Commenting on Harold Rosenberg's *Tradition of the New,* Mary McCarthy once wrote, "You cannot hang an event on the wall, only a picture." It seems, however, that with photography, we have indeed the paradox of an event that hangs on the wall.

Photography is generally taken in either of two ways: as an event, but then as an odd looking one, a frozen gestalt that conveys very little, if anything at all, of the fluency of things happening in real life; or it is taken as a picture, as an autonomous representation that can indeed be framed and hung, but which then curiously ceases to refer to the particular event from which it was drawn. In other words, the photograph is seen either as natural evidence and live witness (picture) of a vanished past, or as an abrupt artifact (event), a devilish device designed to capture life but unable to convey it. Both notions of what is happening at the surface of the image have their counterpart in reality. Seen as live evidence, the photograph cannot fail to designate, outside of itself, the death of the referent, the accomplished past, the suspension of time. And seen as deadening artifact, the photograph indicates that life outside continues, time flows by, and the captured object has slipped away.

As representatives of these two opposite ways in which a photograph is perceived, the funerary portrait would exemplify the "picture." It protracts onstage a life that has stopped offstage. The press photograph, on the other hand, would exemplify the "event." It freezes onstage the course of life that goes on outside. Once generalized, these examples suggest that the time exposure is typical of a way of perceiving the photograph as "picture-like," whereas the instantaneous photograph is typical of a way of perceiving it as "event-like."

These two ways are mutually exclusive, yet they coexist in our perception of any photograph, whether snapshot or time exposure. Moreover, they do not constitute a contradiction that we can resolve through a dialectical synthesis. Instead they set up a paradox, which results in an unresolved oscillation of our psychological responses towards the photograph.
First, let us consider the snapshot, or instantaneous photograph. The snapshot is a theft; it steals life. Intended to signify natural movement, it only produces a petrified analogue of it. It shows an unperformed movement that refers to an impossible posture. The paradox is that in reality the movement has indeed been performed, while in the image the posture is frozen.

It is clear that this paradox derives directly from the indexical nature of the photographic sign.¹ Using the terms of Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics, though the photograph appears to be an icon (through resemblance) and though it is to some extent a symbol (principally through the use of the camera as a codifying device), its proper sign type, which it shares with no other visual representation (except the cast and, of course, cinema), is the index, i.e. a sign causally related to its object. In the case of photography, the direct causal link between reality and the image is light and its proportionate physical action upon silver bromide. For a classical post-Saussurian semiology, this would mean that, in the case of photography, the referent may not be excluded from the system of signs considered. Certainly, common sense distinguishes an image from reality. But why does common sense vanish in front of a photograph and charge it with such a mythical power over life and death? It is not only a matter of ideology or of naïveté. Reality does indeed wedge its way into the image. The referent is not only that to which the sign refers, but also that upon which it depends.

Therefore we ought to introduce a slightly different vocabulary from the usual semiological terminology in order to attempt a theoretical description of the photograph. We shall consider the semiotic structure of the photograph to be located at the juncture of two series. (It is not the place here to justify the choice of the word series. Let us say only that it is the dynamic equivalent of a line, and that the crossing of two lines is necessary to organize a structural space, or matrix.)

The first series is image-producing. It generates the photograph as a semiotic object, abstracted from reality, the surface of the photograph so to speak. Let us call it the superficial series. The second series is reality-produced (one might even say reality-producing, insofar as the only reality to be taken into account is the one framed by the act of taking a photograph). It generates the photograph as a physical sign, linked with the world through optical causality. Let us call it the referential series.

We may now return to the paradox of an unperformed movement and an impossible posture. When in the late 1870s, Eadweard Muybridge’s snapshots of animal locomotion, especially the studies of the horse’s different gaits, came to be known in France and the United States, they occasioned a considerable furor among painters and photographers.² Whether or not a horse should be depicted in

1. In a recent article, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America” (October, nos. 3 and 4), Rosalind Krauss stressed the importance of the indexical nature of the photographic sign, and its impact on contemporary art since Duchamp. For a general introduction to the semiotics of the index, see Charles S. Peirce, Collected Papers, Vol. II, book II, pp. 129–87.
the unexpected, yet “true” postures that were revealed by the infallible eye of the camera, whether or not the artist—including the photographer when he strives for artistic recognition—should remain faithful to nature as recorded rather than interpret it, were the main issues under debate. Yet these aesthetic controversies are symptomatic of what was felt as an unbearable disclosure: that of the photograph’s paradoxical treatment of reality in motion.

The 19th century ideology of realism prescribed, among other things, the attempt to convey visual reality adequately. And to that end, photography was sensed—either reluctantly or enthusiastically—as establishing a rule. But with the onset of motion photography, artists who were immersed in the ideology of realism found themselves unable to express reality and obey the photograph’s verdict at the same time. For Muybridge’s snapshots of a galloping horse demonstrated what the animal’s movements were, but did not convey the sensation of their motion. The artist must have felt squeezed between two incompatible truths that can be approached in terms of a contradiction in aesthetic ideology. But basically this contradiction is grounded in the paradoxical perception of photography in general, for which the example of Muybridge is simply an extreme case.

The paradox of the unperformed movement and the impossible posture presents itself as an unresolved alternative. Either the photograph registers a singular event, or it makes the event form itself in the image. The problem with the first alternative is that reality is not made out of singular events; it is made out of the continuous happening of things. In reality, the event is carried on by time, it doesn’t arise from or make a gestalt: the discus thrower releases the disc. In the second case, where the photograph freezes the event in the form of an image, the
The referential series of the photograph is purely syntagmatic, whereas the superficial series is an absolute paradigm. Contrary to what happens in a painted or drawn image, there is no dialectic between syntagm and paradigm, though both series cross at one point. In other words, this is how we live through the experience of this unresolved alternative, while looking at a photograph: Either we grasp at the thing (or its sign, or its name); the gallop of the horse; but this thing does not occur in the referential series which in fact contains only the verb: the horse gallops. Or if we wish to grasp the verb, the flux, the movement, we are faced with an image from which this has escaped: the superficial series contains only the name, the shape, the stasis. The paradox sets in at the crossing-point of both series, where they twist to form an unnatural, yet nature-determined sign, accounting for what Roland Barthes calls the "real unreality" of photography. The snapshot steals the life outside and returns it as death. This is why it appears as abrupt, aggressive, and artificial, however convinced we might be of its realistic accuracy.

Let us now consider the time exposure, of which the photo-portrait is a concrete instance. Whether of a live or dead person, the portrait is funerary in nature, a monument. Acting as a reminder of times that have died away, it sets up landmarks of the past. This means it reverses the paradox of the snapshot, series to series. Whereas the snapshot refers to the fluency of time without conveying it, the time exposure petrifies the time of the referent and denotes it as departed. Reciprocally, whereas the former freezes the superficial time of the image, the latter releases it. It liberates an autonomous and recurrent temporality, which is the time of remembrance. While the portrait as Denkmal, monument, points to a state in a life that is gone forever, it also offers itself as the possibility of staging that life again and again in memory.

An asymmetrical reciprocity joins the snapshot to the time exposure: whereas the snapshot stole a life it could not return, the time exposure expresses a life that it never received. The time exposure doesn't refer to life as process, evolution, diachrony, as does the snapshot. It deals with an imaginary life that is autonomous, discontinuous, and reversible, because this life has no location other than the surface of the photograph. By the same token it doesn't frame that kind of surface-death characteristic of the snapshot, which is the shock of time splitting into not anymore and not yet. It refers to death as the state of what has been: the fixity and deflection of time, its absolute zero.
Now that we have brought the four elements of the photographic paradox together, we can describe it as a double branching of temporality. 1. In the snapshot, the present tense, as hypothetical model of temporality, would annihilate itself through splitting: always too early to see the event occur at the surface; always too late to witness its happening in reality. 2. In the time exposure, the past tense, as hypothetical model, would freeze in a sort of infinitive, and offer itself as the empty form of all potential tenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGNIFIER</th>
<th>SNAPSHOT</th>
<th>TIME EXPOSURE</th>
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| photograph | Abrupt artifact
   ex: press photograph | Natural evidence
   ex: funerary portrait |
| SUPERFICIAL
   SERIES
   ("image") | | |
| ¹theft of life
   unperformed movement→ possible posture | protracted life |
| ²singular event: gestalt
   "the gallop of the horse" | recurrent time |
| ³DEATH ← not anymore
   not yet | LIFE
   systole
   diastole |
| ⁴HERE
   pin-pointed space: sharpness | NOW
   potential time: out-of-focus |
| ⁵TRAUMA: too early
   blow | MOURNING: Presence (memory)
   hyper-cathexis |
| REFERENTIAL
   SERIES
   ("reality") | | |
| ¹fluency of life
   impossible posture→ performed movement | state of death |
| ²continuous happening: flow
   "the horse gallops" | bygone past |
| ³LIFE: present (or past) tense | DEATH: time absent: O |
| ⁴FORMERLY | THERE |
| ⁵TRAUMA: too late
   anti-cathexis | MOURNING: absence (reality)
   de-cathexis |

Photography not only overthrows the usual categories of time. As Roland Barthes suggests, it also produces a new category of space-time: "an illogical conjunction of the here and the formerly." To what Barthes says, we can add that this formula adequately describes only half of the photographic paradox, namely the space-time of the snapshot. The space-time of the time exposure would in turn be described as another illogical conjunction: now and there.

Here denotes the superficial series as if it were a place: the surface of projection of the photographed event, once it is made clear that the event never occurs there. The surface of the image is received as a fragment of space that cannot be inhabited, since inhabiting takes time. As the snapshot locks time in the superficial series, it allows it to unreel in the other one. Formerly denotes the referential series as if it were a time: a past tense enveloped by the present and in continuity with it. Formerly refers to a past sequence of events that are plausible but deprived of any location.

Now denotes the superficial series as if it were a time, but without any spatial attachment, cut from its natural link with here. Therefore, it is not a present but a virtual availability of time in general, a potential ever-present to be drawn at will from the referential past.

There denotes the referential series as if it were a place, i.e., the referential past as frozen time, a state rather than a flow, and thus a space rather than a time.

When we bear in mind that these two illogical conjunctions, which we have been trying to specify with the help of opposite models (time exposure vs. snapshot) are at work in every photograph, then we shall be able to restate these models in less empirical terms. To look at a photograph as if it were instantaneous (a snapshot) would mean to apprehend the superficial series as spatial and the referential series as temporal; to look at a photograph as if it were a time exposure would mean the reverse. The significant difference between "instantaneous" and "time exposure" would be the commutation of time and space along the axis of either surface or referent, or reciprocally, the jump in focusing on surface or on referent, along the axis of either time or space.

What does the twist in the categories of time and space imply in terms of psychological response? We are not dealing here with the reading of a photograph, which belongs to the field of semiology. Barthes remains in that field when he states that the illogical conjunction of the here and the formerly is a type of consciousness implied by photography. But we are dealing with something more basic to the understanding of photography. That more fundamental aspect can be said to be on the level of the unconscious; but of course the unconscious is involved in reading too. What is in question here is the affective and phenomenological involvement of the unconscious with the external world, rather than its linguistic structure. It is most probable that the necessity of stressing this aspect once again proceeds from the indexical nature of the photograph.

The word here, used to describe the kind of space embodied in the snapshot, does not simply refer to the photograph as an object, a thing endowed with empirical measurements that we are holding, here, in our hands. Because the photograph is the result of an indexical transfer, a graft off of natural space, it
The Photograph as Paradox

operates as a kind of ostensive gesture, as when we point with the index finger at an object, to indicate that it is this one, here, that we mean. In a sense, the very activity of finding a "focal point"—that is, selecting one particular plane out of the entire array of the world spread in depth before us—is itself a kind of pointing, a selection of this cut through the world at this point, here, as the one with which to fill the indexical sign. Finding the point of focus is in this sense a procedural analogue for the kind of trace or index that we are aware of when we hold the printed snapshot in our hands. Both poles of this phenomenon—the means to the image and the result—have in common a contraction of space itself into a point: here as a kind of absolute.

The aesthetic ideal of instantaneous photographs is sharpness. Though there is a trend in photography that tends to blur the image in order to express motion, this contradicts the built-in tendency of snapshots towards sharpness, and relates to the practice of time exposure. Some years ago, there was an aesthetic controversy among photographers as to whether a completely blurred photograph of moving objects should be acceptable or not. Those who rejected this practice claimed that there must be one point of sharpness and that this is enough. Theoretically they are right. Photography may not become totally abstract, because that would constitute a denial of its referential ties. One point of sharpness suffices to assert its own space, for the essence of the point is precision.

How does one relate to a space of such precision? One thing is certain: it doesn't give way to a reading procedure. For an image to be read requires that language be applied to the image. And this in turn demands that the perceived space be receptive to an unfolding into some sort of narrative. Now, a point is not subject to any description, nor is it able to generate a narration. Language fails to operate in front of the pin-pointed space of the photograph, and the onlooker is left momentarily aphasic. Speech in turn, is reduced to the sharpness of a hiccup. It is left unmoored, or better, suspended between two moorings that are equally refused. Either it grasps at the imaginary by connecting to the referential series, in order to develop the formerly into a plausible chronology, only to realize that this attempt will never leave the realm of fiction. Or it grasps at the symbolic by connecting to the superficial series, in order to construct upon the here a plausible scenography; and in this case also the attempt is structurally doomed. Such a shock, such a breakdown in the symbolic function, such a failure of any secondary process—as Freud puts it—bears a name. It is trauma.

We know of certain photographs to be truly traumatic: scenes of violence, obscenity, etc. However, I wish to claim that the photograph is not traumatic because of its content, but because of immanent features of its particular time and space. The trauma effect is of course a limit, but an internal one, enhanced by the subject matter of the photograph, yet not dependent upon it. As an example, one might recall the famous press photograph from the war in Vietnam, in which we see a Saigon police officer about to shoot a Vietcong soldier. This is certainly a traumatic photograph. But although the traumatism seems to be generated by the
Eddie Adams, South Vietnamese National Police Chief
Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executes a Vietcong
Officer with a Single Pistol Shot in the Head. Saigon,
February 1, 1968. (A.P. Wirephoto.)
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depiction of the atrocities of war and assassination, it depends instead on the paradoxical “conjunction of the here and the formerly”: I’ll always be too late, in real life, to witness the death of this poor man, let alone to prevent it; but by the same token, I’ll always be too early to witness the uncoiling of the tragedy, which at the surface of the photograph, will of course never occur. Rather than the tragic content of the photograph, even enhanced by the knowledge that it has really happened (“We possess then, as a kind of precious miracle,” says Barthes, “a reality from which we are ourselves sheltered”), it is the sudden vanishing of the present tense, splitting into the contradiction of being simultaneously too late and too early, that is properly unbearable.

Time exposure implies the antithesis of trauma. Far from blocking speech, it welcomes it openly. Only in time exposure (portrait, landscape, still life, etc.) may photography appear with the continuity of nature. The portrait, for example, may look awkward, but not artificial, as would be the case of a snapshot of an athlete caught in the midst of a jump. When continuity and nature are perceived, speech is apt to body forth that perception in the form of a narrative that meshes the imaginary with the symbolic and organizes our mediation with reality.

The word now, used to describe the kind of temporality involved in time exposures, doesn’t refer to actual time, since it is abstracted from its natural link with here: hic et nunc. It is to be understood as a pause in time, charged with a potential actualization, which will eventually be carried out by speech (or memory as interior speech), and is most probably rooted in the time-consuming act of looking.

The aesthetic ideal of time exposure is thus a slight out-of-focus. The blurred surroundings that belonged to the 19th century style of photo-portrait act as a metaphor for the fading of time, in both ways, i.e. from presence to absence and from absence to presence. Whenever photography makes use of blurring or related softening techniques, it endeavors to regain some of the features through which painting traditionally enacts time. The chiaroscuro for example, is not the background of shape, but its temporality. It loosens the fabric of time and allows the protruding shape to be alternately summoned and dismissed. The blurring of the image in photography is the same. The painterly illusionism of depth finds its photographic equivalent in the lateral unfurling of the photograph’s resolution, not only its blurred margins, but also its overall grain.7 It allows the viewer to

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7. Since chiaroscuro is the temporality of shape, that part of the painterly illusionism of depth that relies on it (chiaroscuro itself, atmospheric perspective, sfumato, etc., as opposed to linear perspective) is ultimately founded on the time-consuming practice of painting. The taking of the photograph doesn’t allow such a practice. Hence the fact that those photographers who aimed at pictorial equivalence repeatedly insisted on preparatory operations and especially on laboratory work, which surround the push-the-button moment of taking a photograph. The aesthetic of blurring brings the photo-portrait closer to the painted portrait, and was defended mostly by the pictorialists. Nevertheless, the process does not imitate painting, but shows that great portraitists such as Cameron, Carjat, Nadar, or Steichen had a remarkable intelligence for the medium. Beaumont-Newhall relates that Julia Cameron “used badly made lenses to destroy detail, and appears to have been the first to have them specially built to give poor definition and soft focus.” See, Newhall, History of Photography, p. 64.
Julia Margaret Cameron. Thomas Carlyle. 1867.
(George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.)
travel through the image, choosing to stop here and there, and in so doing, to amplify the monumentality of a detail, or to part from it. The kind of time involved by this travail is cyclic, consisting in the alternation of expansion and contraction, diastole and systole.

This particular surface temporality of photography is congenial with the ebb and flow of memory. For a portrait (as typified by the funerary image) does not limit its reference to the particular time when the photograph was taken, but allows the imaginary reconstruction of any moment of the life of the portrayed person. (That is the charm of a photo-album; each photograph is a landmark in a lifetime. But memory shuffles in between landmarks, and can erect on any of them the totality of this life.)

So photography in this instance is a consoling object. This movement in systole and diastole is also the one that runs alongside what Freud called the work of mourning. To put it simply, what happens in the mourning period is a process in which the subject learns to accept that the beloved person is now missing forever, and that in order to survive, he must turn his affection towards someone or something else. In the course of this process, substitutive objects, like things that have belonged to the deceased, or an image of the deceased, can help obey the demands of reality. In Freudian terms, this means that a certain quantity of libidinal affect must be withdrawn from the object to which it was attached (decathexis), awaiting to be refastened to a new object. Meanwhile, the loosened affect temporarily affixes itself to “each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object.” ¹⁸ This process Freud calls hypercathectosis. We can assume that the substitutive objects of the deceased can act as representations of these “memories and expectations,” and thus, that they are themselves, hyper-cathected.

We may suppose—again because of the indexical nature of photography—that there is something like a mourning process that occurs within the semiotic structure of the photograph, as opposed to what would happen with other kinds of images, like drawing or painting. A real mourning process can obviously make use of any kind of image as substitutive object. The mourning process then remains exterior to the semiotic structure of the image. But photography is probably the only image-producing technique that has a mourning process built into its semiotic structure, just as it has a built-in trauma effect. The reason is again that the referent of an index cannot be set apart from its signifier. Though it is better exemplified by the time exposure, any photograph is thus prone to a

¹⁸ “Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. . . . [Its orders] are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.” Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917 [1915]), The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Vol. XIV, trans. James Strachey, London, The Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 244-5.
process of mourning, whatever its content might be, whatever its link with real events as well. That the portrait be funerary or not, or for that matter, that the photograph be a portrait at all, is a matter of internal limits, which can be no more than emphasized by the subject matter.

Within the semiotic structure of the photograph, the referential series acts as "lost reality," whereas the superficial series acts as "substitutive object." So what the diastolic look accomplishes when it summons the shape and inflates it, is the hyper-cathexis of the superficial series of the photograph; and what the systolic look accomplishes when it revokes the shape and "kills" it, is the de-cathexis of the referential series.

Trauma effect and mourning process as photography's immanent features induce two opposite libidinal attitudes. The mourning process is that of melancholy, or more generally, that of depression. As to the shock of the traumatism, it is followed by a compulsive attempt to grasp at reality. The superficial series being suddenly wiped out of consciousness, it provokes a manic anti-cathexis of the referential series.

We now begin to understand that the paradoxical apprehension of time and space in photography is akin to the contradictory libidinal commitment that we have towards the photograph. On a presymbolic, unconscious level, it seems that our dealing with the photograph takes effect as an either/or process, resulting in an unresolved oscillation between two opposite libidinal positions: the manic and the depressive.

In Szondi's typology of basic drives (the Szondi-test, by the way, is the only so-called projective test to use photographic material), the manic-depressive dimension appearing in human psychopathology and in human experience has been called contact-vector. This is generally understood in phenomenological terms, as representing the fundamental attitudes of our being-in-the-world. According to Szondi and other psychologists, this manic-depressive vector is mostly presymbolic, and is the realm of Stimmung, mood. It is also believed to be the terrain in which aesthetic experience, especially visual, is nurtured.

More than any other image-producing practice, the photograph puts the beholder in contact with the world, through a paradoxical object which, because of its indexical nature, belongs to the realm of uncoded things, and to the sphere of codified signs.

We have discovered the manic-depressive functioning of the photograph by insisting on the didactic opposition of snapshot and time exposure. And we have seen that the trauma and the response to it in form of a manic defense reaction acted as an internal limit of the snapshot's instantaneity; while on the other hand, the mourning process, which partakes of the funerary nature of photography and induces the depressive position, acted as an internal limit on the time exposure. But of course there is no such thing as an empirical definition of snapshot and
time exposure. One cannot decide on a shutter speed that will operate as a borderline between them. These were only didactic models provided by intuition, but they were used to unravel one of the paradoxes of photography. These models do not point to technical or aesthetic standards; their concern is photography in general. Yet they helped to label two opposite attitudes in our perceptual and libidinal apprehension of the photograph. Though these attitudes coexist in front of every photograph, they can be told apart. Moreover, the alternative character of mania and depression suggest that though both attitudes are coextensive, they do not mingle. Photography doesn’t allow an intermediate position, or a dialectic resolution of the contradiction.

Hegel’s prophecy that art was about to come to an end was published in 1839, the very same year in which Talbot and Daguerre independently made public the invention of photography. It might be more than mere coincidence.