Sontag 54). The seemingly irrefutable authoritativeness of photographic nostalgia comes from its appeal to emotion. As Barthes describes in the term punctum, we believe photographs because they make us feel. They evoke personal memories. Todd Hido’s “#1941,” a nearly blood-colored vista of suburban sprawl at night, evokes the amorphous memory of the feeling of looking out the window of a car as a child, or looking over suburbia at night—an alien world both foreign and familiar. Sprawling urban developments are endlessly repeating yet seemingly personal images, simultaneously nostalgic and alienating. Furthermore, the strong, warm colors emphasize the dreaminess of the image, the fragmentary remembrance of memory: the tautology that photographs look like memory and memory looks like photographs. This phenomenon of self-identification in photographs is illustrated in the motif of *mise-en-abyme*—the image relocated into the image in a loop of representation. We see our own photographs, our past, in other photographs. The abstractness of the forms in Hido’s photographs illustrates photographic surreality, that it is a doubled world that still feels real. Fisher explains, “The Zenoian condition remains in the form of an ontological anxiety that [...] there is no possibility of fully believing in any reality” (Fisher 47). Photographs, instead of preserving “real life,” merely gesture toward it, re-presenting it as an alien double world.

Photographs invest their subject with an idyllic, soothing nostalgia that is simultaneously alienating because the subject is displaced into a fetish. “The Outside” represents the Real: the antithesis of the totalizing narrative of capitalist ideology. Capitalism proposes that human production is at the center of everything and all of nature is for human consumption. This imperialist urge of capitalism, that human space must displace natural and thus unproductive space, works to keep out the uncontrollable, untamable nature—the Real. The cul-de-sac represents this urge, that even living spaces push the natural to the margins in order to fit more

homes, and thus create a more profitable space. A revealing motif of suburbia is the ubiquitous appearance of fences in the production of a living space. The fence in Hido's "#3510"¹³ clearly demarcates the line between the skeletal tree and the domicile. The most fascinating aspect of this photograph is that it expands the sense of "The Outside" to include the refuse, the scrap that is left behind in construction. Not only does untamed nature push at the boundaries of human spaces, but also the garbage heaps that results from construction and consumption press in on the appearance of order. Fisher explains, "An enquiry into the nature of what the world is like is also inevitably an unraveling of what humans had taken themselves to be" (Fisher 83). Hido's photograph locates the viewer on the outside of the domestic, among the refuse, looking in on the location that is supposed to be a marker of the ideal life, of belonging. Therefore, a fascinating turn happens in these images. The outside to capitalist ideology is the uncontained, the inconsistencies in the dominant narrative, the outside of the boundaries of the fence, yet these photographs re-present the veneer of consistency as alien. The domestic becomes the outside from which the viewer is disconnected. Fisher explains, "The centrality of doors, thresholds, and portals means that the between is crucial to the weird [...] the weird denaturalizes all worlds, by exposing their instability, their openness to the outside" (Fisher 28). Hido's constant inclusion of windows in his photographs illustrates this instability, that the sense of inside and out is not firmly demarcated. The glowing window viewed from the outside becomes a threshold to another world, just as from the inside, the window demarcates a border with the outside. Fisher describes the weird as the thing that does not belong; however, these photographs of the domestic call into question what marks inside and outside. Robert Adam's "Summer Nights #18"¹⁴ illustrates this uncertainty around agency and belonging. The darkness of the window presents no life, no sense of any belonging, merely an alien inside (outside). The strangeness of these photographs that imagine the domestic from an outsider perspective is that they invert and blur the sense of belonging. The photographs of Robert Adams and Todd Hido emphasize that the boundaries built around domestic space mark its instability.

13 See Figure 4

14 See Figure 1

The notion of “the outside” also points to the instability of the definitions of what is natural, what belongs. As previously described, photographs culturally mediate the very understanding of humanity and human space. Fisher utilizes the pejorative term used by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius, “grotesque,” to describe the weird perversions of nature inherent to the late capitalist constructive ethos, “Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been” (Fisher 32). He goes on, “The human animal is the one that does not fit in, the freak of nature who has no place in the natural order and is capable of re-combining nature’s products into hideous new forms” (Fisher 35). The American narrative dictates that it is “natural” to transform nature in service of what capitalism deems good, profit and growth. Fisher’s inversion is that the consumptive and destructive developmental practices of late-capitalism are weird, unnatural. The individualist ethos separates humanity and nature, establishing mutual exclusivity. The Anthropocene—that what is in the interest of the human is primary—suggests that humans exert the most influence on ecosystems. The tree in Adam’s “Summer Nights #18”¹⁵ illustrates the tenuous relationship between nature and suburbia by revealing that nature grows in the cracks of developed spaces. The deep shadows covering the top half of the house are a foreboding symbol of the tension between the controlled suburban space and uncontrollable nature. The other tense contrast in the photograph is the bright white siding of the house that reflects the street light, and the deep darkness behind the house that sucks in the light. This contrast plays on our fear of what we cannot see—the darkness is threatening because it will not reveal itself. The natural world contained in Hido’s “#3510,”¹⁶ the skeletal tree, is unsettling, a marker of death and decay. Hido also juxtaposes this marker of the outside with refuse, what remains after the grotesque forms of capitalism are constructed. The domicile that Hido photographs is an apartment building, which represents the growing contingency within the notion of home, the bizarre situation that renters exist in by merely borrowing their living space from a bank or a landlord. The apartment functions as the quintessential example of the mass-produced domestic space: a form that fully disconnects traditional notions of home from the prefabricated housing unit.

15 See Figure 1

16 See Figure 4



Figure 6: "#4022" by Todd Hido

Capitalism displaces nostalgia for home inward to a feeling because, for middle and lower-class families, houses are mass-produced spaces owned by corporations. The domestic is often located in opposition to the faceless and soulless urban, such as seen in de Certeau's "Walking in the City": "Only the cave of the home remains believable, still open for a certain time to legends, still full of shadows" (de Certeau 106). The sense that something personal exists in domestic space is challenged by the homogenized and ordered spaces created in apartment buildings and the unified rows of the cul-de-sac. Todd Hido's photograph, "#4022"¹⁷ represents the rear of an apartment complex that could just as easily be a prison, a duplicated row of windows covered in bars—one lonely window lit in the center of the frame. Hido frames

17 See Figure 6

the photograph so that the building vanishes in the distance, and foregrounds a demolished and puddled pavement, heightening the feeling of dilapidation and inhospitality. Through the conflation of the domestic with attributes of a prison, Hido proposes that the hostile architecture of these spaces conditions the way one lives in them. James Casebere's photograph, "Subdivision with Spotlight"¹⁸ likewise represents the tendency towards homogenization. Even in the small variations of form, the same dull, drab gray permeates not just the row of houses but also the tones of the photograph itself. In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (2010), Fisher comments upon the landscape of late capitalism and its effacement of heterogeneity: "A world without landmarks, a branded Sprawl, where markable territory has been replaced by endlessly repeating vistas of replicating franchises" (Fisher 31). The edges of Casebere's photograph, foreground and background as well as left and right, indicate repetition, a sprawl into infinity, an endless dystopian cul-de-sac. Fisher emphasizes that this world lacks an essential contingent human element, now established through "branding," or the endlessly recognizable short-hand for consumable objects that fill our homes: "In this lukewarm world, ambient discontent hides in plain view, a hazy malaise given off by the refrigerators, television sets, and other consumer durables" (Fisher 50). The consumer miasma of the domestic symbolizes our inextricable connection to capitalism, the everyday dissatisfaction inherent in rampant consumption. The scrap heap out of which culture is formed is in fact created by destructive and wasteful production methods. Photographs are narrow and built on exclusion—only that which is useful is included.

The photographic obsession with preservation instead catalogs disappearance. The photograph is evidence that something once was. Photographs preserve the image of people that are no longer alive, or as in the case of the photographs of Berenice Abbott and Eugene Atget, the disappearance of a city as it urbanizes. Sontag explains Abbott's project of preserving a "disappearing" New York City, "She is not so much memorializing the past as simply documenting ten years of the chronic self-destruct quality of American experience, in which

18 See Figure 5

even the recent past is constantly being used up, swept away, torn down, thrown out, traded in” (Sontag 68). The persistent sense of dissatisfaction that is built into modern subjectivity, that even identity must constantly be reinvented, reconstructed to match the ever-shifting cultural tides points to this persistent self-destruction. The suburban domestic, an exclusively residential zone, then becomes a fascinating site of dissatisfaction, represented in the endlessly repeated, mass-produced single-family homes in Casebere’s “Subdivision with Spotlight”¹⁹ or Hido’s “#1941.”²⁰ The hellish street light sunset in Hido’s photograph heightens the familiar-alien atmosphere of suburbia. This sprawl of homes packed together evokes Casebere’s dystopian model cul-de-sac. The only indication of life is the light shining from windows that point to the unseen interior. This perpetual feeling of being an outsider illustrates the inhumanity of capitalist domestic architecture. In order to mitigate the alienation of capitalism, the modern sense of identity is imported into seemingly stable monoliths such as personal photographs. This impulse, that curation and mediation is the only way to *really* understand the world, is a central tenet of capitalist ideology. Photography of the domestic—in which one must re-construct their own life through photographs—points to fragmentation and a disconnection and a displacement of belonging.

The great myth of America is the “American Dream,” the idea that one can reconstruct themselves—tell or retell their own story. Photography is the ideal medium for a society obsessed with reconstruction. The photograph makes the present into the past, allowing constant reinvention and revision of one’s identity. However, the photograph also appears to always show the truth because it can exactly represent reality. Fisher explains that subversion is dispelled through the shaping of subjectivity, “What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture” (Fisher 9). As in the condition of hysterical paramnesia, images are used as reference points to fit the cultural narrative. Photographs then make us uneasy because they

19 See Figure 5

20 See Figure 3

always seem more full and mysterious than the meaning that has been assigned to them. The triumphant myth of American progress is undercut by a persistent dissatisfaction, that only what is useful is meaningful, and everything else is thrown away. Photographs always wrestle with capitalist amnesia—attempting to document a world that is rapidly self-destructing. Sontag explains, “There is a particular melancholy to the American photographic project [...] The American partiality to myths of redemption and damnation remains one of the most energizing, most seductive aspects of our national culture. What we have left [...] are paper ghosts and a sharp-eyed witty program of despair” (Sontag 47-8). The feeling of alienation in the domestic photographs of artists such as Robert Adams, Ellen Brooks, James Casebere, and Todd Hido illustrates a dissatisfaction with suburban mythology, with the empty promises of the white picket fence.

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