

Ethnography of a PETA Protest:
Looking Back by Keeping an Eye on the Future
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What: A leafleting event organized by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
When: October 2006
Where: New York City

11:35AM. There are four people standing around in a circle, one man, three women. They range in age from early 20s to early 30s. I sidle past them and glance furtively in their direction. There is a poster lying haphazardly on the pavement, folded over slightly, but I can make out it is a picture of a skinned fox. I have seen it before. It is one of PETA's favorites, one to which they return over and over again.¹

¹ The photographs used by animal activists are decisively not the kind of animal photos to which Susan Sontag refers in her book *On Photography*, the coffee table variety which contain images of dogs and cats dressed up in children's clothing or wild animals in their majestic glory atop mountains or waterfalls. No, these kinds of photographs are the ones which stick in your throat: they are often of dead animals, and if not dead then nearly so, hanging onto life by a bare thread. They are animals that have been sliced through, cut open, on the verge of the moment that sees them divided into parts to be either discarded or sold. Indeed animal activism could not operate without producing photographs of what happens to animals behind-the-scenes in industries like factory farming and vivisection. Walter Benjamin's ruminations on photography, compiled nearly a century ago, tap into some of the reasons why.

Those activists who purport to be a voice for animals reiterate Benjamin's point that "there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced" (*One-way* 242). Here it is precisely through the image that the animal gains a voice. Those activists who are certain that we need to see before we can believe also stress how

important it is to bring things closer to the public, which is to say, to make them more accessible and tangible through mechanical reproduction on a mass scale (250). Even though Benjamin remained critical of the reproductive capabilities brought on by modern technology, he nonetheless acknowledged that it could increase the dissemination of the original (artwork, event). Indeed many animal activists believe that it is only by first witnessing animal abuse in all its fine detail that we can eradicate it, utilizing photography because “photography isolates the moment a person ‘steps out’” and permits us to see details of structure in the smallest of things (243). The photograph is often more real than the moment in time it captures.

We might ask ourselves if such photos used in animal activism reflect a past that is public or private, a past that is collectively known or kept hidden from view. Clearly they stir something within the viewer on an individual level and inhabit the viewer personally. One could argue that the efficacy of photographs of torture stems from their ability to confuse the boundaries between a public and private past. Indeed it is not so easy to differentiate between the punctum – Roland Barthes’ term for that which secretly and personally pricks only me – and the studium – his term for that which historically, collectively, and decisively public, including graphic images steeped in pain. Susan Sontag reminds us that a photograph cannot be evidence on its own; it must stir something within the viewer (*Photography* 19). For Barthes, the punctum is at once what is added to the photograph and what is already present, a “trigger” (49, 55) that serves to fill the whole picture, to irradiate all else, that which becomes the only thing one can see. The photographs used by animal advocates, particularly in this leafleting event, depend heavily on the punctum for effect. Because it is what speaks to the viewer

11:40. I walk past the group again. A fifth woman has joined them.

11:43. I lean, very still, against some scaffolding at the corner. I mark myself as definitively not part of the protestors, this group of people who by all intents and purposes are now going about a rehearsal in a very public space. I pretend like I am waiting for someone and often look at my watch in order to keep up this appearance.²

At once they begin to fan out, slowly, very poised, as if dancing. Two of the women float down the sidewalk towards me. One stops on the opposite side of the sidewalk and the other stands closer to me. She is a young, soft-looking girl with a dark bob, wearing jeans and a pair of old Converse sneakers and heavy black kohl around her eyes. She is holding a poster over the front of her body, but, being an October afternoon, the New York weather is decidedly uncooperative. Because of the wind, she is kept busy smoothing out the poster

personally and, at the same time, references a more broad and universal epidemic, the punctum acts as a catalyst for social change. In this way are photographs, more often than not, at once a public and private phenomena.

² Susan Sontag's philosophical workings neatly illustrate this point of futurity. In *On Photography*, she is certain that the person who takes the picture "cannot intervene" in what she is seeing, and that "to take a picture is to have an interest in things remaining unchanged" (12). Compare this notion, which forecloses any possibility of the photograph's future effects, with her later musings in *Regarding the Pain of Others* where she contends that only those people who have the will or ability to do something about the pain and suffering they see in the photograph ought to see it at all (42). The inference here is that the photograph, in its depiction of an event from the past, extends itself into the future and stirs compassion within the viewer. The viewer's "unstable emotion" upon seeing the image must be "translated into action," specifically requiring that one resist the commonplace urge to think there is nothing either "we" or "they" can do (101). The photographer thus becomes not only a recording device but a potential savior in her creation of a document which sears its future audience with a spark that ensures the photograph continues to happen. We may say the photographer, through the photograph itself and future audience, begins a process of interruption. Yet, because "the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes" of suffering are anything but stable (Hartman 3), this instability may engender a certain complacency and even enjoyment in the horrors that one sees. There is always the possibility that the viewer of the photograph is more voyeur than witness,

so people can see the image. Another skinned fox.

She also has a stack of leaflets in her hand. I try not to catch her eye because I am supposed to be the observer, not the participator.

I remember Richard Schechner's concept of the theatrical frame, which allows spectators to maintain a distance from the action, effectively releasing themselves from responsibility or culpability. I only want to be the spectator here. I am doing research, I tell myself: I am watching a show.³

Maintaining a relative distance from the performance, however, takes a great deal of effort, something that Schechner noted at length through his collaborations with anthropologist Victor Turner. In the end, one of the similarities between theater and anthropology was that both effected a change in participant and viewer alike, casting suspicion on the possibility that we could ever, simply, 'watch a show.'

one who reaffirms the appropriateness of the violated body in that very delight which she or he takes in the image itself.

³ Our sense of time is linear, which is to say we move steadily from a fixed point in the past towards one or more fixed points in the future. But the photograph, just as political protest itself, performs a double interruption as it makes a cut into linear time (for we need to pay attention to what has already occurred and resist any prescribed or overdetermined narratives) while simultaneously critiquing cyclical time (for we cannot blindly repeat tradition for its own sake). And yet neither photographs nor protests yield an easy answer for their audience; they only suggest that we cannot focus solely on the past or the future, for it is only in the space of the present that we can bring together both temporalities for critical engagement. Indeed this kind of simultaneity, of bringing together at the same time, is itself a radical move precisely because it signals a degree of urgency (Kern 75). It is this gesture of peeling away at orthodox understandings of past and future and also of the present which engenders simultaneity in its most radical form: all we have left is the now, and thus all we can do now is act. To peel away at orthodox understandings of time, to witness their self-deconstruction, one may say, is to effectively recontextualize them by placing different temporalities side by side, a move in keeping with the word context itself – from the Latin contextus, a hybrid of con- 'together' and texere 'to weave,' it means quite literally to weave together, to stitch together in new ways. If photography becomes its most creative, as Benjamin says, "when it takes itself out of context" (*One-way* 254), then to take a picture out of context is precisely to unravel and

Suddenly she extends a leaflet in my direction and asks, in an even tone devoid of emotion, 'Would you like one?' So much for being a passive observer.

I stammer for a good ten seconds before I remember the activist box I have in my office, complete with pins, stickers, and leaflets just like the one she is offering to me. Almost, but not quite. I manage to mumble: 'Oh, no, I actually have many at home.'

*'Well, would you like to actually **read** one?' There is no humor in her voice and I realize that, to her, I am the enemy. What is implied in her tone, what is left off the end of her sentence, is '...for once.'*

I am further mortified. 'Oh, no, I mean ... I'm actually an activist.' I have repeated the word 'actually' twice. I am desperate to convey to her that I am authentic, legitimate, that I am an activist, just like her, that I am not a fake.⁴

displace expected meanings. A photograph's context is typically determined by its caption – when the photo was taken, where, by whom, and so forth. When the viewer has this information she or he is able to easily situate the image, but when this contextual information is obscured, intentionally or otherwise, the photograph is taken out of its frame and can mean anything at all. To ask whether the photographic depiction of animal suffering in the PETA protestors' imagery takes animals out of context ultimately underscores a more prevalent concern: we conceive of animals largely in terms of suffering, not as beings who experience pleasure, precisely because it is these images – animals bloody, dismembered, and clearly distraught – to which we are repeatedly exposed. So just as Hartman reminds us that certain individuals may be voyeurs of photographic events instead of witnesses, to look at these bloodied photographs does not necessarily mean the viewer has blood on her or his hands. Being subjected to seeing animals in this way not only potentially numbs us to such atrocities, but effectively normalizes the image so that we come to expect this is the manner in which animals ought to be treated. Could it be that by showing such grotesque images we are doing as much harm as good, unwittingly forcing animals into a more tightly-knit context and script from which they cannot untangle themselves and which ultimately leads to their demise?

⁴ Throughout his career Gilles Deleuze was interested more in questions of 'how does it work?' and 'what does it do?' than 'what does it mean?' This, too, is the question posed by performative analyses, for the lens of performance allows us to be more mindful of a thing's effect rather than its meaning, in much the same way as performances themselves

'Oh, okay.' She withdraws the leaflet, but casts an apprehensive look my way. I am not sure if she believes me. I want to try and prove myself again.

'Is there something going on?' Playing so dumb, now. Of course I know what's going on because I received the same email as she did which is why I knew to come here in the first place.

'Some sort of fur festival, or something like it.'

I give a little laugh. Showing I'm cool, you know? 'Oh, nice,' I say, with as much sarcasm as I can muster.

But she doesn't catch my irony. She is on guard, defensive, which forecloses any attempt at a liaison with me. 'Uh, not really.' She looks away with feelings of being put on, like I have fooled her into thinking she could trust me. Which is completely unfounded.

Isn't it?

The two women continue their choreography, one hand holding a stack of

illustrate that the division between 'real' and 'fake' is never as straightforward as we might like. Performance is at once more real and more fake. Deleuze tells us that "to repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent" (1). Weiting against an anti-theatrical prejudice, Deleuze suggests that the fake, and implicitly the repeated and the performed, is authentic in its singularity. This returns us to Barthes' notion of the punctum as that which is definitively addressed to 'me' only, that which in its secrecy cannot be repeated elsewhere. Deleuze makes an interesting and unparalleled turn in terms of what repetition actually does, arguing that we repeat terms or events precisely because we believe they cannot be replaced. Anti-theatrical bias infuses repetition with negativity, but Deleuze suggests that repetition is what we do when an event or term cannot be replaced by another, and as such, can only be repeated. Although we are not trained to see the difference inherent in repetition there is always a choice being made: we are always already culpable, either through doing something because it has always been done or doing something because everyone else is doing it. Of course there are dangers inherent in failing to see that we are responsible for our individual actions. Here the individual and private cannot remain as such, indeed insist on ballooning outward to the scope of the collective public, giving rise to socially accepted attitudes carried out en masse as people align themselves with a particular group. Being socially diagnosed as other, as queer, as infected or otherwise incorrect. Me and not-me. But what can I do about it? (Sontag, *Pain* 101) And so the cycle continues.

*flyers while the other
intermittently propels said
flyers towards the people
walking by, all the while
trying to keep her poster
from being carried off into
the horizon. The bellmen
from the adjacent hotel
keep circling, too,
fidgeting nervously with
their ties. Undoubtedly
they've heard those
whisperings that animal
rights activists are terrorists
who will stop at nothing to
get their point across.*

*It is always interesting to
note the reactions of these
passers-by, because after
all, it is for them that these
performances take place.
One woman is pushing a
baby carriage. 'That's
okay, I got nothing against
that [i.e. their protesting]. I
don't wear fur.' Another
expensively dressed
woman glides by with her
female companion, looks
in the direction of the fur
shop, and says with a
wide smile, 'That's where
we're heading!' A guy in a
sausage delivery truck
snickers.*

*But there are many of us
who do not want to be
pulled into the frame
without our consent. We
have been out here for a*

difficult thirty minutes, where people have either outright ignored the protestors or else vociferously upbraided them. I can sense their frustration because they begin more aggressive tactics. My Kohl-rimmed friend loudly calls out to man in the midst of a conversation on his cell phone, 'Excuse me, but your shoes are leather.' He is stunned for a moment. Then he regains his composure. He realizes he has an audience (me). He smiles condescendingly. 'That's too bad, because I really like them.' He turns his back and walks off.

I take this as a cue that the curtain has fallen for the day. I make my way to the train station and round the corner where I pass a storefront. It has floor-to-ceiling windows and turns out to be a shop that sells, among other items, fur coats and capelets with fur trim. Floating there in the middle of the largest window is a lone postcard sporting, yet again, a very graphic and bloody anti-fur message. I cannot be sure if it was the protestors or, perhaps, someone else who posted it.⁵

⁵ Derrida notes, "The condition for [the post card] to arrive ... is that it ends up and even that it begins by not arriving" (*Post-Card* 29). Thus at this moment (when the event had officially ended) and within this object (the postcard itself) we see bound together a series of meanings of the 'post': at once the postcard arrives when the event is over, indeed is really the only time that a postcard can arrive, its message posted (i.e. stuck up) on the window with the intent of posting a type of communication (i.e. making a post as one does online). Post-haste: if we are so concerned with getting there quickly, do we ignore what happens afterwards in the absence of a person or an event?

The concept of arrival is inextricable from the concept of 'getting it,' both in terms of understanding – yes, I get it – or in terms of the hunt – yes, I've gotten a hold on it. The structural system of non-arrival pervades every system of writing including speech and physical acts. It is always possible that the postcard does not arrive, that our meaning does not arrive as we intended. How often is one misunderstood, or do one's intentions go awry? Yet every meaning must arrive somewhere, destined to arrive, just not destined to arrive as intended. Even if the context is unfixed, no matter. The meaning is clear; we get it. Let's move on. Time's a wasting.

I wonder who else noticed this postcard on the window. If they noticed it, did they stop to consider it? And if they stopped to consider it, were they moved by what they saw? Is it an event that is happening, that has happened, or will happen in the future? Clearly there are many opportunities for authorial intent to go, as it were, out the window. Photographs even more so than speech or physical acts must be filtered through a myriad of channels. In the case of the photograph, there is not only the subject but the one who takes the photo and the one who

As I walk I wonder: is this not what the purpose of street protest is, to forcibly bring otherwise unwilling participants into the frame of the performance? To make actors of us all, to make us realize we have the power to act? Animal activists, like activists for human rights, may say their situation is particularly grave because they must manipulate time, arrest it, and quickly; if the graphic image is, per Benjamin, a history of the future, we are obliged to use it to prevent the egregious event it depicts from happening again. 'Over my dead body will I let other animals suffer like that.' Post-haste towards the pause, a time-space in which we may interrupt or otherwise derail another's consciousness by planting a seed which detours or shocks us out of our habits.⁶

circulates the photo, each of whom may imprint on it her or his particular intention. Perhaps this is why we can say, per Benjamin, that the photograph's basis in quotation ensures may easily arrive at a variety of disparate locations. For better or worse it is destined to exceed the intentions of whomever sent (the message) or took (the photograph). Although postcards are ostensibly private, addressed to someone in particular, they are open for anyone to read, and it is with this openness that interruption can occur. There is always an implicit risk that the receiver of one's message takes it in a wholly different way than one intended. Perhaps we need to insist again and again, to go back to another form of the 'post': It goes without saying that animal activists are conceived of in the public imagination as crazed and violent, as perennially on the verge of going postal.



⁶ Robert Sember argues, "Photographs are particularly powerful mourning surfaces because of the temporal contradiction that lies at their heart," a contradiction which entails they are evidentially present while aporetically absent (37). Photographs refuse to act within prescribed boundaries of presence and absence, and it is this refusal that facilitates their ability to call on the past while, at the same time, keeping an eye on the future. If every spectator is enabled to become a participant, within the street protest scene and beyond, we may perform a number of things simultaneously: we may ignore that we have not historically been able to bridge the gap between performer and spectator; we may allow the photographic punctum, that intense and urgent emotion, to irradiate all else and to become all that we can see; we may begin to see what has been there all along but which we now choose to act upon, or choose to allow ourselves

to be acted upon by the punctum itself. We can choose to allow ourselves to act in the name of affect, to feel again, and again, to move forward based on what one feels rather than on what one cognitively knows. Many animal advocates avoid attending street protests like this one simply because they are not armed with the statistics they feel they need in order to defend their animal-rights position against the flood of detractors that inevitably appear. These animals are bred for their fur, they're used to living in a cage, the critics say, so what's the big deal? Our Benthamian reply – But they suffer ... – is never considered a solid enough reason.

Do we want to practice benevolence, philanthropy, or sympathy in order to help others? Or do we act chiefly to soothe our own pain at the sight of another's distress? Again, it is a question of intention. Perhaps if the deed is done, it does not matter so much the circuitous routes by which it came to be in the first place, or the second, or the third, or the thirtieth, or ...

To go back as one must do in a piece of writing like this is a going back like any other: it is a reassessment, by turns a stubborn stasis and a slippery nuisance, a making sure and then doubly sure and then not sure at all, a realization that we will perhaps never be sure of this or anything else. The incessant negotiation between spectator and participant creates a liminal space between two, where one realizes that one is never wholly either/or. To see is to participate: yes, we are all performers here. But it is this voluntary and constant gesture of self-interruption, of going back and forth and back again, moving between categories and traversing boundaries, of realizing that what we are not is implicitly bound up with what we are. Blank space is anything but an impassable gulf. At the very least it helps engender this precious act of going back while keeping an eye on the future, so powerful, in fact, it can only be repeated and not replaced.

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