

Clear Liquid Thought: The Photographs of Jim Dine

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The camera sees even beyond the visual consciousness.
--Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Argument: The Photographic Unconscious

In his article "Photographie avant analyse"¹ photography critic François Soulages discusses the reciprocal influence between photography (as an emerging technology in the nineteenth century) and the study of the unconscious (prior to the invention of psychoanalysis). To what extent, he asks, did a new technology such as photography enlighten, modify, or enrich the understanding of the unconscious? And, conversely, how did what he calls "the hypothesis of the unconscious" allow for a better understanding of a new technology? These questions, inherent in the beginnings of photography and essentially linked to its role in the comprehension of the visible and the invisible body, have gained considerable importance today.

The photographic works I will discuss here participate in our understanding of the unconscious in a paradoxical way, since they do not imply disclosing images of the artist's unconscious specifically encoded into symbolic meaning. On the contrary, my concern is with these works' potential to generate *visual equivalents* of inner life perceptions in a variety of puzzling formal patterns whose disclosure of meaning is cunningly deferred. The photographic compositions of Jim Dine are not narratives of inner life, but *forms of visual experience* that inform our ways of thinking the unconscious.

¹ François Soulages, "Photographie avant analyse", *Photographie et inconscient* (31-35). In this study, Soulage primarily deals with the beginnings of photography and with its paradoxical uses in psychiatry (the photographs of Duchenne de Boulogne, in France, and those of Hugh Welch Diamond, in England, are dealt with in the context of their institutional destiny and their consequent aesthetic status).

Unlike documentary, informative, or testimonial photography, art photography -- which has enjoyed much less attention in the academia -- requires from viewers a "willing suspension" of their belief in the photographic reproduction of reality. Photography as used by artists reveals shapes which our eyes cannot perceive but which we experience rather synaesthetically. These shapes which surface only dimly into consciousness derive from elaborate technique. By turning the mirror inwards², art photographers create what elsewhere I have called "une cassure photographique"³ in our understanding of mimesis.

My discussion of Jim Dine's photographic work here stems in two larger concerns in my ongoing research with how photography visualizes mental processes (or, part of what we call "the invisible") and how current visual culture redefines our vision of the unconscious. The appeal to the psychoanalytic tradition in the critical discourse on visual culture, even by way of reevaluation, is, when not counter productive, of no avail to the scholar. Not only are the current paradigms of knowledge in Western cultures in a different configuration than that of the turn of the twentieth-century (no matter how many parallels we can establish between the two "turns"), but the techniques of image-making and the perception of images have undergone such considerable changes that force us to reconsider, if not to reinvent, our psychoanalytical frameworks. I would like to suggest in the following that one of the most productive ways of creating such new cognitive and discursive frameworks is by taking the time to look at what artists do when they bring into the viewers' visual field not only mental and sensory images but also strategies through which these images come into consciousness? ⁴

² On the occasion of photography's 150th anniversary, photography critic Andy Grundberg reviewed two major shows : "On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: 150 Years of Photography", at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and "The Art of Photography, 1839-1989", at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas. His review is significantly entitled "Now, the Camera's Eye Turns Inward", in *The New York Times* (18-19).

³ Anca Cristofovici, "'Un frémissement de miroirs, la beauté inattendue' : les mondes photographiques de Geneviève Cadieux", in *Masques et Miroirs dans le monde anglo-saxon* (182).

⁴ What a distance, for instance, between the visualization of the unconscious in Luis Bunuel's films and that of David Lynch's films, especially in his *Mulholland Drive* (2001), which epitomizes an entirely new way of thinking the unconscious.

One can read, for instance, in Dine's photographic explorations of the unconscious, instead of free association, an insistence on editing, a strategy which -- before its being generalized by the use of the computer -- has early on been associated with photography.⁵ Concerning the difference between *free association* -- as a release from consciousness -- and *editing* -- as a form of peripheral grasp of consciousness -- I take as a working hypothesis that it is related to a historically different distribution of the tensions between social, cultural, or historical determinations and the construction of subjectivity.⁶ Although that aspect is only hinted at in what follows, it represents a reference point of my brief discussion here on the ways in which image-making technologies can inform our understanding of the unconscious (and, for that matter, our theoretical narratives of inner life), deriving from Soulages's first question evoked in the opening paragraph, which can, I would like to advance, be productively placed in the context of contemporary visual culture.

Why Jim Dine?

For many years now I have looked at American contemporary and recent fiction and photography from the perspective of patterns of memory as sites of creativity. Jim Dine's photographic work came to my attention while I was doing research on perceptions of aging in visual culture and the visualization of time in connection to that rather delicate issue in art photography. His work struck me for its potential to bring mental processes into the visual field and for its open and intentional relation to the unconscious. In almost every interview Dine associates his use of photography as an artist to his exploration of what he sometimes calls the subconscious, highlighting it as a major *theme* of his photographic work. At the same time, the

⁵ With reference to the photographs of August Sander, for instance, Walker Evans used the term "editing" as early as 1931. For "editing" and "free association" in relation to photography and memory work, Richard Powers provides rich documentary and fictional material in his novel, *Three Framers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985), which, in fictional terms, anticipates paths that the critical discourse on photography has taken only of late.

⁶ Actually Powers refers to photography as "simultaneously the most free and the most determined procedure" (*Three Farmers...*, 250). The tensions at work in the making of a photograph, between the technical determinations of the photographic device and the photographer's freedom to explore, can be read as a metaphor for the tensions -- in the larger picture of life -- between determinations of various natures (social, cultural, psychic etc.) and individual freedom.

unconscious is, as I will try to show, a source for his *innovative technique* as it is for his *aesthetics*.

Dine is known as an artist who has experimented since the 1960s with a wide range of materials and techniques, from drawing, printmaking, and painting, to sculpture and mixed media installations. His entire work can be described as a glossary of recurring images, "an aesthetic journey into a personal world."⁷ He started working on his first series of photographs in 1995 precisely as a means of exploring psychic material more in-depth. As a matter of fact, his photographic work is not so different in purpose from his early work. The last performance Dine held in 1965 was suggestively entitled "Natural History (The Dreams)."

The Guggenheim has recently shown Dine's early works and a retrospective of his drawings was presented at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in the summer of 2004. Yet, in spite of important exhibitions in American galleries and museums, his photographic work seems to be less known in the United States. Dine has lived for many years in between Europe and the United States, and currently lives in Paris part time. Significantly, he donated the entire set of his photographic work to the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and he made the same donation to the Davison Art Center at the Wesleyan.⁸ His living in different contexts, in different cultural and visual landscapes, might account, among other things, for his bend for layering and associating images in photographic tableaux that might remind the viewer of the collage, yet if collages they are, Dine's works result from a quite different technique (and philosophy) than that of the surrealists.

Internal and External Space in Photography

⁷ Jim Dine, *Paintings, Drawings, Sculpture. 1973-1993*, n. p.

⁸ In New York Dine is represented by the PaceWildenstein Gallery, while in Paris the Daniel Templon Gallery shows his most recent work, at an almost annual rate. For reasons of copyright his photographs cannot be shown here. Besides the appended bibliography, several sites present his photographic work. I hope this paper to be an invitation for the reader to become familiar with Dine's less known aspects of his work. The most up-to-date collection of his photographs has been published recently under the form of a catalogue raisonné, in four volumes, entitled *The Photographs, So Far*.

The cognate term "optical unconscious" was first used by Walter Benjamin and, more recently, by Rosalind Krauss in her book on modernism whose title is borrowed from that phrase.⁹ In his "Small History of Photography" (1931), Benjamin points to the "unknown" which lies in wait for the photographic act and he stresses that it is precisely the technical devices ("slow motion and enlargement") that make it possible for photography to "reveal the secret." "It is through *photography*," he concludes, "that we first discover the existence of this *optical unconscious* just as we discover the *instinctual unconscious* through *psychoanalysis*."¹⁰

Krauss analyses the ways in which the "optical unconscious" had to struggle its way out from a system based on the repressed as embodied in the logic of modernism. However, even in its rebellion against the domination of reason, the textual or visual surrealist outlook was based on the Freudian binary understanding of psychic life. Surrealist representations of the unconscious appeared therefore as the violent emergence into visibility of a mixture of strange and casual imagery.

Surrealism has shown that space was *reversible* within a view that opposed internal to external space. Accordingly, every external space represented in a visual work was supposed to be the symbolic equivalent of an internal one. Can we still think of inner life -- visually -- in the same terms?

The Seam (No Suture)

The refinement of optical techniques in the second half of the twentieth century has extended our field of vision and redefined our notions of the corporeal and the mental. As a consequence, juxtapositions of various registers of reality can take quite different forms. Whereas in the surrealist collage, for instance, the seam between inner and external space is still visible, the computer collage gives the artists the possibility to smooth it, if not to completely efface it. As the use of digital manipulations¹¹ in photography shows, inner space can no longer

⁹ Rosalind Krauss. *The Optical Unconscious*.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One Way Street* (240-257).

¹¹ An important distinction should be mentioned here, that between the manipulations in journalistic or any other kind of testimonial photography, on the one hand, and art photography, on the other. In the

be conceived of as a discreet unit, but as a conjunction of zones which we inhabit mentally. At the intersections between images of different zones melded in a photograph, uncanny effects occur, not (or not exclusively) as the emergence of something repressed, but rather as the recognition of dimly known shapes or emotions experienced in the more or less distant past and, as such part, of our affective self or of what in his book, *The Shadow of the Object* (incidentally, a wonderful metaphor for photography), Christopher Bollas calls "the unthought known," that is "the sense of being reminded of something *never cognitively apprehended but existentially known*" (emphasis mine, 17).

Dine's photographs suggest that the visual model of the unconscious or of mental life as *photographic*¹² is linked to the understanding of photography as a mimetic form in a problematic way. Instead of a faithful image of a specific object, person, place, he considers a photograph as an image whose referent is a *synthesis of spaces*, of time moments, of fragmentary images of an object or of a person. Like imaginary referents in the rhetoric of literary texts, a speculative photograph can be the result of a juxtaposition of different iconic objects and mental images.¹³ The editing or doctoring of images results in a seamless representation of mental space, one that highlights not discontinuity but *reconfigured continuity* as an essential element in the construction of subjectivity. Such a perspective calls our attention to the *formative* character of aesthetic objects, an aspect that seems to have fallen into oblivion in the current visual culture critique.¹⁴

former case, which is not my subject here, manipulation serves entirely different purposes (and, as historians of photography have shown, is not a new procedure).

¹² Daniel Sibony has attempted to draw an analogy between photography and psychoanalysis in his essay "Une technique de l'instant ou la machine à cliché", based on the hypothesis that: "Our dreams function on the photographic principle," in *La Recherche photographique* (69-73).

¹³ Philippe Hamon studied this fascinating aspect of the interference between photography and other visual systems of the nineteenth century, on the one hand and literature, on the other. He paid particular attention to the ways in which the various aesthetics of the "imageries" circulating at the time forced literature to redefine itself, and had an impact on the process of reading as well. Hamon analyzes the juxtaposition of various iconic objects in nineteenth-century French literary texts and mentions a detail which supports my hypothesis here, that the objects juxtaposed in the rhetoric of the text were the result of mental images *which had already synthesized various visual systems*, or, the result of what one might call blurred mental images. *Imageries. Littérature et image au XIXe siècle*.

¹⁴ I would like to recall here an important contribution which would be worth reconsidering in

In League With the Dark: An Aesthetics of Doctored Images

Dine has come to photography only recently and to a quite special use of it, one which unsettles categories of the mimesis as well as boundaries between art media. "I feel in photography it's part of the challenge," says Dine about his approach, "*to bring that which is dead to life*", (emphasis mine, 7).¹⁵ In so doing he arrives at what photography critic Andy Grundberg calls a "latent metaphoric potency."¹⁶ His reflection on memory and temporality draws from a combination of new and old photographic techniques which allow him to represent, in one photographic tableau, different time levels and registers of visibility by layering various images, i.e. photographs coming from different captures.

What types of *latent images* do Jim Dine's camera works reveal? What, in fact, made him turn, around age sixty, to photography?

In his essay, "Assaying the Photographic," Grundberg points out that it is precisely the wide range of possibilities provided by the varied techniques Dine uses that allows him to "refashion the consequences of the camera lens", in other words, to *modify* the impressions recorded by the camera. Significantly, the resulting photographs are not always reproduced from negatives, but either from printing plates (in the case of his photogravures) or from larger computer files of digital information. Through the shifts and combinations of images made possible by alternative photographic technologies, Dine unsettles what Grundberg calls the essential tension of his art: that between rational space and "the floating arena of the subconscious." The memory of the camera is articulated to the memory of the computer. Both the photogravures and the digital images are carefully processed, refined and redefined so as to render approximations that are closer to fleeting mental images in all their sensory dimensions. As a result, the photographic tableau becomes a more accurate representation of thinking processes and of emotional

the psychoanalytical approaches of art, that of Anton Ehrenzweig's book, *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination* (1967), introduced in its French translation by Jean-François Lyotard (1975).

¹⁵ Jim Dine, *Photographies récentes*, Interview with Jean-Luc Monterosso.

¹⁶ Jim Dine, *Photographs*,. n. pag.

experience. "All my photographs," declares Dine, "are as accurate descriptions of a thought I've had, or a passion I've had, or a sorrow I've had, as anything I've ever done" (10).

Dine's combining analogic with digital photography, and traditional art techniques enables him to doctor the images recorded by the camera, and to transform them into, so to say, actual virtual images. The high resolution of the computer-produced image is associated in these works with another kind of more evocative precision that creates the illusion of depth. In his inkjet prints, for instance, the contrast between sharp and soft tones results from the use of a program which allows him to "paint in" elements derived from various captures. In his photogravures, the positive transparencies are printed on a copper plate and are then processed in a way similar to the technique of etching, which implies that the plate undergoes the intervention of the hand. Dine intentionally disrupts the fantasy of the control one can have over the camera in order to open up the photographic tableau to varied registers of visibility.

His creative use of the digital camera and of digital processing allows him to produce uncanny effects, an illusion of unfathomable distance, of layers of space displayed in puzzling perspectives, of depth sustained by closeness.¹⁷ The elaborate processing of various captures, as well as the grain of paper they are printed on, result in an intense tactile effect, which is even more powerful in his recent series of large-scale pigment photographs printed on canvas. Paradoxically, such an effect enhances the illusion to the ungraspable character of mental images, and, at the same time, the multiple sensory ways in which they can touch us.

Dine displaces the focus of the viewer's visual habits related to photographs from the real to the mental by insisting on the potential of the camera to record thought and emotion. In his commentaries he parallels the speed of the camera with the speed of dreams and with that of the eye-blink. For him, photography "mirrors *the marginal thought* -- every frame -- and it can be

¹⁷ An interesting technical detail needs to be mentioned here for its metaphorical connotations: the print technology used by Dine "delivers a droplet the size of 10 microns (*the size of a human blood cell*), the droplet size is variable and therefore able to deliver an image of continuous tonality and richness with an apparent resolution of 1,800 dots per inch"). Information given in Jim Dine, *Photographs*, n. p. Emphasis mine,

done so very quickly, not as quickly as the human mind can, yet very quickly, *so that one could have many, many thoughts on a roll of film*" (emphasis mine, 8). However, his photographic images are not snapshots of sudden associative flashes (in the sense of the surrealist automatic free association). On the contrary, they catch the viewer's attention as compositions that combine spontaneity with minuteness.

In his more recent work, Dine uses a different procedure : he recreates mental scenes in actual compositions of objects which he arranges prior to the photosession and then photographs with a digital camera. These photographs are not manipulated; they are not the result of several juxtaposed captures as the first series was. Dine simply creates the scene and photographs "what's there", as he puts it, that is already *edited*. In the first digital works, the "staging" done by way of computer manipulation resulted into a similar smoothing of different spatial planes. Editing seems to be for Dine a way of bringing together the conscious and the unconscious, instead of opposing or separating them into a binary.

Dine notes that for him "photography seems a more accessible road to bring down the unconscious and *channel it*: as grist for my mill" (emphasis mine, 8), a statement that highlights the fact that the objects and figures in his compositions are not illustrations of the unconscious but, like the camera itself, *instruments* to access it. These objects and figures -- which represent analogs of inner or internal objects,¹⁸ of spaces of memory, -- have structural functions within the dynamic of the image that come near to the structural functions images have in the construction of subjectivity.

Because of its capacity to capture the fugitive instant, photography is commonly expected to preserve the past. But the compelling query for Dine is: how can photography record time levels and modes of perception -- verbal, visual, sensory -- that coextend in the fugitive instant of a mental image? And, what kind of knowledge of inner life do such photographs provide us with?

¹⁸ Indeed a photograph can represent, for the image-taker and/or for the viewer, an internal object, as well as it can function as a transitional object in the Winnicottian sense in the adult's permanent construction of subjectivity.

For Dine, that knowledge seems not to be of narrative nature. The "events" that happen in his photographs are purely visual. Like in his other art works, the elements recurring in various combinations in his photographic tableaux contain only possibilities of narrative. Their recurrence itself allows for a wide range of potential narratives. However, any definite narrative development is blocked by the perceptual impact the image produces on the viewer, an aspect which I consider fundamental for what we can learn from Dine's visualization of the unconscious. Time as a factor of narrative development is embedded in the image (it represents, so to say, the very matter of the image) yet "the passage of time" is cunningly bracketed in a skillful visual suspense that compacts past, present, and future in one image and defers the exposure of meaning. Doesn't such suspension of time through narrative freezing transpose, in fact, the common way in which we perceive the passage of time, namely that it passes without notice?

In his latest series (2004), mostly made of photographs of photographs, Dine edits various photographic images explicitly linked to his past seen from the perspective of the present. Most of them are self-portraits in which two images are confronted: the older Dine with the young -- "I and him" -, or his present-day self-portrait with portraits of close people or with still lives. The compositions highlight the fact that the camera does not only record the past; it is also an instrument for reconstructing memory. As in the other series, the oblique angle, the play with the contrasts between sharp and soft focus, the subtle variations of light intensities create a visual dynamic that enables him to deconstruct the very fantasy of the photographic unconscious and of photographic memory as replicative processes, even while he makes use of this fantasy.

"Bringing that which is dead to life" means to Dine beating inert matter into life. He retains on film the capacities of the mind to *retain* -- in time -- parts of life faithfully, that is creatively. By being alert and faithful to process -- to the mind in progress, to the eye in movement -- his photographs integrate fantasies and realities of time passing, of light changing, of texture gaining in expressivity or becoming fragile on the verge of extinction. Even when decentered by asymmetrical framing, the photographs integrated in a composition do not appear like

disintegrating memories but rather like parts suggestive of a whole, and as such reminiscent of the metonymic patterns of our lives sustained by objects and metaphors, by miniature or fragmentary reminiscences of personal or cultural representations. As they loom in chiaroscuro, these shapes have the immediacy of mental flashes. The viewer's attention is bidden not only by what the photographic tableaux represent, but -- most importantly for my point here -- by the suggestive way in which they bring inner life work into what photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard called "visual consciousness." As a result, the varied images incorporated in a frame seem to meet the viewer's eye in remote corners of early life memory, where thought and vision are in the process of being structured, where the unconscious is a way of editing our selves, and clear liquid thought¹⁹ is the one that we see unthinkingly.

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¹⁹ The phrase used in the title of this article is coined after the title of one of Dine's black-and-white photogravure prints, "Clear Liquid Talking", 1996.

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