A TRACE OF ACTIONS UNSEEN: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ERROR AS PHOTOGRAPHY IN PERFORMANCE

Abstract

In contemporary digital photography the accident or fault is an increasingly rare and unusual phenomenon, but it presents valuable insights into the practice of photography. This article discusses how the photographic error reveals qualities of the photographic experience normally hidden in conventional photographs, and proposes a reconsideration of time in relation to photography perceived through the accidental image. The error is conceived as a performance, extending the conventional time scales of the photograph from the 'snap' into three 'acts': the photographic event, the recording of an image and, lastly, interpretation by the viewer. In each stage the error's relationship to time is shown to be ambiguous and multifaceted, counterpointing a simplified concept of time which prevails in the conventional photograph. The error exposes the entanglement of actors and relationships within the act of photographing and in so doing destabilises common assumptions about photographs as simple, immediate documents.

Keywords

Photography, error, performance, time, intuition, practice, digital, not-knowing,

Introduction

Errors, mistakes and failures exist, conventionally, at the periphery of art practice. They are the elements we sweep aside, discarded and overlooked in lieu of the final successful outcome. However, this paper will argue that our errors can lead us to new insights in relation to a practice that has become ubiquitous, familiar, and automatic.

This paper draws upon the research project *In Pursuit of Error*[1]. The project collects and analyses photographs that have, either through some technological fault or human error, not come out correctly, insofar as the resulting image does not represent what was in front of the camera according to the expectations of the photographer. This includes a wide range of common photographic accidents such as motion blur, light leaks, de-focussing, over or under exposure, poor framing, inadvertent cropping, or combinations of these things.

The project began in 2014 as a consequence of the author's artistic practice and has developed into a broader ethnographic study of the error in the practice of artists, professional and amateur photographers. The initial research premise defined an error as 'the unintended or unexpected' in photography, concentrating on the in-camera error, occurring at the moment of taking a picture.

Through international calls for contributions of 'errors', the project has amassed a substantial database of images. The contributions to *In Pursuit of Error*, images from which accompany this paper, cover a broad range of subjects and a wide gamut of errors from the smallest maladjustment to the wildest abstraction. Contributors are asked to supply a narrative to describe how their error arose and why they perceive it to be an 'error'. This commentary reveals a great level of variation in how practitioners define an error and to what extent the fault becomes a tangible visual presence in the final image. The narratives are an important resource in understanding how photographers might seek, value and interpret errors arising in their work, and moves the investigation beyond the visual phenomenon of the error and into the culture and ideology of photography practice.

[1] https://inpursuitoferror.co.uk/about/

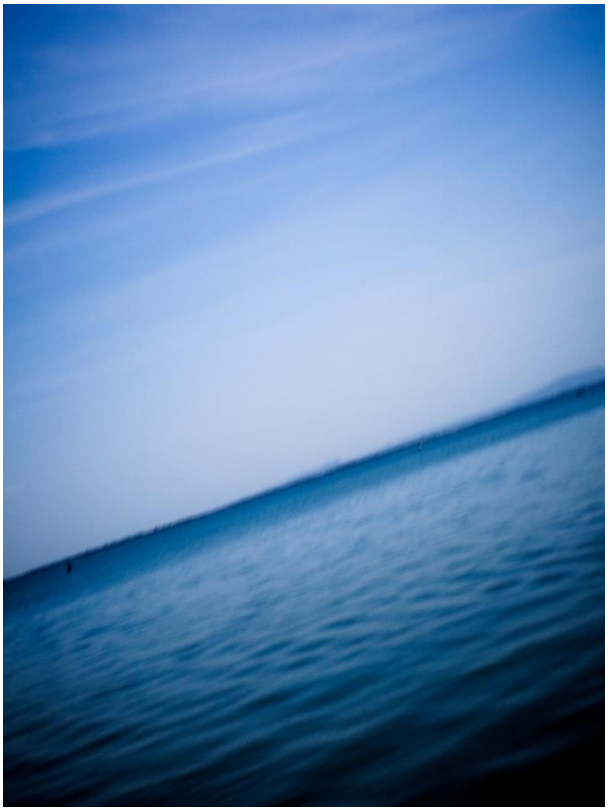

Fig 1. *Through mishandling or misadventure, the error reveals itself*

Errors were a more common and visible aspect of photography when it was a predominantly film and chemical medium but technological efficiencies such as camera automation, image preview and instant deletion have all but eradicated the error from everyday photographic practice and perception.

A consequence of removing errors from the prevailing image culture is that accuracy and resemblance become the predominant signifiers in the photographs we see on a daily basis. The burden of impartiality and objectivity placed on photography since its invention is felt today in the 'machine-vision' aesthetic driven by sophisticated and accessible camera technology, AI algorithms which select, edit and choose our 'best' pictures and internet circulation which strips images of their context in time and place rendering them apparently authorless. Digital cameras and networked distribution now compress the journey from event

to image to such an extent that we rarely appreciate the contingent and situated act of photography which took place in order to bring the image into being.

However, despite appearances to the contrary, the activity of making photographs is still a complex fusion of human agency and technological processes, and it is only when something goes wrong that this becomes apparent. Errors produced by the camera without conscious human intervention create speculative examples of possible image worlds, while human errors reflect ways of seeing which are partial, subjective and affected by our bodily actions and the contexts of time and place. In both cases aspects of time, movement and action are suggested which, through the conventions outlined above, often remain unseen. These mobile and restless elements run counter to the notion of simple transmission from event to image that is presented by contemporary digital photography culture, and suggest a way to reconsider time in relation to photography.

This paper addresses time as a specific indicator of difference between the 'conventional' photograph and the error, based on a distinction between performativity and performance. This linguistic turn distinguishes between the photograph as a singular act of depiction and the photograph as a multivalent object.

Time and the photograph

Photography has a complex relationship to time. Convention leads us to consider the photograph as somehow interrupting time, freezing or slicing it to create a moment paused or captured. This concept of photographic time as an instant (concomitant with the shutter press, the flash, the image 'taken' from the flow) contributes to the sense of identity between the time of the photograph and the time that it represents. This identification with the past

moment dissolves the photograph *qua* object in favour of the representation it contains. The photograph becomes nothing more than a scrap of 'then'; a window onto *that* world at *that* moment, momentarily paused for our consideration.

While this may seem self-evident, this concept of time contributes to the disappearance of the photograph itself in lieu of an appraisal of how well or otherwise it represents. Linking the photograph with the 'real', and as a copy of something in the world, is part of photography's inevitable tautology which frames the primary method of categorising good/bad photos: it looks like/it doesn't look like. In this way the photograph can only reference that which is beyond itself. It points to the world, it defines an object or event, it says 'look at this'. This is a performative concept of photography, adapting the term initially used by Austin (1962) in his speech act theory to indicate an action which does more than just state, but is in some sense a command or instruction. Photographs do not merely state, they communicate. The act of creating a photograph implies a perlocutionary act (Austin 1962, 101).

The performative photograph, bound up in the depiction of an isolated fragment of time, narrows our frame of reference to such an extent that the only aspect of time we are able to consider is what is held within the frame: the moment captured. By contrast, the photographic error, disobeying the 'rules' of photography by eschewing accurate representation, expands our concept of time in relation to photography. Instead of seeing through the photograph to the representation beyond, we are held at bay, for there is nothing to see, or at least nothing which is immediately recognisable as the 'real world' depicted. The moment depicted is uncertain and prompts speculation and a re-telling of events in order to understand what the image shows.

Thus, the photographic error suggests a different concept of photographic time. As a result of the mistake the photograph is momentarily prised free from its linkage to the 'real world' and becomes a continuous express of time that encapsulates not just the end point - the photographic object - but expands backward to the incipient action of making the photograph and forward to the process of interpretation: expressing the photographic event as a series of stages which operate pre-, during- and post- image. This is a concept of photography as performing, not pointing, and expands the scope of our attention from the instant toward the continuum.

Relieving us from our central concern about resemblance in relation to the photograph, the error allows us to consider the relationships that pertain between the photographer, the camera and the context, breaking the spell of neutrality and reasserting the human-technical relationship in the creation of the image. Instead of a single act, the error presents a series of actions and, with the increase of actors in the performance of photographing; it becomes apparent that contributions from different parties at different times play a vital part.

The error presents us with an extended perspective of photography as occurring in three stages. The first stage is the photographic event, and the collision or collusion between camera and photographer in the making of a photograph. This is followed by the image, and the moment of its inscription onto sensor or film. Lastly there is the image as received by the viewer, who is the interpreter and translator of all that has gone before.

What follows is a discussion of these three aspects of performing photography as exemplified by the photographic error. Using my own practice as a photographer (and error maker) and

the contributions to *In Pursuit of Error*, this discussion weaves reflections on practice with observations from theory into an exploratory dialogue.

Improvisation – the photographic event

What happens when we make a photograph? Of course, the term 'make' implies a conclusion of some intention which is set in train well before the result. Perhaps I should add a proviso, go back in time one step, and rephrase my initial question – what happens when we *attempt to make* a photograph? What actions do I and my camera perform in the moment *before* the making, in the *a priori*, anticipatory space before the images is recorded?

The photographer moves their body in relation to their instrument. The actions we perform are a complex sequence (I'm taking as my example here photography as an act out in the world rather than in a studio where many decisions can be prefigured and controlled). To be out in the world, with a camera we are engaged in a sequence of actions which begin as noticing (seeing the thing), then desiring (to capture as an image), then preparing (opening/starting the camera), then framing (holding the camera toward the subject) and only then, in the split second, the making.

Considering the actions that bring a photograph into being reminds us that photographing is a time based action through which a light image is recorded (Philips 2009 337). Not only that, but the photographic event as such requires two actors: the photographer and the camera. Both parties have actions to perform, and their relationship is key to the eventual outcome.

The photographer may be clear in her aims, but sometimes the results of her actions are not. It is this disjuncture between intention and result which categorises the 'error' – the image

envisaged but not fully resolved. Errors can be characterised as either in excess of or in deficit of the result intended by the photographer. On the continuum between accuracy and failure are many possible outcomes: inconsistencies between the photographer's vision and the resulting image, partial resemblance to her intentions, and, to a greater extent, omissions of important features or inclusion of extraneous elements in the final image.

Taking the photographer's intention as the baseline for decisions on whether an error has occurred makes the identification of an error a subjective process, but there are some general photographic errors which we commonly hold to be mistakes such as blurring or defocussing. These accidents are a consequence of the actions that take place before and during the making of the image, and most often lie within the actions of the photographer and other external forces in the environment. Within the actions that take place before the shutter is pressed many things can go astray: a fumble, a misstep, a movement out of place, an object passing between the camera and its field of vision.

Fig 2. *A movement out of place*

The error presupposes and makes visible the human and contextual aspect of photographing, inscribing the aleatory factors of the event into the resulting image. Errors also arise through faulty use or interpretation of the camera controls, and this aspect of the photographic event suggests the camera as a linked presence in the act of making a photograph.

Regardless of the level of technology being employed, the camera has a subjective viewpoint on the thing photographed, and performs its own sets of operations and actions, bidden and unbidden by the photographer. These actions form another set of possible sites for error, however in this case it is not a direct action which brings the error into being, it is an omission, on the part of the photographer, to account for the camera's 'way of seeing' at the point of making the photograph. So in the case of an error of over or under exposure the camera's settings permit its vision to perform in one particular way, when the subject requires something different. Without intervention or adjustment by the photographer any mismatch between the camera's programme (it's subjective vision at that point in time) and the environment is liable to create an error.

Vilem Flusser contends that the interaction between human and technology within photography is carried out through stages of accepting, testing or challenging the camera's programme, the standard procedure by which it produces 'correct', acceptable, photographic documents (Flusser, 2011, 289). The photographer can relinquish control to the camera, trusting in its expertise, or push the camera to perform outside of its programme with 'erroneous' consequences. In either case the entanglement of human and camera in the act of photographing is such that the actions of each are often indistinguishable in the final image.

Thus we have a situation where the photographer's actions, and the camera's actions, and the subject, and the environment all combine to create the potential circumstances for an error to arise. The stage is set, the actors have their roles, and at the moment of pressing the shutter, the error occurs, unforeseen; an improvisation in the midst of what should be a perfectly scripted performance of making a photograph. The error, created in the act of photographing, grounds the image in the context of time and place. It removes from the resulting photograph the potential for timelessness and abstraction and places it instead in the event of photographing – that time-based event in which the error occurs and *may not reoccur*. The improvisation is emergent and unrepeatable, capturing the "chance encounter between us and the machine" (Boym 2017, 17).

The error performs the moment of its making, inscribing the full chaos of the sensory and temporal into the fabric of the image. This moment of making, extending beyond the conventional fraction of a second, now encompasses the actions of camera and photographer which become perceptible, if not entirely knowable.

Interstice – the error-image as aporia

The durational qualities of the photographic event continue beyond the moment of the shutter press, extending into the process of recording and in the download/development of the image. In both digital and film cameras the moment of inscription of image onto recording media is shrouded in mystery. In either case we are faced with the inscrutability of the "black box" (Flusser 2000, 27) which remains, despite any theoretical knowledge of the actions taking place, a mystery in terms of the visibility of the actual processes. In this second phase of the error the myriad external factors of the photographic event give way to internal and hidden factors: the programme, the recording, the chemical reaction.

These imperceptible moments of inscription create a lacuna in our understanding of the photograph, it's poiesis forever hidden from sight. The translation of action to image forms an interstice between our engagement intentions and the results of our actions. When the image is revealed we are permitted re-entry into the space of the photograph as a contemplatable object.

The error as image presents a very different prospect to the conventional photograph. It soon becomes apparent that we cannot really see the subject matter in isolation from the action which brought the image into being. We cannot see 'through' and past the photograph into a recognisable situation/event and thereby forget that we are looking at a photograph. These images are not transparent windows onto past events, instead they are obscured, veiled, fogged with actions and interference which we have no choice but to apprehend along with the ostensible subject of the image.

Fig 3. *The photographic process becomes visible*

In this way the error closes the distance between image, action and subject, compressing the distance between them to create a solidity where we normally expect transparency. With the loss of a separate and distinguishable depiction or subject the image becomes nothing more than a representation of its 'photographic-ness'. Unlike conventional photographs, errors present as objects not windows.

But what is this object? It is photographic by means of its production, but it wanders from the path of convention into territory which exposes elements of the photographic act which are normally hidden from our perception. Through the error image we can 'see' movement, we can 'see' time – we can see its trace, streaks across the surface, obliterating the thing which was the original intention of the photographer. The error inscribes the actions of camera and photographer indelibly into the resulting image and in so doing proposes a very different type of photography to the timeless/authorless images which seem inherent in a machine-led 'automatic' concept of photography. By contrast, error images are messy, subjective and tactile; unveiling a haptic and sensory world which the shutter normally precludes.

Francois Laruelle's thesis of 'non-photography' argues against photography as a 'doubling' of the world through representation (the classic idea of photographic objectivity) instead proposing photography as a form of perceptual enquiry through which phenomena in the world can be identified (Laruelle 2011, 11). Laruelle's concept speaks to photography's essential character and methods while leaving room to consider how the translation of a phenomenon into a photograph can go beyond just depicting that phenomena.

The error, by exposing and making visible the contingent elements taking place in the photographic event gains a solidity and presence which is based on the identification of those phenomena, not a resemblance. Asked to depict time, movement or chance, we would be at a loss, however the impact of their presence in the photographic error is immediate and unequivocal. Because the error is always emergent, the phenomena it contains can be identified but not re-represented. We may be able to duplicate the actions that brought the error into being, but we will not be able to duplicate the image because each time the phenomena that surround the conditions of photographing will be different. Each error is a unique gesture, a true improvisation.

Therefore, each time we encounter an error, we encounter it for the first time. This constant renewal of our perception of the error maintains its inherent unknowability. It is an aporia, and its presence represents a hiatus of order, a question mark. It is as if the camera – in a fugue state - has created something which neither it nor we could preconceive. This momentary destabilisation can be thrilling, suggesting the possibility of other ways of seeing and depicting which do not rely on conventional viewpoints and approaches.

This thrill, or wonder suggests that unlike 'failure' which seems to signal an end point or defeat, the error instead offers a sense of discovery and potential. The 16th century etymological roots of error closely align it to notions of wandering, purposelessness and not-knowing, an openness which, through the Rationalist project of the Enlightenment was gradually subsumed into a much narrower definition which categorised error as opposition to and deviation from truth (Nunes 2011, 21). The earlier concept of error suggests the uncertainty of the error in process and execution, the space of interpretation which it opens

up, and the gap in our understanding which it suggests. The error wanders from the path of conventional photographic truth, and in so doing presents a different way of knowing.

Interpretation – performing in the present tense

The error image is both evidence of the photographic event, and an indication of its ambiguity. Looking at photographic errors involves the viewer in reading or guessing the 'narratives of action' that have brought the image into being. Unlike the performative indexicality of the conventional photograph the error trades specificity for uncertainty both in the moment of creation and in the resulting photograph, leaving the viewer to explore the image for traces of unintended actions. In so doing, the error-image destabilises common assumptions about photographs as simple, immediate documents.

The encounter with the error-image occurs in distinct stages. First there is the sensuous aesthetic encounter with the image in its pure visual sense, responding to the disposal of colour and form across the picture plane. Secondly there is a striving to 'see' what it is that has been depicted, to decode the visual information and trace it back to a recognisable object or event. This secondary looking draws comparisons between the error-image and conventional depictions, focussing on disparity, non-identity and strangeness in the visual phenomenon. Lastly, this examination leads to speculation on the actions or events which brought forth the image, a final narrative unfolding which seeks to interpret the image through knowledge or imagination.

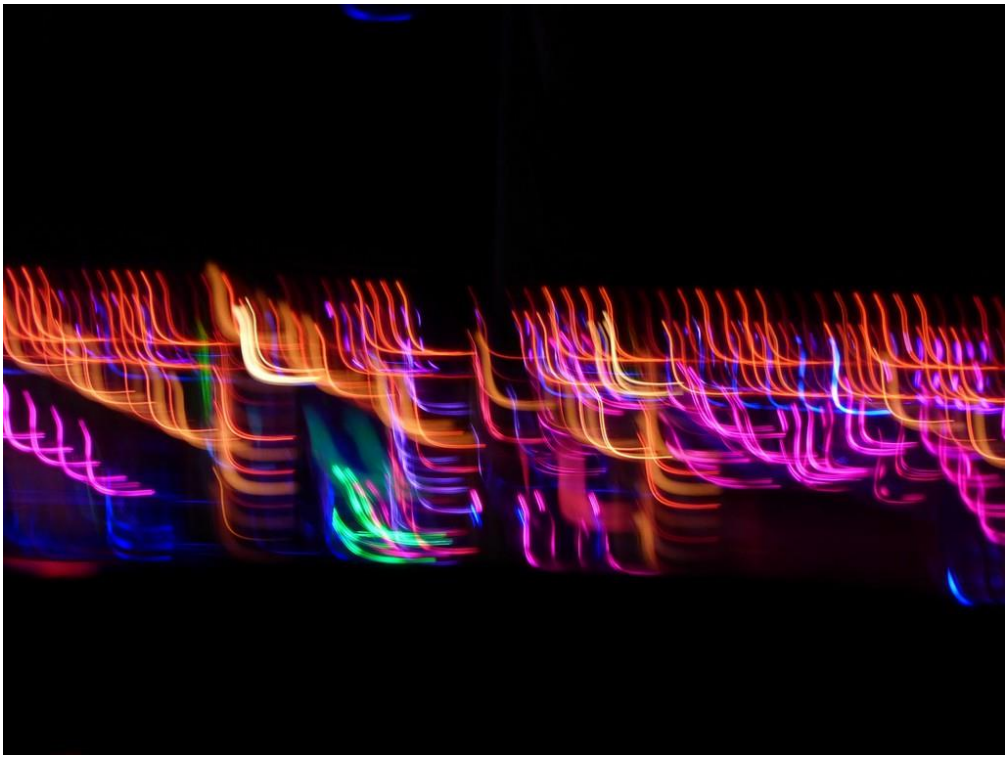

Fig 4. *What happened here?*

This narrative is rarely conclusive, because there are many contingent visible and invisible factors in the creation of the error. When presented with an error our first reaction is often framed as a question: 'what happened here?'. In this wondering, the viewer's mind wanders, back to the story or the circumstances that brought the image into being, forward to the image itself, its visual presence and what it suggests and connotes. Often the story of how an error arose is rather mundane or pathetic (e.g.: I moved, it moved, the camera did something unexpected) yet the image is intriguing, exciting, even beautiful. This disjuncture between action and result is where the power of the error lies – in the unfathomable interstice between the two where something unquantifiable happens.

Through this process of narrative re-tracing, the error as *image* presents an additional complexity with regard to time. The error is of the moment while also leading backward to a time before and during the instant, in which multiple additional stimuli were absorbed into

the image. Because the past of the error image is uncertain, inconclusive or unknowable, contemplation of it becomes a present tense activity, a performing of possible interpretations by the viewer/photographer. The error-image does not rescue the past for the present as we might conceive photography's function, for there is no obvious past identified, only our continuous, present tense wonderings and questions. Without representation as a grounding feature, we remain in a continuous here and now (Green and Lowry 2003).

Thierry De Duve explores the relationship between past and present in the photograph by drawing a distinction between the 'snapshot' and the 'time exposure'. The snapshot is instantaneous, arresting and simplified, whereas the time exposure is protracted and recurrent. In the case of the snapshot, the 'here' of the image is held at a distance because we access it through reference to a past that cannot be re-experienced. The time exposure by contrast admits of a cyclic return, a process of travel through the image by the viewer which brings the time of the image into the present (De Duve 1978, 117).

Photographic errors share similarities with Thierry De Duve's concept of a time exposure. The error image evades definition and through its ambiguity points not to a definitive past but to an 'uncertain now'. The time exposure is "a pause in time, charged with potential actualization" (De Duve 1978, 121). This actualization takes place through speech or memory rooted in "the time-consuming act of looking" in which the viewer is engaged (De Duve 1978, ibid). The encounter with the error image is not one of instant recognition or assimilation, but rather an unfolding of speculation and imagination through which the image is interpreted and perhaps explained. The error, as a 'pause in time', allows for a contemplation which we rarely consider possible in relation to the products of contemporary photography culture, where accurate and simplified images are the norm.

But what are we looking at? Images which stand outside the system of visual discourse which, through convention and expectation, we associate with photographic visuality. For Lacan, visual reality is a social construct, deviations from which might be categorised as hallucination, misrecognition or visual disturbance (Bryson 1988, 92). Error images might be one or all of these things, acting to disrupt the 'screen' of cultural conventions through which we normally perceive photographs, instead presenting a new sort of visual entity which requires a new visual lexicon to interpret.

Kember (2008) referencing Bergson (1912/2004) argues that intuition functions as insight to move us on in relation to what we see, know and understand. For Bergson, intuition was a necessary method of engagement with the complexity of the world, and the fact that elements of it are, and must be, unexplained. Operating on a temporal, internal plane, intuition is the non-verbalised leap which progresses any creative practice beyond established conceptions. The error embodies this leap as a form of not-knowing, both in execution and presentation.

Because intuition is a form of understanding which is inseparable from doing, I would posit the error as itself a form of intuition. The very occurrence of the photographic error in practice is a moment of insight into the immediacy and simultaneity of the photographic event, the interconnectedness and entanglement of factors known and unknown which coalesce, fleetingly to produce the image. (Kember 2008,182)

The error, as intuition, draws our attention to photography as a "dynamic whole" (Grosz 2004, 238). Through our encounter with the error we grasp a more profound understanding of photography than that which we are ordinarily presented with. The error subverts easy

explanations about representation and reality and, through its disruption, turns out attention toward the complex interconnections always at stake between the actors and factors that pertain in the performance of photographing.

Conclusion

The photographic error poses a pertinent challenge to photographic convention. Operating at the periphery of practice, overlooked as a mistake or an aberration, our photographic errors point to the value of missed intentions as a way to reconnect with the important but unremarked aspects of photographic practice. The error reintroduces not-knowing to the process of photographing, a standpoint from which new discoveries are more likely be made and which itself is the bedrock of creative practice (Barthelme 1997, 12).

This paper has drawn a distinction between the performative and the performing photograph as a way to address the differences in time suggested by each. The performative photograph demonstrates a simplified and transparent reading of photography, its representation functioning to transmit an event or object from the past. The performing photograph is altogether more slippery, evading specific readings for a more ambiguous set of interpretations which are often unresolved. The neat portioning of time suggested by the performative photograph is countered by the fluid and extended time proposed by the performing photograph. The performative photograph appears to reduce the number of actors at work to bring the image into being by removing the 'messy' elements of context, whereas the performing photograph ushers in a wider cast, encompassing the human, contingent and contextual factors as additional elements in the photographic event.

The error is a significant example of the performing photograph, exposing continuity and connection between the stages of becoming, inscription and reflection. The error unfolds the neat package of the photograph, exposing the photographic event as a form of unresolved potential: moving through time, within time and being *of* time.

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