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Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection

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Absence in Mapplethorpe's Wake

The photographer's look is looking in a pure state, in looking at me, it desires what I am not—my image. (Susan Sontag)

Seeing death in blackface requires an impossible identification—seeing black *is* being black when black bodies perform in the space of death. (Sharon Patricia Holland)

It is not about what the subject is, but about how the subject is seen. (Robert Mapplethorpe)

The auditorium is illuminated but the stage is blacked out, and the murmurs, laughter, and whispers of the incoming audience are harshly disrupted by a slightly metallic-sounding “click–click–click.” The imitated sound of a camera shutter, irregularly repeated, amplified by the theatre's loudspeakers, and spreading as if it were coming from above and from behind the audience's back, serves as the opening of a tribute to Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) by the contemporary African-Brazilian dancer Ismael Ivo. When the audience of Ivo's *Mapplethorpe* (2002) file into the auditorium, they are surrounded by this sound, which makes them want to turn around and discover who is watching and taking pictures. The repeated clicking momentarily exposes the power that is inherent in photography's sound. It discloses the theatre spectator's visibility and vulnerability vis-à-vis an outside viewer—someone behind a camera, unseen. Simultaneously spectator and spectacle, the audience of *Mapplethorpe* is confronted with the reciprocal mechanisms of visibility.⁷⁷

This scene takes place before the dance performance starts. This is significant because it catches the spectator unaware of her or his exposure to being watched. The soundscape of the camera shutter creates a double state of spectatorship. It makes the audience aware of their own noise, the sounds they make while talking to friends or coughing or scraping the floor; it is as if the unexpected clicking creates an auditory screen against which other, unconscious sounds can be perceived. The perception of one's stirring, and consequently of one's physical presence in space, creates a new awareness of the space from which one looks at the stage. The auditorium now becomes an area that, for the duration of the show, will be dark and invisible, but that

⁷⁷ *Mapplethorpe* had its premiere at the Biennale di Venezia in 2002. Choreography and dance: Ismael Ivo; light design and sound: Heinze Baumann; set design and costumes: Marcel Kaskeline; music: Steve Reich, Giacomo Puccini. The dance performance was created for the opening of the dance biennale “SoloMen” in Venice, 2002 (director: Carolyn Carlson).

at first contains an unrepresented yet significant presence: the seeming absence of the spectators.

In addition, the artificial sound of the camera shutter also establishes a connection to the visual sense. It represents one of the most revolutionary techniques of viewing the world. The photographic practice of observing and capturing the world from behind a technical device, in early photography from behind a black veil, is abstracted here in a click, which evokes for the audience the confusion between the presence of the other as photographer and their own viewing position. The exterior and interior spaces of the theatre hall overlap, and the viewer finds himself or herself watched and possibly photographed.

In her analysis of the significance of sound and voice in cinema (*The Acoustic Mirror*, 1988), Kaja Silverman describes the *photo session* as symbolically fulfilling the function of constituting subjectivity and manifesting the look of the other through a “click.” By discussing Luce Irigaray’s concept of desire and Jacques Lacan’s definition of the gaze, Silverman identifies “two crucial ways of understanding the subject’s relation to visual representation, both of which stress his or her captation—the mirror stage and the ‘photo-session’”. In the former, he or she incorporates an image, and in the latter, he or she is appropriated as image” (Silverman, 1988a: 161). Lacan theorizes the order of the “imaginary” as a state in every subject’s life that functions as an internalized image of the subject’s ideal and coherent self, which is not yet alienated from itself. The mirror stage thus concerns the imaginary; the photo session, in contrast, relates to the symbolic, through which the subject starts to relate to others.⁷⁸

Silverman writes:

The pictorial metaphor through which [the] heightened sense of self is communicated to us is startlingly close to the image through which Jacques Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* “visualizes” subjectivity, adding as it does the notion of what I have ... called “the photo session” to that of the mirror stage as “formative of the I”. Significantly, this exaggerated self-awareness coincides with the primal scene. ... Subjectivity is thus put in place ... through the pictorial (or as Lacan would have it, the photographic) surface, rather than through the projection of psychological depth. It is the consequence of a *mise-en-scène*—of the deployment of bodies within a

⁷⁸ See more on Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage in J. Lacan, 2006. See more on the concept of the photo session in Silverman, 1988a: 161-62.

spatial logic—and of the play of the gaze across that *mise-en-scène*.
(Silverman 1988b: 155-56)

Photography exaggerates one's self-awareness, as it marks being seen by an other. The camera, Silverman contends, is a signifier for the gaze that is outside. And according to Jacques Lacan, this gaze determines a subject at the most profound level in the field of vision.⁷⁹

Ivo's performance illustrates Silverman's ideas and moves beyond them by transforming the seemingly safe and anonymous space of the auditorium into a vulnerable site, laying bare every spectator's participation in the spectacle they are about to consume. The conventions of and the boundaries within the theatre space are shattered by a click. Ivo's audience experiences the potential loss as well as affirmation of their identity as spectators when they are confronted with the click before they actually see anything on stage. The sound discloses the presence of another spectator, gazing at the viewers in the dark and hailing them into a situation of seeing and being seen.

In one of *Mapplethorpe's* scenes, Ivo positions himself, naked, on a metal ramp that recalls a fashion-show catwalk as well as a bench for slaughter. Again we hear the insistent and irritating sound of a camera shutter, accompanied by the almost painfully attenuated mechanical reverberation of the camera's winder. The scene's lighting illuminates only Ivo's legs and lower torso; everything else remains in the dark. With every click of the imaginary camera, the light cuts his body into distinct white squares that seem to dissect him into singular, detached limbs. The dark skin radiates the projected light and takes on an amorphous color, shining, nearly lifeless. Exposed to what appears to be the humiliating gaze of the camera, Ivo's movements to the accompanying sound are timid and resistant. His face is invisible, and thus his seeming distress can only be gleaned from his inhibited motion. But, occasionally, merely for seconds, this photo session's subject, offering his widely spread legs, seems to respond, actively or passively, to an erotic tension created by the simultaneous anonymity and intimacy of the scene.

⁷⁹ Shannon Winnubst offers a critical and race-sensitive reading of Lacan's theory of subject formation in the mirror stage, in which she contends that Lacan's thesis is necessarily based on ocularcentric sensibilities that dominate our contemporary culture. The reliance on sight, images, and visual reflections, as Winnubst argues, is connected to a disavowal of race and racism. Winnubst argues that Lacan's discourse implies a universal structure, which, although not entirely ahistorical, draws on ideological sources that enact a racism, which is endemic to our cultural landscape. (29)

At these instances, the audience's position becomes problematic in their complicit desire for the beautiful, and racialized, body. Now it seems as though the spectators are on the side of those who look through the camera's lens: they appear to be pressing the button, arranging the light, determining the set-up, situating themselves outside of the image they see. The audience's role shifts from passive observers to involvement in such a way that they seem to release the shutter and determine which part of Ivo's body is seen. They seem, in short, to choreograph the scene. By visually fragmenting Ivo's body, eventually they desire what Ivo is not—his image, split and distorted by a collective look.

Linking the spectator's desire for the image to the practice of photography, Geoffrey Batchen, in *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography* (1999), writes that "photographs are always catalysts for, and foci of, that desire invested in looking" (10-11). Following Batchen, I want to suggest that the object of this desire is only a trace, a transient shadow of light in one's inner eye. The real object on stage, Ivo's body, is irretrievably absent. In *Mapplethorpe*, Ivo thematizes the problematic of those bodies that have been underrepresented yet at the same time visually exploited (e.g., in colonial and ethnographic studies of racially othered persons), bodies that have been *overlooked*.

In *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder observes that absence is linked to being:

The word absence comes from the Latin *esse*, or "being", and *ab*, meaning "away". An absence is the being-away of something. The lived body, as ecstatic in nature, is that which is away from itself. Yet this absence is not equivalent to a simple void, a mere lack of being. The notion of being is after all present in the very word absence. The body could not be away, stand outside, unless it had a being and a stance to being with. (22)

Through its relation to being, absence is linked to the living body on the one hand. On the other, absence relates to a structural negativity. *Ab-esse* is being away, not being here, being dead—or, within a photograph, a having-been-there, as Roland Barthes affirmed. (1977: 4) Absence is where the living body and its potential negativity meet.

In this chapter, I want to analyze the potential of absence for the representation of bodies that have not been overlooked but have rather been "looked over" within the realm of a particular, discriminating, and/or neglectful visual practice; a practice that has been formed by an economy of visibility, an aesthetic economy with political

consequences for the construction of the image of the other. The other is fixed in and through the image of a cultural fantasy that is often racist and sexist. I make use of the concept of absence as a tool to analyze the link between bodies and their absences, that is to say their images. If viewers are confronted with the negative aspect of visual presence in art, they become aware of the constructed relation between living bodies and their representations. In my view, the idea of absence disrupts the seeming coherence of this relation, and helps in developing alternative ways of imaging or imagining those bodies that have been subjected to representational stereotyping and pictorial neglect.

In particular, I am interested in the productive quality of absence in photography and (dance) performance. My objects of analysis in the present chapter engage with the art of Robert Mapplethorpe. In his work, we see how the notion of absence is inherent to both photography and performance. At this point, I would like to make a distinction between notions of absence as having-been-there—which is, following Barthes, crucial to photography—and as disappearance (or what I would like to call presence-as-absence), which is, I claim, essential to performance art when it is defined as representation without reproduction.

My argument follows three lines of thought. First, I explore photography's historical relation to the concept of death. From its very beginnings photography has been occupied with arresting moments in the lives of human beings so as to conserve them for future generations. The bond between photography and death has thus been strongly linked to the experience of absence and loss. Second, I address the idea of excess in representation. If something is absent from an image it is either invisible or it is unrepresentable. Both instances motivate us to think about the place of this pictorial absence: Is it in our perception or in the image? In my exploration of this place, the notion of excess offers the possibility to look beyond, behind, and beneath the layers of the image. There is always more to representation than we can see. My third line of thought deals with the process of becoming-image. I argue that bodies can only be pictured by being exposed to the risk of partly losing their subjectivity. Becoming an image, then, means disappearing from oneself in the realm of representation. Throughout my analysis, stereotyped, neglected, overrepresented, unmarked, racialized, and sexualized bodies play a prominent role.

Photography in the Face of Death

Photography's relation to death is documented as early as 1840. In Hippolyte Bayard's works, which are among the first photographs, we find three variations of the photographer depicted as a dead man in *Le Noyé—Self-portrait as a drowned man*.⁸⁰ As Geoffrey Batchen explains, this picture refers to other images by the same photographer, in which he presents himself, like the vases, straw hats, and porcelain figurines that surround him, as an object among the world of things. Bayard stages his suicide as if to speak from beyond the grave to those who will behold the image in the future. On the backside of one of the three prints of *Le Noyé*, he explains that he killed himself out of despair for not being recognized as a worthy contributor to the development of photography (167-171).

In his note, Bayard also makes the beholder believe that the discolored, darkened patches of skin in the image have resulted from the advanced decomposition of his corpse: "Ladies and Gentlemen, you'd better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay" (171). Stressing not only the visual but also the odorous dimension of the encounter with his corpse's image, Bayard animates the photograph from within the image. In other words, Bayard's image becomes alive by how his dead body has been staged as particularly uncanny. The photograph is given vivacity as it is performed through the representation of death.

Here, the event of death is linked to the process of photography. As the print of the photograph passes through time, being handled years after its creation, the corpse in the image seems to decompose further and eventually dissolve the representation of the body. The photograph then becomes an allegory for what Belting, in "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology" (2005), describes as the absence of the body in the image. In his theory of embodied iconology, Belting links the remembrance of the dead to the medium of the image, which, by picturing the missing (now dead) body, allows for a "'symbolic exchange' between a dead body and a live image" (307). Belting states: "The image of the dead, in the place of the missing body, the artificial body of the image (the medium), and the looking body of the living [interact] in creating iconic presence as against bodily presence" (307). The iconic presence of the dead thus replaces bodily presence and renders the body absent

⁸⁰ The three images are printed and extensively analyzed in G. Batchen. They are dated 18 October, 1840 (Direct positive print; Société Française de Photographie, Paris).

in the image. Is this absence of physical presence in the image particular to images of the dead? Or, thinking with Barthes, is it not the case that (photographic) images are produced through and beyond the lethal effect of taking a picture, by refuting the aliveness of the imaged subject in the moment of the click?

As Belting shows in another article (2000), the absence of the human body in the image is a historical consequence of our culture's creation of the *Bildkörper*, the body of/in the image. The *Bildkörper* is a constructed representation of the mortal body, which cannot survive its iconicity. The human body is transformed, grows older, falls pregnant, and dies; yet, it becomes another body in the image, the *Bildkörper*. Belting partly ascribes this effect to the idealization of the human body, which, in its model form, no longer belongs to a human being, shedding its capacity to stay alive in its iconic representation. Losing the body to the image is heightened through the technology of photography, in which the sitter's pose, as Barthes observes, becomes an image of its own even before the photograph itself materializes in the development process. The medium, which allows infinite copies to be made from a single negative or a single pose, also makes it possible to produce several different images of the same person without, however, coming closer to this person's actual look.⁸¹ Again, the body's image, in a multiplied form, replaces the body's realness. Whose body do we see in an image of a body? And: who is the creator of this body-image, if not the body itself?

The issue of the referential body's relation to its authorial power similarly surfaces in Bayard's image. The authorial power, which is commonly attributed to the photographer behind the camera, is doubted and ultimately negated. On the one hand, the calculated confusion about when and by whom the photograph has been made leads to uncertainty about the position or intention of the person behind the camera. How can a dead subject have pictured himself in a photograph? How, if the depicted dead body is the author's, can he have written the accompanying lines after the picture was developed? Consequently, the obscured means of the image's production may suggest the death of the photographer as author. The image's object (a dead body) turns into the image's condition of creation (a dead author).

Taking my analysis further, I want to follow two threads that emerge from Bayard's *Le Noyé*. The first is the link between the image, what can be seen in the

⁸¹ Below I discuss the still image's relation to motion. The "real" person I refer to here is the person, or body, in motion.

photograph, and what lies beyond its frame. I am interested in the absent but embodied presence in an image. This can either be the diseased authorial figure of the image or the viewer's gaze, which embodies an unseen presence in the texture of the photograph. Photography's quality may expose what Laura E. Tanner calls "the ever-present gap between the living-moving body and the body as image" (14). Secondly, I will look at the asynchronism in the emergence of the image, which is perceived as a form of absence.

During the viewer's experience of Ivo's danced *Mapplethorpe*, the split between image and body becomes tangible. Ivo's second act performs a mirror scene. At the back of the theatre space, a set of two-meter-high mirror panes runs across the starkly illuminated stage. The white floor in front of the mirror wall is reflected in the blinding glass. Naked, Ivo lies facing the mirror and slowly rolls his body into the white light. His dark skin stands in stark contrast to the whiteness of the scene. Accompanied by loud percussion sounds, his motions are interspersed with faraway human shouts and calls. Exposed to the light, Ivo seems agonized by what he glimpses from his mirror image at the moments he faces it. When the dark body progresses from one side of the floor to the other, the audience gets to see a fractured mirror image of it. What had appeared to be a seamless mirror turns out to contain cracks and splits where different panes meet.

Ivo's mirror image brings these irregularities to the fore. Consequently, the dancer's body looks fragmented, not so much by the cracks in the mirror but by the mirror itself. In other words, while the mirror itself looks continuous and whole, the image it produces of Ivo's body is jagged and slightly contorted. The smooth (white) mirror seems to generate an uneven image of the dancer's (dark) body. After a short blackout, during which the music continues and gets louder, Ivo is again exposed to the same hard light, but now wearing a long-sleeved white shirt. The scene repeats itself until, after another short blackout, the dancer appears wearing long white pants to complement the shirt. By now, Ivo's black skin is nearly completely hidden; the viewer can barely see a body at all and is confronted with a blank space on stage, in which Ivo's body is represented merely by a face, hands, and feet.

When the music abruptly stops toward the end of the scene, the moving body slows down. Ivo carefully examines himself in the mirror. The mirror scene's conclusion suggests a certain curiosity toward the white image of the black body. But the scene as a whole communicates the blankness and bleakness conveyed by the

white light, which over-visualizes the black body, filling the space's void for its audience while simultaneously fragmenting it for the mirrored black subject.⁸² What becomes visible is the gap between the body and its image. Ivo shows that the image depends on the body that is imaged as well as the light in which it is represented. In exposing the split between his mirror image (self-image) and the spectator's view of his body, Ivo reflects on a representational loss of substance, or an absence of particularly gendered, racial, and cultural bodies in the viewer's construction of images.

Another kind of absence that is related to *Mapplethorpe's* enactment of the gap is also reflected in Bayard's *Le Noyé*: the lack of concurrence in time. The viewer of the image is confronted, at any point in time, with the asynchrony of events that led to the production of the image. Bayard's supposed death must have occurred before the shot was taken, or else he could not have been photographed as a dead man. At the same time, Bayard must have been alive to make the picture of himself; *Le Noyé* is a self-portrait. During the irreproducible leap in time between the making and the viewing of the image, Bayard's skin appears to have decayed and to have left a stain in the beholder's imagination of the depicted body.

In similar ways, Barthes, in *Image, Music, Text* (1977), explains the particular relation of the photograph to the passing of time when he writes that the spirit of the photograph lies in its showing of what has been there, or what is not there anymore:

The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing ... but an awareness of its having-been-there. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then. (44)

This relationship between the aliveness of a photograph and the enactment of death, as well as the representation of absence in the photographic image of a body, bears on

⁸² In *Polaroids: Mapplethorpe* (2007), Sylvia Wolf observes Mapplethorpe's tendency to explore the self in his photographs, often with the help of mirrors or windows, as fragmented and multiple. Ivo's mirror scene speaks to this feature of Mapplethorpe's art and responds to a tradition among African American artists (Richard Bruce Nugent and Richmond Barthé) of mediating a conflicted sense of self through their art. James Smalls describes this trend in *The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten* (2006): "It is the condition of the black subject to be splintered into multiple fragments of identity, to be identified from without within the confines of the modern experience that becomes the basis for the formation and the deformation of identity in the act of image-making" (122).

my combined analysis of Mapplethorpe photography and Ivo's dance performance in the next section.

Politics of Absence

In her influential book on performance theory, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Peggy Phelan conceptualizes a politics of absence. She attempts “to find a theory of value for that which is not ‘really’ there, that which cannot be surveyed within the boundaries of the putative real” (1). However, Phelan does not, as do various forms of minoritarian identity politics, call for greater visibility for the hitherto unseen. Instead, she questions the politics involved in the coercive powers of representational logic. The unmarked, for Phelan, marks the limits of the image for the racial and sexual other. Her resistance to visibility is motivated by the risk of securing specific images of that other, which thus restrains her or him from creating alternative forms of subjectivity. In the contemporary politics of the visual exposure of the self and the other—as in surveillance practices at political borders and the collapse of privacy in the public sphere—the alleged real and the representational are easily confounded. The assumption that what can be represented must necessarily be true fails to recognize the complex relation between reality and image.

The danger of visibility lies in its merely repeating the once-formed image of the conceptual cultural other to accommodate current hegemonic ideology and eliminate deviation. On culturally less-represented and politically disregarded social groups, Phelan says that “[in] framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other”.⁸³ To counter this effect, Phelan's aim is to find what is unmarked in and absent from the image, or what is in excess of what we can see. In her eyes, excess resists representation and generates possibilities of what has been, until now, the unmarked or non-visible aspects of a subject.

Following Lacan, Phelan asserts the constituting role of the external gaze: “In looking at the other the subject seeks to see itself” (16). She goes on: “Seeing the other is a social form of self-reproduction. For in looking at/for the other, we seek to

⁸³ (2) Phelan does not define her use of “other” specifically, but she generally applies it to either the psychoanalytic notion of the other versus the self or to women and racial as well as ethnic minorities—groups of people who do not determine the hegemonic order of visual representation but who are often subjected, as almost-naked young white women are, to the coercion of an ideologizing visibility politics.

re-present ourselves to ourselves” (21). The image of the other simultaneously serves as a screen that reflects as well as obscures the *moi*. Self and other become dependent on each other for imag(in)ing identity. The process of becoming-subject, then, involves a seeing of oneself being seen by the other (Silverman, 1992: 127). Phelan, however, warns of the risk of a complete substitution of self-image for the image of the other, which is always formed by the aesthetic economy of the male white gaze. One cannot and should not aspire to become the image of an other.

Phelan instead calls for fostering a still impotent (because unpracticed) inward-gaze that produces self-seeing, a condition that exposes the subject to a potential blindness, the inability to see the non-visible: “[Until] one can accept one’s internal other as lost, invisible, an unmarked blank to oneself and within the world, the external other will always bear the marks and scars of the looker’s deadening gaze” (26). Seeing oneself fails to produce a complete picture of oneself. It is dependent on the look of the other’s seeing, creating a blind spot where the other’s self will be reflected in one’s self-image. To see oneself is to be within the spectacle, which leaves a blank where seeing and being seen collide. For Phelan, this blank resides outside the visible and thus outside of representation. Yet, this absence can be productive and may have a binding relationship to the visible. Both aspects are expressed in the notion of the “after-image,” the shadow of an image that remains in one’s mind as a memory of the perceived, a trace of the visible. It is itself invisible, yet constitutes the visible in retro- and possibly in prospect. I demonstrate below that Mapplethorpe’s *Self-Portrait* from 1985 plays on this idea of the after-image. It makes visible what Phelan attributes to the realm of the invisible. And, it explores the possibility, and potential failure, of self-seeing.

In Mapplethorpe’s *Self-Portrait*, we see his own gaze revealed to the spectator. Mapplethorpe examines his look, which has so often been criticized for objectifying and othering his African-American models. Next to Mapplethorpe’s flower still lifes, his photographs of nude black men are probably his most famous photographs. Because they seem as aesthetically pure or clean as his flower photographs, Mapplethorpe’s black nudes are vulnerable to that accusation. While they seem to fix the black body through the statue-like and immobile quality of the figures, most of them are also excessively sexual, showing erect penises and erotically suggestive postures. *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980) is perhaps one of the most extreme

photographs that have been flagged to accuse Mapplethorpe of a racially insensitive, if not a racist, attitude. It shows a man in a cheap polyester suit, whose half-erect penis is prominently exposed by his pants' unzipped fly. The man's head is cropped and his well-manicured, elegant hands are held slightly forward at his sides, in an expectant posture. Apart from the hands, only the penis identifies the model as a black man. Although this composition can be cited as a problematic example, the image remains ambivalent.

In his article "Looking for Trouble" (1991), Kobena Mercer defends Mapplethorpe's textual and sexual ambivalence in this and other images: "[the] shock of recognition of the unconscious sex-race fantasies is experienced precisely as an emotional disturbance which troubles the spectator's secure sense of identity" (189). Mercer argues that racist vision lies not within the image but in the viewer's fantasmatic and visual projection. *Man in Polyester Suit* may throw the viewer's potentially racist view back to her or him, and brings it to the fore as a problematic, if perhaps unconscious, way of looking that is part of prevailing ways of seeing bodies. In a similar way, I claim, Mapplethorpe throws his own gaze back upon himself in his 1985 *Self-Portrait*.



Self-Portrait (1985) by Robert Mapplethorpe

Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait* from 1985 shows his stern face looking blankly at something beyond the frame. His face and neck are brightly illuminated; his eyes are cold, with a silvery sheen to them. The rest of the image is black, with almost no contours but an indication of the light that shines on his right shoulder, a hint of light that comes from far away, where his look is drawn. The only anomaly in the otherwise classic posture is a transparent white smear that renders in a distorted blur his face's outline against the black background of the image.

This negative lucent shadow, an inverted shade, is suspended in a moment of arrested time. It seems to represent the fleetingness of vision, allowing for a glimpse of an illuminated presence, momentarily caught on film. But it portends disappearance. Is it one of Mapplethorpe's allegories of death, in this case, his own?⁸⁴ Or is it a glimpse of his self as negative image, one that can only be seen as an ephemeral impression, hovering between two moments in time? Does Mapplethorpe here visually invoke what Phelan calls his internal other?⁸⁵ If so, Mapplethorpe takes the experiment of self-seeing a step further: he makes the image of his self-viewing visible to others. He thus reverses his role as photographer and makes his distorted vision of himself accessible to another's look. The role-reversal is repeated and intensified by the inversion of colors: the typically black body set against a white screen here becomes a white face in a black image. Thus, Mapplethorpe stages his self-portrait as a *negative*.

Phelan has conceptualized Mapplethorpe's tendency toward a form of self-portraiture that is characterized by forms of disguise. The self-portraits suggest a persistent negation of the possibility of capturing the self on photographic paper. Phelan writes: "Mapplethorpe's [...] self-portraits arrest the self-image as it slides into becoming an image of an 'other.' The image captured by the camera is an image which is performed in order to define the central absence of the self-image" (40). By calling into question the representation of his self in his photographs of himself, Mapplethorpe frames the habitually unmarked white gaze within the image, which symbolizes, in his case, the absence of the black body from the white man's gaze, or

⁸⁴ In 1986, only a year after taking this photograph, Mapplethorpe was diagnosed as HIV-positive. He then began to photograph himself with skulls and other symbols relating to death, inspired mostly by his fascination with Catholicism. Mapplethorpe died from an HIV-related infection in 1989.

⁸⁵ In his early Polaroid photographs, Mapplethorpe expresses a recurring concern with the multiple facets of the self. See Wolf: 22. The fragmented or distorted self might be compared to the notion of an internal other, a part of the self that is unfathomable, almost lost to one's grasp.

the deficiency inherent in the photographer's gaze when picturing black bodies. The artist's ability to mark the unmarked (time, whiteness, the self) within the photograph suggests Phelan's reflection on vision. The technique of extended exposure has created a ghostly second face. Again, the self-portrait allows for an analogy with Bayard's *Le Noyé*: they both leave behind a visible trace of the passing of time, something that in other circumstances would be invisible. Both images display a mark (stained skin/streak of light) caused by the different photographic means and tricks. The skin on Bayard's hands and face look stained because of their earlier exposure to sunlight. In the photographer's direct positive process of developing the image, the reddened parts turn black. Batchen even suggests that Bayard uses this photographic effect to draw attention to its "trickery as a mere illusion of the real, as well as to the artifice of the actual text and image we are seeing" (171). Bayard as well as Mapplethorpe thus perform absence as presence: the presence of something invisible in the image.

Such visual performance seems to undermine Phelan's emphasis on performance's productivity through letting-go of the visible:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance. (146; emphasis in original)

The unmarked in Phelan's theory shows itself through the negative and disappearance. Disappearance is an active vanishing, a refusal to be lured into visibility. An example of this kind of productive disappearance is the work of the Guerrilla Girls, a group of women artists and feminist activists based in New York. They exhibit their political art in public places without revealing their identities. By wearing gorilla masks during their interventions, they refuse to participate in the currency of visibility. Disappearance, in relation to absence, is thus constituted by an act or by a conscious movement into nonappearance, while absence can be defined through its lack of coming or moving into visibility, a form of passivity. However, both notions relate to

something missing or to the state of not-being-there, a not-being-there (anymore) in consciousness or in visibility.

Disappearance and absence can be used according to the respective realms in which one seeks to explain the cause of a blank, a negative, an impossibility, an ambivalence, or something missing. Phelan links the effect of disappearance for performance to the passing of time, as do Bayard and Mapplethorpe, albeit in different ways. In seeming contrast to Phelan's conception of performance, under which she also to some extent counts photography, Mapplethorpe's and Bayard's self-portraits aim to perpetuate or freeze the disappearing elements of artistic performance, which help the fleeting arts from reproducing the hegemonic ideology. Does this mean that Mapplethorpe and Bayard, in perhaps different ways, defy the critical potential of their art?

Ivo's dance also seems to reverse performance's power of disappearance through its references to Mapplethorpe's well-known images. Furthermore, the reference to photography as a visual medium brings up every image's unavoidable relation to reproducible technology or persistent iconology. I want to suggest here that precisely the seizing of performance's fleetingness, the halting and exposure of the image's construction of the body, makes us aware of the real body's absence in images. What Phelan means by the excess of representation is something that she positions beyond the image. I focus on the excess of representation within images of the body. That excess, rarely or barely visible to the naked eye, both Ivo and Mapplethorpe seek to perform as a crack in the image, a loss of the self (Mapplethorpe) or a failure to represent a subjective, whole body (Ivo) in a culture that is dominated by the white, male, and straight gaze.

Productive Vision

In *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996), Kaja Silverman discusses a different kind of excess. With reference to Lacan's description of the subject's relation to the image, which he illustrates through the phenomenon of mimicry, Silverman gives particular weight to the concept of the stain. Silverman explains how a subject assumes "the shape of either a desired representation or one that has come through less happy circumstances to mark the physical body" (201). The stain is a form, a color, or a shape we wear to approximate a particular image before we become that image. Silverman suggests that thinking the subject's relation to the image through the

metaphor of the stain allows for a better understanding of this relation. The stain on the one hand accounts for a certain agency of the subject to prefigure its own image, and on the other hand illustrates the body's dependency on its designated representational field. Silverman stresses the stain's importance in helping us understand how the body can corporeally assimilate the image and thus how flesh can be transformed into representation.

The subject's approximation of, or its failure to approximate, its surroundings leads to the Lacanian concept of mimicry, which in my analysis of Mapplethorpe becomes especially pertinent: the notion of the image as a thrown-off skin. This idea, Silverman says, "connotes an *excretion* of the image, a refusal to 'wear' the 'photograph' through which one has been ratified as subject. This image of bodily dismemberment is evocative of the ways in which Frantz Fanon speaks about his rejection of the screen of 'blackness'" (202, my emphasis). In connection with Mapplethorpe's photographs and Ivo's dance performance, the metaphor becomes relevant in its function of a protective shield or a tool for seduction, which acts between the subject and the world of spectators. I want to imagine Mapplethorpe's images as just such a thrown-off skin, which allows his subjects to position themselves at some distance from their representation. Similarly, when Ivo stages his blackness with such insistence that one is fearful of being accused of focusing exclusively on Ivo's racial features, his skin is effectively thrown-off through the image he presents of himself. Ivo dresses himself in white clothes and thus presents his skin as a guise, which he dons at will. The skin's blackness becomes the image that is presented. The skin and Ivo's body lie beneath the layer of representation and act from behind the invisible screen, somewhere beyond the photographic image. In a sense, Ivo refuses to wear Mapplethorpe's photograph—he excretes it.

Silverman's term excretion seems similar to Phelan's representational excess. Both connote forms of representational surplus. For Silverman, excretion is something to be discarded, thrown in the face of stereotyping reality. For Phelan, excess is invisible: something that representation conveys but we fail to see. This invisible substance makes possible resistant readings of the visual world, a process that Phelan ascribes to Mapplethorpe's self-portraits. She observes:

The image of the self, Mapplethorpe suggests, can only be glimpsed in its disappearance. To greet it, one risks blindness, vanishing. ... The

image captured by the camera is an image, which is performed in order to define the central absence of the self-image. (40)

The absence of self-image is here the excess of what representation conveys, and, in Phelan's analysis, a necessary self-criticism by Mapplethorpe as photographer. In my view, however, there is a discrepancy between the disappearance and the absence of self-image. The former is constituted by an initial presence of the imaged subject and its subsequent move toward invisibility; this is where Phelan positions her notion of excess. The latter is characterized by a fundamental nonappearance or nonexistence within the image, from which a hitherto neglected self can possibly emerge. This latter option is the assumption behind Silverman argument on the pose.

In her detailed discussion of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), Silverman gives an account of how the pose is employed in Sherman's photography to convey the abyss between the self and an idealized image. Sherman's images propose the principle of the good-enough photograph, in which the ideal woman, housewife, tragic heroine, or nature girl, is only partially approximated. Similar to the stain, the pose is worn or assumed by the body, and constitutes the body's "image-ability." If one poses for a photograph, one freezes, as if to imitate the image one is about to become. Or, as Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* (1982): "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. ... I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it ..." (10-11).

Sherman excessively stages both the creation and the mortification of the body through the photograph within the photograph. She transposes the pose into the image, making the act of posing part of the composition, and so achieves a doubling of the look at the represented women. The look consequently resides within as well as outside of the image. This doubling of the look results in a seeing of oneself being seen. The viewer of the photograph also sees the depicted subject's exposure to the camera (gaze) and is implicated in the spectacle of the world. In that way, we are thus reminded of the alterity of the gaze, which, contrary to the look, issues from all sides and constitutes or shatters the looking subject through the click of an imaginary camera. In this sense, Sherman's photographic looks expose their viewer to an awareness of the gaze, which, in Silverman's theory, marks and possibly opposes a subject's position within the field of vision, and which, in Lacan's theory, dissolves or

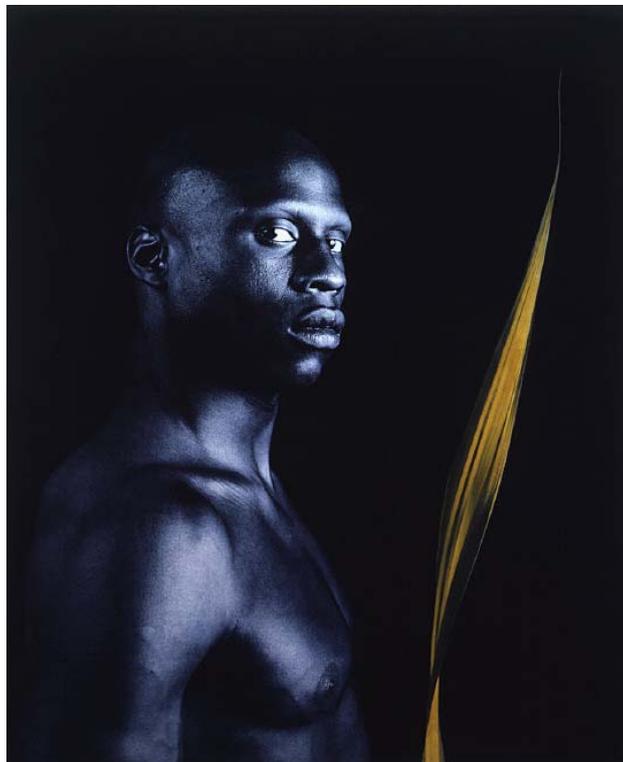
blurs the contours of this subject's position. Lacan writes: "[If] I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of [the stain]." (Lacan: 97)

In engaging with Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and what she calls their ability to produce a *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), Silverman optimistically maintains "the possibility of productive vision—of an eye capable of seeing something other than what is given to be seen, and over which the self does not hold absolute sway." (1996: 227) In my analysis of Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait* and Ivo's dance performance I hope to reveal a similarly productive vision, albeit one that leans more toward how Lacan theorizes the effect of the gaze. Silverman suggests that the camera/gaze photographically frames us within representation. Conversely, when photographed we feel "subjectively constituted, as if the resulting photograph could somehow determine 'who' we are" (Silverman, 1996: 135). Although Lacan also uses the camera as a signifier for the gaze and posits its constitutive function for subjectivity, he also insists that the gaze takes on an object-like quality and that, always already residing in the image, it looks back at the viewer. The gaze thus involves the viewer in the image. And by creating a blind spot where the spectator's look looks back at him or her, it disrupts the subject's fixed viewing position. If we can say that the gaze for Lacan resides in the object, we might, adding to Silverman's productive looking, ascribe a transformational power to particular images. I believe, however, that this power can only come into play under the condition in which the gaze of the other is made visible (present) in and through the image.

Here, the argument ties in with Silverman's analysis of Sherman's art, as well as with my reading of Mapplethorpe. Both artists show something within their images that makes their beholder become aware of her or his unstable subject position when confronted with a particular vision. Sherman's overemphasized pose in the image makes the viewer of her photographs rethink her or his own posing and accommodation of stereotypical images without ever really approximating them. Mapplethorpe's blurred look in the self-portrait indicates the viewer's own indistinct or indeed obscured viewing position. In both cases, time is visibly frozen in the image and reminds the viewer of the absence of motion and flexibility in representation. At the same time, the beholder might feel an urge to break the fixed position of the image, which she or he might do by simply looking or walking away from it. The spell of the pose is broken for the moment, but will return at the next click. Mapplethorpe's and

Sherman's images hold on to and embrace a vision that is absent from non-pictorial consciousness. And they do what Silverman ascribes to the look's potentially transformative powers: they "confer the active gift of love upon bodies which have long been accustomed to neglect and disdain" (227). Through the photographs they explore the tension between the pictorial body and the live body—a tension that, I claim, is decisive for how we see particularly neglected bodies in and through a picture. In the next section I will consider this tension and its possible effect on viewing Mapplethorpe's black male model Ken Moody in a portrait from 1985.

The Unconsciously Visible



Ken Moody (1985) by Robert Mapplethorpe

His portrait shows Ken Moody's upper body from the side. His head is turned toward the viewer, looking out of the picture. The work looks like a black-and-white image set against a black background, which seems to invade the scarce light that shines on the model's face and bare skin. Moody is enveloped by black, and his dark skin turns a cold, bluish white in contrast to the surroundings. At the right side of the image shines a thin, sharp-edged, and pointed golden leaf. The only truly colored element in the image, the "leaf" has an ephemeral, immaterial quality. If it is not a part of a plant,

it could be a streak of light, or an illuminated crack in the solid black wall of the image's background, or an optical illusion, something that seems to move, imbued with magic. The colored crack of light in the background could also result from the opening of a black curtain. This interpretation would evoke a stage-like setting and suggest a strong link to movement and, in the context of my discussion here, to Ivo's dance. Moody's entirely hairless body, his well-defined muscles, large eyes, and sensual lips make him one of Mapplethorpe's typical black males, which have been discussed by art critics, political spokespersons, and cultural theorists with reference to racial issues.⁸⁶

The racial and aesthetic dimension of Mapplethorpe's imagery, it has been argued, reduce black male bodies to abstract visual things, silenced them as subjects, and put them in the service of the artist's sexual fantasies. Carl Van Vechten, who is white and gay like Mapplethorpe and similarly fascinated by the black male body in art, has also been accused of foregrounding "the body of the other—as object of ridicule or admiration, as object of domination or commodification."⁸⁷ Kobena Mercer initially objected to Mapplethorpe's art for fetishizing the black male body in 1986 but later revised his views:

[what] is represented in the pictorial space of Mapplethorpe's photographs is a "look", or a certain "way of looking", in which the pictures reveal more about the absent and invisible white male subject who is the agent of representation than they do about the black men whose beautiful bodies we see depicted. (186)

Mercer's reassessment of Mapplethorpe's art engages with the images themselves rather than focusing on the mere fact that a white artist has photographed nude/exposed black men. Also, he acknowledges his own implication in the image as a (black) gay man, someone who, like a white spectator, is invested in desiring the object and who inhabits the same position of visual mastery he attributes to the hegemonic white male subject.

In the popular and politicized discourse about Mapplethorpe's art, the controversy concentrated on what, to an aesthetically trained Western eye, was the

⁸⁶ Cultural critic Kobena Mercer wrote two essays on his ambivalent relationship to Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men, of which the later text (1991) revises the critique put forth in the earlier article (1986), written with filmmaker Isaac Julien: Mercer & Julien: 57-61. And: Mercer: 184-197.

⁸⁷ Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, cited in J. Smalls: 122.

disruptive, because expressively beautiful, photographic presence of black bodies in artistic imagery. The discussion did not take into account the ambivalent power of the images and their cultural embeddedness in a specific logic of the gaze, a gaze through which the viewer as well as the photographed subject is either socially constituted or negated as spectacle. Although I believe that such political debate is necessary, I contend that the problem lies beyond the disparity between black and white skin. What matters is how Mapplethorpe, in Mercer's words, "reveals what is 'unconscious' in the cultural construction of whiteness as a 'racial' identity" (195). The portrait of Moody brings to the fore the construction of blackness.

Moody's skin in the photograph is not, strictly speaking, black. Reflecting the pale light, the skin acquires a lucid gleam. The golden-brown leaf, the only colored element, adds to the effect of uncertainty about the model's skin color. Offering the viewer only a splash of real color, it indicates the absence of Moody's skin color. The only actual sign of dark skin is its contrast to the whites of Moody's eyes. Hence, in this portrait, the black body that is supposed to be there cannot really be seen. Moreover, the leaf makes the viewer aware of the real body's absence from the photograph. The body that is visible is the mere abstraction of memorized and culturally reinforced images of a black body.

In his essay "A Small History of Photography" (1931/1979), Walter Benjamin observes "how much easier it is to get hold of a picture, more particularly of a piece of sculpture, not to mention architecture, in a photograph than in reality" (253). Remarkably, Benjamin does not mention the human body in his text, an omission all the more conspicuous because he may well have been aware of the paradoxical relationship of photography to live bodies. Belting explains Benjamin's statement as follows: "Da Bilder traditionell das Abwesende sichtbar machen, kompensiert man die Unsicherheit über den Körper mit seiner Präsenz im Bilde, womit sich der übliche Sinn einer Abbildung umkehrt" (2000: 178). Images make what is absent visible, and to compensate for the body's representational uncertainty, image-makers stress its presence in the image more forcefully. This process consequently inverts the meaning of *Abbild*, which literally means the depiction of something; but here the body is made into an image. This inversion of referentiality is reminiscent of my discussion of the body's absence in the image above. One might come to the conclusion that there exists a fundamental incongruity between image and body.

Yet, as has become pertinent in Ivo's dance performance, the problem of the body's absence in the image lies not so much in a mutual inaptness between body and image, but rather in the split between live bodies and the image-producing vision of the viewer. What Ivo's mirror scene exposes is the representational absence of a specific *kind* of body. Ivo's black body appears only through the insistent presentation of his dark skin and his nudity: his body is stripped of cultural artifact, fashion, fabric, and other representational economies. In this raw state, Ivo sees himself fragmented and split through the white mirror. When the dancer is slowly transformed into a whitened figure, his state of disintegration (or disidentification?) subsides and he becomes less and less visible to his audience. I want to suggest that Ivo's dance shows us that every living body, and especially marked bodies, are absent from the images that are produced by what Belting calls ideologies or cultural fictions of the body. In this sense, images of the body are necessarily linked to a culturally constructed image-efficiency or image-ability. Ultimately, Belting suggests, there is little to gain from doubting the body's qualities (*Zweifel am Körper*), while one must certainly doubt the ability of images to represent the living body—indeed, the black, the female, the queer, and the disabled body (*Zweifel an der Bildfähigkeit*; 178).

What I conclude from these observations, partly against Benjamin's argument, is that the body is more difficult to grasp in a photograph, as it dies in the image. It disappears from view and, only under rare conditions, leaves a vague trace on exposed film, as with Mapplethorpe's smear. But in what way is Mapplethorpe's shadow comparable to Ivo's tracing images of black bodies?

When Benjamin refers to Karl Blossfeldt's plant photographs, he insists that photographs, in contrast to paintings, produce a magical value that urges the viewer to search for an hitherto undiscovered existence (2006). The pictures depict plants in such detail that they suggest human-made forms like ancient columns, women's dresses and brochures, slightly askew minarets, or industrial iron springs. Benjamin ascribes to these photographs the capacity to make unknown or invisible existences meaningful. Similarly, Mapplethorpe's ephemeral leaf-like object points to a new meaning for human skin color: the leaf attracts and drains all the brown and ochre particles from the image, leaving most of the image's space in complete darkness, tinting Moody's skin a colorless grey.

What we can or cannot commonly perceive is defined by what is not representable, what does not figure as a culturally readable visual sign. To explain the

after-image as an absent, unrepresentable, yet visible phenomenon, Phelan draws on Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious:⁸⁸

[The] after-image participates in a kind of “optical unconscious” (the phrase is Walter Benjamin's)—a realm in which what is not visibly available to the eye constitutes and defines what is—in the same way as the unconscious frames ongoing conscious events. Just as we understand that things in the past determine how we experience the present, so too can it be said that the visible is defined by the invisible.
(14)

Benjamin acknowledges the existence of a visual space informed by the unconscious, a hidden part of reality that photography reveals through its devices of slow motion, enlargement, or extended exposure. Below I will refer to Eadweard Muybridge's “instantaneous photographs”; photographic studies in which the photographer tried to depict moving bodies through a series of still images.

Benjamin ascribes to a number of early-twentieth-century photographs the capacity to produce a vivid and lasting impression on the viewer because of the long period of exposure that used to be necessary to develop an identifiable portrait. Due to the time lapse in production, the process also resulted in an absence of contact between image-making and actuality. The process allowed the sitter to grow into the picture and give it an air of permanence, which later urges its viewer to bridge the photographed (absent) past and the chemically (artificially) developed present in the beheld image. Benjamin's account of the subsequent development of commercial portrait photography, however, reveals the disappearance of the magic in earlier photographs. He cites Bertolt Brecht's observation that “less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality” (255).

How does Benjamin's concept of the optical unconscious and its miraculous effect on the viewer bear on Mapplethorpe's photography? Michael Taussig's interpretation, mainly concerned with the physiognomic aspects of the visual world, stresses Benjamin's confounding of subject and object. He explains:

⁸⁸ Benjamin describes the veiled aspect of consciousness—which is, importantly, not a psychological but a perceptual consciousness—through reference to the process of walking. Walking reveals something about our bodily consciousness without revealing anything about the body. Benjamin writes: “Whereas it is a commonplace that ... we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking ..., we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person steps out” (243).

For what came to constitute perception with the invention of the 19th-century technology of optical reproduction of reality was not what the unaided eye took for the real. No. What was revealed was the optical unconscious—a term that Benjamin willingly allied with the psychoanalytic unconscious but which, in his rather unsettling way, so effortlessly confounded subject with object such that the unconscious at stake here would seem to reside more in the object than in the perceiver. He had in mind both camera still shots and the movies, and it was the ability to enlarge, to frame, to pick out detail and form unknown to the naked eye, as much as the capacity for montage and shocklike abutment of dissimilars, that constituted this optical unconscious which, thanks to the camera, was brought to light for the first time in history. (149)

Taussig's reading interprets the optical unconscious as a tactile quality of seeing, through which habitual knowledge is brought to bear on the visible world. Taussig locates habitual ways of knowing in the everyday experience of touch: "The tasks facing the perceptual apparatus at turning points in history, cannot ... be solved by optical, contemplative, means, but only gradually, by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation" (149).

If looking is informed by other senses, and if these senses are influenced by technology, photography not only brought into view what had hitherto been unconscious, but it also changed the relationship between the seer and the seen. The seer as photographer became invisible behind the camera; the seen as sitter was thus perceived through a material object rather than a human eye. Yet, at the same time, the model had the (restricted) freedom to pose for an objective eye or her- or himself. The camera's object, which in portrait photographs is represented by a person or a living body, consequently seems to embody and radiate a particular, yet unconscious, knowledge about the vision, of which she or he is part. With Mapplethorpe's self-portrait, it seems that the image itself, and not Benjamin's view of it, confounds the notions of subject and object: it exposes Mapplethorpe to the camera's eye as an object of his own technological, white male (sexualizing) gaze.

In his work on the mirror stage, Lacan identifies a fundamental moment, at which the infant sees himself or herself as both the subject before the mirror (recognition) and the object reflected in the mirror (misrecognition). This double seeing of the self is reminiscent of Benjamin's confounding of the photograph's subject and object. If we take the subject-object concurrence as something that bears on Ken Moody's portrait, it may stir up a critical relationship between the objectified

black model and the white man's vision.⁸⁹ Can Moody overturn the borders between subject- and objecthood, as Mapplethorpe does in his self-portrait? Ivo's mirror scene shows that, before it can challenge the mode of production in which bodies are seen, Moody's body will always be an image of a black man and, receding into darkness, becoming invisible. This disappearing is, as Belting observed, ultimately caused by the absence of subjectivity in the image. The photograph might, under certain conditions, have the capacity to transform the precarious relation between body, subjectivity, and image. To understand what these conditions might be, I will thematize the process of a subject's becoming an image.

Modes of Becoming Image

In his essay "Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death" (1987), Jean-Luc Nancy writes about a poem by Charles Baudelaire about the desire to paint the image of a woman. Nancy describes this desire as the desire to paint the endless process of forming an image, of imagining. The desire of the poet/artist is not

[to] have or produce an image, but to be the image [himself], or ... the imagining process, the process of becoming-an-image. It is the desire to come—as an image, to be the coming (to appearance) of an image. This does not mean representing oneself Instead, it means becoming the specific movement of the image becoming image, the becoming visible of the visible, the coming (to appearance) of visibility. ... The desire to paint [is] to be presenting everything not as a copy or portrait, but as the disappearance of everything in its own presence. (727-28)

In portraiture, the subject of the painting eludes imitation. As Nancy observes, the painted woman becomes "painting of a woman." In other words, the painted subject grows into the image and presents itself from within itself, from behind itself. This conception suggests a critique of the subject-object relation between painter and sitter, and indicates a new form of imaging/imagining. The painted woman turns into a presence of her own making. She becomes a subject with a voice that asks to be painted. At the same time, because she represents the *becoming* of the image instead of a woman's image, her image as *Abbild*, the copy of her real body, disappears.

⁸⁹ Winnubst criticizes Lacan's conception of the mirror stage for disregarding racialized bodies; she considers it important to ask if the "mirror is racist".

In portrait painting, as characterized by Nancy, the painted model disappears from the image: her face disappears into the material of the paint, into the colors; and, in Nancy's example, into the woman's "laughter," which Baudelaire describes as her "wide mouth, red and white and alluring, that makes one dream of the miracle of a superb flower blooming on a volcanic soil" (cited in Nancy: 720). Nancy reads or perceives the painted mouth as laughter, as an expression that cannot be „seen,“ but that is the only part of the painted woman that does not disappear from the image, because it is not subjected to the laws of representation. The model's laughter becomes the only positive presence in the image. It survives representation because it indicates something beyond the visual: it is not dependent on color, light, or shade, or on the substance of the painting. The woman's laughter is present in the image, yet transcends the material conditions of it. Nancy calls this the "wild laughter in the throat of death." Metaphorically, the laughter is born from the vanishing life of the model in representation.⁹⁰

If Nancy's theory can be transferred to Mapplethorpe's portrait of Ken Moody, the abstracted laughter might in this case reside in the look. Contrary to the woman's laughter in Nancy's example, a representation of her unheard voice, Moody's look represents the model's ethereal, invisible, or unseen view. The large eyes framed by black shadows represent the loss of his body to the looks of the outside world. The black man's body, lost in representation, confronts the spectator with a model of Moody's absent real body. His individual body disappears from the image, and is substituted by the force, the sensation of his look. The look survives representation, leaves the picture and becomes alive in the viewer's perception.

The perceptual transfer from the model's look in the image to the viewer's perception beyond the image reflects Nancy's formulation of the painting that comes into appearance only through the movement of the image becoming-image. Moody's transgressing look does not only accomplish this movement, it also doubles the photographed look, which comes to reside in and outside of the picture.

The movement of the image becoming-image entails a doubling of the image, but not, as in Eadweard Muybridge's stop-motion photographs, in the form of a repetition or an almost identical multiplication. Muybridge became known in the late nineteenth century for his attempts to capture realistic motion on photographic film.

⁹⁰ Nancy calls painting a "metaphor for all the arts to the extent that they are supposed to represent." He then goes further: "'Painting' represents representation in general" (731).

His pictures typically show a line-up of stills made of subjects in motion, such as a woman walking down the stairs. Yet, the images do not convey movement unless they are animated in a sequence. Without being able to see or feel the time-gap in between the making of the images, the viewer does not see moving bodies but only an abstraction of movement.

A contemporary attempt to capture the movement of bodies in a different way was made by David Michalek in his art work *Slow Dancing* (2007). The series of 43 larger-than-life, hyper-slow-motion video portraits of dancers and choreographers was projected on the façade of the Lincoln Center in New York City in July 2007. Muybridge used only a few photographic images to show motion; Michalek records thousands of sequential video images to indicate the idea of stillness. The moving image here is slowed down to such a degree that one can barely perceive the bodies' gestures. In both works movement is reconsidered, it becomes dependent on the viewer's perception and is not seen as an inherent characteristic of an animate object or organism.

Both photographs discussed in this chapter make the movement of an image-becoming-image visible through, precisely, the display of time's absence. The absence of time in Mapplethorpe's art could be one of the problematic elements in his display of black bodies, since it also entails a certain negation or loss of historical perspective in his vision of racially othered bodies, which, perhaps unwanted, yet also unreflected, reproduces historically problematic views.

Mapplethorpe's ghostly smear of light, which becomes a blurred, Francis Bacon-like smirk, reveals the lengthened exposure of photographic film needed to produce such an image. And, Moody's upper body, sculpted like a statue carved in stone, forever still, is set in one frame with the volatile, elusive shape of obscure – and possibly inhuman – nature. Time cannot be experienced here as a positive presence. It brings the images to life no more than Muybridge's "still lifes" do. But, as Bayard aimed to effect with his portrait of himself as deceased, the images of Mapplethorpe bring into perspective the consequences and the restraints of passing and past time. When the movement of time is missing from an image, when time is captured in a still image, it shows the mortifying effect of the pose (Barthes, 1982) in any form of representation.

In bringing time in photography into view, Mapplethorpe not only contorts the image of himself as a representative of the white gaze—a gaze now mirroring itself

while caught in misty prejudice—but he also indicates the un-reality of bodily representation. The fixed image of a black male body is unveiled as a visual construction, an imaginary version of the real black male body. Mapplethorpe depicts the danger of the repetition of imagery that neglects the body's predisposition for transformation and its potential for difference.

The subversion of the rigid representation of the othered black, female, disabled, or queer body requires a splitting of the existing image into two or more image-like visions that on the one hand inescapably represent the gaze of the Western hegemonic ideology, and on the other, crucially, the self-seeing view of the othered subject. The split-image in Mapplethorpe's photographs, as well as the fragmented image in Ivo's performance, reside within, not outside of, the original representation. They materialize as a distorted, partial, or, as in Moody's portrait, non-human overlay.

This idea of the overlay can be understood within Phelan's theory of absence as an excess of representation. But, contrary to Phelan's contention that excess lies outside of the image, here it appears to be a feature of the image itself. A feature that is usually absent but that, under certain conditions, becomes visible. Again, we are reminded of Bayard's photographic technique of extended exposure, which created a vision of him that otherwise would not have been possible. With the help of the aging process of the film, Bayard facilitated an invisible or fictitious presence to grow into the image. The absence of some bodies in representation can thus possibly be compensated by a different reading of visual content: a reading that considers the fact that in an image something might be present, yet invisible. The absence of certain forms of visibility is, as we have seen, not so much, or not only, a problem of the image-making, but a problem of the image-reading. Again, as I proposed in chapter two, some images remind us of our failed vision (partial blindness), and some make us consider the potentially positive effects of this failure by guiding us to see the absence of visual presence.