To be continued. Notes on Marc de Blieck's photography

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I.

Even though photography has become a ubiquitous custom, a form of modern life as much as a representational device, one is no longer tempted to look at pictures of places and objects as banal evidence of having been there, of having recorded that place or that object. This understanding of photography as the documentation of presence seems infantile in an age that has made images commonplaces, the "image-world", as TJ Clark would call it.[1] The photographic image as documentation has become obsolete. Modern man has gradually built up a world where life – human life, boring, predictable, calculable human life – has become a stream of images. Personal identity is no longer an interior space but an endless process of exteriorisation of images: *the I with ...* How to rethink personal identity in a world where the interior is no longer the privileged space for the self, when the self is a visual network of visual concatenations, temporary connections, likes and dislikes, comments and passages?

The camera is also no longer the privileged medium of reflection, of focus. The camera has become the acrobatic device of attention deficit disorder, of a globally accepted short attention spans, short memory terms optimally compensated by external prosthetics like hard drives, clouds, folders and hashtags. Vision is still embodied but it has also become an exceedingly externalised procedure. The camera does not just abbreviate seeing. It seems to distract it, to employ it in order to dismember the old, outdated relationship between seeing, the body and memory. A sceptic would even be tempted to judge that the camera wants to transform seeing – its retentions and protentions, memory and *Abschattungen,* as phenomenologists would say – into an anonymous network of images, of imagery without imagination, a network of punctuated presences that we will most likely never see again, never reflect on again, never return to as we used to return to a painting or to a tomb.

Ninety years ago, Walter Benjamin quoted Paul Valéry who wrote that "modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated." Ninety years later, it seems that recent man only works

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[1]   T.J. Clark, *The End of the Image-World,* in *Those Passions. On Art and Politics,* London, Thames & Hudson, 2025, pp. 260-277.

at what makes him redundant. Seeing is part of this operation that turns photography into an endless chain of points in space and time without a strongly embodied relationship to a viewer with a focus, a limited memory, a library and selected interests. The interest of the recent man is to disappears in a sea of recorded and instantly shared instants and thus to make himself (as a self, as an interior) redundant, to dissipate the self and leave behind an immense but indifferent cloud of pictures.

II.

In this image-world, the materiality of photographic paper, the chemical processes involved, the cropping and framing of images has become the specialist gremium of artists. The kind of paper used has been a sort of 'repressed aura' of photography whose technical reproducibility has undeniably placed the medium at the core of late modernity. How one treats photographic paper becomes an indexical sign to relate the photographic work to the living body. Folding fabrics were an important technical aspect in Renaissance painting. It also signals care, attention, order and elegance.

Titian's *Pilgrims at Emmaus* (c. 1533) – and the *Supper at Emmaus* held in Liverpool - is a composition carefully crafted around a clean tablecloth, its regularly dispersed folds concentrating the figures. Similar linen tablecloths, the crispness of their folds clearly visible appear in many Venetian painters, from Jacopo Bassano to Veronese. The linen cloth recaptures the lines from Luke 24 – right before the episode on the road to Emmaus - where it is written that Peter ran to the tomb and "saw the strips of linen lying by themselves". Cloe Nisse is right to emphasize the naturalism of these folds, their delicate shades revealing a clear patter entices the viewer to attentively peruse the painting and to strengthen the surprise of the divine revelation, Cleopas and his mysterious suddenly recognising the resurrected Jesus.[2]

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[2]   Cleo Nisse, *Venetian Canvas And The Transformation of Painting,* New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2026, p. 219-220.

Fig. 1. Titian, *Pilgrims at Emmaus* (c. 1533), oil on panel, 169 x 244, Louvre.

Fig. 2. Titian, *Supper at Emmaus* (c. 1531), oil on panel, 169 x 211 cm, National Museums Liverpool.

III.

Folds are indexes of presence and in photography – other than in painting where they are represented – they can be 'sculpted' on the photographic paper itself, thus emphasizing the materiality of the medium itself. In Marc de Blieck's photographic works, the traceable fold

modifies the image object itself. These folds are the opposite of the baroque infinite process of folding in and out that Gilles Deleuze exhaustively described in his *Le Pli* (1988). These folds and their balanced shades invite the viewer to look closer. Instead of the baroque *distant view,* the view from afar that tries to grasp a deep space, these folds mediate what Aloïs Riegl called a *Nahsicht,* a close view.[3] The viewer detects them from a few steps; they act like a grid on the image object, but they also make the viewer aware of the sculptural materiality of the photographic work. Marc de Blieck's photography modifies the viewer's position in a thoroughly phenomenological sense. In phenomenology – from Husserl to Sartre – one distinguishes between material of an image (canvass, paper) and the purely visual appearance as such, the image-object. The image-subject, on the other hand, is the referent of the image, the depicted correlate or place. Photography has for long carefully camouflaged the relation between material surface and the visual appearance of its referent. As if magically, the photographic images emphasised its *Bildmässigkeit* (to speak with Robert Vischer), its purely visual appearance, its imagery.[4]

And Sartre would much later explain that the object of an image is the consciousness one has of an already known object that is 'quasi-observed' and which teaches us nothing new. The image I have of an object, a person or a place is a form of consciousness that allows me to relate to that object, person or place. But there is a distinction between a perceived and an imagined piece of paper: the two might be related by an identity of essence (*identité d'essence*) but not by an existential identity (*identité d'existence*) since in the imagining consciousness the paper does not exist in the flesh but only 'as image' (*en image*).[5] For Sartre, this possibility of consciousness to distance itself from the real has a broader scope in his philosophy of imagination. After all, the underlying thesis of *L'imaginaire* concerns the intimate and reciprocal relation of imagination and consciousness: imagination as the ability to conceive something *as* absent is nothing else but consciousness that is aware of its freedom. The imaginary affects any concrete situation of consciousness in the world as long as it can transcend that which is merely given. Through imagination consciousness can always bring

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[3]   Aloïs Riegl, *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungar,* Wien, Druck und Verlag der Kaiserlich-Königlichen Hof-und Staatsdruckerei, 1901, p. 20

[4]   Robert Vischer, *Drei Schriften Zum Ästhetischen Formproblem*, Halle, Saale: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927, 53. See also, Edmund Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung (1898-1925)*, Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1980, section 9.

[5]   Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imagination.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969, *L'Imaginaire. Psychologie Phénoménologique de l'imagination.* Paris: Gallimard, 1940.

something unreal in order to act in the world thus proving our transcendental freedom as subjects. But here and now, in the presence of a photo, paper matters, folds matter, the density of images matter. The folds push consciousness back towards the existence of a living and moving body, to a situation, to the core of an intrigue, to a relationship towards a specific place. The folding gesture resists the conception of a photography as a mere visual appearance or as a sudden apparition.

IV.

In contemporary photography, an active dialectic is required between the image as an apparition and the material paper. This dialectic when brought to the level of sculpting with the photographic paper, alters the perception of the photographic work and it changes the aesthetic experience. Marc de Blieck's photographic work engages the viewer in such a dialectic modulation of vision, the dynamic shift of the gaze between the material fold and the visual appearance of the image and back. This modulation of vision, when performed slowly and consistently, facilitates a certain freedom from the conception of photography as the illusion of mere appearances, as the seductive apparition of objects in lush colours and sparkling light effects.

Marc de Blieck's folds transfigure the power of photography to register a specific moment and a place. They suggest that the photographic work renders the density of space, the duration of a moment: the vases, the trees, the waterfalls are more than mere moments – they were correlates that have encouraged a specific perception of the world, along the gestures of a moving body, a hesitating eye that was interested in something more than the certainty of a photographic fact, an eye that finds rest when the photographed object is also sculpted, folded and unfolded, like a linen cloth, like a canvas.

After all, we are told that Marc de Blieck started as a painter. No wonder that he treats the photographic paper with the painterly interest that Titian showed in his *Supper at Emmaus.* This means that both the photographer and the viewer are invited to find a path towards the photographed image that resists the contemporary indifference towards image making, the automatic rendering of presence, of sharing the feeling that one has been here, that one is here. His visual subconscious is interested in a complexification of the image object that the banal photography in the age of the "image-world" represses.

V.

Finally, the image subject: what do we see? Apparently, the camera cannot read. The camera is illiterate; it captures its object like an eating whale, opening its mouth in front on a shoal of fish. It all depends on its position towards an object. This metaphorical image might explain the association between Marc de Blieck's photographic work and Ferdnand Deligny's notion of *point de voir*. Other than the intentionality of a *point de vue* that determines the adumbrations and the temporal constitution of an object, the *point de voir* is an autistic modulation of vision, a simultaneous perception without a centre or a direction, "unmediated and unfiltered".[6] The autist child – the subject of the documentary *Moindre Geste* (1971), realised by Ferdnand Deligny, Josée Manenti and Jean-Pierre Daniel – has no structural perspective on the world where he dwells. The *point de voir* designates his experience of being seized by the surrounding world, without any organising principle.

It's time to hesitate. This discombobulating *point de voir* can become an artistic program, no doubt, but the camera itself, the lens and the mirror and especially the grip, this haptic component that links the eye to the hand and to the ego, the apparatus itself, the situation it engenders resists any complete "deterritorialization". The infinitive of the *point de voir* is never pure and the series entitled *B-sites* (2000) shows how the camera itself - this monumental apparatus of modernity that was meant to testify to the real, without doubt – pushes the eye into one or another perspective. The viewer must read Wim Cuyvers to contextualise these pictures. That is true. But the viewer of a photograph, the viewer that stands in front of a printed image, is also a different *observer* than the photographer or the writer. The observer follows the short frame and his/ her experience is different than the embodied, lived experience of such places that Wim Cuyvers discovered. Standing a few steps behind the lines of a parking place next to a gas station yields another sense of anonymity that their photographic framing using a tripod. The photo documents a moment when the writer was trying to find a name for a place that yielded a difficult encounter.

It's difficult to find a good name for these places: the temptation of calling them 'non-places' is wrong. They are places where a strong sense of indeterminacy and possibility is felt. They

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6   Thibault Desmet, *Marc de Blieck. Point de voir,* in *De Witte Raaf,* no. 239, januari – februari 2026, p. 31.

are at the edge of a function (parking, tanking, etc.) and facilitate all kinds of questionable behaviours (from sex to urinating "in public"). Let's call them *pagan places* in the sense that one can behave there in a way that shows a temporary and spatial indifference to a shared law. Pagan places are intervals between spaces where laws implement symbolic orders. And still, Marc de Blieck's camera work does something to these pagan places: they become correlates to an observer that fixates them *visually* while bracketing the hesitant movements of the body on those spots. That is the hesitation that the camera inevitably inserts in a lived situation. His photographs frame for us a certain position that the observer could take in such a situation, a certain orientation that is not yet based on a set of rules. The camera points towards a direction – the imagination of the viewer conceives of situations that are possible once a border has been crossed. This is a border that is to be discussed, to be continued …

Can a camera turn an indifferent spatial extension – a field behind a parking line – into the memory of an unexpected event, a moment that deserved to be recorded, to be viewed, memorized and pondered upon, a place that deserves attention? Is this recording itself not the ambition of every photographic shot? Obviously, the bulk of the photos we take carry no ambition and attention is not involved in the gesture that preceded them. They are just documents of an "image-world", an indifferent process of representing identity through the automatism of photographing and sharing moments. But what we see in Marc de Blieck's *Point de voir #8* or *Affirmation #32* is this 'virtue' of the photographic camera to obsessively and affirmatively frame a situation or an object. One is even tempted to evoke the Heideggerian jargon and interpret the shutter as a *clearing* (*Lichtung*) that suddenly allows for an object to emerge.

VI.

The camera becomes thus consciousness at work and consciousness has a relational and operative openness. The camera initiates an interaction with and a reflection about a correlate that it promises as worthy of attention. The camera insists also on the perspective from which its correlate should be observed and which correlate is worthy of observation. Marc de Blieck's *Save as Image* (2007-2018) reflects on these programmatic aspects of the camera as a representational device. The historical value of the depicted artefacts is accepted as a shared value. After all, the series depicts artefacts from UNESCO Heritage Sites and international museums. However, *Save as Image* also addresses the act of 'saving' the artefact *as* an image, the act of memorizing it *while* the camera frames it. The emphasis should here fall on the adverb

'as' and not just on the act of saving or on the object that is saved. After all, 'who' or 'what' is speaking in these photographs speaks the language of a photographic act that relates to artworks, artefact, museal fragments in the process of becoming images. This process of translation, transference and reception of existing artefacts *as* images has its own history. In this sense, *Save as Image* relates to an entire critical tradition on photographing artworks that begins with Heinrich Wölfflin's three short essays on the topic.[7]

At the end of the 19th – beginning of the 20sth century, Wölfflin criticised photographers of sculptures who followed their "artistic disposition" (*künstlerisches Naturell*) and highlighted in their photographs the painterly "sideview" (*Seitenansicht*) whereas traditional sculptures should be shot from a "frontal point" (*Hauptansicht*), thus aiming at "coherence and harmony" (*Zusammenhang und Harmonie*). Writing at a time when photography started to circulate globally and thus to shape the view of art, he lamented the "untamed eye of the people" (*das verwilderte Auge der Menschen*) and the "criminal carelessness" (*sträfliche Sorglosigkeit*) of a photography that would deform sculpture. Wölfflin's aesthetic classicism - fed on Goethe and Renaissance art - emphasized clarity and the proper use of light in museums. The impetus of his theory is traceable even in the 1940's, like in Josef Sudek's photographic documentation of artworks. He searched for an ideal position towards the sculpture that is shot on a neutral background.

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[7] See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Wie man Skulpturen aufnehmen soll,* in *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst.* Neue Folge 7 (1896)*,* pp. 224-228, 8 (1897), pp. 294-297, 26 (1915), pp. 237-244. The bibliography is large but see also Geraldine A. Johnson, "'The Life of Objects': Sculpture as Subject and Object of the Camera's Lens," in *Instant Presence: Representing Art in Photography*, ed. H. Buddeus, K. Masterova and V. Lahoda (Artefactum, 2017), pp. 17-57 and Marjan Sterckx, Leen Engelen, *Between Studio and Snapshot: Belle Époque Picture Postcards of Urban Statues*, in *History of Photography*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2013, pp. 445-458.

Fig. 3. Josef Sudek, *Untitled* (1947), 22.9 x 14.7 cm, private collection.

Saved as Image both emulates and question the documentary vocation of photography. The series contains a certain documentary aspect. After all, it does refer to preserved artefacts in their museal decorum. However, the historical connotation that this documentary aspect evokes is fundamentally transformed. The adverbial "as" denotes a specific kind of photographic relation between image and object. Other than in the documentary, objectifying, classicist spirit of the Neue Sachlichkeit (where the spotlight falls on the harmonies rendering of the object), these pictures relate the photographed artefact to interior where they belong. These photos depict artefacts extending in the frames, in the spaces and glass cages that contain them. When "saved as images", museal memory turns historical artefacts in framed, mounted objects. They are completely visible, photographable but also protected, mounted on walls and caged.

This relational aspect of the photographs from the *Saved as Image* series cannot be underestimated: the objects of these images are not just a piece of a porcelain collection from Dresden, some technical devices from Kassel or the famous Nefertiti statue from the Neues Museum. It's the spatial environment that defines these objects and their historical value. A sculpture in a public space defines both the historical figure and the square where it is placed. The figure of Nefertiti relates to the Neues Museum as a goddess that defines a type of seeing and remembering. Her framed and caged display is essential for the way in which religion

becomes art, for the way types of spaces, types of seeing and memorizing change throughout history. Saving the goddess as an image is essential for her transformation from religion to into art, but also for her framing as archeological document, artistic representation, object of aesthetic judgment, all inventions of these spatial turns that the museum has invented.

Marc de Blieck's camera captures the "Heimat" of museal memory: the glass displays are as important as the objects they present; photographic glare is both inevitable and evocative of their materiality, their extension in the space of the gallery, this museal memory that photography can only render fragmentarily, sequentially, from different perspectives. *Save as Image* designate this layered extension of museal memory, its spatial density and that specific moment when the onlooker becomes an observer, when she chooses a perspective, lets objects speak to her and turns some of them into images. The series does not show the artefacts as much as the specific instances when the perception of an artefact becomes an image. Whether the image - in the "image-world" that we inhabit – has a particular relationship with memory, whether seeing today is still related to remembering, all these questions are topics left untouched. When photography has become a ubiquitous custom, a form of modern life as much as a representational device, maybe one should take up painting again in order to find a connivance between images and memory. It's all to be continued …