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OBJECT IN VIEW

The Canary Project: Photographs and fossils

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Figure 25.1 Installation view from *The Canary Project Works on Climate Change 2006–2009*, Grunwald Gallery, Indiana University, 2009. See Plate 26.

A photograph and a fossil have something in common: Both are defined by a body of knowledge and yet both emit the trace of an existence that cannot be fully absorbed.

Diverse writers such as Roland Barthes, André Bazin, Jacques Rancière and Tom Gunning have carefully analyzed the way in which a photograph, any photograph, emanates an indeterminate reality. In looking at a photograph we are looking at something that absolutely was but will absolutely never be again. We are looking at both presence – the literal shining forth of a person or object in the world (the quality of space) – and absence – the disappearance of that thing (the quality of time). A photograph at its core does more than point to a reality in the manner of a sign; It re-presents that reality. Whatever else is added by way of contemporary context, a photograph most essentially says: HERE NOW is/THIS/that was THERE THEN.

The same could be said of any fossil, and by extension any archival object held by a museum, whether that museum be dedicated to natural history or cultural history. The object is an extraction – something taken out of time. Whatever we know about it, we can never know it completely. It emanates an existence, a presence.

Generally, in a museum we try to pull that presence closer to us with information, by knowing more about it, becoming familiar with it. However, paradoxically, the more the object is made subordinate to knowledge, the more its aura recedes. The more general the object becomes within a taxonomy, the less its specificity is allowed to flourish. Its aura wholly resides in this very specificity, which is most often buried beneath information when positioned within an archive. In other words, the authentic relation to us of any archival object or image is its remoteness. When we draw something close with interpretation and a determination of its exact significance, we lose that essential distance, call it an exoticism, in which we can feel our own selves made strange through the interaction.

In photography we can broadly distinguish between pensive and illustrative images. The illustrative image is speedy and delivers information. It depends for its efficacy on the unique truth claim of the photograph (THIS was THERE THEN), but makes quick work of it – employing it to gain our trust but then steering that trust towards a statement (journalistic, scientific or rhetorical). As with the archival object, the image, in this instance, is subordinate to text, and therefore, the crushing specificity of the captured image is not allowed a full unfolding (lest it distract us). Nearly all images are illustrative.

With the more rare pensive image, on the other hand, the truth claim (THIS was THERE THEN) is not choked off and made subordinate, but instead allowed a full unfolding. This opening is essential to a depth (rather than an accuracy) of feeling and is made possible by the independence of the truth claim from context. That is to say, all photographs are tied to propositions (i.e. have a context), but the reality re-presented in the photograph is aside from that context and cannot be reduced to it. All context is contingent and the product of interpretation, unlike existence which is at the bottom of all interpretation and cannot be touched by it, like a stone you can kick but cannot move. Therefore, an image that manages to subvert, radically minimize or pierce through context, whether by accident or artistic intent, has the potential to manifest a presence.

Such “presencing” in an image is profoundly unsettling because of the breakage it creates in our spatio-temporal orientation. This has to do with the physicality of the photograph – the fact that we are not merely signifying, we are actually seeing what was once seen by somebody else and is now being seen by us at a different time. Untethered from the useful orientation of an image’s context, we hover uncertainly between presence and absence, familiarity and unfamiliarity, death and life, present and past, the self and other.

If the pensive image is rare (because its use is less apparent), then the pensive object is even more rare, particularly in those institutions born of the Enlightenment that are dedicated to educating, namely orienting, their visitors. So we pose the question, what would it mean for an object to be pensive? And further, what could such an object or set of objects accomplish in a cultural institution?

The first question is easier to answer than the second. For an object to be pensive in the manner described here, it needs to be liberated to some greater or lesser degree from its context. In the domain of cultural institutions, that context is determined by specific historical or scientific narrative. In a word: Context is constituted by the archive. So, liberating the object from context means liberating it from the archive. There is no total liberation possible, just as it is never entirely possible for the photographic image to be entirely innocent. The point is to create enough of an opening for the presence of the object or image to be keenly felt by the viewer. One obvious strategy for this is withholding information, partially or wholly, temporarily or entirely. A fuller catalog of possible strategies for the rendering

objects in collections pensive is beyond the scope of this chapter, but would make an interesting project.

Yet why would any institution do this? There are many reasons, but there is one that primarily concerns us: articulating the Anthropocene and its most traumatic consequences, climate change and mass extinction.

The Anthropocene is difficult to grasp because it requires us to apprehend at once both the enormous power and the bewildering fragility of human beings. We must see ourselves as both master and slave. Furthermore, we must see ourselves in the perspective of geologic time where we are just a speck. Last, we must see ourselves in relation to other species, both those here now and those that have already vanished. In other words, we must travel out of ourselves to see ourselves.

Climate change is difficult to grasp because whatever we know about it, we cannot fully believe it. Slavoj Žižek diagnoses this as follows: “Our attitude here is that of a fetishist split. I know very well (that global warming is a threat to the entire humanity), but nonetheless I cannot really believe it. It is enough to see the natural world to which my mind is connected: green grass and trees, the sighing of the breeze, the rising of the sun ... can one really imagine that all this will be disturbed?”¹

The skeptics are right on one point: climate change *is* a matter of belief and not of knowledge – belief first in the science, which in its totality cannot not be known by any one individual, not even a specialist; and belief second in the potential for trauma. In the Global North especially, without the more common personal experience of erosion, disaster and loss that is already being experienced in the Global South, we can arrive fairly quickly to a belief in the science (even the entire system of science and knowledge) but this does not get us very far towards any action or any substantial sense of what is at stake because it is countered by a stronger lack of belief in the potential for trauma.

The potential disorientation, even discomfort, caused by a non-illustrative, pensive display of objects from an archival collection can be an opening onto a more substantial sense of what it might mean, in Žižek’s words, to disturb the sighing of the breeze, the green grass and trees of our normal quotidian world. Furthermore, the enormity of these concepts such as geologic time or extinctions cannot be grasped by the rational mind without analogy, abstractions or something else we might term negative capability.

Negative capability is defined by the poet John Keats as: “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”² We will need recourse to negative capability if we are to overcome the fetishistic split articulated by Žižek and to truly believe (as opposed to simply know) that we have been on this planet only for a fraction of a geological second, that we have the capacity to change the climatic conditions on this planet, and that we can be erased from history just as surely as we can we write down words.

The following is a sequence of diptychs pairing photographs from our series *A History of the Future* with objects curated from various university collections (labeled Fossil Study 1–3). The photographs are all of places where scientists are studying the impacts of climate change. Photographs are the thinnest, lightest slice of time. Archival objects are relatively heavy. We

1 Slavoj Žižek, “Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses, part 2,” Lacan, last modified 2007, www.lacan.com/zizecology2.htm

2 John Keats to George and Tom Keats, December 26, 1818, in *John Keats Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 40–43.

are interested in that juxtaposition and with the experiment of viewing the objects representing history as equivalent in some significant way to photographs and vice versa.

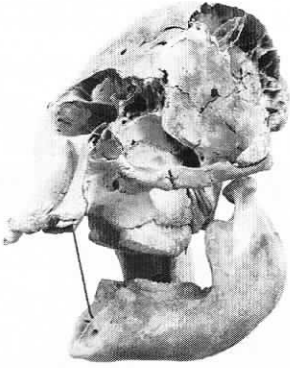


Figure 25.2 Fossil Study 1, from *A History of the Future*, Sayler/Morris, 2014. See Plate 27.

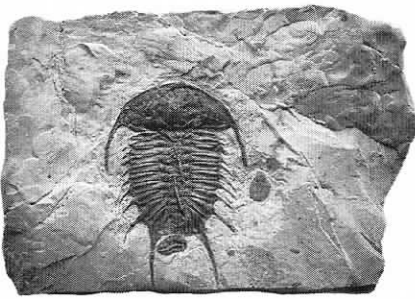


Figure 25.3 Fossil Study 2, from *A History of the Future*, Sayler/Morris, 2014. See Plate 27.

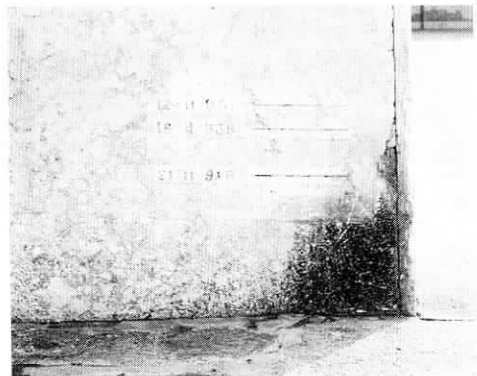


Figure 25.4 Fossil Study 3, from *A History of the Future*, Sayler/Morris, 2014. See Plate 27.



Plate 26 Installation view from *The Canary Project Works on Climate Change: 2006–2009*, Grunwald Gallery, Indiana University, 2009, Sayler/Morris.

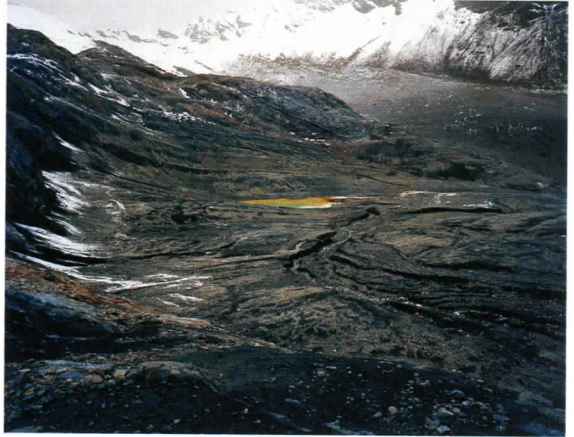


Plate 27 Fossil Study 1, 2, 3, from *A History of the Future*, Sayler/Morris, 2014.