

The Defeat of Time

Friday, December 18, 2009



This beguiling hyper-realistic portrait of a cat must have been even more amazing when Cornelia Saftleven painted it in 1607. It would be two centuries before anyone could see a photograph.

It's next time again.

What a profound joy it is to be provoked by Art. A new exhibition, in Florence, at the [Palazzo Strozzi](#) has me jazzed. It's got everything I like; great craftsmanship, the sexy combo of old & new, a sense of humor, and huge ideas. In a burst of museum-quality genius the very smart curators at the Palazzo Strozzi decided to combine a painting show of *Trompe l'Oeil*, with a photography show of digital images. The exhibition titles connect the dots: *Art And Illusions – Masterpieces of Trompe l'Oeil from Antiquity to the Present Day*, and *Manipulating Reality – How Images Redefine the World*.

Diary of a Filmmaker

Observations by Thomas Ball of Telos Productions

Tromp l'Oeil is one of those maddening, impossible to pronounce French phrases. As you undoubtedly know, it means “trick the eye” and as a genre of painting it is sort of like a Golden Retriever; completely adorable and hard to dislike. The show is about technical skill and clever painting effects but it is also about perception and well-intentioned deceit. It has the entertainment value of a really good magic show. It features not only the technically adept from past and present but also genuine Renaissance superstars including works by Titian, Veronese, Tiepolo and Tintoretto.



Renaissance master Titian shows off his skill painting translucent drapery in this portrait of Archbishop Filippo Archinto painted in 1558. Many believe this portrait influenced Francis Bacon's "Screaming Pope" series.

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There are many still lives in the show. Most go beyond photo realism into more expressive realms. It is hard to remember many of them were painted before photography even existed.



This gorgeously detailed still life represents the stock market crash of 1929. It was painted by Otis Kaye in 1937.

Art and Illusions took a good idea and made it great through the hard work of a talented curator, Annamaria Giusti, and a museum management determined to reach out to the public in highly creative ways. You were encouraged to find guards with special "Ask Me" buttons who acted as docents when you had a question. There was an acoustic guide for adults and another one for kids. The labels were in Italian and in English, and (this is the really hard part) all the people were friendly and seemed like they wanted you to have a great time! The curators cherry picked great paintings, sculpture and displays from all over the globe and combined them (not in chronological order) with wit and skill. The show was a delight. Be sure to check out the wonderfully done [website](#).

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This image feels uncomfortably strange because it was shot with "G. I. Joes" in Paolo Ventura's New York studio instead of Iraq. Title: Iraq 2008, C-Prints 120 x 100 cm Courtesy of the artist © Paolo Ventura

It was, however, the companion, more contemporary exhibition on Digital Photography that put me on a fast train to Florence. I love the spanking new tech of it. What put the great in *Manipulating Reality* was the taste and reach of the curator, Franziska Nori (and her International team) combined with the big ideas of the top notch artists.

The curators seductively tossed out some intellectual catnip when they credited the French Philosopher, Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and his famous book *Camera Lucida* in the introductions to the exhibition. Those of you who know me and are familiar with Roland Barthes are probably saying to yourself, "It's about time . . ." and so it is. *The Defeat of Time* is a quote from Mr. Barthes and the rest of this essay expresses my delight in just three of his amazing ideas.

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French critic and philosopher Roland Barthes circa 1960. His controversial and provocative book on Photography, Camera Lucida, was published in 1980 shortly before he was killed in a car accident.

Roland Barthes wrote about still photography in a philosophical and experiential way. It strikes me that he, and many others before him who wrote about Photography in the twentieth century, were caught up in the fresh fascination of a new medium. Photography, for them, was a new art form exploring issues and ideas contemporary with their lives. Professor Harvey Buchanan (who posts here now and then when I'm lucky) often talks about contemporary artists (for him it was Jasper Johns) having special resonance with young people who are growing up at that particular time. This connection reminds me of nostalgic rush you get when you hear the music that was playing on the radio when you got your first car.

For the 21st century, Digital Media and the related arts is surely the new wave. Maybe it is not so new. The Victoria & Albert Museum in London is currently doing an exhibition [Decode](#) which examines Digital Art from the 60's and 70's. In a similar way, Photography was not really a new technology for Barthes and his contemporaries but, what was being done with it and the effect it was having on our world, was new.

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Promotional still from James Cameron's, 3D digital masterpiece: *Avatar*.

There is no doubt that Digital Art is now. Look no further than James Cameron's new 3D blockbuster [Avatar](#) or the disturbing Chinese "news" animations of the Tiger Woods scandal which combine [animated fabrications](#) with real news footage. (Their creators defend these as trendy journalism because "young people don't take the time to read.")

What I find fascinating about the Strozzi show are the conceptual hooks – the curator's connection to *Trompe l'Oeil*, the artistic manipulation of reality, the experiential nature of these art forms and the provocative ideas outlined so brilliantly through the (not new but new to me) ideas of Roland Barthes.

I need your help here. Barthes first idea is called *studium*. It is a Latin word and the translation of his French is so convoluted and confusing perhaps those of you who better know his work or know Latin can help us out. Barthes, in horribly stilted translation, explains:

"I believe this word exists in Latin: it is *studium*, which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, "study," but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity."

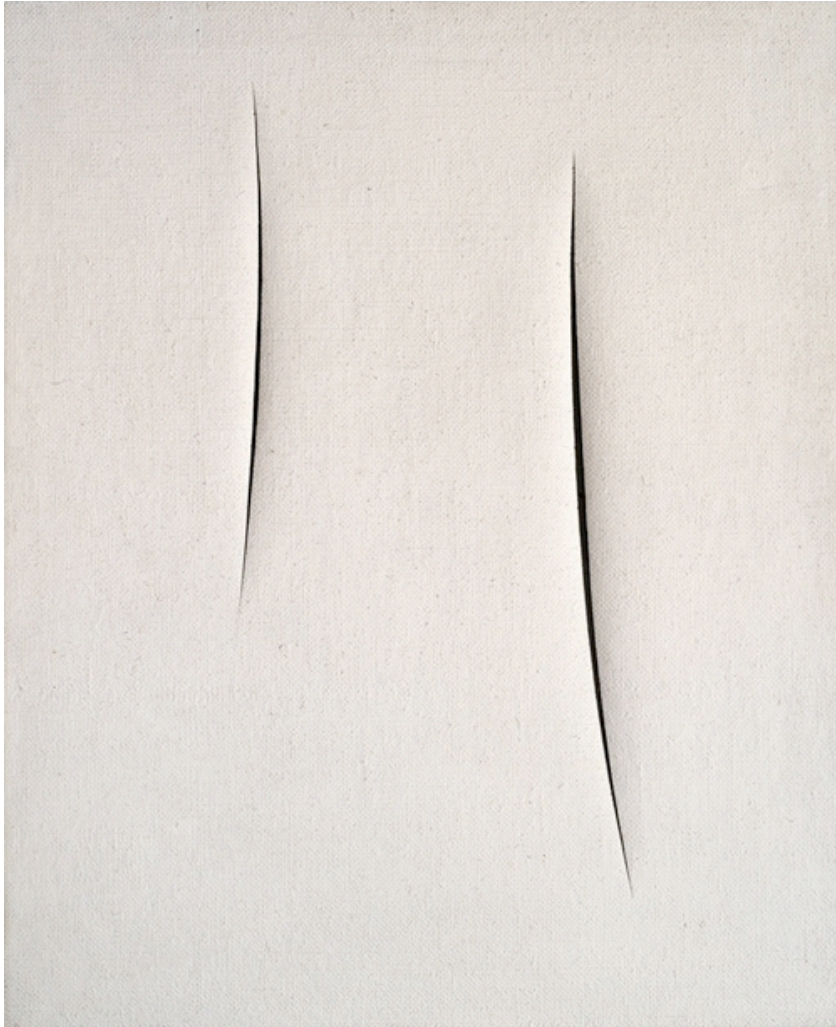
Used in this way, Barthes seems to be saying *studium* is sort of like "field of study." It is the ground on which the more interesting parts of his theory take place. His next idea, which he calls *punctum*, is much easier to understand and he describes it vividly.

"The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. . . it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, . . . for *punctum* is also: sting,

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speck, cut, little hole - and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."

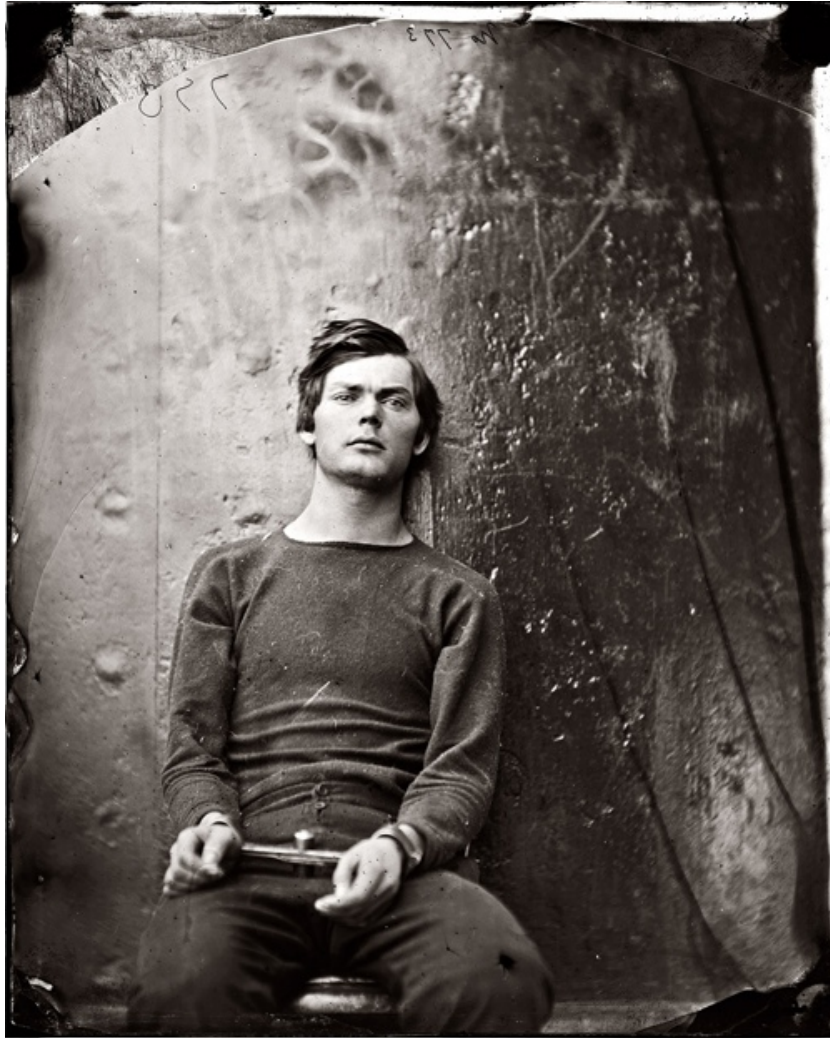


Lucio Fontana's sensuous and violent slash paintings make Roland Barthes theories tangible for me. Lucio Fontana - Concetto spaziale. Attese, 1959, private collection.

Both these ideas remind me of Lucio Fontana's sexy and somehow violent slash paintings where he takes a canvas (perhaps the *studium*) and cuts through it or pierces it (which might be the *punctum*). Barthes is pointing to something that takes Photography beyond the documentary or *reportage* stage and propels into the realm of Art. Photography, in the 20th century, took over the burden of representation from painting. It then grew into something more mysterious.

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This photo taken of would be assassin Lewis Payne by Alexander Gardner in 1865 haunted Roland Barthes.

Barthes then drives home his philosophical nail quite close to my heart as he describes his reaction to a photograph of a jailed young assassin. "I now know that there exists another *punctum* (another "stigmatum") than the "detail." This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is *Time*, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("that-has-been"), its pure representation. In 1865, young Lewis Payne tried to assassinate Secretary of State W. H. Seward. Alexander Gardner photographed him in his cell, where he was waiting to be hanged. The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die.*"

If you love photography you will love his next part. "Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. This *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of *Time* in them . . ." How gorgeous is that? All this stuff slays me.

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In the Strozzi show time bends, breaks and stands still. Waking becomes dream. Reality gets twisted. Amazement turns to wonder and then blooms, first into a smile and then a thrill.

See now the carpeted forest of [Rosemary Laing](#) (Australia, 1959).



Groundspeed (Red Piazza) #05, 2001, C-Print, 106 x 163 cm, Courtesy the artist: DZ Bank Kunstsammlung © Rosemary Laing: Galerie CONRADS, Düsseldorf.

I can't be completely sure, but I think from reading the catalog perhaps this carpet is actually installed in the forest and then photographed. I suppose it is crazy to even care, digital or physical is not the issue – it is the graceful impact she creates. I don't think this was her intent. Considering the work more thoughtfully, it is more of an environmental statement about Colonialism in Australia but I find the image restful. I could so easily live with this image and I would smile at it every day.

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Mamma, Maura e Claudia - "20.12.53-10.08.04", 2004-2009 Lambda Print, Aluminum, Courtesy of the artist; Galleria Alessandro De March, Milano, © Moira Ricci

The images in the show that really pierced me, however, were the poignant photographs of Moira Ricci (Italy, 1977). Moira (seen above in the green T shirt) decided to insert herself into her mother's early life and she does so with the skill of one of the painstaking *Trompe l'Oeil* still life painters in the companion show. Her series is titled *20.12.53-10.08.04*; the dates of her mother's birth and premature death. Moira's body language in all of the insertions has the expressive and haunting quality of certain figures in mannerist paintings, the ones who stare at you and make you uncomfortably aware of your observation.

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*Mamma sulla moto da nonna -
"20.12.53-10.08.04", 2004-2009 Lambda
Print, Aluminum, Courtesy of the artist;
Galleria Alessandro De March, Milano, ©
Moira Ricci*



*Fidanzati –
"20.12.53-10.08.04",
2004-2009 Lambda
Print, Aluminum,
Courtesy of the artist;
Galleria Alessandro De
March, Milano, ©
Moira Ricci*

What started as an homage to her mother from a grieving and talented daughter turned into, for me, the talisman of the show. I found myself getting goose bumps as I felt the inherent loss in these photographs. As I marveled at her craftsmanship and thought about her core idea I could not help but think both her Mom and Roland Barthes would have been so proud.

Until next time with much love,

Tommaso