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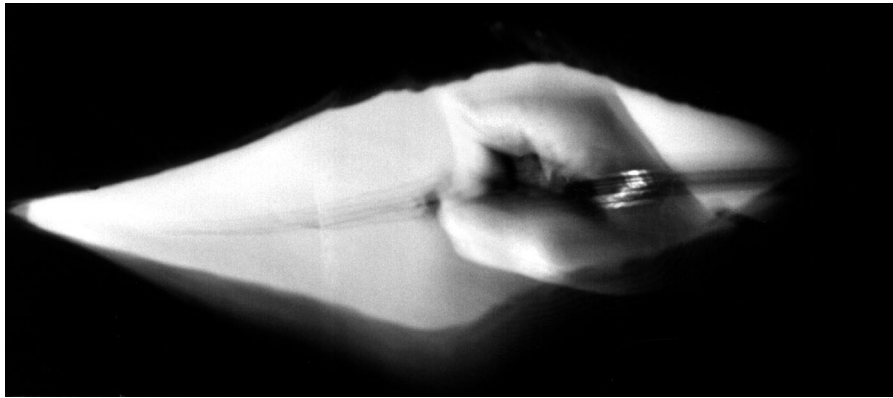


Figure 1. Ann Hamilton, *face to face . 53*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Overture

In his 'Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image', Hubert Damisch states that 'photography is nothing other than a process of recording, a technique of inscribing, in an emulsion of silver salts, a stable image generated by a ray of light'.¹ As Damisch further observes, such a preliminary definition of traditional photographic practices 'neither assumes the use of a camera, nor does it imply that the image obtained is that of an object or scene from the external world'.² Indeed, we know that the history of photographic techniques includes numerous examples of prints made from film that has been exposed directly to a light source – examples might include Man Ray's rayographs or Moholy-Nagy's photograms – in which objects are placed directly onto the surface of a light-sensitive material.

*The essay is a revised version of 'Gloss (à partir de quelques photos d'Ann Hamilton)', published in *Études françaises* 51:2 (2015), edited by Ginette Michaud (issue on 'Toucher des yeux: Nouvelles poétiques de l'*ekphrasis*'), and of a lecture given at University of Toronto in 2018. My deepest thanks to Ginette Michaud and John Paul Ricco for their invitations to share this material, part of a book-length project on Ann Hamilton's *face to face* series, and to Andrea Gyenge for a series of incisive insights and wonderfully perceptive suggestions on the essay.

Without the use of a camera, the light-sensitive chemicals of the paper are exposed to a source of light exterior to the material surface, which then creates this very recording or inscription. Technically, these various experiments further recall the early photographic works of William Henry Fox Talbot, the photograms or 'photogenic drawings' in which material objects are placed on sensitized paper, left outdoors, the image then coming into appearance through exposure to the sun. In eliminating the camera or apparatus from the equation, what all these experiments then demonstrate for Damisch is 'an experimental equivalent of a phenomenological analysis which purports to grasp the essence of the phenomenon under consideration'.³ And as he suggests at the end of his essay, this 'eidetic experience' not only comes into tension with the historical and cultural significance of the photograph; it takes us back to one of the earliest photographic images known, Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* (*Point de vue du Gras*), a fragile, threatened image, so close in its organization, its granular texture, and its emergent aspect [*à l'état naissant*], to certain Seurats – an incomparable image which [as the English translation suggests] makes one dream of photographic *substance* [*matière photographique*] distinct from subject matter [*ce qui fait son 'objet' ou son 'sujet'*].⁴

In removing reference to the camera, apparatus, black box, or camera obscura from determining the 'eidetic experience' of the photograph, in refusing to distinguish the photograph in terms of 'object' and 'subject', and in refusing to reduce the photograph to its 'subject matter' alone (theme, iconography), one therefore arrives at a thought of the photograph as 'matière photographique'. 'Matter' in this sense is defined less in terms of substance (as suggested in the English translation) or an inherent property of the photograph (its chemical composition) than matter – the 'texture' of matter – in its emergence or, strictly speaking, 'à l'état naissant', variously translatable as a state of nascence, an arising, surging forth, or coming to birth. At the same time, questions of technique and experimentation with light and chemical process cannot be dissociated from a phenomenology whose 'reduction' becomes both possible and yet simultaneously impossible, immaterial and material, opening towards an 'eidetic experience' for which the photograph is not simply the origin and outcome but comes – emerges – into birth and presence.

Damisch's argument suggests that the photograph in its material singularity exposes a limit to the phenomenological experience it simultaneously makes available, displacing the very terms that phenomenology assumes for the world – that it is composed and constituted in terms of phenomena that appear and are visible – to a 'matter' at once inscribed and simultaneously exposed (to and from itself), to a matter or 'sub-stance' that is always already divided from itself and so ex-scribed in its emergence rather than standing firm or in-scribed. In this sense, rather than subsumed under what is usually termed 'process' (as in the identification of different photographic 'processes'), the photograph – the writing of light – is articulated less as the space of an appearance than an exposure understood as spacing, displacement, contact, or touch. These are terms that begin to approximate the conditions of thinking 'la matière photographique' or photographic matter 'à l'état naissant' rather than thinking of photographic matter as pure

substance, phenomenon, or process. More pertinently, this emphasis on elevating photographic technique to the level of concept or thought – on rethinking technique in terms of its conceptual force – is to expose, in turn, conceptual thought to the very ‘matière’ that the photograph *is*, to the techniques of ‘recording’ and exscription in which the photograph comes into existence, presence, birth. In short, if the ‘essence’ of photography that the eidetic experience purports to bring into appearance *is* at once its technique, matter, existence, then how are we to think this sense of exposure – of being exposed – that the photograph brings to light?



Figure 2. Ann Hamilton, *face to face · 7*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Aperture

[...] this introductory lair of matter [cet antre introductif de matière].
Paul Valéry.⁵

The mouth opens and the photograph comes into being. It is not the shutter of the camera that opens in this instance but a mouth, lips parted, through which light enters. As the lips part and the light passes into the back of the mouth’s cavernous space, the oval shape of the mouth and the ellipsoid created by the swollen puffiness or pulped edge of the lips is seen inscribed within the photograph itself, a mouth that frames the scene as it comes into appearance between the parted lips. Just as the edge of the photograph frames the mouth and the lips form the mouth’s opening enclosure, so these same lips frame each of the scenes that come into appearance and exposure, scenes exposed here each time the mouth opens.

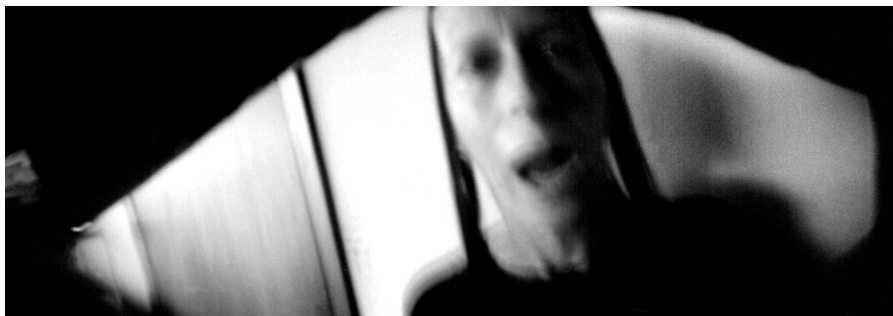


Figure 3. Ann Hamilton, *face to face · 22*, 200. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

The photographs are created out of a single hand-cut frame of light-sensitive film that is placed in a small black 35mm film canister, which has a small hole or aperture pierced in the side of the canister covered over with a small piece of tape. Once the film in the canister is placed in the mouth, the piece of tape covering the aperture is peeled off, the mouth opens, the film frame is exposed to the light, and the scene in front of the open mouth is recorded and inscribed on the surface of the film (exposure time varies from 5–20 seconds).

Composed in black and white and of various figures, environments, landscapes, shapes, objects, the scenes are a little blurry because of the ‘method’ employed, the slightly awkward and technologically unsophisticated technique – ‘mouth-held’, we might say, rather than ‘hand-held’ – through which the photograph is created. An unsteady hand or trembling fingers, mouth or lips quivering, a touch of saliva that seeps through the aperture, a small cough, swallowing, secretions from nasal mucus, vibrations in the throat, phlegm – any of these are enough to create the lack of resolution in the photograph, and thus the varying degrees of clarity through which the figures and the various scenes appear. But the scene – figures, faces, landscapes, various backgrounds, objects – this scene is still, each time, in each instance, still ... visible, still comes into visibility as the mouth opens, the lips part, and the light inscribes, suffuses, or impregnates itself on the material surface of the film.

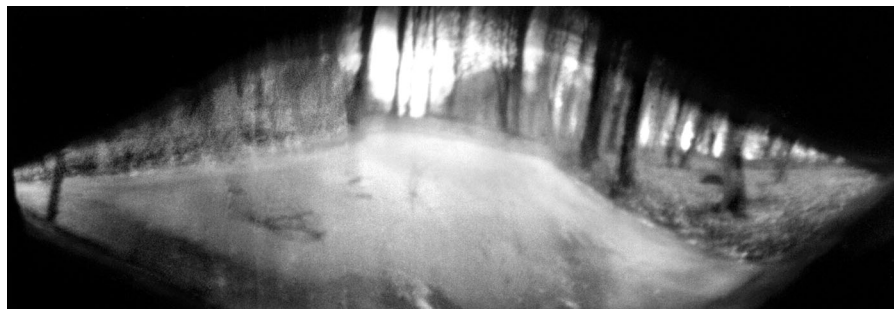


Figure 4. Ann Hamilton, *face to face* · 14, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Sténopé

The photographs, taken from a series from 2011 titled *face to face*, constitute what Ann Hamilton refers to as her ‘pinhole mouth photographs’, or ‘mouthings’.⁶ The reference to the pinhole camera corresponds here to the mouth in its very opening, this mouth which is also the shape of the eye. If the reference to the pinhole camera is suitable (we recall that the image generated is a naturally occurring phenomenon as much as a technical invention), it stems from the analogy to a camera without a lens, a light-proofed box in which there is a pierced hole or slight aperture. The French call this an *appareil à sténopé*, from the word *στενός* (*stenos*), the narrowness of an opening, and *ὀπή* (*opê*), which is an orifice, like the opening in a chimney or a hole or window in a wall, but the term also suggests a viewing or the very

faculty of seeing, thus denoting the operation of the eye itself. As the light passes through the aperture, and depending on both the length of time the aperture remains open as well as the distance between the aperture and surface on which the light is cast, an inverted image is screened inside the dark box of the pinhole camera, which is then projected on the back wall or captured on light-sensitive paper. In spite of the lack of a lens, this process also echoes the way the eye works as a sense organ, in which the eye functions as an optic and the retina becomes a receptor. As an external source of light passes through the cornea, refracted through a lens, an image is created on the retina, which is the light-sensitive membrane located in the back of the eye. And as we know, this image is naturally inverted before we see it reversed the right way up. Similarly, in the pinhole camera, as the light from outside the box passes through the aperture and projects an inverted image on the opposite side, the resulting image is created by this so-called *camera obscura* effect. And even though pinhole photographs have a nearly infinite depth of field and everything appears in focus, and even though there is no distortion through a lens, exposure times are relatively long, which creates this blurring effect, particularly around moving objects.



Figure 5. Ann Hamilton, *face to face · 16*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

What is Plato's famous cave if not a camera obscura, the largest ever conceived, I suppose? If Plato reduced the mouth of his grotto to a tiny hole and applied a sensitized coat to the wall that served as his screen, by developing the rear of the cave he could have obtained a gigantic film, and heaven knows what astounding conclusions he might have left regarding the nature of our knowledge and the essence of our ideas [...].

Paul Valéry.⁷

The mouth opens and the photograph comes into being. Or the mouth opens and the photograph comes into existence and exposure. It is not that the world exists prior to the photograph being taken. The world is not that place populated with people in certain contexts or environments that the photographer then decides to photograph. The photo is not a photograph or

representation of a world which is then captured and identifiable in the photograph, of a world – people, environments, landscapes, objects – that logically and temporally pre-exist the photograph. For each time the mouth opens, the world comes into existence in and as the photograph. The mouth opens and the lips part, and each time, in each instance, the world comes into existence photographically, as if the photographs were now the condition – the immeasurable or incommensurable measure – in which the world worlds and comes into being. The exposure of the photograph is immediately or instantaneously the way in which the world comes to show itself.



Figure 6. Ann Hamilton, *face to face* - 20, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Diaphragm

[...] *the body is only mouth.*
Jean-Luc Nancy.⁸

In the closing pages of *Ego Sum*, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that ‘the incommensurable extension of thought is the opening of the mouth’.⁹ It is the mouth that ‘opens and forms’ the Cartesian *ego* (‘other lips’, he says, ‘had already opened to deliver into the world this “me” when it let out its first cry’) – it is the mouth that utters *ego sum*, *ego existo*. The role of the mouth in Nancy’s reading of Descartes is decisive here, for if ‘the mouth is the opening of *Ego*, *Ego* is the opening of the mouth’.¹⁰ As Nancy continues:

the Cartesian soul [...] as the soul of the one whose being consists in uttering, stands in this place-non-place of a mouth that opens and closes upon “*ego sum*”. And that opens and closes at once, a second time, repeating and not repeating “*ego existo*”. This double beat utters the subject, utters itself as subject’, and as the mouth utters these phrases, Nancy concludes, ‘the subject ruins itself and collapses into this abyss.’¹¹

Here Nancy’s rethinking of the subject at one of its most privileged and founding moments in modern thought not only insists on the intersection of thought, speech, and body removed from any mind-body distinction. It coalesces precisely around the ‘mouth’ that utters *ego*, this mouth through which it is

a matter of reaching the place, indeed of going back to the instant of a foundation, that of the Subject – in order to lend an ear to what only the foundation can make audible, because it triggers it and brings it about: the whisper of the subject that utters itself there, and collapses there.¹²

As the mouth opens and utters ‘ego sum’, ‘ego utters itself there: it externalises itself there, which does not mean’, Nancy insists, ‘that it carries to the outside the visible face of an invisible interiority. It means, literally, that *ego* makes or makes itself into *exteriority*, spacing of places, distancing and strangeness that make up a place’.¹³ For the subject never establishes an autonomous, self-sufficient foundation for itself (the cogito) without inseparably and indissociably providing a kind of portrait or narrative account of that moment, some act or presentation in which the subject – already un-founding, at its ‘origin’, its own autonomy – never fully distinguishes itself in its founding from its discursive and literary mode of presentation, a fable or a fictioning of the subject (Nancy demonstrates with insistence how this fable of fictioning occurs in Descartes’ writings). The exposure of the subject is not just always in excess of any self; the self *is* exposed. As Nancy recollects, recalling the reference to portraiture made by Descartes himself: ‘the author of the method can only present himself in painting – and this painting is at the same time its own original and the mask of the original who conceals himself, two feet away, behind his portrait’.¹⁴

In order to rearticulate the role that the mouth plays in the uttering of ego, Nancy then marks a distinction between the mouth or orality and *bucca* or buccality, the *bucca* that exists, as it were, before any ‘oral stage’:

But a mouth is neither a substance nor a figure. *Bucca*, a more recent and more trivial term, is not *os*. *Os*, *oris*, oral mouth, is the face itself taken metonymically for this mouth that it surrounds, carries, and makes visible, this mouth that is the passageway for all kinds of substances, first of all of this aerial substance of a discourse. *Bucca*, on the other hand, is the puffed cheeks, the movement, the contraction/distention of breathing, eating, spitting or speaking. Buccality is more primitive than orality. Nothing is yet taking place there, and more importantly, that has not always-already spoken there. But an unstable and mobile opening forms at the moment of speaking. At this instant, nothing can be discerned; *ego* does not want to say anything, *ego* only opens this cavity.¹⁵

Nancy’s reading of Descartes in *Ego Sum* locates the photographic at the heart of Descartes’ most famous utterance, suggesting that ‘if the *ego* sees itself in the snapshot’ (*l’instantané*, a term that extends the sense of an instantaneous moment to a Polaroid photo), it is this

snapshot [*instantané*] that allows the luminous trace of its unstable image to be inscribed (but is it an image? it is an utterance, an uttering, at most the opening of a mouth ...), this vision and this inscription themselves depend on [...] the instantaneous closing (the instant 'is' also instability) of the diaphragm through which light passes.¹⁶

Playing on both the anatomical and photographic sense of the term in French, Nancy evocatively suggests that 'the evidence of the *cogito* has the nature of a *diaphragm*' (in French, the opening of an aperture on a camera is referred to precisely as the *ouverture du diaphragme*).¹⁷

The so-called objectivity of the lens – this lens that is tied to a historically circumscribed set of conventions for creating a photographic 'space', a spatial arrangement that results from rectifying incorrections and deviations in the lens itself – this lens in the *face to face* series now becomes more like a diaphragm in its anatomical sense. *Diaphragma* is the partition, barrier, or muscle which divides the thorax from the abdomen. As the mouth opens, as the lips part, the space created becomes a threshold, the liminal space of the diaphragm between the world that is recorded and the cavernous and opaque space of the back of the mouth and throat as it descends into the body, this cavity or cavern in which the canister is placed and the light becomes inscribed.

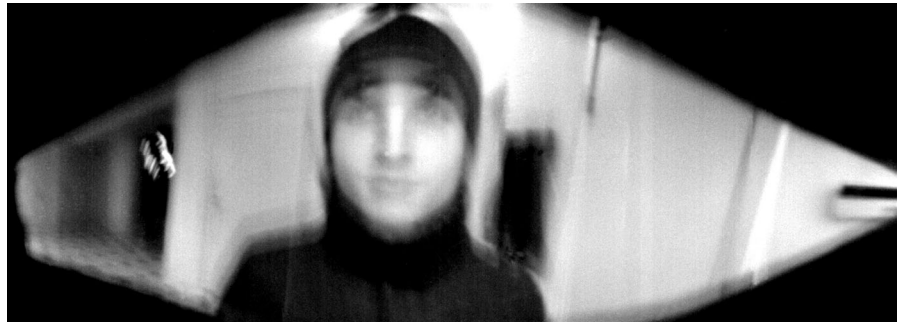


Figure 7. Ann Hamilton, *face to face* - 25, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Pupilla

*[...] let's see, can eyes manage to touch, first of all, to press together
like lips?
To which surface of the eye do lips compare? If two gazes look into each
other's eyes, can one then say that they are touching? Are they coming into
contact – the one with the other?
Jacques Derrida.¹⁸*

Once again – once and again – the mouth opens and the photograph comes into being. The iterative structure implied in making these photographs

involves an unfamiliar or defamiliarising sense of proximity, especially when a human figure is photographed, for the figure or face has to be in unusually close proximity to the photographer's mouth in order for the photograph to work. But there is also another sense of distancing and estrangement. For the proximity is not just defined by eye-to-eye contact, nor mouth to mouth contact, as when two people kiss by touching their lips together, but eye to mouth contact, an estranging technique that one senses is often uncomfortable, if not also socially impolite (think of when someone stares at a part of your face for a period of time but avoids eye contact, refusing to look you in the eye). In light of this sense of proximity and distance, it would be important to recall that the size and scale of the reproductions when projected on a screen both exaggerates and diminishes this defamiliarising effect, especially when compared to the showing of these same photographs in the space of an exhibition or on the page here, in which the size and scale of the mouth corresponds more closely to the mouth of the viewer facing the photographs. If the photographs are also a staging of a face-to-face encounter, as the title of the series at least intimates, it is a facing that takes place as at once a reflection and a simultaneous distortion, at once an echo and a physical displacement, at once a mirroring and mise-en-abyme: 'Making the orifice of language the orifice of sight', Hamilton writes,

the resulting image is a trace presence of standing or sitting 'face to face' with a person or landscape. The figure or landscape becomes the pupil in the eye shape created by one's mouth, much the same way as one sees a tiny image of oneself in the reflection of another person's pupil [and as Hamilton recalls, 'pupil' comes from the Latin *pupilla*, which means 'little doll' or 'puppet'].¹⁹



Figure 8. Ann Hamilton, *face to face · 23*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Recorded and inscribed in each photograph is the endlessly finite exposure of the world as it faces or as it surfaces, even as this surfacing is not strictly a face-to-face encounter but rather an exposure of mouth to eye and eye to mouth, of mouth to pupil that finds itself reflected in the back of the throat's opacity, this opacity in which we as viewers find ourselves looking out. The dramaturgy that binds and unbinds the mouth and throat to the eyes and pupil reinforces less a form of *self*-reflexivity than this sense of proximity and

simultaneous estrangement, at once a scene of intimacy and a simultaneous distancing in which no identifiable 'self' exists that is capable of reflecting back on itself, or that is not immediately subject to its (own) self-displacement and distancing from an 'other' to which we are exposed.²⁰ This detachment from a self is reinforced through the endless circulation of mouth to eye and eye to mouth, the transitions from mouth to pupil, that then finds itself reflected and simultaneously effaced in the cavernous depths and opacity of the throat, in the darkest abyss of the subject.



Figure 9. Ann Hamilton, *face to face* · 28, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Osfacere

The photograph becomes the permanently inscribed record of a chemical exchange, the light touching the film frame in the canister and fixing itself there on its surface. A kind of alchemy, one might say, an impregnation, or a kind of transference that gives birth to the photograph in its exposure. Just as early photographic techniques involved solutions, emulsions, and substances, including process of cleansing liquids, these photographs are immersed in an exchange of materials and fluids. But they also displace those various photographic techniques in which the exchanges and reversals of light and dark are invariably subject to 'corrections' and the overcoming of limitations – inverted images are placed upright, negatives become positives, blur becomes focus, chemical imbalance is rectified, dirt and acidity becomes purity through washing and cleansing, fading becomes permanence. For as the film canister is placed in the mouth's 'succulent theater', the film frame and its exposure become part of this rhythmic exchange that now defines the entire body – a rhythm articulated as at once distinction and simultaneous dissolution, diffusion and infusion, projection and ingestion, absorption and distraction.²¹ For we know that the body is just as fluid, vaporous, and gaseous as materially solid – the rhythms of breathing, the spit and saliva that cleanse the mouth, the movement of air down the throat, 'the humid and eager depths of the nostrils' as Valéry again suggests, the flowing of blood

through the veins, endless circulating, impregnation, secretions, perspiration, spit, mucus, phlegm, excrement, saliva, sperm, faeces, menstruation, urine. In this sense, like the film canister and its aperture, the body is also a retainer punctuated with openings, slits, cuts, holes, cavities, apertures, and orifices – mouth, ears, eyes, penis, vagina, rectum. As sites of passage and transference, inlets and outlets, the series of *face to face* photographs (at least theoretically speaking!) could have been taken through these other orifices too. Just as there exists an endless exchange between the shape of the open lips and the shape of the eye, what comes into play here is thus an endlessly interrupted metonymy of the mouth, these orifices (*os-facere*) that are so many making of mouths, so many eroticised zones of contact, touch, pleasure, as well as contagion and contamination.



Figure 10. Ann Hamilton, *face to face · 1*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

No doubt we have come to think of the open mouth as a silent scream, the space of an utterance which is also the space of a pregnant silence, a silent uttering which seems to express agony, pain, suffering, distress, angst. And so, we read the mouth in this instance as the site of an existential crisis, the means through which some human or psychological condition is uttered. Edward Munch is the obvious reference. Rembrandt's self-portrait or portraits by Caravaggio come to mind too. Or one might think here of Vito Acconci's video, 'Open Book' from 1974, the mouth evoking an abjection that is simultaneously the site of a negotiation, agreement, or contract with the viewer.²²

The painter Francis Bacon referred frequently to a still from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* – the image of the screaming nurse in the famous sequence on the steps in Odessa – which Bacon kept in his studio as inspiration for many of his painting in the late 1940s and early 1950s (referring to these open-mouthed screams in Bacon's paintings, Gilles Deleuze once wrote that 'the entire body escapes through the mouth').²³



Figure 11. Still from Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

It is this image of the nurse that closes the filmic sequence as the troops march down the steps massacring those who attempt to run away. In the closing part of the scene, the nurse's mouth is held open, but the figure has been shot in the eye. The pair of glasses – their form echoing both the eye and mouth as well as the oval of the face – no longer function to see (at least as compared to previous scenes in the film where the nurse conspicuously blinks). Here one eye is gouged through, the other barely open, squinting, seeing the scene unfold, but now seeing nothing, the blood congealing to obscure any view. The eye with the oval glasses no longer sees as the mouth opens, and the metonymical circuit between the mouth and eye is broken, interrupted, at once punctuated and punctured.

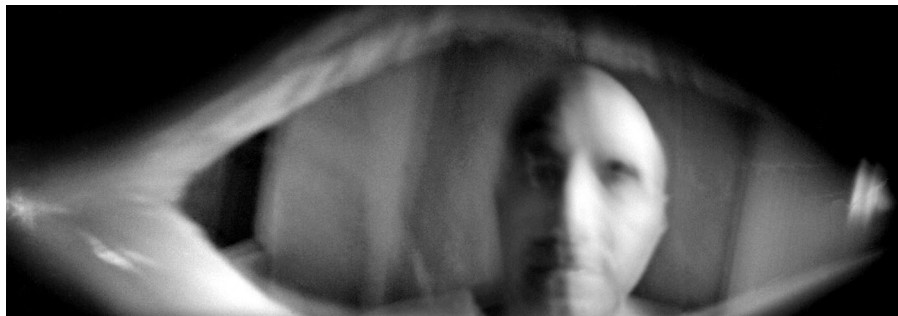


Figure 12. Ann Hamilton, *face to face · 5*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

If there is anything existential in the series of *face to face* photographs, it is an existentialism removed from all emotion, all psychology, all angst, all sense of abandonment or dread, any sense that the world is somehow meaningless, plunging the subject into existential crisis – in short, an existential cry in which the mouth is said to speak various conditions of existence. For this is an existentialism that is nothing other than an affirmation of existence removed from all humanism, identity, subjectivity, or inter-subjectivity – in short, removed from the assumption that the photograph can record or speak some human, psychological, or existential condition.

Rather than the site of an existential condition, we are perhaps closer in the *face to face* photographs to Samuel Beckett's *Not I*, or at least a reading of Beckett that refuses to close his work off as the expression of an existential crisis. In the performance of *Not I*, the only thing that is seen on stage is a spotlighted mouth, the rest of the actor's body blocked from view, leaving exposed nothing but a mouth that frantically utters the text. Significantly, Beckett himself referred back to Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* as corresponding to the effect of the open mouth on the stage. But the analogy is only obvious in relation to the uninterrupted suspension of speech uttered by the open mouth. For in *Not I*, the performance is of a disembodied woman's voice, save for the mouth which speaks, and speaks frenetically, as famously performed by Billie Whitelaw – uttering, pausing, moments of linguistic recursivity, continuing on, interrupting herself, silence, uttering. As Beckett once suggested, the mouth here is nothing more than 'an organ of emission, without intellect'.²⁴



Figure 13. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (1647-1652), Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

If the series of *face to face* photographs refuse the symbolic, iconographical, or expressive traditions they also seem to inspire, they nevertheless evoke the mouth as the site of ecstasy, of lips parted in extreme anticipation, as in Bernini's celebrated sculpture of Saint Teresa swooning in ecstasy, this swooning that is also said to be unspeakable or untranslatable. But this ecstasy, in excess of or lacking any determinate signification, withdraws from any form of self-expression. For, with lips parted and eyes opaque, a sense of expectancy is created, an infinite waiting – waiting with bated breath – a lack of fulfilment, a longing, anticipation, suspense, an absent sense, a finite moment that is nothing symbolic but that is sustained and punctuated here in its infinite interruption.

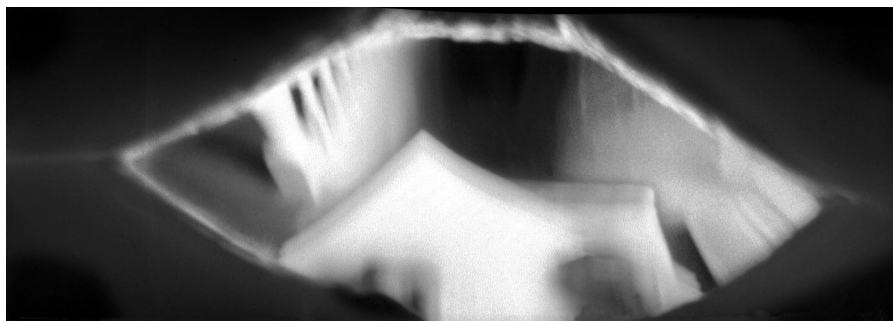


Figure 14. Ann Hamilton, *face to face* · 36, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Stoma

If the opening of the mouth is a gesture that implies speaking, the gift of speaking, the photographs might also be translated into an orifice understood as the opening of a wound. These are photographs that are also wounds or *stoma*, in which the surface of the body is punctured (whether naturally or surgically) by a slit or aperture so as to connect the interior of the body to its outside – foramina, that are not only holes, openings, apertures, orifices, passages but ways of piercing (*forare*), or embrasures, these enlargements of the interior aperture of a door or window that are made through a sectioning, slicing, or oblique cut. Medically, stoma function like a *pharmakon*, a wound or trauma to the body that is created in order to heal. *Stoma* (στόμα) or *stom-en* (denoting various body parts and orifices) also refer to the mouth or mouthpiece, connoting not just speech, talking, or voice, but also the mouth of a river, an outlet or inlet – of outlets as inlets and inlets as outlets. Neither the one nor the other, but both inside and outside implicated in a permanent exchange and circulation of this ‘buccal space’ and what Valéry called its ‘critical nerviness’, both interiority and exteriority exposed to one another in this opening – at once overture and exposure – to the outside.²⁵ In Nancy’s terms, this buccal place ‘is not a place, and yet it is not out of place. Within a place, within the extension of a face, it makes up the gaping of a non-place’.²⁶



Figure 15. Ann Hamilton, *face to face · 2*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

Two lips kiss two lips, and openness is ours again. Our 'world'. Between us, the movement from inside to outside, from outside to inside, knows no limits. There are exchanges that no loop [boucle], no mouth [bouche] can ever stop. Between us, the house has no walls, the clearing no enclosure, language no circularity. You kiss me, and the world enlarges until the horizon vanishes. Are we satisfied? Yes, if that means that we are never finished. If our pleasure consists of moving and being moved by each other, endlessly. Always in movement, this openness is neither spent nor sated.

Luce Irigaray.²⁷

As the mouth opens, the world comes into being, comes into appearance. As the mouth opens, the world comes into exposure. There is no violence here, as suggested in the possessiveness of 'taking' a photo, a photo 'shoot', or 'capturing' a scene. But the technique is not merely passive either, in the sense that photography might be distributed into a practice that is either active or passive. For the world is *let be* in this very gesture of opening the mouth. Or rather, the gaping mouth gives birth to the photo as it gives birth to the world, to this world at once exposed and created in the act of uttering (the technique implies a creation out of nothing, then, not a production).

In the photographs, this is speech that is immediately exposed to light, to the photo-graph as the writing and articulation of light. Nothing is withdrawn, nothing remains in reserve, nothing is hidden or latent that does not come into being and existence in the very act of uttering, this gesture in which the lips part and the photograph is born. At the same time, this is not the utterance of a subject that pre-exists the act of speaking. Nor is it a language, as it were, housed in the mouth that pre-exists the mouth and the enunciating subject (language as the so-called house of being) but language in and as the act of its articulation, the gesture of speaking if not speech itself, this moment or instant when the mouth opens prior to discourse. One might think of it as the opening of a dialogue, but only insofar as dialogue is understood as the rhythmic displacement or spacing (*dia-*) of

the logos. For the subject comes into existence in the act itself of the mouth opening – ‘a faceless mouth’ – where ‘this articulated opening, in its extreme contraction, forms: *I* [...] it forms *itself* into an *I*, it feels itself *I*, it thinks itself *I*.²⁸

In this articulated opening, what remains in play is thus the act of speaking in and through which each of the photographs comes into being. This is the act of speaking – the uttering, a scene of enunciation – in and through which each of the photographs comes into existence, but this act is the literal opening of the mouth and the act in which the mouth speaks and something is about to be uttered – the condition of all locution, allocution, the elocution, the intonation, the enunciation, the address, the expression, the declaration, the proclamation, the performance, even as the open mouth remains irreducible to their articulation – in short, that which foregrounds the saying rather than what is said.



Figure 16. Ann Hamilton, *face to face · 60*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist. ©Ann Hamilton Studio.

[...] the orifice the elastic pulped edge of which draws the mobile contours of the opening of a sense that is each time other, singular, thrown and suspended in various ways, interrupted, without accomplishment, so that it can better retain in suspense the force of its impulse.

Jean-Luc Nancy.²⁹

As the mouth opens and the lips part, each of the photographs create a further hiatus in the unfolding narrative, an opening or aperture that is not the mere creation of a gap – a gaping hole in a material object, an abyss – but a hiatus understood more in terms of a rupture, an interruption, a cut, a spacing, an interval. If there is speech, it is speech that is therefore not articulated in a narrative form. It does not unfold according to any strict narrative logic (these photographs are not stories but unfold like the story of ‘O’ but without the story). For the opening of the mouth is a punctual moment, an interruption or exclamation (Oh!), a sudden interjection – mouth open, agape, gaping, stunned, speechless, as if the origin of philosophy that begins in wonder (*thaumazein*) was now encountered in this very opening of the mouth at the instant of speaking. And this happens, as in the photographs, not as a

logical sequence, a narrative, a causal relation, or story – something that unfolds in succession or has a progression leading to a conclusion, achievement, or accomplishment – but each time, each and every time the mouth is opened, at every instant, at each and every instance (as Giorgio Agamben asserts, ‘to grasp a whateverness [*qualunque*] one needs a photographic lens’).³⁰ This instance – which has no interiority, identity, individuality, stable position, or stance – this instance is marked by its suddenness, abruptness, suspension, an impulsive or compulsive seizing or existent grasping, a gasping, mouth open, gagging, each time an irruptive, ecstatic, and singular instance, and then again, still, once again, yet again.

Notes

- ¹ Damisch, ‘Five Notes’, 70.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid., 72.
- ⁵ Valéry, ‘Mouth’, 50.
- ⁶ Hamilton, n.p.; Simon, *Ann Hamilton*, 241–242. No doubt the photographs that make up the *face to face* series recall Hamilton’s extensive exploration of the mouth in other works (see the artist’s website at www.annhamiltonstudio.com), but our focus in this essay is more modest.
- ⁷ Valéry, ‘The Centenary of Photography’, 197.
- ⁸ Nancy cited in Michaud, “...la bouche touche”, 29.
- ⁹ Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 111.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 112.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 111.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid., 112.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 43–44.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 111.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 103.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Derrida, *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy*, 2.
- ¹⁹ Hamilton, n.p.
- ²⁰ Sara Guyer explores the ethical relation to the ‘other’ in terms of the mouth in her incisive essay, ‘Buccality’.
- ²¹ Valéry, ‘Mouth’, 50.
- ²² The video is available at https://www.ubu.com/film/acconci_book.html
- ²³ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 16.
- ²⁴ Beckett cited in Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 665.
- ²⁵ Valéry, ‘Mouth’, 50.
- ²⁶ Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 111.
- ²⁷ Irigaray, ‘When Our Lips Speak Together’, 73.
- ²⁸ Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 107.
- ²⁹ Ibid., xi.
- ³⁰ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 49.

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