





Various Assumptions

The Still Lives of the Artists by Kevin Breathnach

I write this essay every year and, every year, I see it morph to suit the quote that kicked it off a little better. ‘Every artist’s work changes when he dies,’ says John Berger in his essay on Giacometti. ‘And finally no one remembers what the work was like when he was alive.’ This was never as I remembered it, never as I needed it to be. What I remembered Berger saying was that death changes not the *work* of every artist, but the *image*. Berger makes his claim immediately after some remarks on Giacometti’s demeanour in a famous photograph showing him crossing the road in the rain, his coat pulled over his head for shelter. Berger says he looks ‘like a monk,’ but to me the photograph casts Giacometti closer to one of his own sculptures. It was an understandable slip of memory, in any case, and it caused no trouble in the end. I simply included the quote as I’d initially remembered it, and as usual nobody noticed. Still, I think there’s something instructive about this particular misremembering. The work of John Berger had been changed, after all, and John Berger had not died. What I know *had* happened to him, however, might in some way account for his essay’s curious reticence about the person who took the photograph in question. In 1994, about fifteen years before my memory experienced his work as somehow altered, John Berger had his portrait taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson. The occasion is described in *Photocopies*. Mid-conversation, the photographer turns away from Berger. Then quickly he returns. ‘He has picked up his camera and is looking at what is around me again. This time he clicks.’ For some photographers, collaboration with





the sitter is of central importance; to Cartier-Bresson it was anathema. To be his subject was to feel one's subjectivity dissolve. It has now been ten years since he died. Isn't it odd? His work does not seem to have changed at all.

What are the defining characteristics of a Cartier-Bresson portrait? And to what extent do these characteristics make the work resistant to change? For one thing, there is the grey. His portraits are taken not in the reductionist style of Avedon, nor in the near-obscurity of Edward Steichen's blacked out oeuvre. These particular black-and-white photographs are shot in natural light, their unfurling shades of grey endowing their sitters with an air of nobility and thoughtfulness. 'Nothing was more important to him than respect for the various shades of grey,' says his biographer, Pierre Assouline. 'One day we will speak of CBG (Cartier-Bresson Grey) in the same tones as they speak of IKB (International Klein Blue).' Whereas the portraiture of Avedon and Steichen approaches, from opposing angles, a sort of photographic abstraction onto which the viewer is invited to project their own ideas, Cartier-Bresson's work is 'filled up' with the complex internal workings of a whole spectrum of monochrome. There is no space for the viewer to work with. No give. After leaving the developing room, his photographs develop no more.

Another portrait of Giacometti shows its subject from the waist up. It is a more traditional portrait; the sitter's face has been offered a good deal more autonomy this time. Giacometti stands to the right of the frame, his left-hand tucked neatly into his right inside-pocket. Caught in three-





quarter profile, he seems to have emerged from the building behind him. He is a little dazed to find the texture of his newspaper so strongly echoed by what he remembers of his own face, the texture of which he knows is echoed by the door to his right, whose texture in turn will echo that of his jacket. Cartier-Bresson might as well have carved this tableau from a single block of stone. It is a closed-system of textural echoes made legible only by the subtle interaction of its various greys. It is evocative of touch, of fingertips, finally of sculpture. The portrait seems immovable. There is nothing to add, and no place to add it. It is as if, in truth, the building from which Giacometti has just emerged is none other than Cartier-Bresson's developing room.

The visual echo is by no means the sole preserve of texture or shade, however. In the geometrically precise work of Cartier-Bresson at least, it is detected most often in the transitory mirroring of certain shapes. So, for example, in his portrait of the surrealist writer and art critic, Michel Leiris, the subject is hunched down in the bottom left of the photograph, the rest of the frame given over to a bank of bookshelves in the sitter's personal library. Against one bookshelf there rests a ladder (already a resonant motif in the early history of photography) without which the books on the top shelf would be quite out of reach for this diminutive subject. Though the ladder is clearly consigned to the background, its central positioning occasions it to dominate our first glance at the photograph. Look at it for a moment, though, and the ladder is cast further back into the frame by a very pronounced vein zigzagging its way up Leiris' forehead, which at last becomes a sort of pictorial





fulcrum. Not only does this visual echo delineate the photograph's field of depth; it also calls playful attention to both the contents of its subject's head (books) and the style of subject's books (cerebral). In Cartier-Bresson, the visual echo is suggestive of something slightly beyond the frame. It is always working to establish just enough context to let us imagine that we know something of the subject and their work. In the echo, there is allegory.

His photograph of Alexander Calder was taken in the sitter's home. Calder's face is large and plural. It dominates the frame. We might even say it has been granted the full pictorial autonomy befitting of such a large face were it not for the grid of vertical and horizontal beams cutting across the background in subtle evocation of the sitter's angular, architectural style of sculpture. Alone, the photograph recalls the work. But the manner in which it does so sounds an inter-photographic echo that speaks also of biography. In 1929, André Kertész made a portrait of Calder. The sculptor looks much younger now. His face is smaller, more singular. Probably he is handsome. It is difficult to tell for sure, though: his body has been obscured by the horizontal and vertical wires of the work-in-progress before him. Cartier-Bresson greatly admired Kertész. 'We all owe something to him,' he said, 'whatever we have done, Kertész did first.' He knew this photograph, he had studied it for a long time. He situated his own grid accordingly. Taken just six years before its subject's death, his portrait positions the architectural grid in such a way as to suggest that Calder's work has been fulfilled, that it is now *behind* him. Indeed, although Calder had two sculptures left in him, he spent most of the seventies





painting luxury vehicles on commission. It would be some fifteen years before André Kertész would die. Yet his work was already changing. After Cartier-Bresson's portrait of Calder, the picture Kertész took no longer seems suggestive of anything but a lifetime's work to come. Now, the work stands *before* Calder, *only before him*. The image is smaller now, more singular. Probably it is handsome. It is difficult to tell. It has been obscured by the rhetoric of an image that has come to stand before it.

Cartier-Bresson liked to play with people's hair. His portrait of Roland Barthes shows the semiotician staring directly into the camera. His legs are crossed, though mostly cropped from the frame. With a cigarette in his left hand, Barthes leans his right arm back into his chair. His swagger is a little too studied. Behind him, an almost architectural row of files and folders strongly echoes the neat *en brosse* of his hair. Made in 1963, nearly twenty years before Barthes wrote his seminal work on photography, the picture's visual echo evokes the exactitude and the practice of categorisation so characteristic of its subject's early thought. The swagger would come more naturally in time.

He made his portrait of Susan Sontag a decade later. He had not tired of hair. The couch on which Sontag is seated takes up almost the entire frame, to which her sprawl is central. Her legs are also crossed (less cropped this time), while her hair is flecked with a grey well served by Cartier-Bresson's photographic palette. Unlike Barthes, her eyes avoid the camera's gaze. Her arms emerge from inside her coat, the sleeves of which fall regally from her shoulders, like a cape. The gathered cloth, bunched higher to the left





than the right, echoes the shape of her hair perfectly. It is a stately, even sovereign, pose that appears doubled to evoke its subject's stately, even sovereign, prose. Within five years, Sontag will have written her own (and perhaps the very first) seminal work of photographic theory. ('In all this chaos,' she writes there, quoting Cartier-Bresson himself, 'there is order.') Right now, though, she is thinking mostly about film. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes wrote that photography is tame if tempered by certain empirical or aesthetic habits such as leafing through a magazine in a hairdresser's. I bow to Barthes, but only to look beneath him. What I want to understand is the apparent sharpness of being photographed as if in a magazine *for* hairdressers that has stunned a certain few to reconsider the aesthetic habits of photography itself. The hair becomes the sitter: that is the *studium*. But did the sitter worry they'd become the hair? In any case, it is no surprise that Barbara Hepworth, whose unruly thicket is not so much echoed as *extended* by the plant life in the background, never composed her own treatise on photography. Her portrait is not one of Cartier-Bresson's best. Nothing is told about its subject except, perhaps, at a push, something about the negative space that Hepworth's sculptures lent meaning to. There is little meaning offered here. It probably needs a prop—one of the geometrically adventurous pieces from Hepworth's back catalogue, say, or even just a work-in-progress.

It was not unusual for him to draw on his subject's work in this way, especially in the case of visual artists. He gets Joan Miró standing before a number of his canvases wearing something of the same owlish expression as his painted





figures. A bespectacled George Eisler is shown peeping over a self-portrait, as if appealing for his image to be considered only through his own art. In another full-body portrait of Giacometti, whom Cartier-Bresson must have photographed more than any other artist, the subject walks at three-quarter angle with a mid-sized sculpture held in both hands. His step falls in time to that of the towering *L'Homme qui marche I* to the left. 'After 1945 Giacometti's sculptures became thinner and thinner,' writes Berger. 'It was concluded that they were on the point of disappearing.' Here, his movements are so hurried that the film's exposure cannot (or chooses not to) keep up. His figure becomes blurred to the point where his outline appears every bit as indefinite as the sculptures. He is a ghost at last, a bridge between the living and the dead.

Avigdor Arikha is more assuredly present before the camera. In what is perhaps the most visually complex portrait in Cartier-Bresson's portfolio, the painter appears to the right of the frame. He turns his neck away from the painting. Now he is facing the camera. Upright he holds a painting which, slightly taller than he is, shows a standing female nude from behind. His left-arm stretches into the centre of the frame. The horizontal line it describes is echoed by a representation of the very same left-arm, which appears in a self-portrait propped on an easel occupying the bottom left of the frame. There, Arikha is represented standing in a pose so similar to the one he makes for Cartier-Bresson that it would appear to be emanating from a mirror were it not that the painted figure faces away from us. The mere suggestion of mirroring draws our attention back to the female nude. In the painting, we notice now, she is standing





beside a mirror. She stands so close to it, in fact, that her reflection is largely obscured by her own body. Still, it is definitely there. Her legs, her pubic hair and her abdomen are all clearly visible. They constitute a reference that works within the larger context of the photograph to 'realise' its referent. It is as if this female nude, standing between Arikha and an enormous mirror, actually exists. Avigdor Arikha was a realist painter. He did not paint from memory or from imagination. He painted from life. 'Only this is true,' he said. With its realistically depicted figure depicted somehow realer still, it is tempting just to chalk it down as a skilfully made concession to its subject's art. It is quite a bit more than that, however. It is a self-portrait.

I'm not sure Cartier-Bresson would have agreed with Dorethea Lange's notion that every photo-portrait is a self-portrait. I don't believe he saw anything of himself in his portrait of Louis Aragon, for instance. I can't think he saw much of himself in his visions of Pound or Capote or Mauriac either. There are certain sitters, however, with whom he clearly identified. Their portraits speak to this. Like Cartier-Bresson, Arikha absorbed the lessons of his early artistic influence (Abstract Expressionism) before breaking out on his own to depict life as it was lived. It was not 'a return to figuration,' he said, but the figure had certainly returned. He understood texture and he understood geometry. He worked only in natural light and he finished a painting in one session. His artistic practice, grounded in immediacy, was spoken of as being directly analogous to Cartier-Bresson's *instant décisif*, that single moment when, the photographer believed, the world opened up and bared itself in flagrante. 'I prowled the





streets all day,' wrote Cartier-Bresson, 'determined to 'trap' life—to preserve life in the act of living.'

It is in this light that the portrait's internal logic starts to grind to its conclusion. The positioning of Arika's self-portrait invites the viewer to think of it not as a painting but as an image reflected in a mirror. The bottom left of the frame has become a mirror in which the figure on the right of frame is reflected. The spaces of foreground and background are very clearly delineated: they are quite literally bordered by the portrait's (un-bordered) paintings. Such a clearly marked division has the effect of flattening both planes, the foreground especially. Under this sort





of scrutiny, the notion that one figure in the foreground could be the reflection of another figure in the foreground becomes implausible. Yet our exploded readings linger on (they always do). For us, there is still a mirror in the left of the frame. It is facing the camera. If it is facing the camera, then its reflection must belong to the photographer. If the reflection belongs to the photographer, then its resemblance to the subject of the photograph (still to right of the frame) is uncanny. He must be the photographer himself and this must be a self-portrait. ('Photography is a means of appropriating something,' wrote Sontag.) As our exploded readings start to disintegrate (they always do), our understanding of this portrait as a self-portrait adds a further richness to the picture. The image to the left of the frame, which we imagined and have now un-imagined as a mirror, is cast *en abyme* as it once again assumes its status as a work of art. Is it a study for the photograph in which it appears? Or has this photograph somehow caught itself in the very process of developing? It would not surprise me. This is, after all, a portrait that develops as none of the others do. Why did Cartier-Bresson go to such lengths to make it so?

'The original way in which the work of art was embedded in the context of tradition was through worship,' said Walter Benjamin. Within the Christian tradition, however, the image was initially viewed with suspicion, even horror. Lycomedes, a disciple of John, had a portrait of his master painted in secret so that he could worship it in his cell. 'I see that thou art still living in heathen fashion,' John reprimands





him upon discovery. 'This that thou hast now done is childish and imperfect: thou hast drawn a dead likeness of the dead.' It was not until the conversion of Constantine in 312AD, when the coming of Christ was deemed to have concluded the Mosaic prohibition, that images started to appear in monasteries and churches. 'God had finally shown himself in an image,' writes Hans Belting. 'Only this wasn't a made image, but a body. Images, when finally they began to circulate, drew their authority first and foremost from this body. Those that later came to be designated as true were true inasmuch as they attested the true body of Christ.' In the Orthodox tradition, the icon became a devotional object. There, the image itself is worshipped in the belief that it can transmit devotional energies to its subject if made according to certain pictorial conventions. An icon is a window into heaven. Its maker must use a technique known as 'inverse perspective' to depict this heavenly space as infinite. 'The Son of God become man could not be presented as one who had become so confined in the limits of the body that the universe was left empty of His government.'

But left empty is was. God is dead, said Nietzsche, and although an exact time was never given, we know His death corresponds pretty closely to the invention of photography. Within just a few years, it had altered the way people looked at the world. By 1853 Feuerbach was already noting that: 'our era prefers the image to thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, the appearance to being.' Photography is a magical activity, the photograph a cultic object. It has been related to death, to the work of mourning, even to prophecy. Photography stops time. Balzac would





not allow his picture to be taken because he feared *it* would take *him*. Hugo made sure his picture was taken. He believed it would make him. Each author's approach offers its own concession to the power of photography, a power arising from its particular relation to truth. Here, for the first time, were images created not by hand, but by machine, by technology. A photograph is a literal emanation of its referent. To look at a photo of Giacometti (who else?) is to be a witness to actual traces passed onto film by the sculptor's own body. The photograph constitutes a 'certificate of presence.' It is true inasmuch as it attests the true body of the referent. The camera was infallible. It replaced the eye of God. People believed in Photography.

At around the same time, artists and writers assumed the role of secular saints, inviting the world to view their work as in some way sacred. In this reading, art was something that could bypass mere daily doings and go straight to the essence of things. Cézanne could plunge into the depths, it was said, 'and fix upon the secret of Being in a few abstract lines.' In Russia, Kazimir Malevich claimed his non-objective art offered access to a so-called 'fourth dimension.' 'The drawing of a cross for the first Christians is for us the drawing of a square,' said his protégé, El Lissitzky. 'This is the new faith.' It was no mere revolutionary dogma. In the United States, Abstract Expressionism made its own appeals to the spirit. 'Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life,' wrote Barnett Newman, 'we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.'" Such exalted claims were by no means limited to the visual arts. Rimbaud saw himself as a seer. Yeats said the work of a writer was 'a





blind struggling in the network of stars.' Brecht viewed art as a means of spiritual transformation. This is all old hat at this point. But whatever we might think of these claims (and personally, I don't think very much of them), the fact that they were made remains.

God died and an infrastructure of saints collapsed. Then the pantheon moved in. It was left to the photographers of the age to 'canonise' those writers and artists who, directly or indirectly, sought to occupy the vacancy. Nadar gave it a shot. So did Steichen, Avedon and André Kertész. Their attempts were admirable, in a way. But the work was never allegorical enough for iconography. It posed too many enigmas. Cartier-Bresson was different. He photographed everyone worth photographing in a style that, like the icons of the Russian Orthodox tradition, conformed to a strict geometry in order to portray with complete economy the life and work of his subjects. His catalogue is a 'canon' of the twentieth century. Nobody's work embodied the term quite as fully. But in so 'canonising' these figures, he placed them under his camera's rule. Unlike the Russian Orthodox tradition, where holy figures are portrayed as unconfined, Cartier-Bresson's sitters are nearly always depicted indoors, enclosed, imprisoned. Is it any wonder that cigarettes have such a high symbolic currency in these portraits? Christian Bérard is even placed behind bars.

Nothing is transmitted beyond his concretised frames. There is no 'beyond.' His subjects are imprisoned in their own image, their image fetishised at the expense of the work. The idea of the Author, this figure of 'genius' responsible for the work, is introduced before the work ever gets an airing.





Has anybody read even a single one of Pound's Cantos since Cartier-Bresson took his portrait in 1971? I sincerely doubt it. But if by chance some wet petal on a bough (or was it a *black petal*? a *wet bough*? a *pet bow*? who knows?) contrived to move beyond the image, they would find the work already changed, diminished, singularised. Barthes said that to give a text an author is 'to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.' To give an author an image in the manner of Cartier-Bresson has much the same effect. A limit imposed on the author. They are furnished with a final signified. There is no longer Ezra Pound, only Cartier-Bresson's 'Ezra Pound.' Did Cartier-Bresson know the damage he was doing?

To give a text *an image of an author* is to appropriate the text, to reduce it to a singular set of photographic conventions. It is to smother the text not with a final signified, but with a final signified of a final signified. I look at Giacometti's sculptures, I look at them closely, and all I see is him crossing the road in the rain. It has become an utter tautology to say the image of Giacometti looks like his own work. The image *is* the work. It belongs to the photographer now. His photos even tell us so. Did you notice anything strange, for instance, about that other Giacometti portrait, the one so evocative of touch, of fingertips, of sculpture? The sculptor's own fingers play no part in this sculpted scene. They have been put away, pocketed, concealed. It would not surprise me to learn they had been broken. 'Technologies of inscription and the undoing of certain protocols of reading, writing, and thinking that they occasion must be thought together,' said Gerhard Richter, introducing Derrida. 'In addition to the





affirmative, gathering, preserving dimension of the archive, there is *the violence of the archive itself, as archive, as archival violence.*' Diminished in this way, artistic work has ceased to matter. Is it any wonder the portrait catalogues of Cartier-Bresson's successors (Mapplethorpe, Leibovitz, Bailey) are all filled up with celebrities, of images *qua* images? At least Warhol was up front about his workings; at least he placed himself within it.

Cartier-Bresson never sat for his own self-portrait. He let others do that for him. Naturally, he knew the damage he was doing. So did Derrida. He'd understood quite early, in fact. 'What I was writing had to lead both socially and politically to the defetishisation of the author, especially the author as they appear according to the photographic code.' He took steps to protect the work, forbidding all public photographs of himself until, in the late-1970s, a year or two after Cartier-Bresson was said to have 'retired,' the prohibition was finally lifted. Cartier-Bresson never took his photograph, which perhaps explains why his work seems so difficult to a society literate only in the image. He was not the only one to have taken caution, in any case. In 1946, Cartier-Bresson arrived at Paul Valéry's house only to find the poet 'formally dressed as a member of the *Académie française* rather than as himself.' In this ridiculous get-up, Valéry stood next to a bust of his own head that he'd positioned on a mantelpiece in front of a mirror. The picture is such a mess that it is often cited as an example of how collaboration with the sitter doesn't work. But Valéry was a figure who 'never stopped calling into question and deriding the Author.' Was





he really ‘collaborating’ with the photographer? Hardly. His portrait is a send-up of the form. Others were a little slower to understand, but it seems clear that word eventually got out in certain circles. ‘Today the more the author’s figure invades the field,’ wrote Italo Calvino in 1959, ‘the more the world he portrays empties; then the author himself fades, and one is left with a void on all sides.’ Colette, Eisler, Brok and Aragon obscure their faces accordingly. Colette even sits with a companion. But it was all too little, too late. I look at Giacometti’s sculptures, I look at them closely, and all I see is him crossing the road in the rain. His coat is pulled over his head. But is he really looking for shelter? Or is he looking for a place to hide? In that decisive moment he came close to disappearing, but he did not come close enough. He was snapped, trapped, a monk in the rain. His hiding became his habit and his habit became his icon and his icon hides the work. It has disappeared completely now. Man keeps walking, but he walks with a void on all sides.

