



Excerpt from Martha Langford,
**Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory
 In Contemporary Photographic Art**
 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 59-61

5 | A FORGOTTEN MAN

In theatrical presentation, Locke's Way begins, as this chapter has begun, at the very end of creation that is the act of imposing of title. "This is the end," says the narrator, holding up a colour snapshot of a dead woman. "But there was a beginning, with him and her." In installation, Locke's Way is a continuous loop, something like the roll of paper that ran through Jack Kerouac's typewriter and became the manuscript of *On the Road*, and very like its manic expression of disappointment in the human condition:

Dean took out other pictures. I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, wellordered, stabilized-within-the-photo lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road. All of it inside endless and beginningless emptiness. Pitiful forms of ignorance ... He made one last signal. I waved back. Suddenly he bent to his life and walked quickly out of sight. I gaped into the bleakness of my own days. I had an awful long way to go too.¹⁰

To trace all the expressions of memory in Cumming's work from *Reality and Motive* to *Locke's Way* is also "an awful long way to go." The work is copious and multivalent, sometimes seeming to lash out in all directions, against all closely held opinion, moral, social, and ideological. A consistent feature of these attacks is Cumming's undermining of our fundamental beliefs in photographic images. If we associate photographs, especially personal photographs, with certain kinds of knowledge and memory, Cumming's examination of the evidence will suggest that they are "endless and beginningless emptiness. Pitiful forms of ignorance," that nevertheless preserve the lustre of our dreams.

The distance between proud sidewalks and senseless nightmare roads is no distance at all; in real world, real time, everyday experience, they merge suddenly; we collide with ourselves, as other. Kaja Silverman describes something of this as she examines her response to negotiating her way through crowds of homeless people in Berkeley, California, where she lives. Their outstretched hands are part of Silverman's regular routine – arbitrarily, she gives to some, not to others – but she cannot get used to them. The very presence of this population sets up a "specular" panic to which she confes-

ses: "What I feel myself being asked to do, and what I resist with every fibre of my being, is to locate myself within bodies which would, quite simply, be ruinous of my middle-class self – within bodies that are calloused from sleeping on the pavement, chapped from their exposure to sun and rain, and grimy from weeks without access to a shower, and which can consequently make no claim to what, within our culture, passes for 'ideality.'" Silverman invests her discomfort in a re-examination of the psychoanalytic mirror stage, developing theories of heteropathic identification, or "identity-at-a-distance," through readings of cultural productions in which the spectator is captivated by reflections of the self in a less-than-ideal other. Crucial to this notion is the subject's active awareness of difference: turning to the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, she conveys his rejection of "fusion" between character and spectator – Brecht wants to combat "character identification," using the knife or the scissors of "symbolic differentiation." At the same time, the spectator must feel at home in the political theatre: Brechtian distanciation is not making the familiar strange, but "making the strange familiar." The path, whether political or social, has been beaten down by the "look's imbrication in memory ... There can thus be no return or recollection which is not at the same time a displacement, and which, consequently, does not introduce alterity." Silverman's productive remembering look opens the possibility of "a profoundly dialectical relation to the other, whose past one does not relive precisely as he or she lived it, but in a way which is informed by one's 'own' recollections." Fiction is admissible, as is forgetting: "to remember imperfectly is to bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly to shift the contours and significance not only of the past but also of the present."¹¹

"Heteropathic memory (feeling and suffering with the other)" is taken up by Marianne Hirsch who defines it as "the ability to say, 'It could have been me; it was me, also,' and, at the same time, 'but it was not me.'" Silverman's model is further explained as "identification-at-a-distance," whether spatial or cultural, combined with temporal coincidence. Hirsch distinguishes her own form of heteropathic memory, "postmemory ... in which the self and the other are more closely connected through familial or group relation, for example, through what it means to be Jewish or Polish," though distanced over time. For Hirsch, whose work deals with the Holocaust and its intergenerational transmission, there can be no question of bridging the gap between memory and postmemory, though the "heteropathic imagination struggles." Applications of Hirsch's theory, as well as her own study of the aftermath of 9/11,

show that the struggle goes on, using photographs as "fragmentary sources and building blocks," wherever there is collective or personal trauma.¹²

The frameworks of Silverman and Hirsch have considerable resonance in the literature, as references to them elsewhere in this book plainly show. They are particularly useful in relation to Cumming, as I want to suggest in a few preliminary remarks. Silverman's jumping-off point is also Cumming's: his work makes us uncomfortable in our awareness of others, in part by making us aware that we are paying very close attention selectively. Given Cumming's human subjects and intrusive technique, spectatorial complicity in selection is an uncomfortable feeling, one that some people would deny categorically by labelling the artist as a voyeur or social deviant. Blame is also an option, whether placed on the medium,



the messenger, or the marginalized – the work is a site of psycho-social unrest, a condition often exacerbated by the explications of its author, who measures the utility of art by its capacity to disturb. Brechtian distanciation is an avowed technique, which in Locke's Way is disturbingly brought home. A central character, developed in photographs, haunts the work, casting a shadow over Cumming's entire oeuvre. King or fool? Cumming has trafficked in both; they are frequently conjoined, the suturing rough and clumsy. Locke's Way portrays such a doubled subject, perhaps doubly wounded by memory and postmemory, setting up a whipsaw in the spectator who shifts between fact and fiction, tedium and crisis, normality and alterity, looking and looking away. Such carnivalesque performances have been known to induce specular panic: these things are best forgotten. Remembering in order to forget becomes a radical act whose personal and political viability is tested in Cumming's psycho-social laboratory.

10. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 254.

11. Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 26, 170, 84-87, 181, 189.

12. Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Ithaca and London: University Press of New England, 1999, 9-10; see also Hirsch, "I Took Pictures: September 2001 and Beyond," *The Scholar and the Feminist Online* 2:1 (Summer 2003). Accessed 21 August 2012. <http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/ps/hirsch7.htm>