

Graduate Works in Photography 2009
Parsons The New School for Design

The MFA Photography program is a 21st-century studio and think tank. Students develop their work in a collaborative environment, focusing on the relationship between concept and production. A rigorous critique process and regular meetings with faculty, visiting artists, and critics help develop a unique point of view and situate work within historical, theoretical, and contemporary visual contexts. Departing from the traditional semester format, the MFA is a 26-month, 7-term program. It commences with the first of three eight-week intensive summer sessions in residence at Parsons. Fall and Spring semesters complement the summer sessions with students engaging in independent study, either in residence or with the use of the latest distributed-learning technologies. Students graduate prepared to define the future creative role of photography as teachers, scholars and practicing artists and photographers.

Graduate Works in Photography 2009: Parsons MFA Photo Thesis Exhibition

August 26th through September 11th, 2009

Arnold and Sheila Aronson Gallery, 66th 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10011

Examples of work by graduates of the MFA in Photography program can be found at www.parsonspphotobook.com

Madiha Aijaz
Emily D Cameron
Jenna Choate
Francesco Vincenzo Donato
Jacquelyn Mason Drayton
Daniel Durtsche
Amy Theiss Giese
Aaron Gustafson
Erik Madigan Heck
Olga Migliaressi-Phoca
Lauren Pascarella
Peter Snyder
Keith Telfeyan
Merve Unsal
Jessica Yatrofsky

Photographs, Taken

An Essay by Lindsay Caplan

The history of photography is in many ways the history of its expansion and flexibility as a medium. Photography pervades everyday life, and everyone in some way can lay claim to it; yet it has also been elevated to an art form, a practice that can and should be mastered by fine artists. While one or another of these aspects of photography may come to define the medium for a moment, any attempt to fix that definition immediately unravels to make room for countless exceptions; every boundary in turn points to where transgression is possible, even necessary. This is perhaps photography's only consistent characteristic; it is a medium imbued with anxiety, and crises, around the question of what it essentially is.

Such crises at first seem to be a main subject of the Parsons Photography MFA class of 2009. Despite the nominal allegiance to the medium, in several of the works the photograph appears only as an elegant remainder, often absent or creatively eschewed. Most of the work incorporates other media, and a number of pieces display the photograph as if it were something else—video, sculpture, film, or painting. Some have no visible trace of the photograph, but are instead an animation, performance, or installation. There are works that overtly suggest a debasement of imagery by displaying it as background decoration or flooring, and other pieces situate commentary on this critical stance as their main subject matter. Indeed, the entire show seems to be about the power, and problems, of images rather than the specific mechanisms that produce them.

This is likely the result of the pedagogical context in which these works were made. The Parsons graduate program emphasizes that photography is not only a technique but also a site where the philosophy of art, modernity, and technology has been refined and contested. The coursework, critiques, and discussions that form the program focus more on the conceptual than the technical aspects of the medium, even if both are ultimately necessary to compose a successful work. This focus, then, has infused the show with a decisively metacritical air. Photography appears as much as an idea in these works as a

technique to be employed. As a result, the most straightforward photograph is also a reflection of its process and its history. But equally the most reflexive, self-conscious piece is stubbornly tied to the original picture, as something that points beyond itself, even beyond the history of photography, toward a depiction, a presentation of information, or a narrative.

So while meditations on medium specificity are certainly dominant throughout, there is also a palpable sense that photography has a unique, albeit complex, relationship to the world. Although none of the works presume that the photograph is somehow a direct reflection, this privileged relationship appears throughout in other guises. Some of the artists take advantage of the connection, using a photograph to comment directly on world events. Others instead present a critique of how politics are represented, showing that formal analysis is itself a political act. Then there is a selection of artists who overtly avoid this affiliation, instead employing a hyperrealist aesthetic that overwhelms the viewer with a richness of color and fantastical imagery. These pieces push the medium in other directions, far from photography's documentary heritage toward utopian aims. In each of these cases, and often in spite of the artists' attempts, the persistent bond that a photograph invokes between a site and its representation pervades all of the works in this class's thesis exhibition.

One cannot then help but sense that this show is not about a crisis in photography, but rather a celebration of its infinite possibilities. The various techniques, as well as the associated theories, of the medium seem to function as stylistic rather than polemical choices. The work here exploits the flexibility that has defined the medium since its inception—as commercial, high art, and mundane. What had been historically incompatible stances are contained within one piece and appear reconciled and complimentary. A work that critiques representation, coming close to insinuating that it is impossible, is premised upon

news photographs of politically loaded scenes. Though this is by no means self-evident in the final image, the weight of these original sites (now twice removed) cannot be completely offloaded. Just the possibility of a caption retains its presence within the work, ready to overwhelm any interpretation with a more specific, localized reading. Likewise, photographs of children holding picture books of the World Trade Center site juxtapose a damning critique of historic portrayal with a deadpan documentation of photography's traditional commemorative use.

But such tactical incorporation has another important effect. It is not ultimately concerned with photography, but rather with how one fashions oneself as a photographer. In an MFA show, the two are inexorably tied to one another; each body of work is also an attempt to construct oneself as an artist. This is admittedly a difficult task today, for any one stance seems terribly problematic. Here photography's history becomes a burden as well as a source for potential ideas. There is a foreboding sense that everything has been done before, but at the same time there is an imperative to address this substantial past. And so many of the works comment upon this history, or creatively combine references in startling ways or from unexpected sources. These juxtapositions serve to fashion both the work and the artist, situating each within an artistic genealogy. To this effect, many of the participants in this graduating class claim to have come to the program as "picture-makers," only to leave as artists. Photography seems too problematic, perhaps too narrow. But whether navigating the terrain of the art world today as a photographer or as an artist, any position can be potentially destabilizing, even threatening, to one's identity.

Moreover, it is difficult to situate oneself in history given the pressure in the art world to contribute something unique, something truly new. This seems to be remedied by a strong fascination with new technologies and an optimistic stance toward them. Pro-

grams in photography have also become programs in new media, and this thesis show is no exception. Many of the pieces use new techniques that, while sometimes undetectable in the final image, are still their key focus. There is a series of serene panoramic landscapes, for example, that were taken while the artist was free-falling from a plane. And an abstract image of a band of color, reminiscent of tangled cords, is in fact the result of a computer program gone awry. There is also a playful stance toward photography's relationship to other media through structuralist film, video portraiture, and animation.

Flexibility, then, in form and content, along with a thematic multiplicity and an embrace of contradiction are not only trends in art but also strategies for the artist to manage moments when definitions and relations are being reconfigured. These moments are precisely those of transformation, in meaning and in the material conditions in which one works. A powerful and pervasive optimism regarding these changes, artistic and otherwise, shines through the works in this show. This optimism rests alongside an extremely critical posturing toward medium and representation. Perhaps this duality comes with knowing that historically the most self-conscious, analytical, conceptual, contested and controversial work is productive for both art and the artist. This makes it hard to know when one is taking a risk, and it is also all the more difficult to feel as though one is risking anything. But this is a condition squarely within the particularities of today. So to read these works with an eye toward the future is to see them not only as reactions to change, and to history, but also as propositions for how to fashion our relationship to the image, to image creation, and ultimately to ourselves.

Lindsay Caplan is a doctoral student in art history at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York.

Works

Madiha Aijaz

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Opposite page: *I belong/I'll be long I*, 2009, still from video animation, 2.7 min
Following pages: *I belong/I'll be long I*, 2009, still from video animation [detail], 2.7 min
I belong/I'll be long II, 2009, still from video animation [detail], 3.4 min



Emily D Cameron

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Opposite page: *Untitled (Pearls)*, 2009, digital c-print, 20" x 30"
Following pages: *Untitled (Swing)*, 2009, digital c-print, 20" x 30"
Untitled (Frames), 2009, digital c-print, 20" x 30"



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Opposite page: *Offering*, 2008, digital c-print, 20" x 16"
Following pages: *Self Portrait*, 2009, still from video, 3 min
Sexercise Bike, 2008, mixed media





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Opposite page: *Plate #3, two photographs*, from the series *Accountability*, 2008, color positive film, 8" x 10"
Following pages: *Plate #18, fourteen photographs*, from the series *Accountability*, 2009, color positive film, 8" x 10"
Plate #19, sixteen photographs, from the series *Accountability*, 2009, color positive film, 8" x 10"



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Opposite page: *Arton*, from the series *One World Trade*, 2008, digital c-print, 20" x 30"
Following pages: *Katy*, from the series *One World Trade*, 2008, digital c-print, 20" x 30"
Tara, from the series *One World Trade*, 2008, digital c-print, 20" x 30"

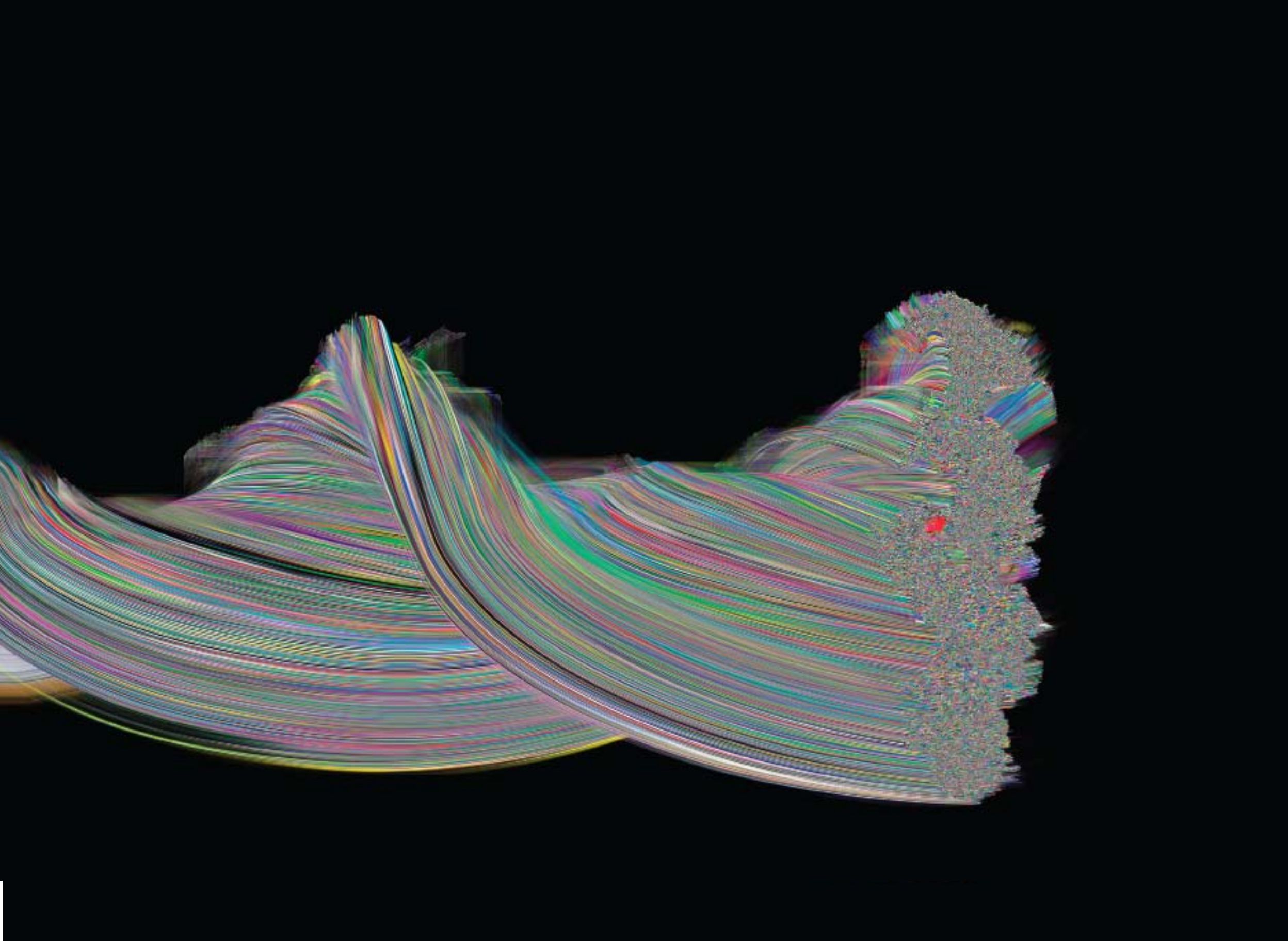


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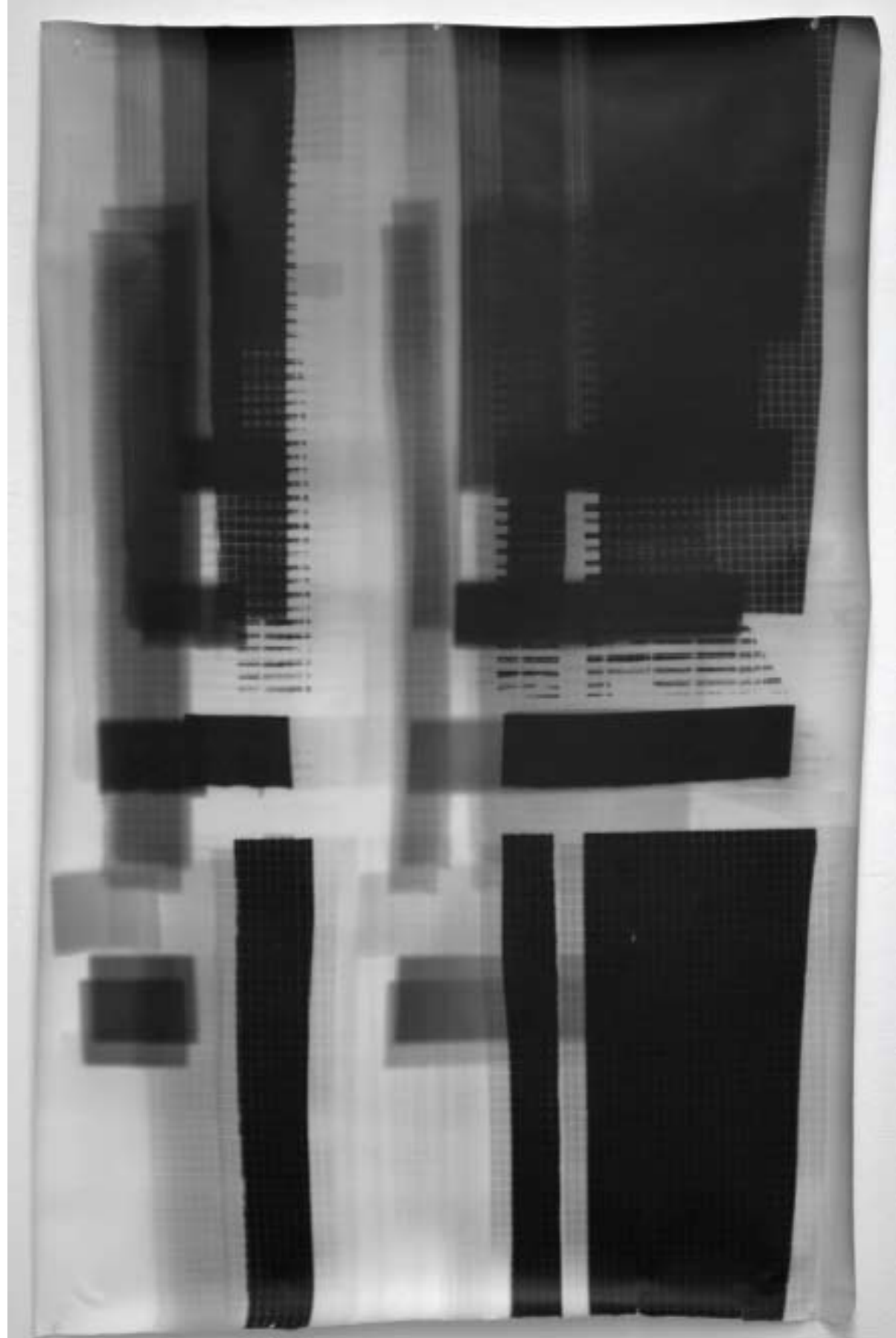
Opposite page: *Untitled*, 2009, digital gelatin silver print, 24" x 24"
Following pages: *Untitled*, 2009, digital c-print [detail], 30" x 54"



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Opposite page: *05/17/09, 11:37 p.m., 3 minutes*, 2009, unique gelatin silver print, 64.75" x 42.5"
Following pages: *06/30/09, 10:31 p.m., 70 seconds*, 2009, unique gelatin silver print, 58" x 42.5"
06/22/09, 9:09 p.m., 40 seconds, 2009, unique gelatin silver print, 55.5" x 42.5"





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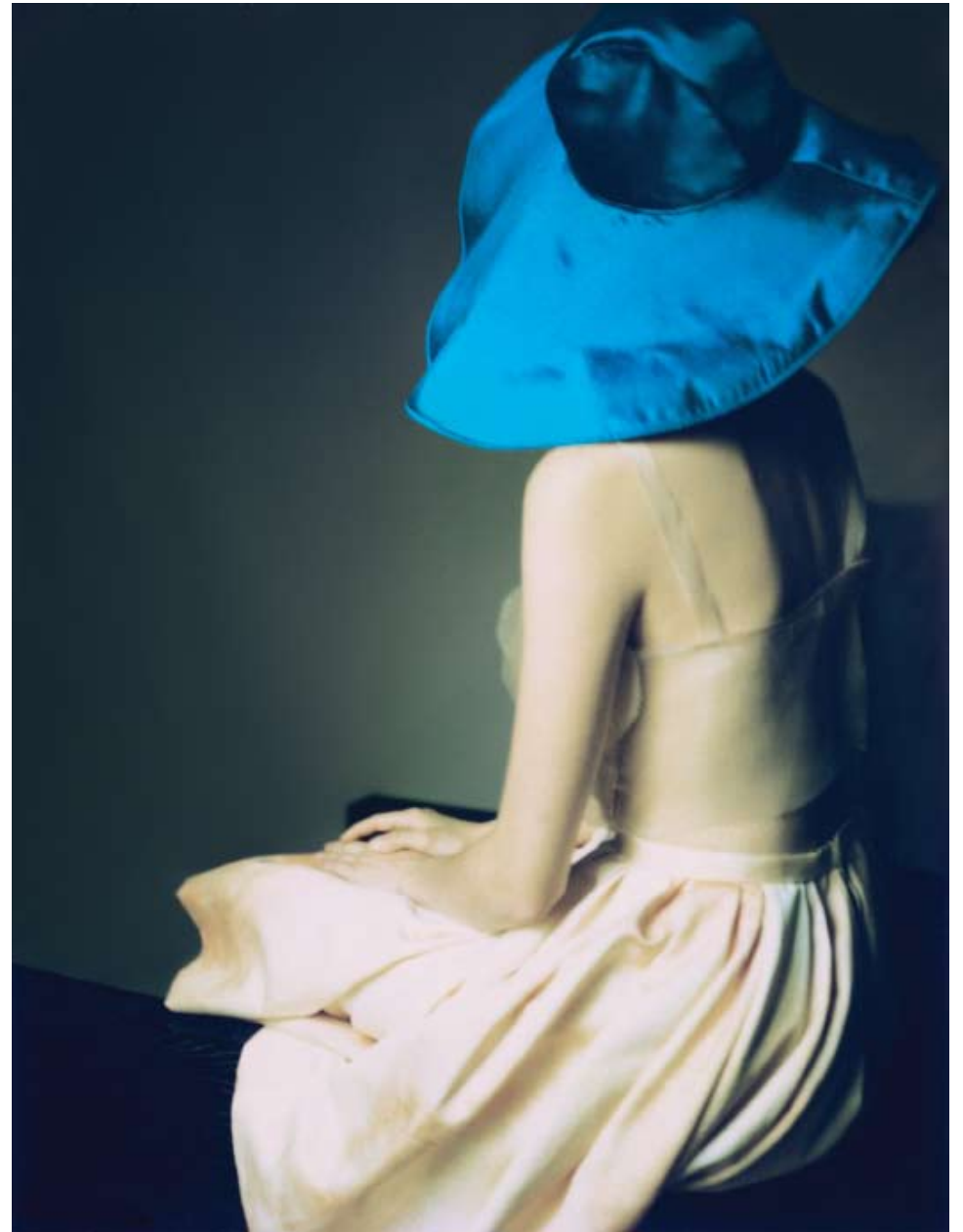


Opposite page: *For Frank Donato, Death of Photography*, 2009, stills from video, 5 min
Following pages: *Document of Freefall #92*, 2009, digital c-print, 20" x 30"
10,000 ft., Cascade Range, Washington, 2009, digital c-print, 40" x 50"



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Opposite page: *Rodarte #8*, from *Nomenus Quarterly 4*, 2008, Polaroid print, 50" x 60"
Following pages: *Camille*, *The Fallen*, from the series *The Metropolitan Opera*, 2009, digital c-print, 60" x 160"



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Opposite page: *Confrontations*, 2008, stills from 9-channel video installation, 1 min loop
Following pages: *Untitled 1-4*, from the series *Bankers*, 2009, stills from video, 1 min each



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Opposite page: *Untitled*, from the series *New School Gallery*, 2009, digital c-print, dimensions variable
Following pages: *66 5th Avenue*, from the series *Cut-Up*, 2009, digital c-print, dimensions variable
Untitled 1, from the series *Flat Façade*, 2009, digital c-print, dimensions variable



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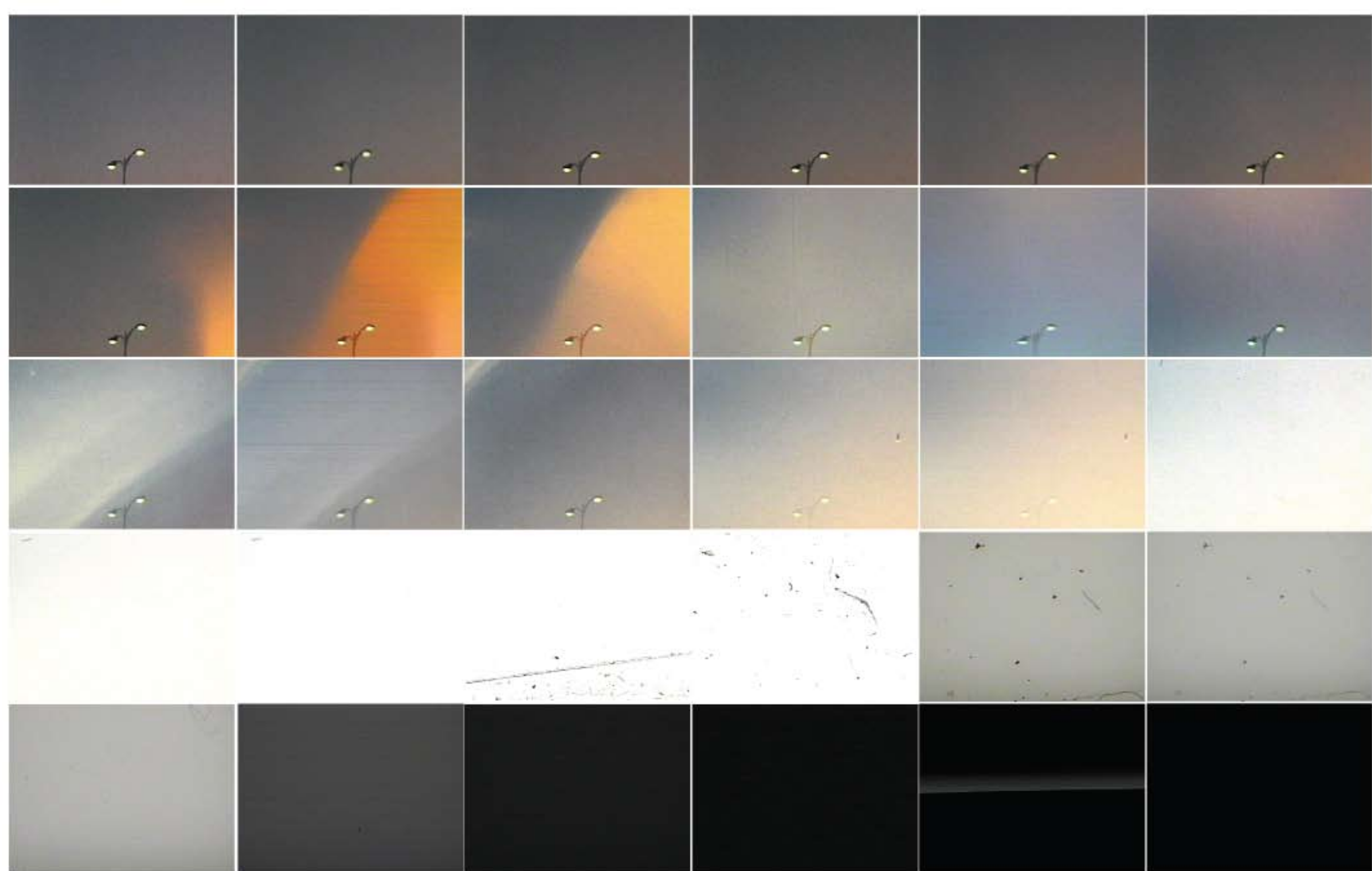


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Opposite page: *The Ephemeral Nature of Rationality in Pertinence to Mitigated Consciousness (Nail in Wall)*,
2009, c-print [detail], 40" x 50"

Following pages: *Incarnation*, from film installation *Lyrics to an Instrumental Song*,
2009, digitized 16mm & 8mm film [sequential stills], infinite loop



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Opposite page: *China Increases Security in Uighur Region*, 2009, digital c-print, 8" x 10"
Following pages: *Post-Election Unrest Continues in Iran*, 2009, digital c-print, 8" x 10"
Khamenei Speaks in Tehran, 2009, digital c-print, 8" x 10"



Jessica Yatrofsky

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Opposite page: *Untitled*, 2009, Polaroid, 4.25" x 3.5"
Following pages: *Anonymous Description of Performance*, 2009, text
Untitled, 2009, Polaroid, 4.25" x 3.5"

The room is stale and bare, save for some stacked chairs and the awaiting trio. A young man stands nude; he is muscular and fair-haired. His boyish demeanor is offset only by the quantity and breadth of the tattoos that adorn his body. The second man wears a formal suit. He carries a cello, and is seated adjacent to the first man, facing away from both him and the audience. There is a single lit spotlight, aimed in the direction of the viewers. It separates the two men. The artist stands between the two men, infiltrating the duet with a simple black dress, a Polaroid camera in hand. She positions herself as the fourth point in a diamond of two men and the blinding spotlight.

The first young man places a black blindfold over his eyes; he turns towards the audience. The performance begins. The cello player commences with a passionate self-composed piece. His naked partner begins to masturbate. The music accompanies his actions, filling the room; the blindfolded man's autoerotic movements eventually steady and sync with the rhythms of the cello's chords. The harmonies seem to shift, and the minor chords converge with major, creating a lighter mood.

The artist, silent and motionless until now, raises her weapon. The camera flashes repeatedly as she snaps picture after picture of the blindfolded young man, who continues to fondle himself, seemingly to no avail. The Polaroid's fall lazily toward the tiled floor, landing arbitrarily. The chemicals react, and slowly the young man's likeness is recreated on the fallen sheets.

Suddenly, the cello player finishes his piece, and, as if directed by the music, the man surrenders and drops his hand. The artist turns towards the audience. The performance has completed. What a peculiar ménage à trois.



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