

The Open Photograph

Essay for Niko Luoma: For Each Minute Sixty-Five Seconds

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We must endeavor to expand for productive purposes the mechanisms (means) that have so far been used only for purposes of reproduction.

László Moholy-Nagy, *Production–Reproduction*, 1922

An unlikely proximity between image and sound perceived by László Moholy-Nagy underwrites the artist's iconic 1922 statement *Production–Reproduction*, a key text of the Bauhaus and early twentieth-century modernity. In his manifesto for a new art—which would influence Walter Benjamin and György Kepes amongst many others—the artist outlined the importance of a productive seeking of “new impressions,” with a critique of a tendency he decried as “reproductive”:

It is a specifically human characteristic that man's functional apparatuses can never be saturated; they crave ever new impressions following each new reception. This accounts for the permanent necessity for new experiments. From this perspective, creative activities are useful only if they produce new, so far unknown relations. In other words, in specific regard to creation, reproduction (reiteration of already existing relations) can be regarded for the most part as mere virtuosity.

In an accompanying footnote, Moholy-Nagy revealed he had “investigated this in two areas: the gramophone and photography”. The joining of sound and image was prescient: image, music, and text were unified by mechanical technologies, traditional forms becoming changed beyond recognition. Moholy-Nagy was echoed by Walter Benjamin, who noted the socially transformative potential of distribution, the dissemination of images on the page and sound by radio. More

skeptical than Benjamin of immediate social transformation, Moholy-Nagy critiqued the tendency to use these technologies only for the purpose of reproduction. It was not enough to simply re-photograph old masterpieces or record classical performances to develop society: a new art was needed that was specifically multiple, made and distributed by mechanical means. He critiqued skill deployed to conventional ends as grandstanding: “in specific regard to creation, reproduction (reiteration of already existing relations) can be regarded for the most part as mere virtuosity.” In his later, equally influential 1947 text *Vision in Motion*, Moholy-Nagy doubled down:

The enemy of photography is the convention, the fixed rules of the “how-to-do.” The salvation of photography comes from the experiment. The experimenter has no preconceived idea about photography. . . . He dares to call “photography” all the results which can be achieved with photographic means, with camera or without.

Moholy-Nagy knew that much more was possible through mechanical means. Drawing upon photography and recorded sound, he saw potential unfulfilled.

For Niko Luoma, sound plays a pivotal role in his photographic process. Sound informs, but also challenges and transforms photography, taking the image beyond representation, towards new spaces, formed of new temporalities and differing rhythms. Luoma’s developed technique is to expose light to the surface of the photographic negative through small focused and accumulating bursts, according to a series of rigorous structures. In *Cronos* this becomes an array of intersecting lines of vivid colors displaying the artist’s interest in the meeting of composition and chance event. With a rhythmic discipline, this develops into an intense and polyphonic field in *Symmetrium*. *Motives* and *Ligeti*, monochromatic works, pursue structured and overlapping lines, with compositions of increasing delicacy and complexity. We might go further still. For Luoma also searches for new structures, and works performatively with the photographic apparatus. In a practice that is

open-ended and experimental, his method has something in common with John Cage's "preparation" of conventional instruments, in which the composer modified ordinary instruments to produce specific qualities of sound. Luoma re-tools the camera and interrupts its function, so that it sees only light, so that it demonstrates a level of sensitivity that can scarcely be perceived when the camera is used conventionally. His exposures, built up one line or impression at a time, sequentially over an extended duration, mirror a field of sound, delicately differentiating a variety of inputs, modulating in frequency, volume and pitch. We perceive, by looking at his pictures line by line, how they describe a temporality that indicates an extended and concentrated event, performance and encounter.

Recalling that Luoma moves beyond representation, we might be surprised when the artist's *Adaptations* appear to shift away from a concern with sound by drawing on visual references. A wide range of paintings, photographs and drawings are "adapted" by the artist, calling to mind the practices of appropriation. Some of the *Adaptations* are immediately recognizable, their forms strongly echoing graphic outlines and rectilinear forms found in the adapted works. Quickly, however, the series resists such resemblance as a dominant or recurring logic. With the same sequential process of light exposure, here producing overlapping planes with glass-like surfaces (an effect first present in the artist's preceding *Variations on a Standard of Space*), Luoma's works find few overt echoes. Francis Bacon's studies for a portrait and David Hockney's pool paintings can be recalled instantly. Yet, in a surprising turn, Picasso's Cubist forms, while appearing to lend themselves to Luoma's method, with flattened planes and graphic markings, remain enigmatic: their colors provide the most immediate clues to recall and recognize their source. Iconic photographs, amongst them Henri Cartier-Bresson's "Behind The Gare Saint-Lazare", and the documentation photograph of Luigi Russolo's Futurist "Art of Noises", actively undo claims to depiction. Cartier-Bresson's original photograph—forever fused to the notion of a "decisive moment" which proclaims

the image to be a singular, recognizable event—is skewed by Luoma into diagonal shafts, spotlights towards a central event that, in two versions, are black void and over-exposed white center. The Russolo by comparison sings with color. This latter work is a singular key to the *Adaptations*: it attempts to reach beyond the photograph, color becoming animate and boisterous. From here a daring proposition of the *Adaptations* comes into view: depiction is no longer dominant: performance comes forth.

Crossing all of Luoma's projects is the performative space of the photograph. In his disassembly of Cartier-Bresson, the image is shown to be a choreography. It plays upon paintings by Bacon and Hockney, both of which, coincidentally, have their seeds in photographs that the artists used as parts of their working process, Luoma shows us the performance of the figure, a performance which he shifts, so that it ceases to be a representation, but becomes an actor, a force. In *Self-titled Adaptation of Peter getting out of Nick's Pool (1966) Version II*, 2018, the human figure is reduced to three circular traces. Though the architecture of the scene is static—and rendered here with a level of detail—the body is on the verge of disappearance because it is moving, in action. In the *Adaptations* of Bacon, the figure, near intangible, exits. Where have the figures gone? Have they left the frame to make the image?

Luoma builds his images methodically. One exposure is laid upon another as a composition is shaped and developed. And time is slowed. He moves between the camera and a drawing made as he works, tracing observations and accumulating impressions. Against the quickness which characterizes photography—its ever-decreasing units of time for production, transmission, and even reception—Luoma treats time as elastic: it is open. His drawings demonstrate prolonged encounter. They emphasize a looking that is responsive and analytical, active and

concentrated. Luoma's tracings begin on top of an artwork's reproduction, as the artist identifies structuring logics. In a second, subsequent drawing, made to outline the work, a distinct and yet indebted form emerges. There are multiple temporalities, and this is the time between a score and its manifestation. Like a composer translating image into sound, Luoma is translating an image, but he is turning it into something new, something which we should, after Moholy-Nagy, insist on calling a photograph.

To work with photography is to challenge time. To work with photography as an artist is to destabilize time and change its meaning. The Post-Fordist philosopher Paolo Virno described art and poetry as the construction of alternative units of measure, suggesting that the encounter we have with a work of art is disruptive, shifting our experience and opening new trajectories. He describes memorably an idea that art is akin to the surprise of discovering that the standard meter rule—the measure from which all other standard measurements of length are determined—is no longer a meter at all, but 90cm or 110cm. And so it is with Luoma.

Photography's rapid precision is undone and time unraveled. In Luoma's images we discover that the standard time of the photograph is not a fraction of a second outside the view of the eye—but an extended moment encompassing a multiplicity of events that come into contact and change each other.

In his now iconic study of music, Umberto Eco's essay *The Poetics of the Open Work* described a pivotal shift in experimental composition. Eco identifies how instrumental composers—Stockhausen, Berio and Boulez, amongst others—increasingly sought to leave spaces of ambiguity in their scores, a “considerable autonomy left to the individual performer in the way he chooses to play the work”. Leaving tempo, duration, or volume unspecified, forcing performers to improvise or work against bodily limit, they rethought the score as a space of encounter,

against direction and against reproduction. Eco's characterization of this as an "open work" acknowledged that music's performance, in an age of information, was becoming central; live experience could not adequately be recorded nor could it be exhausted. Could the Open Work tell us something about photography? Perhaps it can, if we can let go of our expectations of the image. Then we might reach some surprising conclusions about photography: that an image is necessarily performed and performative—not a copy but an act, even a gesture; that our images do not compete with time, but use it—images operate across many temporalities; and lastly, that photography can, and should, move beyond representation—new vocabularies are possible, and these images need look like the present world. All of this is to say that the image is an experiment, and that experiment takes root in abstraction.

The earliest image makers—proto-photographers and early adopters—wrestled intensely with light and its qualities. Light's infinite variability makes it hard to discipline. Many of the earliest photographs made by the pioneers of photography are hidden from view: they were—in technical terms—errors and failures: too bright or too dark, lacking detail, or failing to resemble the pictorial traditions that the first photographers sought to emulate. But they revealed something of the essence of photography. In their making, in an echo of the recent writings of the German art historian Peter Geimer, they uncovered that photography begins with abstraction, and not representation. A case in point is the *Album D'Essai* by Hippolyte Bayard, an early photographic pioneer who is often written out of the history of photographic invention. A 2015 exhibition and book of Bayard's *Album* show abstract apparitions and fading residues—amongst the earliest instances of an image resolved by photographic process. The images are akin to "stains and traces", suggests curator Luce Lebart, characterizing the faint and delicate abstractions. This is the photographic image: light-sensitive, with an infinitely delicate sense of space. As Geimer recounts in his *Inadvertent Images*, a narrative of

progress quickly overran the exquisite potentials the sensitive medium was capable of. It is only now that it has come back into view.

Niko Luoma has been working with light, exploring and testing its capacities and potentials. With light as both subject and object, his images are opening spaces. The *Adaptations* create a sensation of dense layering, a depth that can be unlocked not as illusionistic pictorial distance, but as the perceptual complexity of light as material. In many of Luoma's projects the image begins at black: indeed, at the limits of every photograph are two monochromes, one empty and one full. They are the start and end of the image, the brackets of a space within which we can act. The space in between is infinite, and ready to be played: Luoma is sounding it out.