Wols, *Untitled*, 1946–47

Wols, *Untitled (rabbit/comb/harmonica/button)* c. 1938–1939

Laure Albin Guillot, Plate II, *Brazilin*, from the album *Micrographie Décorative*, 1931

could see sexual grotesquery in Blossfeldt's plant studies shows just how mixed up the rational and the irrational, the 'sachlich' and the 'informe', the real and the surreal could be.[79] These were the psychical extremes of modern life and photography was well suited to dramatising them. Indeed many photographers were pursuing similar visions at this time, notably Brassaï, Laure Albin Guillot and Wols. The camera's capacity to bring forth small details certainly produced new knowledge but with its unmoored perspectives and unsettling subject matter it could also introduce new uncertainties. Wols switched between existential abstractions in oil, watercolor and pencil, and exquisitely abject still life photographs of impoverished materials. Here is man, Wols seemed to suggest, caught between the cosmos and the kitchen table, between higher dignity and utter dissolution.

Lens, shutter and light-sensitive surface

In 1977 Rosalind Krauss published what came to be regarded as one of the most significant pieces of art criticism of that decade. Once again *Dust Breeding* played a central role. In 'Notes on the Index, Part 1', Krauss noted that

evidence and traces had indeed become the main preoccupations of vanguard art, particularly in North America.[80] Moreover she compared the turn quite explicitly to the work of Marcel Duchamp for whom the index had been such an important artistic/anti-artistic concept. Later, in *The Optical Unconscious* 1993, she construed Duchamp's *Large Glass* in just such terms:

> ...there is no want of evidence on the *Glass* itself that it must be seen as a surface of impression. For many of the signs it bears are organised as traces, deposited there like footprints left in sand, or the rings that icy glasses leave on tables. They are imprints rather than images, striking a receptive surface – like that of nervous tissue: the Sieves with their residues of dust, the Occulist Witnesses with their ribbons of mirror, the Draft Pistons with their indexically formed contours.[81]

Like a photographic image dust is a 'physical index for the passage of time'. Thus *Dust Breeding* is a kind of index of an index, or trace of a trace. For Krauss, it is Duchamp who 'first establishes the connection between the index (as a type of sign) and the photograph'.[82] But as her argument develops it becomes clear that her thinking about photography privileges touch and contact, what she calls the 'absoluteness of... its physical genesis'. To this end she invokes the physicality of the cameraless photogram as the medium's essential form, since it 'only forces, or makes explicit, what is the case in *all* photography'. But does it?

Certainly, the photogram is indexical in the immediate sense that it may be made with the referent in contact with the light-sensitive surface, without the mediation of a lens, forming an image that may not be recognisable. But as we have seen a photograph is indexical in two senses: as recording of light and the implication of a vantage point for that recording. It is more appropriate to see the photogram as a special instance of 'the photographic', not as the medium's purest form.[83] This confusion does at least indicate that the desire to define photography, to locate in it an essence, has a distinct history that has been subject to change depending upon which part of the apparatus is being thought about. For example, consider the role that is played in theories of photography by the camera. The camera is made up of what we might think of as three distinct parts (mediums, even): the lens, the shutter and the light-sensitive surface. When theories privilege the lens it is usually in relation to the depiction of space and the conventions of realism determined by linear perspective and optics. Here we are in the realm of resemblance and iconicity, where the origins and essence of photography are located in the *camera obscura*.[84] When the shutter is invoked it is in relation to time and duration, and photography's origins and essence are located in the desire for arrested vision. When the light-sensitive surface is invoked it is usually in relation to the question of contact and touch, locating origin and essence in the shadow or trace. At different historical points and in different contexts we

William Klein, *Untitled. Abstract photogram*, 1952

can see that the emphasis on each component part of the apparatus has varied. Consider how, between the mid-1920s and the mid-1970s the shutter seemed to play a very active part in popular and more serious thinking about what photography is. The celebrated Decisive Moment, in which the lens cuts out a fragment of space and the shutter a fragment of time, was thought to be very close to the essence of the medium. It loomed very large in popular and artistic accounts of what it was or could be. Looking back however, we can see that era (a long one at half a century) was in part prompted as much by other media as by photography's autonomous search for its own essence. Cinema, a fully mass medium by the 1920s, invented the moving image but it also invented a new relation to still images. Photography began to pursue this stillness, or arrestedness, as if it were unique and definitive. It mastered and monopolised stillness, which became culturally dominant in the form of reportage. This lasted roughly until video intruded as a mass form to become widespread by the 1970s, with its portability and capacity to be readily fragmented. At that point the Decisive Moment began to wane in the conceptualisation of the medium in commercial, artistic and popular circles. The photo-reportage of 'events' receded (we will come to this shortly). Today few speak of the moment – decisive or otherwise – being unique to photography or definitive of it. The moment still haunts photography of course, which is partly why so much staged photography in art since the mid-1970s renounced the direct capture of events the better to explore what such an event was or is. The dramaturgical work of Cindy Sherman and much of the work of Jeff Wall are the obvious examples. Contemporary photographic artists seem to prefer the stoicism of the lens and the enigmas of the light-sensitive surface to the ecstasy or trauma of the quick shutter. That seems to be what this now relatively slow medium is for them, and it would certainly point to the renewed interest in an image as slow and temporally complex as *Dust Breeding*.

Likewise we could think of the various points at which the light-sensitive surface – the component that makes photography at least in part an index – has been predominant. The crises of historical memory felt in the wake of the two world wars gave rise to an intense desire for the photograph as trace, witness or *aide-mémoire* (André Bazin's ontology, published at the war's end, is clearly marked by a profound collective desire for sober record). To these we could the add the less collective desires for the photograph as trace that surface in individual circumstance, so well charted by Roland Barthes. More recently photography's becoming electronic ('the digital') has also tended to focus discussion on the light-sensitive surface. Debates about digital cameras have made a fetish of their difference from older equipment, rather than their continuities with it. Digital cameras still have lenses and exposure duration, and are thus subject to all they imply, but relatively little is said of this.[85]

Emphasis on the role played by the lens has also risen and fallen across photography's history. Think of the preoccupation with the 'faults' of the lens and the artistic aversion to clear detail typical of Pictorialist photography, or the embrace of 'straight photography' – frontal, rectilinear, clear – typified by the New Vision and its descendants, which clearly mark a certain priority of the industrially standard lens and its descriptive capacities. Since the beginnings of photography lenses have basically remained unchanged, inching steadily towards a kind of perfection. Of shutters we can say much the same. The light-sensitive surface has changed a great deal, especially in the move from paper, metal and celluloid coated with chemicals to electronic sensors. It will no doubt continue to evolve. Putting all these things together, as cameras do, we can say that photography stays the same and changes.

But photography also changes because of what it photographs. We tend to think of photography telling us something about subject matter, or at least about what subject matter can look like when photographed. But it also works the other way around. It is barely possible to understand photography outside of what it photographs. Subject matter affects what we think photography 'is'. For example industrial subject matter (say, a steel and glass building) makes photography seem industrial. Natural things (a plant, a cloud, or dust) can make it seem natural, like a 'pencil of nature'. The fleeting (a man jumping over a puddle) renders it a medium of the shutter. The immobile (a water tower) makes it a medium of the lens. And the desirable or the past (in the end they are much the same thing) makes it an existential medium of touch and contact. The actual technical procedure of the photograph might be exactly the same in each case (lens, shutter, film and so on) but the status of the subject matter seems to

Étienne Carjat, *Portrait of Charles Baudelaire*, c. 1862

Walker Evans, *Trash Can*, c. 1968

determine or conceptualise how the photograph is 'felt'.[86] This is photography's 'affect'.

Needless to say our grasp of lens, shutter, light-sensitive surface and subject matter are never really this separate but abstracting them allows us to see just how complex any definition of photography can be.

Baudelaire, re-remembered

Perhaps the first writer to truly grasp the ephemeral as the key to modern experience is Charles Baudelaire. It is Baudelaire who attends to the transient and the marginal in the pursuit of a more nuanced and thus more equivocal understanding of daily life. In *Les Fleurs du mal* 1857, dust is given dramatic evocation:

> Disease and Death make only dust and ash
> Of all the fire that blazed so bright for us
> [...]
> My cradle rocked below the stacks of books –
> That Babel of Instructions, novels, verse
> Where Roman rubbish mixed with Grecian dust.[87]

Moreover Baudelaire understood that the true emblem of modern life is the *rag picker*:

> Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously: he collects like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry.[88]

The rag picker stands against bourgeois consumerism and its *boredom*, a phenomenon that takes on a monstrous and cosmic dimension in much of Baudelaire's thought (it is worth recalling that *Les Fleurs du mal* was originally to be titled *Limbo*). But by the early twentieth century Baudelaire's writing was all but forgotten. Thereafter it is preeminently Walter Benjamin who comes to see the task of the cultural critic as one of sifting through what is cast aside or overlooked, and Benjamin achieves this through a recovery the spirit of Baudelaire. As Thierry de Duve noted, 'Baudelaire's modernity might not have reached us except beneath a layer of dust had Walter Benjamin not passionately exposed its profound ambivalence.'[89] It was only when Baudelaire's thought had itself become trash to be salvaged that his diagnoses began to be taken seriously. And as Benjamin pointed out, rag picking was for Baudelaire a *method* as much as a subject matter:

> Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse, and both go about their solitary business while other citizens are sleeping;

> they even move in the same way. Nadar [who photographed Baudelaire more than once] speaks of Baudelaire's 'pas saccadé' [jerky gait]. This is the gait of a poet who roams the city in search of rhyme-booty; it is also the gait of a rag-picker, who is obliged to come to a halt every few moments to gather up the refuse he encounters. There is much evidence indicating that Baudelaire secretly wished to develop this analogy. It contains a prophecy in any case.[90]

Of course, halting every few moments to gather up discarded refuse became Benjamin's method too, just as it was for those photographers who worked in the Baudelairean spirit, from Eugène Atget to Eli Lotar, André Kertész and Walker Evans.

In the margins of modern life one might divine something unexpected; something that could, if articulated, make thinkable the social tensions and temporal ruptures of the age, something with the potential to become a *dialectical image*. Time and again Walter Benjamin singles out and reflects upon bits and pieces from the almost nothing of the everyday. This is the guiding principle of his great meditation on Baudelaire's era, the *Passagen-Werk* or *Arcades Project*.[91] In this assembly of notes and quotes left unpublished at Benjamin's death, the motif of dust recurs twenty three times, no less, and often in ways that recall Baudelaire's understanding, and Bataille's too. For example, in the section 'Boredom, Eternal Return' Benjamin writes:

> As dust, rain takes it revenge on the arcades.– Under Louis Philippe, dust settled even on the revolutions.
>
> [...]
>
> Plush [upholstery] as dust collector. Mystery of dust motes playing in the sunlight. Dust and the 'best room'. 'Shortly after 1840, fully padded furniture appears in France [...].' Other arrangements stir up dust: the trains of dresses. 'The true and proper train has recently come back into vogue, but in order to avoid the nuisance of having it sweep the streets, the wearer is now provided with a small hook and a string so that she can raise and carry the train whenever she goes anywhere.' Friedrich Theodor Vischer, *Mode und Zynismus* (Stuttgart 1879). p. 12. Dust and Stifled Perspective.[92]

In her commentary on the *Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss describes the approach:

> How are we to understand the 'dialectical image' as a form of philosophical representation? Was 'dust' such an image? fashion? the prostitute? expositions? commodities? the arcades themselves? Yes, surely – not, however, as these referents are empirically given, nor even as they are critically interpreted as emblematic of commodity society, but as they are dialectically 'constructed', as 'historical objects', politically charged monads, 'blasted' out of history's continuum and made 'actual' in the present.[93]

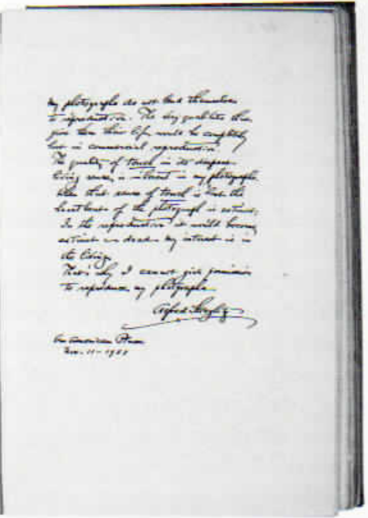
With imagination, dust might allow past and present to be apprehended together. Here is Benjamin again:

> It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the Then and the Now come into constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the Then to the Now is dialectical – not development but image, leaping forth. Only dialectical images are authentic... images.[94]

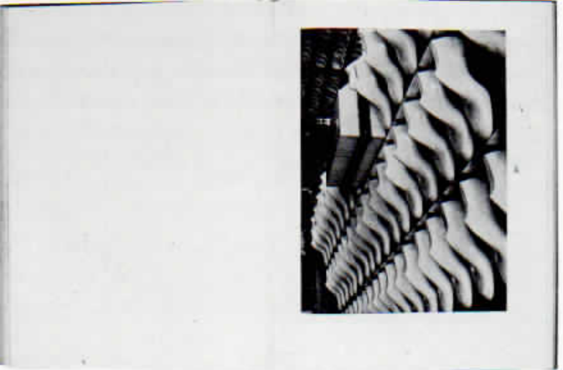
Dust is not elevated to the level of a commodity; it cannot aspire to exchange value or use value (unless it finds its way into an artwork, or is recycled) but through re-presentation it may become a catalyst of critical thought and a way of imagining a quality of duration quite at odds with the speed of modernity. Duchamp's *Large Glass*, Man Ray's photograph, Baudelaire's imagistic writing and Bataille's provocation all approach dust in this way.

Moreover this was the character of Duchamp's entire artistic project. One of the notes in his *Green Box* suggested a 'kind of subtitle' for the *Large Glass* could be 'Delay in Glass'.[95] Taking eight years to complete, it was assembled with numerous technical processes that simply could not be rushed, not least waiting for dust. Plus of course it took the delay of several decades before the network of Duchamp's arcane procedures could be unraveled and their full impact felt. For all his modern materials, for all his desire to move beyond the mark of the hand in an embrace of chance and the machinic, for all his reliance on the immediate impact of first impressions, his was a stubborn art of calibrated *slowness*.

Alfred Stieglitz, 'Statement' in Fred J. Ringel, ed., *America as Americans See It*, 1931



'Shoe forms', from Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Die Welt ist Schön* [*The World is Beautiful*], 1928



Traces of what?

It should be said that in general the camera's fascination with texture has tended toward the trite. Countless anthologies and annuals of modernist photography carried 'studies' of bits of machinery, shiny kitchen utensils or sweetened nature. Surface became the means to a spurious rapprochement between the natural and the man-made, the organic and the inorganic. It is there in Edward Weston's reduction of the world to an inventory of forms and surfaces (peppers, toilet bowls, shells, nude women, boat hulls, violins); and it is there in the social Darwinism lurking in so much of the European New Vision that sought to naturalise the industrial by allying its patterns and forms with organic structure.

But there was no reason why the recording of surface could not move beyond this. *Dust Breeding* was an early example but there were others. Issue 3–4 of *Minotaure* from 1933 reproduced a page of Brassaï's photographs of Parisian graffiti, or more exactly primordial scratches cut deep over decades into the stonework of the city. Brassaï's accompanying essay 'Du mur des cavernes au mur d'usine' ['From the Wall of the Cave to the Wall of the Factory'] alluded to many of Surrealism's interests: ethnographic artifacts, the ambiguous nature of all signs, the pitfalls of human communication, the primitive mark that hovers between form and formlessness, anticipating writing and promising a convulsive beauty.[115] For Brassaï graffiti was the 'bastard art of the streets of ill repute'. It was not about play but 'mastering the frenzy of the unconscious. These abbreviations are none other than the origins of writing.'

Brassaï was aware of the slippage we make when looking at photographed surfaces, presuming we are coming to know them directly. It is precisely because of their flat description that photographs have the potential to open up the distance necessary for the speculative contemplation of everyday surfaces. By the 1950s however, the urgent mark making that had interested Brassaï had entered the wider understanding of art through the mass media popularisation of abstract painting. When his graffiti photographs reappeared in *US Camera 1958* they played into an account of the untamed mark as heroic artistic gesture. Now it was *high art* that was being sought in the low mark.[116]

Also in 1958 *Architectural Forum* published 'Color Accidents', a portfolio of Walker Evans's compositions picked out with a camera from the surfaces of run-down walls on New York's East 85th Street.[117] Evans's captions echo Brassaï's: 'It will be the privilege of this cornerstone to stand in insulted majesty as long as possible. Rome was not built in a day. Here, wall writing is as it should be, illegible, its form in no way obscured by meaning.' Evans then draws a parallel between anonymous happenstance and the art of high modernist abstraction:

> The pocks and scrawls of abandoned walls recall the style of certain contemporary paintings,

> with, of course, the fathomless difference that the former are accidents untouched by the hand of consciousness [...] Paul Klee would have jumped out of his shoes had he come across the green door below; ...the subtle explosion [of this] photograph... might have been a conception of Jackson Pollock's.

Evans was not exactly making abstract art out of photography but using photography to point to abstraction as it occurs out in the world. Only reproduction on the common magazine page enables this. Had Evans made these images into prints for exhibition the lightness of the observation would have bloated into imitation or homage to abstract painting.

Indeed, the following year the American photographer Aaron Siskind published *Photographs*, a book of moody black and white images of close-ups of walls marked by anonymous daubs, rust and flaking paint.[118] In the book's introduction, Harold Rosenberg makes the obvious comparison with Abstract Expressionism but notes how Siskind's imagery reminds him much more of the look of abstract painting as it appears in reproduction:

> Instead of scenes that seem like paintings, Siskind's pictures ARE paintings as they appear on the printed page – which is where people today see most of the paintings they see. They are reproductions, though reproductions that have no originals [...] As pictures to be PERUSED, these photographs have the grand advantage over other book art that their qualities are all there, on the page. A reproduction of a painting is at best a substitute, and a poor one. It is art living under reduced circumstances; it cannot engage our interest without raising questions concerning the scale, color, texture, etc. of the original, which it cannot answer. In looking at an art reproduction the mind is divided between the present image and the one that is absent. In a Siskind photo we may forget its source.[119]

Ordinarily, photographs reproduced in books have little means of asserting their difference from 'original prints'. The reproduction is likely to be seen as the work itself, with a forgettable 'source', as Rosenberg puts it. To the public at large almost all photographs are images that exist wherever they are seen, while a reproduction of a painting is never mistaken for the painting itself. In this sense the photograph on the page is an image without objecthood, without intrinsic location, size or materiality.

Siskind's images certainly mimic the aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism yet in their adherence to clear description they are built on a certain truth to the medium of photography. Siskind has it both ways, pursuing photography as an 'independent art' while aligning it with the vanguard painting of his time.[120] But as Rosenberg noted, if Abstract Expressionism was by 1959 experienced widely, it was as reproduction where the 'mark of the hand' would be experienced not so much as a painterly mark as a *graphic* one, its tactility translated into sheer visibility. This is in part why the abstract painter who proved to be the most popular was the most graphic: Jackson Pollock.

DU MUR DES CAVERNES AU MUR D'USINE

Brassaï, 'Du mur des cavernes au mur d'usine', *Minotaure* no. 3–4, 1933

Spread from Walker Evans, 'Color Accidents', *Architectural Forum*, 1958

Abstraction, index, canned chance

With all this in mind let us return once again to Duchamp's dust. Although it had been settling across the whole surface of his glass, it was to be removed from all but a small area. These are Duchamp's fragmented remarks on the process, from the *Green Box*:

> To raise Dust on dust Glasses for 4 months, 6 months. which you close up afterwards hermetically = Transparency.
> –Differences. to be worked out
> For the sieves in the glass allow dust to fall on this part a dust of 3 or 4 months and wipe well round it in such a way that this dust will be a kind of color (transparent pastel) *Use of mica*
> Also try to find several layers of transparent colors (probably with varnish) one above the other. The whole glass.–
> To be mentioned the quality of the *other side of the dust* either as the name of the metal or otherwise [sic] [121]

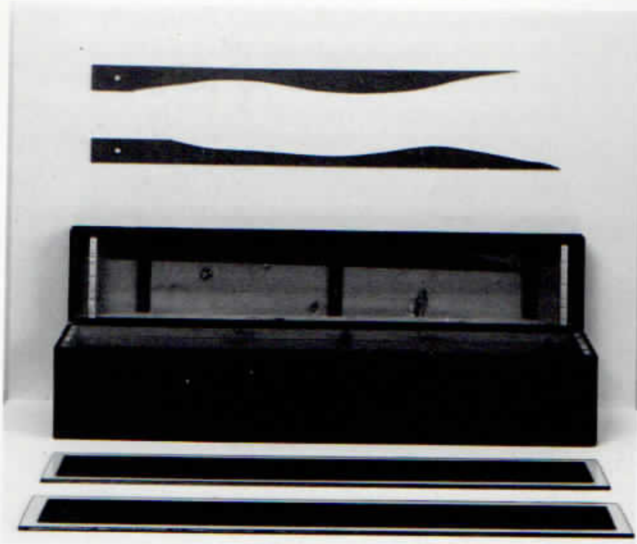
The 'hermetic closing' of the dust was achieved with a clear cement or varnish. Duchamp planned to secure several different thicknesses of dust that would produce different densities of translucent colour to embody different periods of time. In this way the fixing of the dust was akin to the fixing of a latent image on a photographic negative or print. Moreover, once upright the glass support would allow light through the fixed dust, like a slide in a slide projector. The critic Jean Clair even described the *Large Glass* as 'a giant photographic plate'.[122]

Duchamp called this kind of trapping 'canned chance', and it was one of his key artistic strategies. The proto-photographic *3 Standard Stoppages* 1913–14 is the earliest and clearest example. From a height of one metre, Duchamp dropped and fixed three one-metre lengths of thread onto strips of flat canvas. From these lines, wooden 'rulers' were made. These provided permanent irregular curves to be used as templates or 'standards' in his subsequent works, including *Tu m'* and the *Large Glass*. This too is comparable to the way a photographic negative of a unique occurrence (a man jumping over a puddle, or dust accumulating on glass) can be captured and used to generate unlimited standard copies of chance.

Dropping things onto surfaces may not in itself bypass the hand or intention, any more than photographing a chance event does. In fact the procedure can be profoundly bodily. We need only think of Jackson Pollock's painting or a snatched reportage photograph. But introducing a gap between the mark-making tools and the receptive surface does set up an interval of contingency that means that the surface becomes not just the receptor of traces or marks but the repository of only semi-predictable *events*.

While dripping might be the abject ruination of representational painting, for Pollock it was a harnessed technique. Gravity was no longer to

Cover and page from Aaron Siskind, *Photographs*, 1960



Marcel Duchamp, *3 stoppages étalon [3 Standard Stoppages]* 1913–14, replica 1964

Opening page of 'Dada's Daddy', *Life*, 1952. Portrait of Marcel Duchamp by Gjon Mili.

be depicted exerting itself upon objects, rather it would be an active element of painting as object, process and record. Thus there are deep affinities between the canned chance of *3 Standard Stoppages*, or *Dust Breeding* and the famous photographs of Pollock at work taken by Hans Namuth, Rudy Burckhardt and others. We look obliquely at horizontal surfaces at they receive traces, in images that function both as anecdotal documents and publicity. Such photographs emphasised performance as much as any final painting, establishing a vision of Pollock himself that was as striking as his canvases. Notoriously, a feature in *Life* magazine from 1949 asked: 'Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?' It reproduced three paintings in colour, one including the artist standing in his overalls, taken by Arnold Newman in Pollock's barn. With the background cut out, its space hovers between studio, gallery and page. Overleaf we find two photos of the artist at work. 'Pollock drools enamel paint on canvas', 'He applies sand to give enamel texture', the captions tell us.[123] Art and artist become one event.

Three years later Duchamp himself was in *Life*, descending a staircase in Gjon Mili's multiple exposure. It mimicked Duchamp's painting of 1913 and the high speed chronophotography of Étienne-Jules Marey that had inspired it.[124] Duchamp knew the value of the portrait of the artist in the age of mass media, but he had tended to subvert its banal publicity. This one was unusually slick but it did have the merit of incorporating the mix of chance and design that structured so much of his work.

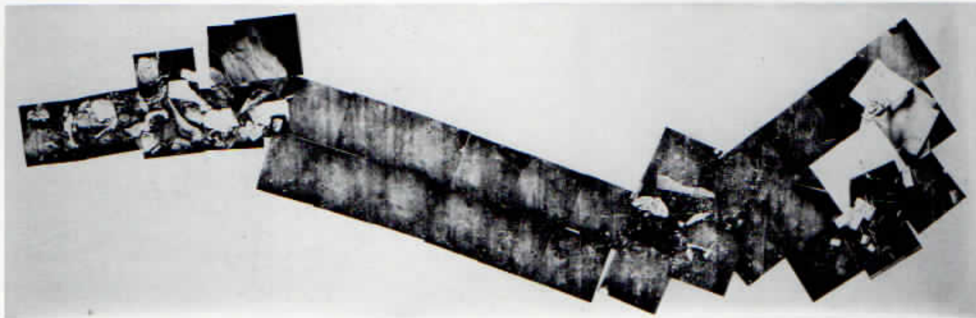
The Sound of Dust

In 1951 the American artist Robert Rauschenberg began his *White Paintings*, a suite of large monochromes made with common white house paint. Pollock's mix of design and chance was replaced by a glossy void. While far from the first monochromes in art, their plain whiteness did present a number of interpretive challenges. The critic Clement Greenberg remained quiet on the subject but accepted much later, in 1967,

DADA'S DADDY

A new tribute is paid to Duchamp, pioneer of nonsense and nihilism

ON NEXT FOUR PAGES, DUCHAMP'S ART



Bruce Nauman, *Composite Photo of Two Messes on the Studio Floor*, 1967

Victor Burgin, *Photopath*, 1967–69. Installation view, *When Attitudes Became Form*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1985

directly downwards to make a series of photographs of the floor of the gallery space. These were then printed actual size (1:1) and attached to the area of floor that had been photographed. In this way *Photopath* plays with ideas of touch and contiguity by actually putting the indexical image back into contact with its referent and at risk of being literally trodden underfoot, a fate suggested if not encouraged by its title. The photograph as point-blank copy is depersonalised even further by erasing any 'point of view'. We cannot tell from how far away the photos were taken. Photographs tend to acquire their meanings at a physical and temporal remove from the site of their taking. They also tend to be smaller than the things they depict. Neither miniaturised nor portable, *Photopath* literally occludes the gallery floor with its own image, a rare example of an entirely site-specific and uncommodifiable use of the medium.

Forensic Ritual

In the light of these kinds of practices, *Dust Breeding* can be seen as a *forensic* image. A surface bearing traces is photographed from eye level. The camera transforms incidental marks from an unspecified past into signs for interpretation. The lowered gaze emphasises the body of the photographer as present witness, at a threshold between the closure of an event and the opening of its investigation.

By the 1920s photography and the search for disturbed dust were already important elements of modern forensics, particularly the science of fingerprint detection, which was institutionalised around 1900. This is an aspect of forensics that can only be effective in a dust-free environment. As a modern science of the indexical sign, fingerprint detection was premised upon a world of industrially smooth surfaces, kept clean by 'maids with feather-dusters' as Georges Bataille mocked in 1929. Hygiene prepares surfaces to record the invisible traces of touch. And then, to make fingerprints visible, they first have to be dusted with a fine soot (a bred dust), using a

Photographer unknown.
Forensic police officer gathers fingerprints. c. 1952

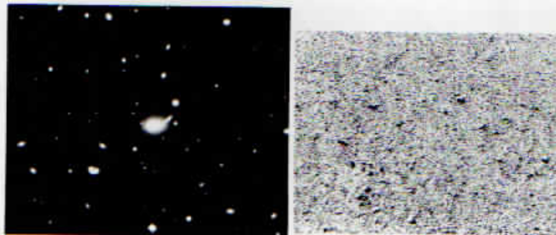
Page spread from Edward Ruscha (in collaboration with Mason Williams and Patrick Blackwell), *Royal Road Test*, self-published 1967

delicate brush. The soot adheres to the sweat of the invisible fingerprint and makes it visible.

It is remarkable how often the forensic image is invoked in the art of the late 1960s and 1970s. Its basic structure is so simple and artless it lends itself to a variety of practices roughly united by an exploration of trace and process. Edward Ruscha took crime scene documentation to ludic extremes with the book *Royal Road Test* 1967, hurling a typewriter from the window of a speeding car and then photographing the scattered 'incident'. The documents were then fleshed out with bureaucratic description, measurements and annotations, as if it were a crime scene investigation. John Divola's series *Vandalism* 1973–75 explores something similar. Breaking into disused houses, he turned arty vandal with an aerosol can, string and cardboard before photographing his interventions. Rich in narrative implication, Divola's images slip between forensics, performance, sculpture and art photography.[155] Lewis Baltz's topographic projects such as *Nevada* 1977 and *Park City* 1978–79 pored over of bulldozed terrains being transformed into suburbs. But these are merely the most literally forensic examples. Similar photography found its way into a far broader range of works including much of the documentation of Land Art, many of Gordon Matta-Clark's photographs of his architectural interventions, Gerhard Richter's *128 Details from a Picture* 1978, Ana Mendieta's series of her body traces *Silhueta* 1978, documents of the temporary sculptures of Richard Serra, Richard Long and Jan Dibbets; and Jeff Wall's first major work *The Destroyed Room* 1978. Although this is a period of art that is thought to have broken with any self-conscious idea of 'style', certain image forms and tropes recurred and the forensic was one of the most widespread.

If such works highlight their status as indexes or traces they are also to be understood as performed rituals. In 1990 Robert Pincus-Witten looked back at this turn: '[T]he virtual content of the art became that of the spectator's intellectual re-creation of the actions used by the artist to realise the work in the first place.'[156] The distinction was being erased between process as art and documentation as art. As a result, making sense of the work would itself become a form of ritual, like a police investigation.

By the latter part of the 1970s the whole idea of art as trace was so familiar in advanced circles that artists were beginning to parody its attitudes. Exemplary here is a photographic book titled simply *Evidence* 1977, published by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel. It consists of 59 photographs selected from around 1.5 million. The artists visited archives of dozens of American institutions (police and fire departments, manufacturers, parts testing companies, laboratories, medical and educational institutions). The photographs selected were then presented in a classic-looking photographic book, one image per spread with generous white borders and no captions at all. Presented this way the evidence offered by the images is at best elusive. Strip the most



John Divola, from the *Vandalism* series, 1974–75

Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Desert-Galaxy)*, 1974

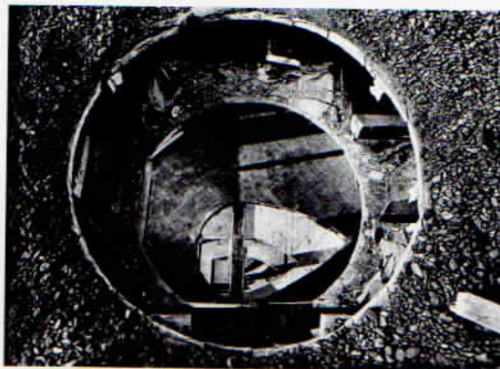
Lewis Baltz, *Fluorescent Tube*, from the series *Nevada*, 1977

Gordon Matta-Clark, Photograph of *Conical Intersect*, made for the Paris Biennale, 1975

functional photography to its bare essentials and you are left with enigmas, not facts. *Evidence* was issued at a time when it was common practice among curators and historians to lift photographs out of archives and present them in the museum as art. Topographic studies could become Landscape photographs. Auteurs could be discovered in newspaper image files. Amateur snap shooters could be seen as artistic visionaries. However, like *Dust Breeding* the photographs selected for *Evidence* were just too strange to make the transition. Tellingly the book opens with an image very similar to *Dust Breeding* – a glance down at a surface marked with irregular lines and covered in dried powder.

Also in 1977, the artist Robert Filliou had himself photographed cleaning (without permission) the dust from one hundred artworks in the Louvre and the Musée d'Art Moderne, including Cimabue's *La Vierge aux Anges* and Man Ray's *Porte-Manteau* (a 1921 photo of a nude woman fashioned into a hat stand). Filliou placed a quantity of the removed dust (a stain on a white cloth) in a small archival box along with a unique Polaroid of the artist at work. As a little provocation, Filliou suggested that the dust was the source of the aura of the now cleaned artwork, and that it could be readily transplanted to any other.[157]

While formless and object materials have become commonplace in contemporary art, the hygiene of the white cube must be maintained, in the last instance at least. Gallery spaces are vacuumed, removing the microscopic bits and pieces dropped by visitors. Skin and hair from bodies, fibres from clothes, mud from shoes. In 2000 the artist Vik Muniz collected the dust from art museum vacuum cleaners. He then used it to remake installation shots of art works by Richard Serra,



Untitled (photographer unknown), from Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, *Evidence*, 1977

Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978

Robert Filliou, from the series *Poussière de poussière*, 1977

Carl Andre and Barnett Newman, and even a floor piece by Barry Le Va that was itself made of dropped debris. Muniz then re-photographed his photorealist reliefs and exhibited them as prints, upholding museum hygiene while turning its repressed material into a new subject matter. It was a playful, mannerist gesture but it pointed to the unresolved tensions between art and waste that Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp hand opened up all those years ago.

An artwork, almost

In 1989 photography was celebrated internationally as a medium that had reached its 150th year. Although there was no precise 'beginning', no single moment of invention, several survey shows were staged to commemorate the versions of the technology announced in 1839 by William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre. In London, The Royal Academy of Arts exhibited photographs for the very first time with the ambitious survey show *The Art of Photography*, declaring with great publicity that the medium was a respectable and independent art.[158] *Dust Breeding* was included (one of the prints from 1964), displayed in a section titled 'The Modern Movement'.[159] Amid the bold photograms and typically graphic imagery of the New Vision, *Dust Breeding* looked unassuming and somewhat out of place. This is where I first saw it, as a student. In the catalogue for this show Robert Shapazian anticipated the confusion, pointing out that beyond whatever a raw encounter with *Dust Breeding* might offer, a richer appreciation would depend on the 'sort of accrued meaning' that comes with an understanding of Marcel Duchamp's complicated working methods and his use of photographs as both notes and works.