

Carmi Dror's (Im)perfect Pictures and the inherent error of digital photography

Since its inception in the 18th century, photography has amazed us in its abilities to produce testimonies of fragments of our lives, from analogue printing of shadows to digital cameras. Photography theory tried at the same time to determine the meaning of the image, often through a binary distinction, between true testimony and fabricated fiction. In this paper, I will keep these distinctions in mind as I think of the glitch in digital images, studying both their mechanical and visual creation. I will start by briefly comparing the *modus operandi* of analogue and digital cameras. As I highlight similarities and differences between the two black boxes, I will focus on the electronic components of the digital apparatus. The digital camera's complex computing mechanism translating light to data, resulting in the image, will be presented as paradoxical: a creative writing that remains invisible. The works of artist Carmi Dror will offer a glimpse on this invisibility. In works displaying gaps, breakage and dissolutions, what would at first glance seem like an error would actually testify for an image truer than we think. In portraits of naked, disintegrated bodies, Dror's works will suggest that the error is inherent to digital photography, and by exhibiting it as is she will inscribe a glitch poetics that evades distinctions, where the photograph is neither wrong nor right.

Very schematically speaking, the analogue camera works as follows: I want to take a picture; I look from the viewfinder: I see what I want to capture in the photograph. I press on the shutter-release button, the shutter opens: light comes in through the lens, exposing a sensitive material in it, like film. The reflection of light from the object/subject/scenery imprints on the sensitive material quickly, as the shutter closes. A negative is made. After a process of development, involving a liquid fixer and topped by a stopper, the image unearths.

The digital camera works both similarly and differently. With the press of a button, light reflected on and by the object indeed enters through the shutter, but now sensors are those capturing the rays of light. For the sensor, light means electric signals. In a process called **mosaicing**, the sensor filters each ray by wavelength and divides it to three colors: red, green and blue. Each color is composed of different levels (between 0-255), to be finally embedded in a pixel. The pixels are transferred to the Image Signal Processor (ISP), often regarded as the heart or the brain of the digital apparatus, which **modifies the pixels and re-arranges** them, in a range of actions titled **de-mosaicing**, resulting in the image we see on our camera's screen. As such, the pixels, the picture elements, may be perceived as mere dots, but are in fact visual depictions of the way in which the camera **translates** light to data and **writes** the photograph.

Although minuscule, the machine-automated writing of the image in the pixel is extremely rich. While analog photography produces the image in a technology of reflections, the translation process of the digital camera is not as straightforward; while it transcribes rays of light, it also transforms the information they bear. Light waves are therefore not simply filtered but actively hie-rar-chized, re-organized, and perfected; they are edited to what is for the camera an “optimized” form. The image is thus written in an economy where, one bit of information, or some rays, are favored to others – and they are eventually mixed, replaced and even effaced, so much so that, as Brian Hayes notes, a single pixel can combine information from a dozen other light waves.¹ The digital camera therefore does not only take pictures, but makes them - it is a creative process that mechanically manages what we see.

¹ Brian Hayes 2008 <https://www.americanscientist.org/article/computational-photography> Computational Photography

Described as such, the digital camera is revealed as authoritative: it has the qualities of an author that is full of force. What's more, beyond the technical capacity of creation - in translation and writing, the digital camera also has the power of holding this very process transparent to us. Its authorship is so strong that its imperceptible: a visual image originates in our hands but its making remains out of reach. Attracted to these means, in her work artist Carmi Dror (lives and works in Tel-Aviv) aims to picture the force of the digital. The digital camera is thus not only her medium but also her subject, and photography takes part in the artwork, offering us an opportunity to question what we see when we look at images.

In the ongoing series *Anthropolysis* (2018-) Dror shoots her friends and lover. They pose standing, naked and still, as she uses a process similar to scanning, turning around them, below and above, photographing them from all directions. By doing so, the artist tries to capture her subjects in their whole, to photograph them in their entirety. She then uploads the many photographs to a computer program that embeds them together and composes three-dimensional models. The works in the series are therefore two-dimensional renderings of these models.

(1) *Anthropolysis_X* (2019), for example, seems to depict a group of people, both women and men, together. Are they touching? Are they caressing? It does not really seem like a so-called “good” photo of them. It is hard to describe what we see; it seems impossible to identify a person from the image. (2) The photograph remains, in many parts, broken. Composed of rough patches, it appears hollowed and holed. Instead of seamless, smooth bodies, that the software promised to produce, we remain with scraps.

(1) In *Anthropolysis_A Beginning* (2020), a group comes alive once more; what can we see? Are these the same people? Can we recognize someone? Looking at another work, there is an urge to take a closer glance, (2) seek more details, see as much as we can to decipher, identify,

and understand. Yet only so much information is readable, in a tangible, reasonable way. The bodies are so fractured, so split and broken to different fragments of skin that even tattoos seem disembodied from the bodies they are etched on. (3) We are left with undistinguishable figures, in multiple body parts, not even sure to whom they belong.

The technology behind the program Dror uses is based on photo-gramm-etry technique, mostly used for digital mapping. The software is programmed to seam and weave photographs together, embedding pixel to pixel, grouping images of flat surfaces to voluminous forms. Yet the software's rendering did not result in precise or near-perfect, saturated, high-definition images as identical or real as can be. Instead, this promising technological procedure created an exceptionally deficient picture.

The software Dror uses works similarly to procedures done by the ISP just described. It writes the representation by reassembling pixels. Dror assumes that the "patches" in the work resulted from images where the subjects moved. Even though she had asked them to lay still, a mere breath could have caused motion, resulting in a change of lights, directly affecting the photograph's translation and thereby the writings. Thus, the holes in the work depict what for the program is a failing to link photographs and create a complete model. In other words, a glitch.

This idea of the glitch describes how, for the camera, the disconnect is an error. For us, however, there is more to these rifts: they reveal the computational logic of the apparatus. As such, the gaps and absences deemed to be faulty uncover how images are subjected to corrections. That which technically and visually looks as if torn apart by information, the fracture and blank spaces in these shattered portraits of bare bodies are not empty pixels standing still but a telling portrait of what is usually **eliminated, of that which rests out of sight**. As such, what we perceive is not nothingness, but what, as of yet, remains invisible.

In portraits that are relics of the digital translation process, Dror's works studies both photographic portraiture and digital imagery, boldly attesting to what the digital camera does when it takes pictures, and thus to what we see when we look at them. In that which seems as lacking or empty, her hollowed photographs visually expose the **hierarchy at the basis of the digital image structure and its consequent dismissal**. By exhibiting the error, Dror does not seek to draw a picture of failure, but rather a reverse image, where gaps of information are included, embraced and celebrated. As such, disclosing the collapse of the apparatus' optimization mechanism does not mark it as an error, but praises it as **poetical**.

Outside of any ideal of completeness, in this poetics parceled bodies are neither correct nor incorrect: in their in-de-finite-ness, they stand to show how fragile all portraits are. This glitch poetics is thus neither a theory of an absolute wrong nor of a supreme right, but of a constant movement between attributions, shifting, never "just". As such, the series' title, *Anthropolysis*, from Greek: Anthro - the human being, and Lysis – a process of cell disintegration, suggests that what is natural to the human is **so** to digital photographs too.

At this point I think of Roland Barthes' *La Chambre Claire*, where he denounces the ways in which the image is "heavy, motionless, stubborn".² Declaring that the photograph ignores his true self, who is "light, divided, dispersed"..."mobile, shifting, altering",³ Barthes resents portraits, arguing that there could not be at once a fixed and correct image of himself,

² 12 27F

³ⁱⁱⁱ 12 27F

because selfhood is “uncertain”,⁴ it “doesn’t hold still”.⁵ For him, like in *Anthropolysis* “the Photograph gives a little truth, on condition that it parcels out the body”.⁶ The parcellation is not truthful in and of itself; what is true about it is its attestation to being always incomplete.

Dror’s works offer us a glimpse on what digital writing is, and this includes myself, speaking in front of you today. Do you really see me? Or rather, is what you see, me? What is it that you see? Has your view of me changed throughout these rough twenty minutes? What is the relation between my paper and my image? Would a broken image have affected my argument? Would a broken argument have affected my image? And this is only in our present realm. I think of spaces in which my image means more than any career moment: for example, what does a photograph in a certified document show?

Claiming that Dror’s work reveals the error inherent to digital photography, is not a critical judgement about the value of the image. Joining Barthes, it is a claim for the poetics of the glitch, for erroneousness so unstable it confuses any distinction **between right and wrong**. Dror’s liquid, translucent and transitive portraits thus present that which slips off the screen, whether it’s the computer screen or the screen in the viewer’s eyes: the unfixable. The background behind these bodies, in the so-called computer-gray, known to be prevalent in digital editing software, stresses this point further.

⁴ 102

⁵ 12 What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) “self”; but it is the contrary that must be said: “myself” never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and “myself” which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, “c’est ‘moi’ qui ne coïncide jamais avec mon image; car c’est l’image qui est lourde, immobile, entêtée (ce pour quoi la société s’y appuie), et c’est moi qui suis léger, divisé, dispersé et qui, tel un ludion, ne tiens pas en place”. 27F

⁶ 103, « La photographie donne un peu de vérité, à condition de morceler le corps. » (161 F)

Yet as Dror's works draw a parallelism between the digital process and the portraits that result from it, where the unknown of the known is that which is depicted, it is still hard to see the glitch as poetics, rather than as mistakes. Barthes' philosophy of photography suggests how the unfixable comes about when he says that only "love, extreme love" "erases the weight of the image".⁷ This point is granted in Dror's work when we remember her choice to photograph her loved ones. Affection, as a deviation from a desire to seize, physically or intelligibly, objects and subjects, opens up the gaze towards that which ultimately could never be captured at once. To the loved ones depicted joins the camera as subject, in both software and hardware, and the series is presented as an intimate observation, where all participants are portrayed naked.

In front of this bareness, when conceptualizing our relation to photography, Barthes knows that images are usually understood through a divide: either they are subjected to a civilized code of perfect illusions, and thus tamed and restrained, or appear as hallucinatory, intractable, irreducible and ecstatic.⁸ In his very last words of his very last book he suggests that between the two, "the choice is mine".⁹ Yet, in the poetics of the glitch, as in love, that which is at stake is precisely not the choice, but the realization that the two alternatives are intertwined. Not to be or not to be, but the very echo of the proposition itself. Acknowledging the erroneous within the image is a letting go of the composition of a firm answer. It is as such that, to me, that glitch poetics offers beyond aesthetics, a politics. Against correctness, in its constant movement, even though the photograph may try to capture an instant, **nothing** is fixed for good.

⁷ 115 (177F)

⁸ 12, 27F

⁹ 119, 183 F