

MONTAGE

The Persistence of Photodynamism in Representations of the Expanse of Time

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Leading art history survey texts and museums have reinforced a tradition of summing Italian Futurism as a failed experiment. Largely a symptom of modern art history's pre-occupation with the domination of French Cubism's lineage of spatial explorations, this neglect has left a gap in our understanding of modern art and has undermined Futurism's investigations of temporal experiences—and effectively, Futurism's significant contributions to contemporary art practices. Despite this misleading institutional reception, a century after the Futurist photographer Anton Giulio Bragaglia wrote his manifesto *Fotodinamismo Futurista* in 1911, discourses emerging from concepts of Photodynamism have continued to persist on the periphery of contemporary art practices in ways significantly omitted by modern and contemporary art historians, curators, and critics.¹

This paper will attempt to correct art history's omissions by examining photographs by Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Francesca Woodman, and Atta Kim, and situating them within a legacy of Photodynamism. To establish a case for this perspective I will give a short history of the use of the instant image followed by a synopsis of Bragaglia's manifesto and photography. I will conclude by highlighting photographs by these three contemporary photographers to show how each use long exposures in various ways to engage Photodynamism and question the viewer's experience of represented time.

My argument here is strengthened by a contextual background regarding art history's predisposition towards representations of movement that explore space rather than time—a tendency preceding both Cubism and the history of photography. Effective proofs of this topos is found within E. H. Gombrich's essay "Moment and Movement in Art," which recognizes that the bias for a transcriptive instant has a long history in painting.² As Gombrich describes here, the act of becoming, or the representation of transitions, was simply deemed an inappropriate matter for painting by Lord Shaftesbury and

1. Although Italian Futurism has maintained a place within the history of modern art, it has not been considered of much influence. This perspective is evidenced in the small section on Futurism included in Hal Foster's survey text *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, and Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005) which consistently references its lacking. Additionally, the recent reinstallationment of the Futurism gallery within New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2009 not only separates the movement from the rest of modern art but places the artwork in a room that breaks the fluidity enjoyed by the rest of the early 20th century galleries. By limiting entry points to a single threshold, MoMA situated the gallery like a dead-end. See Mark Van Proyen's "Back to the Futurismo: Dromotude and the Ethical Unconscious of Contemporary Art" in *Art Criticism*, 24.2 (2009), 55-83. The centennial of Futurism has inspired many new conferences, exhibitions, and publications, yet art history's need for a comprehensive inclusion of Italian Futurism remains unrequited. In addition to art history's main Francophile focus, this unfortunate fact is due to many contributing factors including the historical links Futurism has to the Italian Fascism, internal political crises following WWII, the destabilizing internal protests of 1968, and the lack of support modern and contemporary Italian art has found within its own nation (which has led to the misplacement or destruction of a vast amount of artworks and documents). See Flavio Fergonzi's *The Mattioli Collection. Masterpieces of the Italian Avant-garde* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2003) and Emily Braun's

Gotthold Lessing in the 18th century, and by James Harris in the 19th century.

Throughout Gombrich's essay it is clear that these philosophers of art favored a representation that captures an Aristotelian turning-point, where the drama of an illustrated narrative is at its ripened peak. Referred to as the *punctum temporis*—literally “piercing time”—this representation of immediacy assumes a culturally sophisticated viewer will recognize the narrative depicted and be able to supply the past and future scenes implied by an exemplary slice of time. The artist's skill was thus measured by their ability to select a single moment which, supported by gesture and composition, is representative of the whole. This practice has evolved over time to establish a problematic representative standard where the instantaneous moment has become regarded as a testament of the image's truthfulness, a practice assimilated by photography through photojournalism, as demonstrated by Dorothea Lange's journalistic photographic “Migrant Madonna” (1936).³

At the turn of the century, photographers were prompted by the changes in technology and culture—such as the invention of the telephone, the steam train, and the wireless telegraph—to document and analyze the transitional qualities of modernity. In 1911, motion photography had two dominant ancestors: Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge (Figures 1 and 2). Both of these physiologists used their cameras as tools to analyze the stages of motion. Their chronophotography was groundbreaking and shifted the way viewers understood the world around them; they “ruptured the perspectival code that had dominated painting since the Renaissance” by collapsing a succession of images within a single frame, thus presenting “a language for representing simultaneity.”⁴ Together their innovations set precedence for Bragaglia's experiments, yet Bragaglia's Photodynamism was prompted by his critique of Marey and Muybridge's scientific images, which instead of recreating motion represented a series of independent moments that were synthetically combined. Marey

Italian Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture: 1900-1988 (London: Prestal, 1989).

2. E. H. Gombrich, “Moment and Movement in Art” in *The Image and the Eye* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1982), 40-62.

3. “Migrant Mother” is a leading example that highlights the problematic relationship that the instantaneous image has to truth. Though this photograph has achieved an iconic status within American culture as an illustration of the hardships undergone by farmers during the Great Depression, it is simultaneously representative of a fictional journalistic story that was constructed around a posed image to support the political interests of the FSA. See Roger Sprague, “Migrant Mother: the Picture,” *Migrant Mother: The story as told by her grandson*,

<http://www.migrantgrandson.com>.

4. Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: the work of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1992), 281.

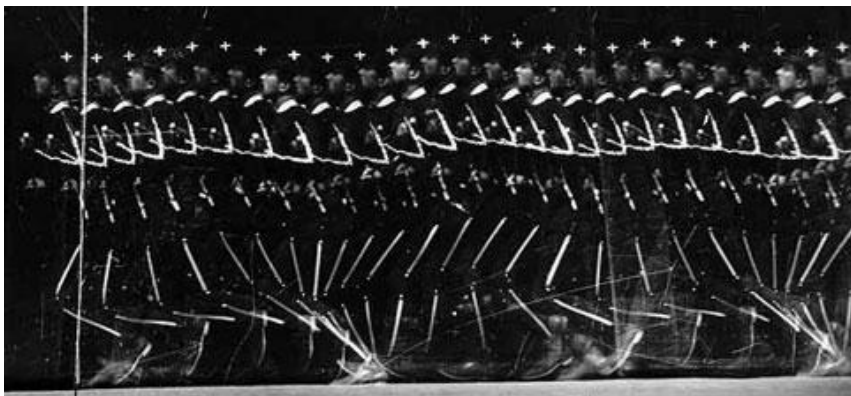


Figure 1: Étienne-Jules Marey, *Motion Study*, c.1885.

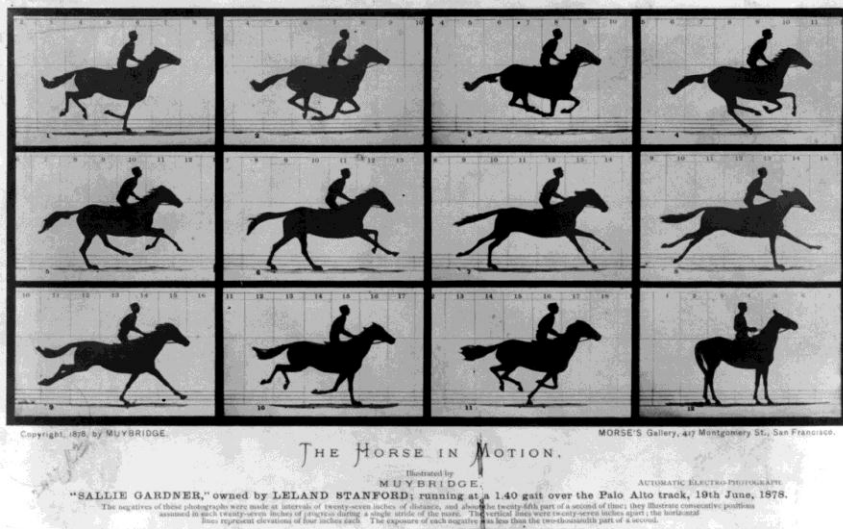


Figure 2: Eadweard Muybridge, *Galloping Horse*, 1878.

and Muybridge's photographs were in alliance with still photography's tendencies towards subdividing, disintegrating, and shattering movement.⁵ As though an illustration of Zeno's paradox, the images of Marey and Muybridge separated the trace of motion into distinguishable stages, relying on the persistence of vision or overlapping forms to *imply* motion (measured through space) rather than *represent* motion (which must be experienced through time). Their images reinforce the long-stated belief that static moments in time could symbolize expansive durations, yet there is no life that is unbound time. As Gombrich insists, "As soon as we assume that there is a fraction of time in which there is no movement, movement as such becomes inexplicable."⁶

Rather than align himself with these photographic experiments, Bragaglia's theories of movement were heavily influenced by Henri Bergson's philosophies regarding the nature of time, duration, and lived experience. A contemporary Marey, Muybridge, and Bragaglia, Bergson heralded intuition and subjective experience, describing basic time as "the continuation of what precedes into what follows and the uninterrupted transition, multiplicity without divisibility and succession without separation."⁷ Bergson did not accept analytical measurements of time converted into space, as depicted in the images of Marey and Muybridge, rather he asserts "real duration is *experienced*," and that spatialization creates artificial divisions of time's unfolding.⁸ Bragaglia's manifesto of Photodynamism describes an interest in capturing the trajectory of motion: motion as natural, fluid, alive, and invested in exposing the "interior essence of things."⁹ As his photograph *Change in Position* (Figure 3) shows, Bragaglia intended to reconstruct movement and represent the *sensation* of the trajectory of movement, including all of its "intermovemental fractions." Alongside his brother Arturo, Anton produced at least

5. See Anton Giulio Bragaglia "Futurist Photodynamism 1911" in *Futurist Manifestos* Ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 38-45.

6. Gombrich, 45.

7. Henri Bergson "Concerning the Nature of Time" in *Bergson: Key Writings*, Ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (London: Continuum, 2002), 205.

8. Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity* (Paris, F. Alcan, 1923), 243.

9. Bragaglia, 44.

twenty photographs of bodies gesturing through space between 1910 and 1913.¹⁰ Using elongated exposures, these images record the trace of a continuous trajectory of motion that captures of all the in-between spaces lost in Marey and Muybridge's divisionism; they effectively trace "the shape of movement" and the "continuity of an action in space." His photographs frequently image a blurred, dematerialization form representing the subject's integration into its environment, and thus essentially representing the body as energy in flux. Photodynamism was intended to expose a sort of parallelism between the soul and the body, going beyond optical reality in order to expose the "inner, sensorial, cerebral and psychic emotions," in other words the "interior essence" of its subject.¹¹

The contemporary photographs I will now highlight display the persistence of these Photodynamic sensibilities. Using the camera as a mediatory tool to visualize realities beyond the capacity of the human eye, photographs by Francesca Woodman, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, and Atta Kim extend Bragaglia's conceptual basis to approach and explore metaphysics, psychological spaces, and even politics.

My argument here invokes and expands upon the Adam Weinberg's exhibition *Vanishing Presence*, held twenty-three years ago at the Walker Art Center. This exhibition is one of the rare occurrences where the lineages of Photodynamism have been imagined formerly. Significantly Meatyard and Woodman were included in *Vanishing Presence* and described by Weinberg in the exhibition catalog as "heirs to the Bragaglia tradition."¹² I am adding to this conceptual history the photographs of Atta Kim.

10. Braun, 296. Braun's research has concluded that the negatives for these postcard size images have been lost; the exact number of images produced by the Bragaglia brothers remains unknown.

11. Bragaglia, 45.

12. Adam D. Weinberg, Martin Friedman, Eugenia Parry Janis, and Max Kozloff, *Vanishing Presence* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1989), 74.



Figure 3: Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Changing Position*, 1911.



Figure 4: Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Untitled*, 1960.

In Ralph Eugene Meatyard's untitled photograph of his eldest son Michael (1960) the elongated exposure is used as a time-bending technique to embrace the transience of life (Figure 4). As Michael lifts and lowers his arms here, the entire volume navigated by his arms' trajectories is made visible. To the viewer who has been trained to desire a *punctum temporis* this visual vaporization is disruptive—Michael's arms appear to literally dissolve into the energy of the air that he is vigorously stirring around him. Through its recorded duration, this photograph is more than just a portrait of the photographer's son; it becomes a "dynamic representation of reality." As Bragaglia wrote,

It follows that when you tell us that the images contained in our Photodynamic works are unsure and difficult to distinguish, you are merely noting a pure characteristic of Photodynamism. For Photodynamism, it is desirable and correct to record images in a distorted state, since images themselves are inevitably transformed in movement.¹³

The optical distortion that viewers observe in this photograph is an essential syntax of movement. Through this image Meatyard has embraced this syntax in order to capture the fleeting qualities of a living and changing reality. This photograph affirms Michael's vitality by representing the transformative process of his becoming, a process that the fragmented, instantaneous image has developed towards absolving.¹⁴

13. Bragaglia, 43.

14. Much of Meatyard's critical reception thus far has been focused on his series *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater* (1974). In the exhibition catalogue for *Vanishing Presence* Weinberg cites an unpublished essay by Christopher Meatyard which highlights the photographer's experimental photography and the relationship between these images and Meatyard's studies in Zen philosophy. See Weinberg, 82-83.

Photographs from Francesca Woodman's "Space" series (created between 1975-78) similarly utilize the transformational qualities of long exposures to accomplish an emotive poignancy and surrealism (Figures 5 and 6). Through Woodman's choreographic blurs this series of images employs Photodynamic means to express a psychological and metaphysical relationship to time. Woodman's body dematerializes, becoming heavy-breathed and vaporous, and transfusing with her environment. As Kozloff describes, "The figural dissolve is meant to signify a somehow live transit at the *viewer's* moment of contact with the image, rather than when the transit must have been, at the past moment when it was recorded."¹⁵ Her extension of the event of the present moment proposes to disrupt the viewer's notion of time itself as a subject. Rather than a "decisive moment" Woodman presents a multiplicity of moments, insisting on the viewer's recognition of the event of time represented by her performance. The durational gestures that she impresses within the confines of both a fixed perspective and a single still-image result in the creation of an abstract form drawn in space that resolutely becomes symbolic of her psychic state. The fact that these images have never before been compared to Bragaglia's own self-portrait (Figure 7) is shocking, for Woodman's image seems to finely illustrate Bragaglia's interest in "record[ing] the continuity of action in space [...] the immediate shifting of volumes that results in the immediate transformation of expression."¹⁶ Breaking down these

15. Max Kozloff in *Vanishing Presence*, 45.
16. Bragaglia, 40-41.



Figure 5: Francesca Woodman, from "Space²: Providence, Rhode Island," series, 1975-1978.

Figure 6: Francesca Woodman, from "Space²: Providence, Rhode Island," series, 1975-1978.



Figure 7: Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Self-Portrait*, 1911.

boundaries of representational and measurable time, Woodman's images express a personal and emotional displacement as her body dissolves and the boundaries of her own form become fluid within its environment.¹⁷

The final example of Photodynamism in contemporary photography I give in this brief defense is a photograph from the "DMZ" sub-series of Atta Kim's *On Air Project*. With shutter speeds averaging eight hours long this project documents movement by way of its seeming absence.¹⁸ Using techniques similar to Bragaglia's, Kim evokes the fundamental qualities of photography: the lens, light, and time. As Kim's camera remains static throughout the imaging process the world buzzes around it, the resulting images challenge the form of reality that still and documentary photographs offer and prod the notion that there is

17. Woodman's critical reception has been dominated by a focus on how her self-portraiture illustrated contemporaneous feminist theories. It has largely avoided any discussion of the significant attention Woodman gave to time in her film and photography works. The potential for this new direction, instigated by Max Kozloff's essay for the *Vanishing Presence* exhibition catalogue, has been recently appended with Jennifer Blessing's essay "The Geometry of Time: Francesca Woodman's Video" in *Francesca Woodman* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 197-203.

18. It is interesting to compare this image from "DMZ" to Daguerre's

more to see than the instantaneous shot can provide. Kim's images depict the ephemeral nature of humanity, translated into pure light and energy. In an interview with curator Inhee Iris Moon, Kim stated: "the disappearance in [the] *ON-AIR Project* does not represent the negative phenomena of disappearance, but ironically confirms the value of existence through disappearances."¹⁹ Similar to the way that Bragaglia's Photodynamic images dematerialized their subjects into their surroundings to show the fluidity of vitality, Kim records the transfusion of matter into energy, suggesting the true impermanence of life—humans, natural things, and even history. This particular photograph from "DMZ," represents a location on the border between North and South Korea, one of the most heavily militarized borders in the world (Figure 8). Here Kim seems to utilize the technique of the extended exposure to create a political protest. Over the duration of the photograph's exposure, thousands of troops have moved throughout this Demilitarized zone. The result record is a presentation of the endurance of the landscape over the temporal political struggles, which have burdened this location for over sixty years. In accordance with Bragaglia's manifesto, a case could be made that this image expresses the sensation of this location, the memory of the landscape, which becomes more accurate through the durational shot. Going beyond the documentation of a human gesture, Kim records a grandeur trajectory that transcends the human condition. In this recording, the landscape trumps over history, reminding viewers that history is definitely a creation of humanity.



daguerreotype *View of the Boulevard du Temple* (1838). Though Daguerre image was dictated by the inhibitions of early photo chemistry's low levels of light sensitivity, *View of the Boulevard du Temple* is effectively a durational photograph that similarly highlights the resilience of the cityscape compared to the fleeting nature of its inhabitants, whose presences do not manifest in the daguerreotype.

19. From "Q&A for the Indala series" (2008) in Leslie A. Martin, "Things for What Else They Are" in *On-Air Eighthours* (Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern), 10.

Figure 8: Atta Kim, from "DMZ: 8 Hours" series, 2004.

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Together these photographs by Francesca Woodman, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, and Atta Kim offer only a very brief introduction to some of the ways Photodynamism has been explored and expanded upon by contemporary photographers. Countless more examples could be included in this trajectory to show the complex lineage Photodynamic concepts have instigated as they continue to influence and inspire discourses building throughout contemporary art. Folded within the analysis of Photodynamism's lineage this essay demonstrates the necessity to revalue the work of Italian Futurist photographers—and to question further the tradition of favoring the *punctum temporis* and instantaneous image over the durational time. It aims to expose some of the holes left in art history through the dismissal of the innovations of Italian Futurism and, through this work, affirm the innovative theories Futurists artworks have added to our understanding of representations of motion and time. ■