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Glass photography

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From Anne Carson's *Glass Essay:*
But it has no
name.
It is transparent.
Sometimes she calls it Thou.

There appears to be a trending misunderstanding—or at least stubborn insistence, which we can historically blame on the Romanticists and more recently Gwyneth Paltrow—that beauty is necessarily natural. Where there's a season (in hell) for washing off one's make-up, for natural glow, freshly picked mimosas, walking the Romantic road, and blind honesty, some of the most beautiful things in the world are simply not, as they say, biological. So much I have learned from the likes of Joris-Karl Huysmans, house music, fairy lights, Art Deco, camp, Caitlin Jenner, decadence, the USS Enterprise, and artisanal perfumes. In fact, some of the most beautiful things in the world are carefully constructed illusions of naturalism that we happily indulge in, because—to paraphrase poet and essayist Adrienne Rich—certain forms of honesty must work through artifice to find their form in the real.
Though trying to define 'honesty' or 'truth' within this context feels reckless, I might say that in its more luxuriant moments, truth bends to surface aspect, expectation and the ability to suspend one's disbelief. That said, I'm into fiction. Or, more precisely: I'm into how fiction makes incursions on the surface of the real.
Jokingly, I have been telling people that the theme of this symposium on Elisa Sighicelli's work revolves around the question: "Photography: Who Cares?" Or alternately: "Photography: Why does it matter?" This is not because I am of the opinion that photography is of little value, but because the very topic of questioning mediumistic limits has paradoxically felt unlimited in its possible permutations. In other words, going there feels like a trap: you're either destined to spend the rest of days wandering along a winding *philosophenweg* growing evermore nauseated as the 'truths' about perception, subjectivity and gaze slip away with zeitgeist, or you spend 20 minutes at a symposium falling flat on your ass trying to oversimplify problems of representation, which have been fundamental to aesthetic inquiry since forever. As neither option is particularly tempting, I chose to find an out in what Elizabeth Hardwick might have called the "nothing new, except in disguise," and, as she prompts, "escape on the wings of adjectives."
Hence, I am latching onto the notion of 'transparency,' glass and it's near-nothingness, to reflect on the limits of perception posed as a question to this audience. As an aesthetic experience, glassiness—or what Anne Carson sometimes calls "Thou," because personification tends to calm what's otherwise existentially dizzying—is allied with emptiness, distance, mystification, stillness, inffability, condensation and constraint. Its delicate surface is spun from the same ontologically iffy stuff as alienation and estrangement, yet it also contains and protects with a clarity intended to encourage perception. In other words, glass grants us a distance that makes possible the act of looking: it safely contains what feels most fragile, or freaky, to reflect on.

In Carson's *Glass Essay*, something has been lost, namely love, but you could never tell from her tone. It's as though grief has gone straight to her head with its gin-clarity, rendering the world around a series of sharply indifferent impressions. Light, space, mothers, weather, rooms, Latin lessons, the Brontë sisters, human bodies, their nude hues, growing up a girl, and that pesky thing of love's inevitable disappearance, each appear in her poem as self- similar forms refracted off grief's glassed surface. "I want to speak more clearly," she meditates. Elsewhere, she adds: "It is as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass. / Now and then a remark trails through the glass." If as readers we are hit by the awkward repetition of 'glass' in these last lines, it is only as a stern reminder to pay attention to the poem's atmosphere. Carson is asking us to move through the verse's cold surface with her: she is asking us to look deeper.

She is asking us to perform the rather more diffcult (perhaps impossible) double act of looking *at* something while also looking *through* it. We are asked to go through the looking glass into a world where one's fantasy-life can reign free and feel itself amplified, whilst keeping a firm eye on the surface of that same glass: what textures and temperatures it holds, what moods and atmospheres, what meanings, what versions of ourselves. In another context, it would make sense to elaborate on a literary history filled with likeminded sad glass atmospheres—and there are many—such as that stifling bell jar in which Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood sat "stewing in her own sour air," the beautiful and broken *Glass Menagerie* of Tennessee Williams's fragile imaginary, or the reproductive lens that Shakespeare forced us to look into in "Sonnet 3," if not only to forever horrify unmarried minds with the admonition: "Die single/ and thine image dies with thee." But since photography is our subject, it seems relevant to consider what glass atmospheres exist outside of language. I may have narrowly escaped getting stuck in the theoretical impasse of 'why care' about photography's visible limits by hopping on board with the vitreous, its projective valence and bleak frozenness, but what exactly does its material aura entail— what, I might ask, is its perfume?

The question is not figurative, and the answer is simple.

If there's a perfume equivalent to the glass atmosphere described by Carson, or anyone else whose felt themselves throttled by likeminded instances of foreignness and clarity intermingled, it is Chanel no.5. Granted, this must be understood in context—since it's creation, the perfume has undeniably turned into the quintessential old lady scent of the century, even if the instance of its creation was nothing short of a revolution for the perfume industry. Created in 1921 by Chanel's in-house perfumer Ernest Beaux following a prompt to conjure up the essence of modern woman, no.5 is a modernist masterpiece of layered transparencies that distort and amplify at surface what holds together its base. In its interior structure is a very traditional, beautifully built bouquet—a French turn-of-the- century floral. Rose, jasmine, ylang-ylang. What gives it its glassiness, however, is that wrapped around its classic heart are chains of synthetic carbon molecules known as aldehydes, which were first developed in the 1850s but had as of then never been used in perfumery. As scent critic Chandler Burr explains, "the more atoms you have, the more the scent changes." In other words, the aldehydes function like a distortion lens, a looking glass, or more to the zeitgeist in the early '20s, a curtain wall. See, Beaux took from modernist

architecture the novel idea of removing from the perfume's facade any visible cues to the interior structure; entering into Chanel no.5 implies passing through a transparency at surface to find yourself rediscovering from alien angles the classicism at its core.

What I am trying to tease out of Chanel no. 5's aldehyde atmosphere, with particular consideration to Sighicelli's work and the questions at hand, lies in its ability to make disappear the so-called walls or perceived limits of a material, and so give way to new perspectives—but always within the fact of material surface. The aldehydes undo the identity of what they envelop. The florals are made strange beneath this carbon curtain, and with them our ideas on an entire symbolic regime. Without any of the drama of disestablishment held so dearly by most of the avant-garde's and without the felt necessity to rule out tradition, these carefully constructed atom chains imperceptibly shift our sense experience of what would otherwise feel familiar. Most importantly, the effect isn't just clever copy-writing, but occurs at a material base. To wilfully drift into the photographic, what would otherwise appear to us as ordinary is synthetically fucked with on such a profoundly elemental level that it suddenly becomes hard to imagine what it was to begin with.

While people love to cite the Picture Gen era truism that "a photograph is not a substitute for anything," what happens to the real when it is caught in a still image is similar—or, at least *can* be depending on who's behind the camera—to how an idea of femininity might morph in the subtle distortion of a carbon atom. What exactly is substituted in the photograph's shady exchange with reality escapes simple articulation—is it a sense for a sense effect? One materiality for another? Or something more deeply concealed in surface?

Consider it kismet that a young Man Ray would move to Paris in 1921, the very same year Beaux's scent hit the shelves at Chanel's flagship on rue Cambon, and write: "Of course, there will always be those who look only at technique, who ask "how," while others of a more curious nature will ask "why." Personally, I have always preferred inspiration to information." While I wonder if Man Ray's bad attitude about information was not in part due to living in a city still deep in recovery from Baudelaire's fabled "Salon of 1859" critique, which aimed at something similar by contrasting, quote, "poetry and progress [as] two ambitious men who hate one another with an instinctive hatred," noting that if ever they were to meet on a road, "one of them has to give place," I am tempted in this instance to also side with inspiration as the more compelling question. To side with inspiration feels on par with mere perfume. It asks to pick up on notes cloaked in light and transparency, or in other words to consider what is intimated in the photographic surface as a material construct. What does its particular glass atmosphere hold? And—why? For what reason are we compelled into its intonations of clarity, that blank stare, which enables its more categorical ability to lower us into atmospheres of the fragile, to reflect or shatter, confuse?

So few minds have dwelled in the photographic facade and ability to distort and amplify the real, instead choosing to focus on the indexical content provided by the likes of its so-called scientific apparatus, or the mass psychology available to the infinitely reproducible industrial and machinic image, or—later—in the embedded nature of the photograph deep within language, and in the text that is constantly deployed to prove or be proved by the image.

Anything more strictly linked to the flights of fancy that happen through the fact of its material distortions have been mostly left to a handful of '80s semioticians honing

sympathetic-critical aesthetic positions about how to read cultural artefacts without—as Wayne Koestenbaum noted in his Notes on Glaze, "foreclosing one's desire." To dwell in the photograph's capacity to seduce is to link minds with its artifice, and take pleasure in its the distortions of its veils. It is to refuse the distancing effects of critical disinterest in favour of what Man Ray sentimentally clung to as *inspiration*, but would probably be better described as a capacity for clarity, openness and alteration. In other words, the photographic surface veils representation in all its possible confusions, amplifications, and distortions—its *mere perfume*—but it would be a mistake to confuse this veil for opacity. With its lenses, glasses and limpid surfaces, lightness and weight, the photographic facade asks of itself to think more clearly, echoing Carson's atmospheric sharpness, and to do so through its layered transparencies. Looking and thinking are conflated into a single sense experience; perhaps that's why Man Ray's epitaph ended up reading: "Unconcerned but not indifferent." Sensing that it would be impossible to find a clear end in anything other than the surfaces of photographs themselves, Spotify staged an unintended denouement for this essay. As I write, the Man Ray Beatz remix of Blondie's *Heart of Glass* comes on, lowering me into the chopped and screwed atmosphere of Debbie Harry's fragile feelings. The pleasure she takes in love's conflicted effects is—well—*inspiring*. It strikes me—and let's be fair, I finished this circa 4 a.m. on an airplane—that Harry may have nailed defining the limits of photographic representation way back in 1978 by reminding us that most glass atmospheres lack clear contours. There are only "parallel lines" of thought and vision, blurred, and, as she sings, "Mucho mistrust, love's gone behind." Knowing Man Ray (the artist, not the sound-cloud DJ) once professed to loving contradictions, claiming that it was one way of assuring his liberty, quote, "the real liberty one does not find as a member of society" helps in following the remix's conceptual logic. The slowed down rpm brings me to a semblance of conclusion about photographic representation: perhaps it isn't so interesting to consider whether an object is photography, than to consider the photographic surface as an atmosphere where one can hang out delightfully befuddled with Blondie and Man Ray—you know—"lost inside / adorable illusions and I cannot hide."