# afterimage

THE JOURNAL OF MEDIA ARTS AND CULTURAL CRITICISM




VOL. 43, No. 4

01>

7 25274 79734 9

USA $5.50/CAN $7.50

## Paul Graham: The Whiteness of the Whale

PIER 24 PHOTOGRAPHY
SAN FRANCISCO
AUGUST 1, 2015–FEBRUARY 29, 2016

This exhibition collects the informal American trilogy by New York-based British photographer Paul Graham. In the snowy amnesia of *American Night* (1998–2002), the electrifying disorientation of *a shimmer of possibility* (2004–06), and the dark mnemonic humor of *The Present* (2009–11), flickers a symptomatology of American vision. This exhibition's contemporary photographs "of nothing" are of the United States, as we cannot clearly see it: as a settler society, racist, and therefore abject. It was the lure of the logo that above all things appalled me.

In Herman Melville's original: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me." Graham titled the exhibition after a selection from Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), reproduced in an exhibition catalog co-published by MACK and Pier 24. The grasping horror of the novel's Chapter Forty-two complements the harrowing gleam of *American Night*'s "white pictures," overexposed to the edge of legibility. Lone pedestrians in the middle distance appear chillingly misplaced, out in the open under an unforgiving blaze. In *Man in Car Park, Memphis* (2000), Graham's composition imbues a nondescript parking lot with an eerie emptiness, intimidating the viewer with the ineluctable pavement of nature. A Saia truck in the distance resuscitates my hours inside the fallow and irrigated emerald expanse of the California drought, where these freighters are hazy with the dust of hundreds of miles; in my branded reverie, the man is easily forsaken.

This exhibition hangs in a space that once warehoused commodities that arrived by ship. Pier 24 Photography, opened in 2010, is neither museum nor gallery. It introduces itself as "a place to view and think about photography," and is a consistent subject of excited buzz at photo events in the city. *The Whiteness of the Whale* benefits from minimalist exhibition design and the contemplative, private atmosphere ensured by Pier 24's unique policy of free admission by appointment only. Pier 24's exhibition statement introduces the themes of its first solo show as "racial and social inequality, the texture of everyday life, and the nature of sight, perception, and photography itself." This meditation is intellectually generative and immensely affecting; an attentive engagement with the trilogy will go beyond the pier's walls. As Graham put it in his exhibition-related lecture, held at the California College of the Arts (CCA) on October 13, 2015, the un/spectacular inequality of the US is "quite a difficult thing to ignore, at least at first."

The chromatic deprivation of *American Night*'s ominously light-washed photographs recalibrates the eye. The series's saturated photographs of suburban homes read as garish introjections. Meant to induce shock, this chromatic vertigo is a special moment in Graham's oeuvre. His work gained notoriety in the 1980s, when his photographic rendering of Thatcherism caused controversy for the fact of its color. The chromatic avenues of observation and critique in Graham's work offer some of the most distinctive and beautiful expressions of his formal range. Binaries prove inadequate to the interpretation of this work; *American Night*'s vivid "McMansions" (what Malvina Reynolds called, in an intentional slippage of scale, "little boxes"[1]) are not hypervisible, but *also* susceptible to disregard; my eyes repeatedly mistook them for something like ads. Nonetheless possessed by their "ticky-tacky" promise, I was gripped by the fantasy of ripping plastic and paper tags off of new clothing; I took shelter in the violent American Dream.

This lurch toward consumerist relief warns of a civic drowsiness. Graham's subjects in *American Night* are endangered within the motorist's ecology and the proprietor's domain. They are stranded in a landscape of car dealerships, empty parking lots, auto body shops, and drive-throughs. In *Woman waiting by telephone, San Antonio* (2002) Graham dead-centers a woman on a swath of pavement. A storefront sign describes the roadside parking lot in which she stands as "Open for Business." It adopts the distinct risk of the clearing, and reveals the three-bedroom as the hunter's perch.

The exhibition text explains that *American Night* "span[s] the nation's four compass points," a curious description for work undertaken in a country in which space, if we follow Jean Baudrillard's meditations, "is the very form of thought."[2] What is revealed is not simply the pervasiveness of poverty, but the terrible clarity of *overspread* as an organizing principle for the settler colonial state and the incursion of the corporation. (Recall the goal of Manifest Destiny, in its coining usage: "to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent.") Take for example *Man waiting at bus stop, Detroit* (2001) from *American Night*. At the bus stop, a sign reads "NO STANDING." The waiting man leans, resting a moment off his crutches, against an unadorned white building of unknown usage (nonresidential, single story). A gleaming red sedan recalls the series's suburban driveways. Another sign, affixed to the unpainted brick of a restaurant adjoining the white cube, sanctions the presence of those residents: "Parking for Yum Yum customers only." Squint against the pearlescent refusal of the print, and an American truth becomes visible. "No loitering" is the *terra nullius* of corporate colonialism.

If the violence implied through such signage is that the police (a purportedly civic force) are a red-faced gentleman's phone call away, what does this mean for the street photographer, historically associated with the criminal element? In his CCA lecture, Graham joked that in the case of trouble on the street he leans into his British accent—"works like a charm." Not for nothing, but Graham's racial privilege (in which his accent is a factor) to transgress sociotopographic boundaries (across the boonies, the suburbs, the city) without major apprehension centrally enabled the trilogy. The constitutive power of whiteness in the work must not evade our attention through charm or jarring or any other means. Graham's meditation on American geography draws on the deep well of what is not often acknowledged as a kind of apartheid, but his aesthetics are not immune to problematic symbolism. That Graham's work is of canonical importance is all the more reason to be strict with its charisma.

At the center of the large gallery showing *American Night*, four large prints impose on the space of a temporary "inner gallery."

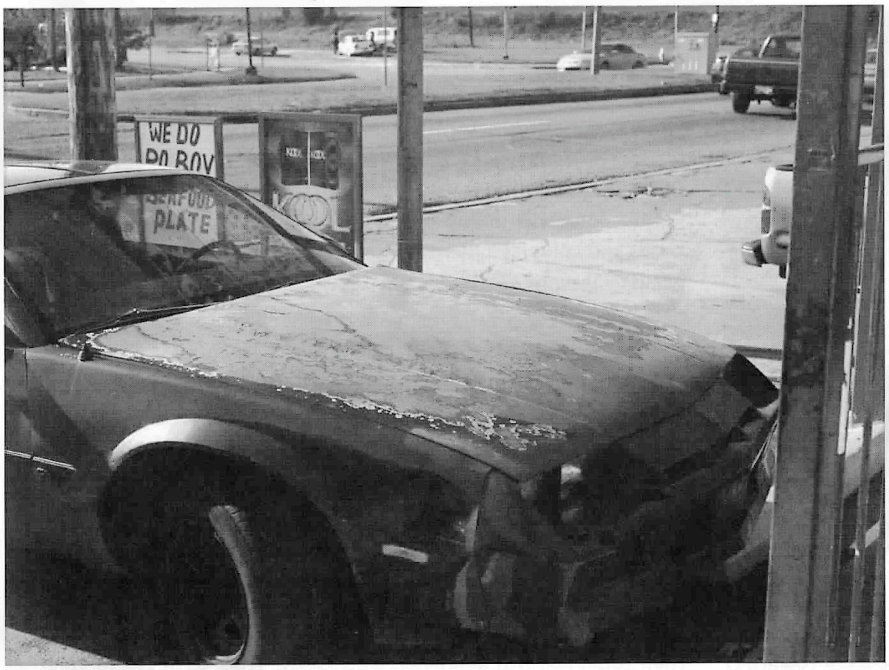
Dramatic late-afternoon light pierces New York City, shadowy with gravitas and insecurity. Of the four black subjects, one appears in profile, wearing a gauze eye patch. Another sits in a wheelchair in the street, arm over his face. (It is unclear whether the subject is shielding himself from the camera. Graham explained, again during his talk, that the man was wiping sweat from his brow. Be that as it may, the anecdote doesn't inhere in the image. One gets a whiff of exploitation.) Here, Graham's literalism risks invoking a mythology of degeneracy in a dubious strategy to confer humanity by inhabiting one's own fearful privilege, using others as props. This problem is emphasized by the segregated exhibition design, which obscures the relational dimensions of race, class, and health and inscribes the territoriality of racial Otherness into the show. Further, the intended effect of claustrophobia in this "inner city" assumes and plays upon white fear, thereby positing the gallery itself as a white space.

The installation of *a shimmer of possibility* is also unique, and rather ingenious. The series is shown in its entirety, totaling over 160 images, with a gallery dedicated to each of the twelve volumes of the photobook collection for which Graham was awarded the 2011 Paris Photo Book Prize. The variously sized photographs are presented not at "eye-level," but in compositions of up to twenty images recalling the "stuttering" quality of embodied vision. In effect, the walk through Pier 24's many galleries powerfully complements the exploratory gaze constructing Graham's America. *shimmer* elegantly stages photography's simultaneous Heraclitean and Democritean sensibilities of time; Graham often invokes the notion of time-as-river, yet also chides the viewer of his "filmic haikus" too eager for narrative.[3] The subversive rot and simplicity of Graham's extended attention to one littered, tired street corner restores a scintillating chaos. In *Orleans (Cherries on Sidewalk)* (2006), spilled bright red maraschino cherries glow in their puddle of preservative on a gray sidewalk. This unlikely image stands alone, implying a heightened awareness and providing no narrative exit from the incident. The sets comprising *shimmer* may alternately be read as a visual subversion of what Guy Debord called "commodity-time," which promotes "a sequence of falsely individualized moments" roughly corresponding to the spectacular, the "newsworthy" imagery that Graham disdains.[4] The trilogy dwells emphatically in the provisional, but the world's shimmer escapes the viewer numbed by the glitz of corporate media. (It is significant that Graham's formal conceits mimic the perceptual symptoms of head trauma.) "Not only is the relation to the commodity visible," Debord wrote, "but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world."[5] He wrote of *occupation* and *conquest*, of "geological layers of commodities"; Graham's American trilogy shows the settlement of capitalism as a dominant aesthetic component of this country's landscape.

In *shimmer*'s *Pittsburgh (Man Cutting Grass)* (2004), the red and blue of a striped shirt picks up the camera's red lens flare and the man's blue kerchief. Raindrops catch the sunlight. But I am wrenched from this scene of noble peasantry toward the Exxon sign in the distance. Or, consider the cracked and curling paint job on the hood in *Louisiana (Camaro)* (2005), which, vibrant blue and green, siphons the gaze toward the gas station's advertisement of Kool cigarettes. Graham's chroma-politics suggest the influence of consumer capitalism on our "deep literacy . . . in which intuitive and selective attention remakes coherence from the incidental flow of daily life."[6]

This is accomplished in part by challenging the meaning of traversal to any notion of a Great American Photography. Envisioning

*Man in wheelchair at sunset, New York* from the series *American Night* (1998–2002) by Paul Graham; © 2002 Paul Graham; courtesy Pace and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York




*Louisiana (Camaro)* from the series *a shimmer of possibility* (2004–06) by Paul Graham; © 2005 Paul Graham; courtesy Pace and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

this continent through photography has meant the simulated mastery of expanse—the dream of a distance not fatal. In the nineteenth century, the mode of expedition organized geographic subjection. In the twentieth century, tourism reached a rolling boil in the road trip. Both have profoundly influenced a collective vision of what is called "America" through their shaping of photography. Graham replaces the coolness of car culture with an invisible death by exposure, from sea to shining sea. Rejecting the tourist's aesthetic, the viewer is denied any orienting vista, in any of the series. Graham strikes a fearsome chord in his depiction of the failure of navigation, the financial contingency of topographic mastery, and the cruel precision of agoraphobia as an index of settler colonial guilt.

Yet a motif of visual and mobility disability provides, in all three series, an all-too-familiar out. Angst is pent up, symbolically, in the abusive nomination of physical disability as exemplary of social fracture and debasement. Conceptual recourse to blindness posits an evacuated notion of inequality *as lack*, and situates American vision as ignorant, rather than educated and seduced by travesty in the guise of property. This poetical teleology unfortunately undercuts the compassion of Graham's project—the projection of fear onto the bodies of the marginalized accomplishes nothing. It is, in fact, dangerous. David Chandler suggests, in his catalog essay, that Graham presents individuals whose ethically beneficial depiction is new to the (presumed) viewer; "He forces us to look when looking is difficult, where, simply out of respect, we might rather avert our eyes."[7] No, "simply out of respect" does the racist gaze blot out collective abandonment "where escape is not possible."[8] The reckoning visitor will note any privileged gaze lusting for the instruction to look when it hurts.

Take one of the photographs in the *shimmer* set from *Everett Avenue, Chelsea, Boston* (2006): an empty parking lot at the edge of a wood, nothing but a line of force. We are presented a nothing that cannot nullify, cannot mollify American history. To revel in the correctly noted embodiment of Graham's style achieves here its specific political solemnity in the physical culpability of encounter. Fusing distance, disparity, and disappearance, Graham's enigmatic non-places are American in the hint of reservations, of camps; in the disorientation of the parking lot, we slip toward detention. The viewer is confined to the terms of this world, aggrieved but never condemned: I saw a spider's silk catching the light in *shimmer*'s *New England* (2006) and was back on the street where I grew up, a hare halted in the clover.

*The Present* appeals again to the sensorium of our inattentiveness, pointing to the perpetual visual-historical illiteracy that perhaps defines the present. In this final installment, the trilogy's evocation of sensory lethargy and inattention turns picnoleptic. Large prints of New York City street scenes hang close to the floor, merging the sidewalk with the pier's floor. The city's lunch-breaking workers, shoppers, and pedestrians inhabit the galleries. This transmogrifying city is startling, amusing, ghastly. In *34th Street, 4th June 2010, 3.12.58 pm*, the central subject in this diptych's first image wears Tweety Bird earrings. The Time Warner cartoon character is also tattooed on her chest. Her shirt and purse are pink, her shopping habits seemingly fixed. She cries, and wipes an undereye with fingers splayed in visual repetition of the wink of a yellow smiley on her T-shirt. She pauses in a bargain alley under a large banner printed "2 Suits for $150.00," and the involuntary arose: "Always low prices. Always." Walmart's logo and slogan were proven indelible only to curdle in Graham's photograph. The perceptual grip of advertisements may be offset by the excesses of literacy; the sign cannot dictate, not always. *The Whiteness of the Whale* mounts a powerful visual critique of the hypocognitive glint in the American eye, drawn inexorably to a corporate vision that determines what saturates our vision and what fades. Graham is helping us see. Let us try.

**STEPHANIE AMON is a writer based in San Francisco.**

NOTES **1**. Malvina Reynolds, "Little Boxes," on *Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth* (New York: Columbia Records, CS-9414, 1967. **2**. Jean Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso, 2015), 16. **3**. Paul Graham, "Conversation between Paul Graham and Urs Stahel," Paris Photo Platform, November 15, 2014, https://vimeo.com/112269814. **4**. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 2010), unpaginated, proposition #149. See also Graham, "Conversation." **5**. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, propositions #40–42. **6**. Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, "Constellations," in *Paul Graham: The Whiteness of the Whale*, exh cat. (San Francisco: Pier 24 Photography and Mack Books, 2015), 180. **7**. David Chandler, "Consciousness Breathing," in ibid., 33. **8**. See Gwendolyn Y. Purifoye, "Nice-nastiness and Other Raced Interactions on Public Transport Systems," *City & Community* 14, no. 3 (2015): 286–310.