

ROLAND BARTHES\*:

## PROBLEMS WITH UNDERSTANDING PHOTOGRAPHY

.../ "Photography is unclassifiable because there is no reason to *mark* this or that of its occurrences; it aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language: but for there to be a sign there must be a mark; deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don't *take*, which *turn*, as milk does. Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.

In short, the referent adheres. And this singular adherence makes it very difficult to focus on Photography. The books which deal with it, much less numerous moreover than for any other art, are victims of this difficulty: Some are technical; in order to "see" the photographic signifier, they are obliged to focus at very close range. Others are historical or sociological; in order to observe the total phenomenon of the Photograph, these are obliged to focus at a great distance. I realised with irritation that none discussed precisely the photographs which interest me, which give me pleasure or emotion. What did I care about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape, or, at the other end, about the Photograph as family rite? Each time I would read something about Photography, I would think of some photograph I loved, and this made me furious. Myself, I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body; but an importunate voice (the voice of knowledge, of *scientia*) then adjured me, in a severe tone: "Get back to Photography. What you are seeing here and what makes you suffer, belongs to the category 'Amateur Photographs', dealt with by a team of sociologists; nothing but the trace of a social protocol of integration, intended to reassert the Family, etc." Yet I persisted; another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture. So I went on, not daring to reduce the world's countless photographs, any more than to extend several of mine to Photography: in short, I found myself at an impasse and, so to speak, "scientifically" alone and disarmed.

Then I decided that this disorder and this dilemma, revealed by my desire to write on Photography, corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses, those of sociology, of semiology, and of psychoanalysis but that, by ultimate dissatisfaction with all of them, I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me ( however naive it might be ) : a desperate resistance to any reductive system. For each time, having resorted to any such language to whatever degree, each time I felt it hardening and thereby tending to reduction and reprimand, I would gently

leave it and seek elsewhere: I began to speak differently. It was better, once and for all, to make my protestation of singularity into a virtue-to try making what Nietzsche called the "ego's ancient sovereignty" into an heuristic principle. So I resolved to start my inquiry with no more than a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed *for me*. Nothing to do with a corpus: only some bodies. In this (after all) conventional debate between science and subjectivity, I had arrived at this curious notion: why mightn't there be, somehow, a new science for each object? *A mathesis singularis* (and no longer *universalis*) ? So I decided to take myself as mediator for all Photography. Starting from a few personal impulses, I would try to formulate the fundamental feature, the universal without which there would be no Photography.

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So I make myself the measure of photographic "knowledge." What does my body know of Photography?"

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