

Between Positive and Negative Forms

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The exhibition "Photo Op" (short for photo opportunity, that is, an arranged opportunity to take a photograph) focuses on the conditions of photography and seeks, despite the origin of its title, to isolate them from daily circumstances and timing, to found itself on them and place them at the center of its endeavor. In a circular format, simultaneously exploring and producing itself, the exhibition revolves around an experiment whose tools are its materials, its laws are its rules and its products are its exhibits. The tension between the medium's feasibility, which is the *possibility* of photography, and its action's prospects, which are the *opportunity* of photography, is further emphasized when visual information appears in the exhibition space, accompanied by instructions from the artist, which are then translated into an image, processed and produced within that very space and exhibited on its walls. The process which develops and transforms in the viewers' presence throughout the exhibition's running and within

its space exposes the format of the exhibition, with its operating mechanisms and objects. The various contents raised by the works and the contexts that are alternately constructed and deconstructed—between the works themselves, among them and their installation, and between these moves and the method that enables them—are a consecutive articulation of ideas which are formed as they develop and avoid a fixed definition. The exhibition space is a dynamic arena that exposes moves stemming from an idea and its processing into an exhibited object, and aims to discuss photography's basic attributes and its place in the discourse of contemporary art.

Despite the customary contrast between light and darkness, open and closed, revealed and concealed, the empty space (the white cube) at the opening event of the exhibition corresponded to a certain extent to photography's dark chamber—the black box inside the camera, the sealed magazine of the analogue photographic film, the dark room, the (hidden) data file of the digital photograph, the computer which deconstructs these data, the inkjet instructions from

printer to paper. It is as if the bare walls conceal the unknown in which the translation from light to picture takes place, as does the great wonder which is the transition from idea to matter. This stage takes place in the exhibition in a manner that is immediate, changing and continuous, and may thus be considered as an (immediate) action rather than a (transitional) state; a kind of syntactic combination of progressive and simple present, which can be projected onto the relationship between verb and reflexive act or even further onto the differences between reflex and reflection, reflection and self-reflection. This latter concept is of great importance in philosophical discussions of, among others, questions about actual space and abstract perception or key paradoxes in mathematics, physics and ontology.

There is something of a Cartesian disconnection from sensory-based experience in Matalon's choice to renounce the external world as a source of images and navigate his journey among photography's basic materials. Instead, the works turn to inner reflection in an attempt to return to the underlying foundations of the medium. However, while these foundational materials

are assimilated—through processes based on digital procedures rather than photographic actions, whose result is, among others, digital images without a material origin—the backward-turned gaze is focused on a primary yet novel space. This frenetic space constantly oscillates between photography's basic materiality (drawing with light, by definition) and its total absence (such as binary writing). This constant shift between contents and void reveals the falseness of measures for moral differentiation between existential status and aesthetic validity, or for gauging the distribution of images that are nourished by a gaze turned outward on the world and its events as opposed to images that gaze inward on their sources of production. The failure of such moral measures is stressed when the reflexive space is regarded vis-à-vis the incomprehensible volume of images created in the world daily and dispersed throughout it so unbearably easily.

The exhibition's dynamic character does not allow one to conceive it as a totality, but only as a fragmentary collection of temporary situations and sections, which do not add up to a spatial continuum. This raises questions

about the nature of understanding as doomed to rely on partial experience, and therefore emphasizes the absurdity of any interpretation. As an artistic microcosm, the exhibition, with its inherently fragmentary format, represents other, more extensive mechanisms that originate in ideas and eventually exhibit their visual expressions, while simultaneously subverting such expressions and suggesting they should be perceived as a stage in the process rather than its endpoint. The refusal of the interim situations, which sum up the various days of exhibition, to be organized uniformly, continuously and with finality perpetuates their dispersal as parts that do not join together into a whole even if the images of which they are comprised share the same source. This refusal releases the subject's hold on narrative and frees the image from the bear hug of metaphors and from a relationship of semblance with the world. This disconnection paves the road to observing the medium of photography beyond its images and through its means, and opens up an abyss between the simple façade of the medium's primary features and the complexity at the root of its contemporary uses.

The images in the exhibition are vestiges of the use of photographic materials, attesting to the manipulations effected on them. The technical stages of image production are exposed in the exhibition space, but the fundamental acts preceding them are not. Searing them in matter is but a solid illusion and an ironic expression of the abstract nature of creation and the elusiveness of its motivations. In contrast, the rebellious beauty of the developer fluid oozing over the surface of some of the images and the tattered charm of the photographic papers that had been exposed, in folded and crumbled form, to the artificial light of the enlarger call for a discussion of a new aesthetics. The terminology of these aesthetics assimilates the tension between raw materiality and virtual digitization, and reflects the dramatic change at the very essence of the medium, whose definition originated in image and likeness but now extends over the wide-ranging space between analogue and digital photography. Vestiges of simple or complex encounters between direct and indirect actions performed on photographic materials are imprinted in the images and fixed as their contents. The images present and represent

these very actions by abolishing their hierarchy, but bestow on them different roles and thus different significance in the discourse of representation. A thick liquid bubbling from a colorful black-margined puddle is the content of an image created by fire hitting the photographic paper. The heat of the flame scorched the paper, opened a gap in it and left black margins around it, while the flame's light created a colorful reaction which gradually expanded from the midst of the fire to the photosensitive paper's edges. After being developed, the (metaphorically and literally) burnt paper was scanned and then digitally translated into a data file that was processed and printed as a photograph. This photograph, with its wholly uniform and smooth surface, represents the encounter ignited in the dark room, sealed in a photograph and momentarily mounted on the exhibition walls. Presenting this photograph as a solitary image or as a one in a series is subject to change; such changes are inherent to the exhibition's format and affect the way its images are read and the interpretation that accompanies their viewing.

The documentation of these installations can be found in the exhibition's website (<http://www.photo-op.co.il/>) and, like the perpetuation of interim states and transient events, indicates a paradoxical existence in an alien space that denies their temporary nature. Nevertheless, cyberspace expresses well the basic contrast, whose various aspects are repeatedly explored in the exhibition, between photography's immortal nature and its reproducible quality, which has led to reproductions and samplings that carry no vestige or trace of image or likeness. The website, which is updated daily, follows the developments in the exhibition space, accumulates its images (albeit in data rather than matter), including such that have disappeared from the space in the meantime, and preserves changes that may indicate deliberations and doubts in the process. The website's artificial memory preserves a collection of interim situations which is as close as one can get to a comprehensive perception of the exhibition as a whole. It is precisely this comprehensiveness which embodies the gap between this overview and an accurate documentation of the exhibition's fragmented quality.

Laying out the interim situations as a uniform sequence does injustice to the exhibition's gradual composition and to its fundamental moves, designed to measure and time information in a manner that accumulates into significance and interpretation, or else to block and disrupt information that passed through it briefly, in order to eject it from the interpretative arena.

At the opening event of the exhibition, among radiantly white bare walls, two images were produced, which Matalon had made a short while earlier and sent from his studio to the workshops within the exhibition space. The process of producing the images—which, in the absence of any other significant occurrences or images, drew most of the audience to it—ended with their framing behind a black, sealed Perspex surface. At the end of the opening event, one black rectangle (in which a photograph of a rolled-up paper was concealed) was placed against a white wall far from the entrance to the gallery. On the following day, another black rectangle was hung next to it, identically sized but different in concealing a different photograph. Just as the exhibition's format represents general mechanisms of a

museum exhibition, so its first hours reflected the unexpected surprises that were to occur throughout its running. For the first thirty-seven days, during which many photographs were installed in the gallery space and on its walls, these two images remained hidden behind a black cover. On the thirty-eighth day, one of them was partially exposed (or, for some viewers, re-exposed), through a hole smashed by the artist in the black frame's glass and Perspex. In the exhibition website, these two images remained exposed since the night after the opening of the exhibition, and from the second day onward their black sealed surfaces are documented in various installation views.

The images featured in the exhibition are created in surprising and fascinating techniques derived from a pure inquiry into the medium's elements and resulting from a rich and varied use of its materials and tools while ignoring the world and its stimuli. These images are abstract and enigmatic even when it seems one can follow the action taken in them and perceive their original materiality. The images are installed in the exhibition space according to the artist's day-by-day

decisions, which are based—like his motives in creating and choosing them—on real-time considerations and decisions. The artist's instant responses, both in the images and their installation, may be the result of calculated consideration or a momentary intuition about the space that transforms the images and is in turn transformed by them, and about the various meanings pertaining to its temporary states. The installation avoids, as mentioned, linear regularity (except for the quantity of images, which grows with time, albeit not regularly) as well as overt editing principles, but it does create certain contexts that provide clues to its syntactic logic and allow one to deduce meanings.

Various pairs of contrasting photographs, showing the negative and positive forms of the same image, are installed in the exhibition—juxtaposed on the wall, side by side; framed back-to-back between two panes of glass that reveal their duality; hanging on both sides of a dividing wall that bisects the gallery space and halves the double image into two separate gazes—charging these opposites with significance that stems from their position in space. The tar-black liquid and the scalding splashes

that accompanied its vigorous pouring onto white paper is transposed and appears on the other side of the wall as sparkling stardust in a dark sky, at whose center flows a thick milky way. The movement evident in a sheet of photographic paper indicates its numerous folds, whose imprinted marks create facets of reflected light in various shades of white on black. It is affixed to the back of its negative image, which is reversed both in hues and in the forms' direction, creating a perfect match between image and its opposite. This symmetrical duo leans diagonally on the wall, allowing a glance from under one image to its negative double. This allows one to deduce the principle that underlies several monotonous images, which embody, with beautifully gentle grey hues, a perfect correlation between opposites, which only a minimal shift saves from collapsing into a monochromatic void. The thin contour line of the grey object against a grey background exposes a minimal degree of shifting, which nevertheless is responsible for the essential difference between entity (visible image) and nothingness (a devouring, annulling correspondence, such as one sees around the still-detailed grey object,

fully merging the black and white backgrounds into a uniform grey surface). This gap or shift—the photo opportunity found among photography’s conditions of possibility—is, as it turns out, an infinite space despite, or perhaps thanks to, turning its back on the world.