Exhibition Review

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JM Coetzee: Photographs from Boyhood

Curated by Farzanah Badsha and Hermann Wittenberg, at the UCT Irma Stern Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa, 28.11.17–20.01.18

There is a joke I especially like in the US version of *The Office*: Erin, the receptionist, takes the last photo on a disposable camera at an office party, sees it has reached the end of the roll and throws it in the bin saying, 'Oh, all done!'. Then in a talking head interview, she explains, 'Disposable cameras are fun, but it does seem wasteful, and you never get to see your photos'.

At the risk of over-freighting a quick joke, and probably stopping it from making me laugh any more, I do think Erin pinpoints something important about photography as a form with this mistake (if it is a mistake). She separates out two parts of a phenomenon – the photo as act and the photo as object. As Erin construes it, a disposable camera's function is to provide the pleasure of taking photos, and she reminds us that this can be a pleasure entirely separate from the object it anticipates, the potent and curious item created by the act. An inversion of this preference of functions could be the photos sometimes found at the end of a roll of film: of bedrooms, of feet, even of the shop in which they are about to be developed, which fast-forward and forget the act of taking the photo to bring the photo(s) as object(s) closer.

I thought of Erin looking at JM Coetzee's *Photographs from Boyhood*, which distinguish themselves by the time held between their two photographic identities. They were previewed in Oxford as part of the conference *Travelling with Coetzee* ahead of their full exhibition in Cape Town at the Irma Stern Gallery. The exhibition presents hitherto unseen photos taken by the young John Coetzee between 1955 and 1956. They existed as developed but unseen rolls for more than 60 years until passed into the care of Hermann Wittenberg by Coetzee when he finally moved out of his apartment in Cape Town, included, apparently by accident, among boxes of dark room equipment.

Wittenberg had them scanned, with Coetzee's eventual, but (and again – ostensibly) largely indifferent agreement, and the end result, for now, is this exhibition, which has been curated by Wittenberg and Farzanah Badsha: a remarkably moving collection of photos that bring us close to Coetzee and his moments of photography.

The photos are scenes from provincial life. In images that range from blurred, unfocused experiments to – as Wittenberg astutely emphasises in his brochure notes – extremely technically competent executions, we glimpse Coetzee's family and friends, his home and his school, excursions made by the family, and the young photographer himself, in a series of arresting self-portraits: serious, dramatically lit, eyes boring into the lens.

This is the Coetzee of *Boyhood* (1997), a young man intensely self-aware and probing a complex, fascinating, though often recalcitrant and distressing world. He took dozens of rolls of photos, and printed just a few (himself, at home), but most did not even make it to a contact sheet. Instead, they were only ever seen in the phantasmic form of a mentally inverted negative. A couple of the photos in the exhibition are Coetzee's original prints, bearing the marks of thumbtacks, but the great majority are printed here for the first time. So until this year, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that they only existed as photographs in the sense that they were taken and not in the sense that they existed as self-reflexive objects, as photographs in any teleological sense.

What is most palpable is how the photographs worked (and until very recently existed entirely) as social and exploratory tools for the boy who took them. A (unique) photo of Coetzee's father being reprimanded by his aunt at a clandestine angle is a rare and furtive incursion into his father's space and vulnerability. A photo of a school friend brandishing a teacher's cane while, presumably, the teacher is out of the room is a tentative involvement in the systems of hierarchy and punishment that obsess the young protagonist of *Boyhood*. These are acts before they are objects – sixty years before, which through a small accident of fate might have stayed indefinite.

Adam Phillips (2010) identifies how Diane Arbus's camera was an apparatus for social exploration, of experimenting with closeness to people who would otherwise have been beyond reach. He asks: 'If the camera is an ice-breaker – a way of having something to do with these people who she could never become – what is the picture a picture of?' – suggesting the photo itself is a record of the act, of a 'thwarted closeness.' Coetzee's adolescent photography-as-exploration is a second, luminous example of Phillips's suggestions, but the conditions collateral to the young, working class, amateur photographer provoke a still more existential question: to what extent does the picture exist? The photo-object is a kind of guarantee for the photo-act, but is an impermanent and slight guaranteeing object. We are looking, in *Photographs from Boyhood*, at photos

that very nearly did not exist in any usual sense. Their slim though potent physical existence was, until so recently, in most cases overlooked and unconsidered. It was, in two senses, a negative existence. To look at many of the photos as they are now in the exhibition – objects – and to feel their immense poignancy is, I think, to imagine they don't exist.

Coetzee takes photos as the child of a poor white Afrikaans South African family at the beginning of a boom in amateur and home photography. Technological and financial constraints shape the nature of his photography: 'I had to ration my shots,' Coetzee explains in an interview with Wittenberg (2017:12). He could not have expected to be able to print more than a handful of the images from the tens of rolls exposed. Therefore, each exposure was an investment, but more particularly an investment that was not going to be paid off with a print or any positive image. In most cases then, it was pure investment, pure demonstration, underwritten by the ghostly and fragile negative image.

In this exhibition, Coetzee – fluctuating between adventurous experiment and chastising caution both as photographer and adolescent – shows us that taking a photo is a demonstrative as much as a transitive act. Or perhaps: that taking a photo is essentially a demonstrative act. For that is how Coetzee's photos make me feel. They make me feel that the photo-object is a distinct and even incidental by-product of the crucial and characteristic act. As Michael Taussig (2011:68) puts it in *I swear I saw this*, appropriately arrestingly, appropriately enigmatically, 'like a fish leaping unexpectedly out of the sea, the image provides testimony to the need to offer testimony.' Coetzee's photos of the family's black South African farm workers visiting the sea for the first time mark an important occasion, one that was revisited neither in *Boyhood* nor by printing the photos. So the event was marked simply by the young Coetzee being there and taking the photos.

And I'm not sure it is even right in such a case to suggest that the printed photos of that day at the beach, as they appear in the exhibition, refer to that fact or document that intention. They are new objects that are related, by blood as it were, to the intention or demonstration but were and are not participant in it.

I can express something by taking a photo entirely separately to that which the photo as object expresses. Often, a photo is an act of love. See Coetzee's dozens of his mother (as opposed to the one of his father), leaving their house, turned towards the door, or sleeping on a train with the sun slanting across her face. If photography, as an art, can facilitate some form of unconscious cognition, we can hope that photographs are able reveal things about us – the photographers – that we did not know, or did not know we knew. Our photos can surprise us; for example, our own photos might expose or suggest to us that we are in love with someone. When a photo reveals like this, it reveals something about the act of the photograph, interpreting what that act expressed.

And it can just as easily interpret incorrectly: a photo could persuade us untruthfully that we are in love with someone too.

In one sense a photo fails to record the act that produced it, and in another it does so with difficult, unmatchable success. My response to these *Photographs from Boyhood*, I should recognise, certainly is shaped by *Boyhood* the novel. The photographs might also provide the basis for one reading of the relationship between the novel's precise, even dispassionate narrative voice and the turmoil, ecstasy, obsession, and confusion it documents. Focused exactly by the twin coordinates of the present tense and the third person singular, it is a voice that asserts a total aesthetic certainty while pointing away from itself entirely.

In *Age of Iron*, Coetzee (1990:102-103) describes the particular and rich impermanence of photographs:

> Lying all these years in places of safekeeping across the county, in albums, in desk drawers, this picture and thousands like it have subtly matured, metamorphosed. The fixing did not hold or the developing went further than one would ever have dreamed—who can know how it happened?—but they have become negatives again, a new kind of negative in which we begin to see what used to lie outside the frame, occulted.

We are used to thinking of photos as potent objects, both in everyday life and in critical writing: as Coetzee envisions them here: strange, transmutable objects that, Susan Sontag (1977:3) observes in one of the best-found words in her book, '*thicken* the environment we recognize as modern' (emphasis added). Coetzee's vision of the positive becoming a negative – 'a new kind of negative' – applies itself readily to his own metamorphosed photos shown in this exhibition, but also provides a way to think about other acts that fix or axiomatise – writing, for instance, or even remembering. Coetzee pushes language in this direction, towards 'writing as a graphic system,' as Peter MacDonald observed in one paper given at the Oxford conference. Such acts – 'fixing', 'developing' – gestate and transform too. The photograph lying in a drawer is an object in the richest, most fraught sense of that word, but distinctively an object that reveals its own creating act by objectifying it – the act itself becomes suspended, insistent, intractable.

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