

# Camera Dolorosa

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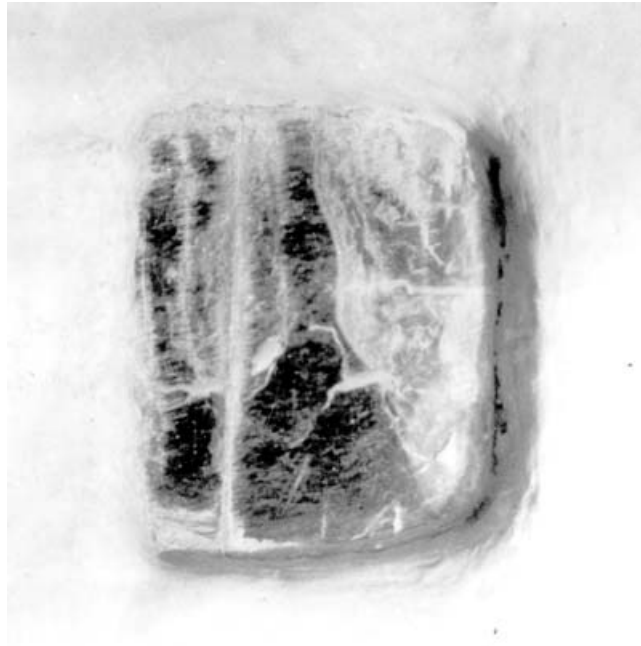
This is a fragment of a book I am working on, written in the first instance against Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. My opening claim is that the ongoing influence of the book has not been exhausted by readings that dwell on its lack of controlled argument or on its few moments of propositional clarity. I set out, therefore, to read as idiosyncratically and to write as strangely as Barthes himself. I argue that Barthes's sense of photography is too domestic, too much slanted to the vernacular, the poetic, the subjective, the native, the nostalgic, the anecdotal, the candid. I argue that his 'pain' is not painful enough, that his sense of memory is too abstract and easy. For me the famous punctum is just a pinprick. I think the wound is much larger. As an art, photography insistently gives us the pain and the boredom of seeing, and the visual desperation that can follow: *camera dolorosa*. I am interested in another sense of photography that stresses its inhumanity, its boredom, its apparently endless capacity to show us things we do not want to see. I try, in making that argument, to write just as unreliably about 'theory' as Barthes does, and to produce a book at least as strange as his.

**Keywords:** Roland Barthes (1916–1980), *Camera Lucida*, Rosalind Krauss, Michael Fried, Charles Sanders Pierce (1839–1914)

1. One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of a selenite window (figure 1). It had once existed, and may still exist, in a pueblo house on top of Ácoma mesa in New Mexico. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'This is the condition of photography'. Sometimes I would mention this amazement, but since no one seemed to share it, nor even to understand (life consists of these stretches of solitude), I forgot about it.

My interests in photography took a more cultural turn. I decided I liked photography *in opposition* to painting, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it. This question grew insistent. I was overcome by an 'ontological' desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was 'in itself', by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images. Such a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by its tremendous contemporary expansion, I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it has a 'genius' of its own.

2. So Roland Barthes wrote, with a different photograph in mind, on the opening page of *Camera Lucida*. I imagine him sitting at a large Empire desk, in the house where he had lived so many years with his mother. The shades are drawn, and he has spread out the family photographs, along with his favourite clippings from photo magazines and 'the latest "emergency" reportage'. He is in a singular frame of mind: for some reason all that matters now is to think about photography: to think his way into it, pushing right to its 'essence'. He wants, perhaps obscurely at first, to use the imaginative journey to speak about

Figure 1. *The Selenite Window.*

his mother's death: to pin the meaning of her memory to a photograph, to 'fix' it, in the inevitable photographic pun.

At least that is a picture we are permitted to conjure while we read *Camera Lucida*. This Barthes is not the same as the one that readers knew from his other writings: this is no longer the voice of the scintillating essayist, the famous interpreter of Panzani pasta or the Marquis de Sade. It is a sad and concerted voice, given to melancholic parentheses, momentary distractions, abrupt changes of mind, and pages that quietly turn away from their opening ideas.

The Barthes of *Camera Lucida* is loath to deploy his customary semiotic analyses. He is given to writing numbered sections so short that they would not even fill a double-spaced typed page. (As I have learned from copying him, and discovering how short his book really is.) The denser and more worked sections become prose poems, and at times the book is a whispering-chamber of French aphoristic prose from Baudelaire to Mallarmé and (especially when it seems the sections are arbitrary excerpts from an unbroken inner monologue) Proust. I hear the narrator's voice in *Camera Lucida* as an intimate but steady undertone, a combination of distracted musing, whispered confession, and public lecture.

Margaret Olin puts the voice that speaks in *Camera Lucida* in quotation marks—'Barthes'—to distinguish it from the voice in the other books, the more public ones, which she assigns simply to Barthes.<sup>1</sup> Or the letters and documents that preserve Barthes for us outside his own texts could be denominated Barthes, so that 'Barthes' could stand for the voice that speaks in certain semiotic, sociological, linguistic, and structuralist texts: in that case it would be necessary to invent an elaborate notation, for example "'Barthes'", for the singular character who speaks in *Camera Lucida*. "'Barthes'" would have written 'Barthes', but given him up for a reason that is not entirely clear; and "'Barthes'" would also have attempted to overwrite Barthes. But I will leave all those ramifying distinctions to one side for the moment, because I am fascinated, as I am meant to be, by the melancholic author in his darkened and seemingly empty house. (Let's just call him Barthes, not forgetting his scare-quote avatars.)

What I want to know is: why does this figure make me so annoyed? His obsession with pictures of race, of mental debilitation, of lost places and people, and above all with what he thinks are unusual costumes and faces: all that

1 – *Representations* (Autumn 2002), 99–118.

might be annoying on a first reading, but it also makes sense as the very personal, mainly uncognised, always inadequate solace of a person who has lost someone he loves. That is so, even if I do not sympathize with it, even if I find his 'exotic' images overdetermined and over-familiar. The closeted calm voice sometimes reminds me of the nauseating tutor in Sartre's *The Words*, the one who stood too close to Sartre, forcing him to inhale the tutor's sour breath. That could also be a source of annoyance, and yet its closeness is also right for the subject. No, what bothers me is that the voice is supported by a certainty I cannot understand: a conviction, almost, that his frame of mind is not an impediment to his theorization. What a strange conviction, even stranger than the scenario in which mourning is accomplished by writing memoirs about one's mother *as* a photograph.

3. *Camera Lucida* seems soft, at times even liquid. It feels pliant and unhealthy, like an overwatered plant in a conservatory. And yet it is compelling: it makes me feel a pessimistic solace that I am led to think was sufficient, a clammy comfort that Barthes created by writing it into existence. It causes me to rethink what an author's control might amount to, or what theory can be when it is so entangled with desires that it hardly appears as theory. And all that adds to my annoyance: is *this* photography?

4. 'This book was born of impatience': so Hubert Damisch began his book on linear perspective (a book that, not incidentally, has also made me impatient over the years). My first reaction to Barthes's book, as far as I can recall it, was enraptured attention, mingled with some difficulty understanding what I took to be his method. That difficulty has not diminished. Nor has it become easier to understand how to read the burden of affect, how to attend—or not to attend—to the saddened voice that speaks so carefully about things that only it can know.

Readers have remarked on Barthes's melancholy tone, as if the effect of patient sadness can be read separately from the argument the sad voice undertakes. 'Il y a un voile de tristesse répandu sur son oeuvre', according to Philippe Roger, 'un timbre mélancolique'.<sup>2</sup> Here melancholy does not impose itself on the text 'from the outside', as T.J. Clark says, describing himself typing 'nearly soundlessly into screen space at the fin-de-siècle'.<sup>3</sup> Barthes's voice insinuates itself into the fabric of his argument, and even, insidiously, into my own responses and now my own writing. I am aware of a tidal pull from the lulling authority of his prose. I am washed down along its currents. I adopt the French-style alternation of overly long and surprisingly short sentences. I employ apostrophes. I indulge in asides. I make sure my parenthetical remarks are slightly obscure, but never really opaque. I even, and only half in fun, dutifully format my pages with Barthes's drop capitals. I am already looking forward to introducing my own rare words and neologisms (but who can compete with Barthes: Ecmnesia! Animula!). I tell myself I am doing this to be as faithful as possible to the real openness of the book—the quality that Barthes named *écriture* and that used to be called 'paraliterary'—in hopes of finding a reading and finally a *use* for the book, a use that begins by refusing to limit itself to the book's theory or its melancholy story.

5. *Camera Lucida* would be simpler if the unreliable adopted voice were used to propose a conventional argument. Then the speaker, Olin's 'Barthes', could be carefully dissected from the matrix of his claims about photography. The book could be parsed, disentangling Barthes's desire from 'Barthes's' reasoning, dividing the apparition of the Winter Garden photograph from the actual photographs out of which it was hallucinated. The book would become usable for photography theory in the way it has often been taken to be by readers who

2 – Anne-Marie Bertrand, *Bulletin Bibliographique Française*, 2003.

3 – *Farewell to an Idea*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1999, 13.

prefer to ignore the hot-house or glass-house atmosphere that nourishes Barthes's strange thoughts.

The case of *Camera Lucida* ('case', as opposed to problem, because it has to do with pathology, as in Nietzsche's *Der Fall Wagner*, and also because *Camera Lucida* seems obdurately resistant to being taken as a model) can be succinctly demonstrated by noting, in an abbreviated fashion, what happened to two art historians who approached the book from opposite sides: one who attended to the writing's effect on the argument, and another who took the writer's argument apart from his voice.

Rosalind Krauss praised the 'paraliterary' in 1981, citing Barthes and proposing a reconceptualization of what would count as historical and critical writing.<sup>4</sup> A decade later, she was still thinking about the paraliterary, trying, in *The Optical Unconscious*, to combine analytic expositions of art history with passages written in a literary mode. The literary passages include florid descriptions of Clement Greenberg's unpleasant face and manner, and they alternate, typographically, with passages of art historical analysis. The two kinds of writing are jarringly different: for me, at least, they do not create a new paraliterary writing or even call one another into question. My own reader's experience is that the presence of pages of analytic art history—the majority of *The Optical Unconscious*—highlights the literary ambitions of the descriptive passages, prompting me to judge them as I would judge first-person memoirs or fiction. Could they stand on their own as literature or fiction? Could they be read alongside, say, an essay in *McSweeney's*? For me they remain awkward interlopers, occasionally embarrassing interruptions of a far more accomplished historical narrative.

A diametrically opposed reaction to the writerly challenge of *Camera Lucida* can be found, appropriately, in Michael Fried, who took just a few sentences out of one section of *Camera Lucida* in order to craft his argument about absorptive photography and the punctum.<sup>5</sup> He deliberately ignored the prose in which those few sentences were entangled, and made only two passing remarks on the quality of Barthes's writing, as if to say that no matter how troubled Barthes's text might be, it is still wholly legitimate and even responsible to seize on moments of analytic clarity and use them to construct defensible arguments. I can imagine Barthes declining to disagree.

I won't be arguing with either author in this book.<sup>6</sup> I only want to note the textbook opposition they present in their approaches to *Camera Lucida*. One tries to emulate Barthes's living hybrid of theory and writing, and ends up producing a clanging juxtaposition of theory and writing. The other professes no particular interest in Barthes's writing, and, like a surgeon using a dissecting instrument, extracts two lines of theory from the entire book. My moral is just that Barthes's book remains exceedingly hard to read and just as hard to use.

6. Annoyance is partly the effect of never knowing whether Barthes's ideas can make sense outside their exotic matrix of *écriture*, unless the book is strip-mined for ideas and discarded *as a book*. (As Fried does.) Annoyance is also knowing (as Krauss shows) how treacherous it is to do anything but ignore the *écriture*.

And annoyance comes from realizing that there is a third option, but that it may not be achievable. I take it Barthes did not worry about *écriture* in his book in the way I am: for him the 'essence' of photography was immersed in writing, and discovered within it. That is a nearly unapproachable position for a writer interested in photography, because it cannot be sensible to say that the best way forward is to risk losing *any* theory by writing so strongly that the writing may overwhelm and ruin whatever may be said. It even takes courage to *read* the book for the 'pleasure of the text': not only because academic habits insist on

4— *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1985, 295.

5— *Critical Inquiry*, (2005) 546.

6— My response to Fried is in *Critical Inquiry*, 938–56.

excavating a text to find its claims or its truths or its argument, but because *Camera Lucida* is more than just *scriptible*, as Barthes said of Balzac's *Sarrasine*: Barthes's book has a purpose, an argument, a conclusion.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, there are claims in *Camera Lucida*, and obscurely, they are what we are to understand as creating the book's form and voice. If I find myself reconciled with this, or tempted to go ahead without working on it, then I have declined to take up the challenge the text throws down. Any academic essay that locates Barthes's arguments and reads the writing as a symptom is not serious enough about the book's form, just as any impressionistic piece of art writing that calls on the punctum is not serious enough about the book's intention to argue.

7 – S/Z, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang 1974, 4.

7. So now as I write my answer to *Camera Lucida*, twenty-five years too late, I think again of the fact that so many writers take it, and in particular the punctum, as a touchstone. Especially those who would not normally propose such personal concepts, so detached from history and close to solipsism. Writers who would not allow themselves to reason with such a breathtaking absence of scholarly support. It is as if that book, perhaps the least scholarly of the central texts of visual studies, has protected itself by shrinking away from the glare of criticism, shriveling to a point-like punctum of its own.

*Camera Lucida* has no footnotes, and the English translation has no list of sources: omissions that simultaneously declare 'Barthes's' independence and leave readers stranded on the text as on an island, with few other writers' voices in earshot and no escape from the peculiarities of the author's memory. (This book strikes a compromise in that regard. The abbreviated references in parentheses should be enough to allow readers to navigate from this book to the many that address *Camera Lucida*.)

It is clear that a full answer to *Camera Lucida* cannot be an academic essay in an academic journal: two decades of scholarship have not yet produced such an answer. The only way to reply to a book as strange as Barthes's is to write another even stranger.

8. I will begin, then, with a selenite window. A window made of selenite is first of all a flawed window. I cannot clearly imagine what the world would have looked like through it, even though I have been to the top of Ácoma mesa, where the adobe village still stands, and I have looked down on the sunken desert floor, and let my eye follow the slow rise of the ground up to the bluish scrub in the mountains that surround the mesa, which sits like a cylinder of rock in an enormous bowl filled with dust. The little garden plots in the desert below, where the villagers still grow native corn and beans, are so far away that the people tending them can just barely be discerned from the houses on top.

Through selenite windows, people in Ácoma would have seen nothing but the blue of the sky and the similar shades of adobe, mountain, and sand. Seen through the window, the world would look like ill-fitted pieces of mosaic crushed together, pressed and refracted by the translucent mineral into a nearly indecipherable pattern. The window's inclusions, its grit and spalling sheets of rock, would make the window more a reminder of the lit world beyond it than a representation of that world. The light would bend in such complicated and unhelpful ways that the view through the window could only serve to demonstrate that something was not being seen. Rigorously unseen, according to inflexible rules of optics.

Photography could be compared, I thought when I first found the photograph, to that selenite window. It promises a view of the world, but it gives us a flattened object that is hard to interpret as more than a reminder of the world we may think it should deliver.

9. The selenite window itself, not the photograph of it, was my first idea for a model for photography. Sometime later I thought photography could be better

compared to a sheet of black ice, the kind that forms overnight on a lake when it is bitter cold and there is no wind (figure 2). I know from experience that it can be terrifying to walk on black lake ice: it fractures with each footstep and the breaks squeal and shriek as they spread through the ice. Underfoot, the fissures look like white crystalline ribbons. Somewhere a foot or two beneath them, the ice ends, and the black water begins. Black ice is a horizontal window that looks down onto nothing visible. Peering down, you see into a thick deep darkness: not a black surface like a wall in a dark room, but a place where light becomes weak, where it loses energy, where it dies in some viscous depth. The lake water that must be underneath the ice seems more an idea than anything visible. It is an idea of falling or drowning. It is a place that admits light but does not give back any image.

So I thought that looking into a photograph is like standing on black lake ice and looking down into the water beneath it. The material surface of a photograph is often transparent to vision: my eye moves right through it, except where the surface is scratched or textured, or where it reflects my face. Yet seen from close up, a photographic print does have a certain minuscule thickness, and in that thin layer the mixed crystals and paper fibers create a shallow and uncertain illusion of depth.

How seldom Barthes mentions the surface of the photograph: he looks through, habitually, and does not reflect on how his gaze has penetrated the paper. Partly that is an effect of studying pictures in magazines, and partly it is the common reaction to photographs. Rosalind Krauss calls this the 'it's' response: 'it's a portrait', 'it's a landscape', 'it's a very beautiful woman', 'it's a man on the right who is in drag', 'it's an x or a y'.<sup>8</sup>

8— 'A Note on Photography and the Simulacral', in *Overexposed*, edited by Carol Squiers, 171–73.

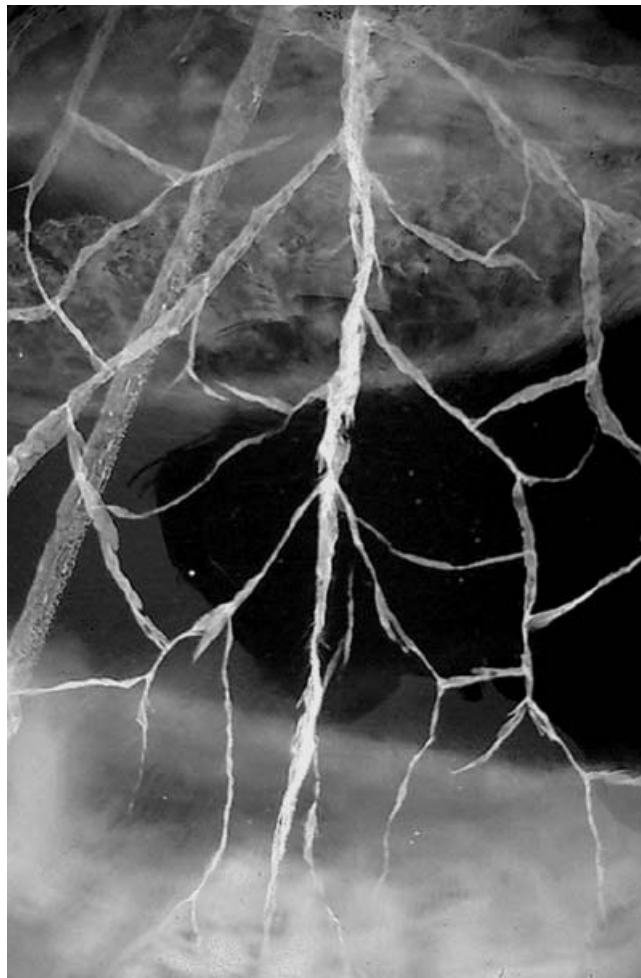


Figure 2. *Black Ice*.

Normally looking at a photograph is *only* looking beyond its surface, seeing the people and landscapes back there somewhere in or beyond or behind the photograph itself. (No word is quite right, as E.H. Gombrich and Richard Wollheim have argued. When I look at things an image represents, I am not clearly conscious of looking past anything.) It is the same with black ice: it hardly catches my eye at all. Only its cracks and surface imperfections and faint reflections show that it is there at all, and so I look deeper, below it, searching for something to see: but there is nothing certain beyond the flaws and frighteningly thin thickness of the nearly invisible ice.

10. I chose these examples of stunted seeing in the first instance because photography tends to be conceptualized with the help of brilliant metaphors of perfect windows, lucence, logic, and transparency. Cameras are still imagined, despite their increasing complexity, as machines of reason and light: the pinhole camera, the camera obscura, the diagrammed eye with its inverted retinal image, the Euclidean ray diagram, the camera lucida, are all metaphors of the ease with which photographs are thought to capture geometrically accurate images of the world.

It has long been a critical problem in photography that the medium provides its own concrete metaphor: once it was the simple Kodak box camera, and now it is the autofocus autoexposure autowind motorized professional-black megapixel camera with wireless internet uploading and diffraction-limited, multicoated computer designed aspheric optics. Either way the actual machinery prompts the metaphoric machinery, facilitating the notion that photography is mechanical and therefore, in the logic that can only be persuasive to people who don't think too closely about their machines, potentially the equivalent of the simple pinhole camera.

The crushed-looking selenite window and the unstable sheet of lake ice were antidotes for those misleading and relentlessly optimistic metaphors.

11. The camera lucida, Barthes's choice for master trope and title, is a device with a semisilvered prism, which makes it possible to trace the outlines of an object, a person for example. It was popular in the early nineteenth century among silhouette artists and portrait painters, and again from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1960s, when it was adopted by naturalists to trace objects seen under the microscope, and by archaeologists and biologists to produce accurate outlines. (And, beginning in the 1990s, by David Hockney and a small group of scholars.)

Barthes could have called his book *Camera Obscura*: that would have been historically appropriate given photography's origins, but he wanted the archetypal image of light and enlightenment. He chose *Camera Lucida*, I suspect, in order to oppose the connotation of darkness in camera obscura. 'It is a mistake to associate Photography, by reason of its technical origins, with the notion of a dark passage (*camera obscura*)'.<sup>9</sup> But the camera lucida is hardly a suitable metaphor of light: it is a finicky instrument, which involves peering into a small aperture or through a tiny prism, and it can be very difficult to balance the little light it provides with the light of the object.

9 – 106.

It is true that a camera obscura can be very dark: it can take a full five minutes to let the eye adjust to the darkness of a room-sized camera obscura. But even the camera obscura is too light for my purposes, too optimistic about the ease of pulling the world onto a flat surface. In 1568 Daniele Barbaro praised the motion and color of the image he saw projected in a camera obscura. Movement and light have been motifs in the literature ever since. Besides, as Barthes says, the camera obscura belongs to photography's 'technical origins': as a model, it confuses etiology with explanation.

12. I also chose the rock window and ice sheet in order to reject the semiotic index as an identifier of the photographic. (Charles Sanders Peirce's category of indexical signs: those that physically issue from what they signify. Smoke rising from a chimney is an indexical sign of a fire in the hearth. In painting or drawing, so it is said, the world makes no direct physical mark on the canvas. Painted signs may be iconic—they resemble what they denote—or symbolic—conventional, as in the word 'photograph', but never indexical. But, so it is said, photography is indexical because the silver compounds in the negative are directly affected by photons from the object.)

This theory about photography's indexical nature was helpful for some art criticism in the wake of minimalism, when it was important to stress photography's material nature and its independence of ideation. That purpose aside, the allegedly indexical origin of photographs is not phenomenologically convincing, and I think Barthes would have disliked it. What is gained, he might have asked, by proposing that the familiar elements of photography are best understood in terms of the most esoteric, mathematized, and abstract interactions of subatomic particles? Or, as Geoffrey Batchen has argued, where is the theory when it appears that Peirce has only entangled it in an infinite regress of signs?<sup>10</sup>

To extract a manageable sense of indexicality from Peirce's writing it has also been necessary to avoid the contexts in which that doctrine is lodged. Peirce said, for example, that signs of all sorts—photographic ones included—are mixtures of indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs, thereby ruining the initial distinction that has been used to set photographic signs aside from painted ones.

I love Peirce's texts, and I take pleasure in losing myself in his labyrinths of mathematized logic.<sup>11</sup> I also like, but I don't understand, his ideas about photography. An iconic sign of a rainy day, he says at one point, is 'the mental composite photograph of all the rainy days the thinker has experienced'.<sup>12</sup> What is a 'mental composite photograph'? I can't say I have ever experienced such a thing.

13. My metaphors are less optimistic than the camera, less mechanically confident than the camera obscura, not as much trapped in semiosis as the index.

The selenite window and the black lake ice are meant to model part of photography's failure to present the world as it is taken to be seen. They also propose that the material surface of a photograph—speaking literally, and including the layers of dyes, silver halide molecules, the paper base and its water-resistant surface—is not just a part of photography, but most of it, sometimes all of it. Especially when that surface appears, as it must if we attend to it closely enough, as something more like a griffonage (that is, an illegible handwriting) of marks and scratches.

14. Things became more complicated when I began to attend to my models as *photographs*. I was glad, then, that neither had any particular aesthetic or historical interest.

The photo of the ice is nearly an amateur nature snapshot. Turn the image upside-down, and the surface cracks become a tree. It is an indifferent photograph, taken by a scientist in Montana as part of a documentary project. The original is a deep neon blue: 'natural' in the sense that the scientist did not tinker with it, but also intolerably close to the color of some commercial plastics.

The picture of the Ácoma window caught my eye because it was nearly lost in the files of the American Museum of Natural History (its only annotation was '260769, Selenite window', written in script with a steel nibbed pen). The images around it in the same file were prosaic ethnologists' documentations of the mesa; they belonged irresistibly to their place and time ('Aug. '27')—a location in culture that has no particular appeal to me.

10 – *Overexposed*, 21.

11 – *Culture, Theory, and Critique*, 2003, 5–22.

12 – *Collected Papers* 2.438.

Not that there is such a thing as a pure absence of aesthetic or anti-aesthetic value, or of historical context: but I needed the noise of aesthetics and history to be minimal.

15. As photography, both have flaws of a sort that are consonant with the meaning I wanted to assign them as models.

I have studied the photograph of the selenite window very carefully, but I am still not sure which side is up. If the window is recessed in the adobe wall, then one of the shadowed edges should be on top. The decision is complicated by the frame—is it wood? Paper, or perhaps canvas? On one side the frame appears to cast a shadow onto the wall, as if a box had been constructed and put in place in Ácoma to mask extraneous objects from appearing in the shot. Then I notice that the framing edge and its shadow do not match. There is a notch in the frame, answered by a projection in the shadow. A chip in the adobe wall in one corner of the photograph makes it look as if the window was removed from the building along with a rectangular piece of the wall, and that the frame was a box. But that does not solve the problem of orientation. I reproduce the photograph here in random orientations.

16. As a photograph, the selenite window is a good but imperfect model of imperfect visibility. Large sheets have split off the left and right like curtains, and a linear fracture (it looks like a pull cord for the curtains) runs down one side. In the middle is a clear portion: perhaps an image could have been seen through it after all. The file at the museum has a blank for ‘Taken by\_\_\_\_\_’. ‘Taken’ is struck through and ‘cop’ (copied) is written in its place. The copyist is given as J. Kirschner. My photograph is, therefore, a copy of a copy, at the least. It is tiny: the window itself is barely one and a quarter inches high on the print. To even begin to see it I had to use a high-resolution scan, which resampled the photograph’s fibers and grains and presented me with a uniformly blurred approximation. The surface of the original print remains only in the black grains of dust that Kirschner carelessly preserved. (And that I carefully preserve.) The selenite window photograph is imperfect as a metaphor of photography, but its imperfection is exact.

The black ice photograph is also an intricate and specific model of imperfect representation. It records several layers within the ice: on top is the tree- or root-like network of cracks, and just underneath it is a diagonal fracture running from the top center to the bottom right. The diagonal fracture just touches the branching fractures: it is in a layer of ice just beneath them. Lower still is a rough serrated ridge that crosses the field of view just above the dark opening. It touches the diagonal fracture without overlapping it. These three layers must represent different stages in the freezing of the lake, from top to bottom. Beneath the three layers is another area where the ice has either partly melted or is still forming. That deepest and least perfect layer forms a curved opening onto the waters below.

Only when I had seen all that did I finally notice that the darkest area of the image has an irregular outline, with two hair-like marks protruding from its upper-right corner. And then, at last, I realized that the photographer had wiped the surface of the lake with his mitten before he took the photograph. The invisible top surface of the ice must have been covered with a thin film of snow, and some buckle or snap on the photographer’s mitten left a sawtooth pattern where that film was brushed away. Five layers, therefore, between invisible water and invisible air.

17. Those two images were my talismans when I began to write this book. Later I found a third ...