





The New Interval

Nicholas Mueller

Invented and used by earthlings, the photograph is the stuff of extraterrestrials.

-Henri Van Lier, 1981¹



I. The New Interval

At first it was simply a fascination with the pose: the awkward gesture of holding a camera up to the space *in front of* one's face. These four to fifteen inches, between the photographer's nose and the screen of a digital camera, constitute a new interval in the world—a space that demands further investigation.

I do not subscribe to apocalyptic or utopian readings of the paradigm shifts enacted by the digitization of photography. After all, pictures are still pictures—flat and mute—and we still use cameras to take them. But the vernacular experience of photographing *feels* different and that is because a new space, between eyes and screens, has opened up, while another quite different gap has closed. The old experience was charged with the occult darkness of the film chamber; the new one is flooded with the brightness of the open field. These two encounters produce very different relationships to the creation of the image. In the new space of photography,

a picture impresses itself upon us before we make it; in the old order, we impressed the image upon ourselves before we knew it.

Over the past five years I have spent a great deal of time watching people view the pictures they were taking. I came to suspect that while the simultaneity of digital photography had relieved some of the ontological uncertainty of the old medium, a new difficulty had been created. Now, the body is apparent—planted before the subject—but the mind seems elsewhere. I observed photographers' slack-jawed attitudes and intense, yet absent, stares turned rapturously on their tiny camera screens, and I wanted to know: *where are they?*

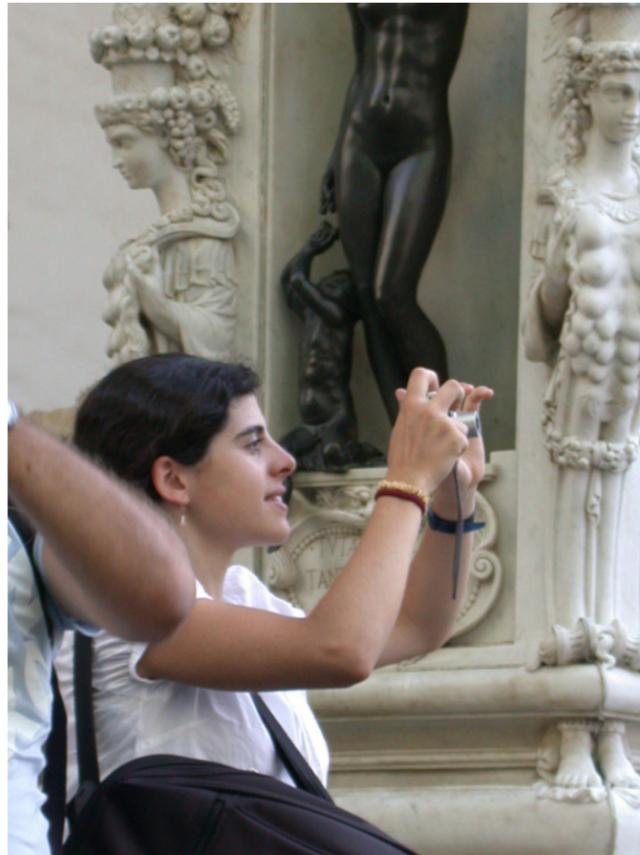
The Belgian philosopher Henri Van Lier's *Philosophy of Photography* was written in 1981, but was not widely available in print until 2005 (and not in English until 2007). He died in 2009, and although he lived to see and write

elsewhere about the digital age, this text is something of a Rip Van Winkle—recently awoken into a changed world. Despite, or perhaps because of this temporal blind spot, I found myself drawn to its trippy, sometimes spellbound affect when watching people take pictures. Van Lier both scolded and valorized analog photography for the thicket of formal and empirical contingencies in which the making and viewing of pictures was constantly entangled. For him, much of this indeterminacy was born in the dark space of the interval between exposing the negative and being exposed to the image. This is precisely the space that has disappeared in the current experience of digital camera photography—shifting the act from a ritual of hope carried out across darkness, toward a process of assessment and dissemination grounded in luminous clarity.

Van Lier's text is as much a philosophy through photography as for photography, and its existential thrust hinges on the terror of the real lurking behind the flimsy picture plane of our reality. Or, as he puts it: "In the encounter of photons and halides, the real engenders the black spots while the reality intimates that these are indeed marks and zones."² Photography both obscures and reveals our desperate mental game in ways that words cannot.

He refused to address photography in the language of semiotics, insisting that "the slightest excess of vocabulary would be fatal . . . because it threatens to obfuscate what is most specific to the photographic index, namely its terrible muteness, which one is in danger of confusing with the eloquence of signs."³

In Van Lier's oracular world, "the photographer inhabits the camera obscura, and he ultimately and always draws in the future viewers with him."⁴ I hold a picture in my hands knowing that I am reading it across a dark passage of temporal loss and limited signification. In the old analog order of photography, this sensation of viewing inevitably infected the experience of photographing. With the camera to my eye, I already sensed that the image was going to be other—an alien offspring of the moment I shared with the shutter mechanism. I was there, but my picture would always be elsewhere:



*What is most important for photography—as with interstellar space—is the night . . . the darkness and non-light out of which luminous eventualities manifest themselves punctually and incidentally, emerging out of the dark only to return to it.*⁵

What, then, becomes of Van Lier's black hole in the digital age, when the image is in front of us before we are ever alone with either our sensations or our hopes? What future are we imagining for our pictures now, and how does that shift our photographing moment?

Today, most people see the image before they "shoot" it—already a flattened, bright rectangle—rather than a peephole promise of what will most likely be a photograph. Furthermore, the contingency of what Van Lier calls "indices and indexes"—of what will appear and what it may mean—is given over to instantaneous assessment. The photograph is immediately evaluated in terms of the still-present scene and subject. We take pictures. We examine them, perhaps glancing at the subject as a helpful reference. We edit and repeat the process in an effort at refinement or accuracy—perhaps in a further stab at attractiveness and spontaneity. And then we do it all again.

One could imagine that this new simultaneity would relieve the disturbingly "contingent" experience of the old medium. But it seems instead to have shifted the burden. With analog photography, we always knew that no matter how much we tried to control the outcome and imagine the future image, the picture was uncertain in a way that we were not. We saw the world before the photograph reconstituted it for us. That, at least, is how it seemed. In other words, the analog photograph betrayed its own instability so we didn't have to question ours. Twentieth-century theorists' perpetual degrading of the medium's "truth content" was merely an attempt to reassure ourselves that we were made of more solid stuff. But the jig, as they say, is up. The digital camera inverts this paradigm. The future is no longer a question of what the picture will be. *What we will be in front of the picture* is the new contingency of photography.

What, exactly, does this future promise? In an optimistic mood, I like to think of it as a ritual of enacting presence in the teeth of the experiential collapse demanded by incessant consumerism. In the newly extended moment of the



photograph (viewing, shooting, editing, viewing, shooting, editing) we shop for the image that will buy us the best future moment of visual consumption. We edit our camera pictures the same way we shop for sneakers online—looking at a picture and imagining our future with it. It is both a deeper submission to consumerism and a more ardent resistance to alienation than photography has previously encompassed. Increasingly, the ritual of viewing photographs is no longer about forging a tenuous connection to the past—or even about memory. It is, rather, an act of repeatedly reconstituting a presence that feels situated in time, resonating between a past and a future that suggests the now, while constantly deferring it. The picture is always present, even before it is fixed. We are the ones who have come unmoored.

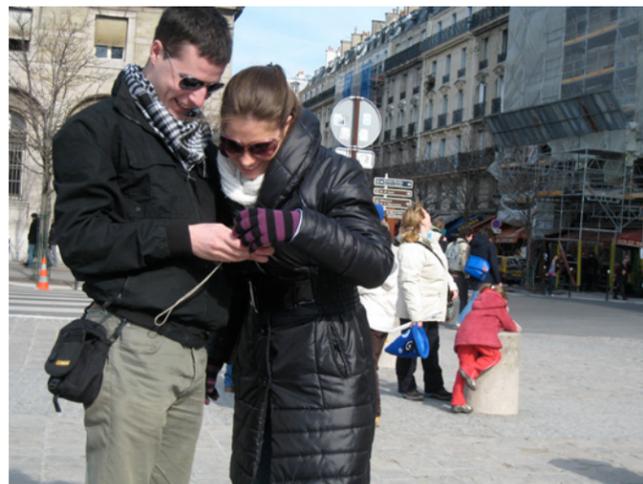
II. The Huddle

One usually chatters around a photograph, when passing the family album around for instance, in order to simultaneously dispel the panic of the real lurking underneath and in order to animate a feeble reality.⁶

Watching people participate in the immediate collective viewing of digital camera pictures does not dispel Van Lier's ontologically desperate reading of the social exchange around photographs in the analog age. But just because we're fighting off panic doesn't mean we're not, momentarily, succeeding. These acts of urgent huddling—the couple photographs each other and reviews the results; friends gather around a cell phone to admire what has just happened—provides a reassurance of shared presence. In doing so, it momentarily recharges the promise implied but deferred in the moment of picture-taking. It is precisely this social performance that we hope to reanimate in our future encounter with the already familiar image, huddling again around the device that is both camera and album, or imagining the intimate collective of buddies, remotely huddled around our recent uploads.

An Observation:

Last spring I watched a tall young man take self-portraits in front of a cathedral. He placed himself between his camera and the landmark, holding the device down and out at arm's length. He exposed some pictures and pirouetted quickly to evaluate them in reference to the building behind him, now placing the screen between himself and the scene. He held the camera down, using his body to block the sun's glare as



he backed into a passerby. Later, in the photograph, he will be present. But, I thought, he is not here now. The picture is already exactly itself, and he is the one lost in space.

III. The Serpent

In one of his more free-wheeling passages, Van Lier compares the analog photograph, as an object that habitually escapes “interpretation and decoding,” to a serpent: “The fascinating serpent transfixes us through its movement from back to front (the intervals of the negative of the negative), and left to right (the lateral overlap of indices).”⁷ The indeterminate movement of “reading” across the picture plane still remains, but Van Lier's oscillation of negatives and positives—a temporal movement between the then of the exposure and the now of the print—has disappeared in contemporary photography. It has been replaced by another temporal fluttering: between the immediately visible photograph and the future economy of the image. Furthermore, in the taking of digital photos we are confronted with the simultaneous appearance of the picture and its subject: a pair of indivisible but irreconcilable appearances.

Van Lier contends that “the serpent is not actually perceived by the one who is fascinated and stunned by it.”⁸ To the extent that photographers imagine the picture's future reception while absently scanning its instantaneous appearance, this observation is precisely true. To Van Lier, the photograph/serpent “establishes a non-space and non-duration, outside of the imaginary”⁹ as a function of its delayed appearance and syntactical indeterminacy. The digital camera image, no less indeterminate, but infinitely more immediate, recasts this logic. In the extended moment of picture-making and picture-viewing, we alternately confront the physical subject (person, place, thing) and the quite distinct vessel of ideas and narratives (what Van Lier calls “mental schemas”) that the photograph inevitably becomes. As with all ecstatic rituals, we demand presence but cannot be present. The picture holds its ground while the photographer drifts off into a spatio-temporal netherworld, hypnotized by the competing demands of reading, representation, and the projection of a future self.

The serpent has a new dance, and judging by the gaping, glassy-eyed faces of most photographers, it is seductive. We could assume it is the joy of engagement and mastery: I

am here; I am taking pictures; I am analyzing, editing, and enjoying them! After all, the rhetoric of this new media is all about our immediate ownership of experience, and the voice or vision that we can broadcast in affirmation of that achievement. But I suspect that the sensation is closer to weightlessness than anything else. We are already thinking about where we will send or post our images; about how they will be captioned and who will be impressed or entertained. What passes for the joy of presence is really the vertiginous freefall of alienation. We are expressed as a future commodity of the self, registering and recalibrating at electronic speeds. It is exhilarating and hypnotic, but it is not the same as being there.

Something does happen to us in the thrall of those inches between our eyes and our screens. Our sleek little imaging devices evoke another era's science fiction while signaling this era's baseline of social participation. Even so, when we push the button we are transported, or perhaps exported, before the image is ever sent. We experience ek-stasis, in the true sense of being outside ourselves.

I looked at the LCD image of the young man photographing himself in front of the cathedral. I took some pictures. I reviewed them, but they didn't seem to explain the queerness of what I had seen—that strange disassociation of self from context, in the very gesture of trying to affirm just that. How could I tell you about this strange phenomenon, of the man doubling himself and disappearing all at once? How would I explain that he was not really present in front of the cathedral on that lovely spring day? I wanted to try again, but by then he was already reviewing his pictures, imagining himself with them, in his future, as he staggered away. He was right in front of me, but he was no longer there. And neither was I.

NOTES 1. Henri Van Lier, trans. Aarnoud Rommens, *Philosophy of Photography* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 38. 2. *Ibid.*, 39 3. *Ibid.*, 18. 4.. *Ibid.* 5. *Ibid.*, 38. 6. *Ibid.*, 37. 7. *Ibid.*, 43–44. 8. *Ibid.*, 44. 9. *Ibid.*

