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# Palimpsests: Salvage, Sacrifice, and the Subject of Truth in Photographs

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**Palimpsests: Salvage, Sacrifice, and the Subject of Truth in Photographs**

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

June 2010

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## **My Polaroid: Finding Truth in a Chicago Winter**

*To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study, is not a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindnesses.*  
(Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22)

As I begin this thesis my thoughts return to a Polaroid snapshot I found peeking from a melting snow drift last year. A previous owner scorched the photograph of an embracing couple before discarding it in the slushy pile. The heat charred and curled back the plastic coating and photosensitive paper, opening the hermetically sealed image to the elements. Moisture collaborated with fire to contort one of the smiling faces into a horrific sneer and steal colors from the other, antiquing it prematurely. In this lost fidelity, I developed a strange affinity with this faded figure. More so than the self-conscious smiles populating the albums of pictures linked to my online profiles or populating family photo albums, the abandoned grin became my own.

In the profoundly personal vein with which Gordon speaks in the epigraph, I set out in this thesis to understand my encounter with the Polaroid. And yet this personal fervor is not a pursuit of self-discovery (at least not solely). My obsession with a variety of old, decayed, and documentary media also erupts from this encounter. Earlier arguments I have made concerning such objects in classes and papers have threatened to make contact with what I can only characterize as the wounds of a truth. These injuries, neglected until now, have nonetheless marked my work, my scrapped paper sections and overqualified statements bandaging over fears of getting lost in the cuts like a masochist, left speaking gibberish to those who do not share my convictions. To at last begin to understand these media, I set my sights not only on unraveling my efforts to paper over the truth, but also to examine the scar tissue inscribed by a methodically-numbing naïve post-structuralism that does not permit the possibility of knowing

what wounds. I seek here to fully reopen the Polaroid and draw fresh lifeblood from the abjected media.

Immediately evident are three components of the haunting, damaged artifact – the old and documentary registers I mark above – the residual form of the Polaroid and the photographic medium. The indirect affect these forms generate through deprecation, the truth that is revealed through the subtraction of their evidence is more difficult to discern. What I will identify are precisely the uncanny appearances generated at the powerful interstices where these components and their corruption work in tandem to shape a media form I will elaborate as palimpsests.

Gordon defines the palimpsest as “a document that has been inscribed several times, where the remnants of earlier, imperfectly erased scripting is still detectable” (146). In the first case study I will start to triangulate the significance of this phenomenon by side-stepping the Polaroid’s complex layering of exposure and erasure through the examination of two zines – small, handmade, publications. These zines, in different ways, mark the murder of Brendan Scanlon, a Chicago street artist. *The Zine*, Scanlon’s posthumously published work, operates much like a miniature of the public art he practiced, anticipating and even demanding the overwriting input of competitors and comrades. *Forever Solve*, published a year after his death by his friends and family, commemorates Scanlon’s life and labors through a collection of childhood drawings and photographs. The zines and zine making exhibit on the one hand photographs and on the other the work of overwriting, permitting me to complicate the trajectories I am tracing as I seek the truth of the Polaroid. The defacement of a residual form in the shape of *The Zine* and the photographs composed within the pages of *Forever Solve* shuffle the components in revealing ways. Compounding this exploration, I then turn to the mail art collected and published by Frank Warren in his PostSecret community art project. Tying these

medial facets together, *PostSecret* allows me to return to multiple examples like my Polaroid, expanding my singular experience to a more generalizable form, exploring the disfigurement of personal photographs to confess anonymously.

The concept of the palimpsest has been deployed elsewhere in media studies in ways illustrative both of where my approach begins and from what I seek to move past. Mafalda Stasi in “The Toy Soldiers from Leeds” examines slash fiction as a palimpsest which indicates “a nonhierarchical, rich layering of genres, more or less partially erased and resurfacing, and a rich and complex continuum of themes, techniques, voices, moods, and registers” (119). Robert Stam in “Palimpsestic Aesthetics” deploys the term in a somewhat contradictory fashion in his exploration of Third World cinema. Stam questions the flattening claims in Stasi’s argument. He indicates a diachronic component structuring the textual hybridity of palimpsests. “Although for some hybridity is lived as just another metaphor [for] free play, for others it is lives as pain and visceral memory. ... Hybridity, in other words, is power-laden and asymmetrical” (60-1). Stam draws this out by using the palimpsest to expand on hybridity via an understanding of chronotopic multiplicity emphasized in the use of detritus. The idea persists across a larger span of scholarship. As Stam relays, “this oxymoronic space-time is not found only in recent theoretical literature. It was anticipated in Walter Benjamin’s ‘revolutionary nostalgia,’ ... in Fredric Jameson’s ‘nostalgia for the present,’ among other critical insights (Stam 61). These perspectives, which will come to play in this study, attack a certain view of comfortable hybridity that Stasi advocates.

In “A Life More Photographic,” Daniel Rubenstein and Katrina Sluis examine the alienated appearance of images like my Polaroid. Though such casual photographs are countless and commonplace, the authors find “the snapshot has remained highly private, concealed from

public eye, and quite often an invisible image” (10). The chance public appearance of these mementos finds them often packaged as “found” photographs, “stripped of notions of authorship or details about the original purpose of the image, its subjects and the circumstances of its creation” (10). The ready-made label for such ready-made media, found characterizes well the cultural and material conditions of the Polaroid I discovered and the photographs I examine here. In “Embedded Memories,” Will Straw examines sites like *Found Magazine*, *Long Lost Perfume*, and other digital collection drives to understand the social mechanics of collecting obsolete media. He finds the claim of being found itself situates a complex artistic arrangement. Straw says “The visual bias implicit in the idea of being found is what allows all these movements to imagine cultural artifacts, originally marked by distinctive forms of sensual expressivity, as occupying space in roughly equivalent ways” (13). Collecting both alienates the object from its means of production and classifies it into periods.

A unique perspective is required to address the time-locked material of photography, its liminal place between private and public and old and new, and how capture and deprecation acknowledges and configures a visible interval between these positions. Alain Badiou’s philosophical system lends a coherence to these approaches and concerns that has yet to be adequately exploited with media studies. As a means of drawing together these interests, I will interweave Badiou’s philosophy with media studies to portray the rupturing event conceptualized at the heart of his work as the truth of the Polaroid. Piercing the “democratic materialism” of discourse and the formal ideal of hybridity, Badiou’s eventual dialectic proclaims “there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths,” as revealed by events (*Logics of Worlds* 45). This dialectical approach leads me to regard the palimpsest as a medium whose potential is



realized where these paradigmatic ways of regarding the differentiating forms of communication are forced to come to terms with a solidifying sameness.

It is useful to begin by framing the complex philosophical motions I will detail throughout my introduction in other terms. Addressing Badiou's philosophy, Slavoj Žižek in "From Purification to Subtraction" characterizes the theoretical revolution his subject inaugurates as "[t]he shift is one from *difference* to *antagonism*." ("Purification" 166). This involves a move "from tension between phenomena and Thing to an inconsistency/gap between phenomena themselves" (167). Žižek presents Badiou's truth procedure here as a reflection of Sigmund Freud's method of dream interpretation:

[T]he real kernel of the dream is not the dream's latent thought, which is displaced/translated into the explicit texture of the dream, but the unconscious desire, which inscribes itself through the very distortion of the latent thought into the explicit texture. (168)

To speak in correlating terms, the real kernel of the photograph is not the object it captures in its frame, which is displaced/translated into the explicit surface of the image, but the truth of the photograph, which inscribes itself through the very distortion of our perception of the photographic image.

My labors in this regard will draw from Badiou's principal texts, namely the above cited *Logics of Worlds* and its foundational predecessor *Being and Event*. His minor writings, like *The Century*, *Conditions*, *Ethics*, *Infinite Thought*, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, and *Theoretical Writings*, and articles like "Destruction, Negation, Subtraction," and "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art," and "Some Remarks on Marcel Duchamp" do much to influence my efforts to tailor his body of work into a coherent approach to media studies. These texts, many recently

translated into English, provide a complex but enlightening theoretical basis that will shape my writing here.

I consciously choose the term “shape” rather than a more adapting term such as “inform” or “influence” precisely to indicate my desire to sculpt my work through his rigorous system. This willfully submissive posture is taken up both to force my writing in new directions and to supplement a system that remains impoverished in its capacity to consider media. Media studies reproduces metonymically the measure of Badiou’s thought in action judged by Paul Ashton, A.J. Bartlett, and Justin Clemens, in their introduction to *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*, “Masters and Disciples.” Ashton, Bartlett, and Clemens identify a few categories of work, namely introductions, critiques, and projects that have taken a piecemeal approach to his thought, as by far the most common approaches to Badiou’s thought (4). Peter Hallward’s *Badiou* is an unsurpassed example of this form of work. I am no match for Hallward’s philosophical muscle. His masterful relay of Badiou’s philosophy will do much to augment my study.

I principally follow the underrepresented approach taken up in *Praxis*, however, by putting Badiou’s philosophical system to work as a method. This approach is to place my focus on what Badiou’s philosophy may produce from case studies rather than drawing examples into an inter-philosophical debate. Alex Ling’s “Can Cinema Be Thought?,” Oliver Feltham’s look at Theater in “An Explosive Genealogy” and Lindsey Hair’s exploration of documentary film “Ontology and Appearing” are exemplary cases of this approach in action. These predecessors address artistic concerns familiar to readers of Badiou. The philosopher has maligned film many times and in multiple ways and speaks well of dance, instrumental music, painting, and theater. His elevated forms and the objects of his derision demonstrate an air of detachment from modern media. This selection bias has not eluded Badiou’s critics. John Roberts notes in “On the Limits

of Negation in Badiou's Theory of Art" that nowhere is Badiou's thought on painting associated with "the practical problems of producing convincing modernist painting on the ground today" (273).

The distance between Badiou's neo-classical thought and contemporary media practices I must bridge is measured by the promise of his philosophy – the gap normally separating the radically new from the everyday. Badiou's approach to art and media, which he terms inaesthetic, is one of subtraction and autonomy in an age of additional features and sociability. As Hallward puts it, Badiou's system links "a philosophy of the extraordinary" to "a philosophy of the unspecifiable or aspecific" (xxviii). Straddling this monumental theoretical divide, Badiou seeks to:

salvage reason from positivism, the subject from deconstruction, being from Heidegger, the infinite from theology, the event from Deleuze, revolution from Stalin, a critique of the state from Foucault, and, last but not least, the affirmation of love from American popular culture. (xxviii-xxix)

I have no illusions of measuring up to these wide-ranging challenges to academic doxa. Still, in a small, intimate way, something of each of these goals will echo in my efforts here.

Badiou's dialectic can be usefully broken up by way of the titular pairing of his foundational *Being and Event*. Being encompasses the ontological as it concerns the proper being-as-such, capital B being, of an entity and the coming into existence of such being in a situation, a being-as-being. Badiou confronts this realm of thought through the axioms and formulas of set theory. Set theory is a familiar character in grade school math text books as the mathematics governing Venn Diagrams. Such a being is made manifest, appearing in the world, or being-there or being in a world, via a logical connection. Badiou approaches this logic of appearance via the calculated relations of category theory, which comes to the fore in his second

major writing, *Logics of Worlds*. Category theory, a more recent theoretical turn as compared to set theory, does not have a ready grade-school application. Loosely speaking, category theory depicts the relationships between objects as they shape a topology; which, to risk further abstraction, is to say it is a mathematical cartography that grades the different elevations that shape the landscape of a local topography. Beyond his calculations of life and the ways it takes shape, the second movement of Badiou's dialectic concerns the event, its subject, and truths. The potential of these transformative concepts runs through the earlier cited ontological and logical configurations and so cannot be understood without first confronting his ontology and its appearance.

### **Being**

To orient my work to this task, the first step in laying out my methodology must address Badiou's ontology. To do so is to begin with something only mathematics can name and to which only art may give an appearance – the void. Being as void is pure multiplicity marked mathematically as the empty or null set,  $\emptyset$ , within set theory. The void is the bare field on which each circle of a Venn Diagram is drawn. It is then the basis for counting each loop as a subset and is *included* in every count of sets (as elementary math textbooks do so much to remind students). Yet it does not properly *belong* to any set, it exceeds all measure of inclusion. The void is “neither local nor global, but scattered everywhere, in no place and in every place” (*Being* 68).  $\emptyset$ , the mark of pure being, is then alone in the world, a self-sufficient presentation. Being a unique case, this makes it the particularly good axiomatic foundation for thought. In Badiou, then, being-as-such, the pure multiple, is shown in the mark of the void, the absolute predicate of existence which is uniquely nothing, nothing *in particular*.

Existence derives from the void, taking shape in diagrammed circles, mapped borders, and identity labels. How and whether this differentiation takes shape as coherent, countable situations may be a difficult question in media theory. Badiou says outright, for example, the blending of media in movies means “there is no ‘objective’ situation of cinema” (*Infinite* 83). Due to this inconsistency there is no truth in film for Badiou. Any novelty to be found in cinema is to the credit of the actors, the director, or the music – the artistic forms films mix together. Illustrating how this putdown bears on the non-filmic work at hand, Badiou condemns film as a purely hybrid medium “the ‘plus-one’ of the arts, both parasitic and inconsistent” (*Inaesthetics* 83). This approach to hybrid art forms articulates a point of resistance to my efforts to apply Badiou to the palimpsest. Yet, elsewhere Badiou steps back from this condemnation somewhat. He says there remains “a great question to have a relation to multimedia and to new forms of images, of art, which is not the paradigm of totalization. So we have to be free about that sort of dream” (“Fifteen Theses” para. 10).

The situations of cinema Badiou accepts are bound up with artists. In his confrontation with Badiou’s general disregard for cinema as an art form, Ling finds that “Badiou clearly recognizes cinema to have been an art, his frequent citing of the ‘thinking cinema’ of Griffith, Welles, Murnau and Eisenstein (as much as Godard, Kiarostami, Viconti, Oliviera, and the like) amply attesting this fact” (294-5). At one level, the case studies taken up later occur within a situation of auteurs – Scanlon in the case of the zines and *PostSecret* as a project that attains coherence under the organization of Frank Warren. Yet the very nature of my enquiry into a media form insists that the palimpsestic qualities I address earlier do not recede behind such a “singularity whose emblem is the author” (*Inaesthetics* 83). The question of naming, exemplified

by Scanlon's use of the pseudonym Solve and the anonymity of the *PostSecret* project, is significant and will be stirred up in my consideration of those works.

The alternative passage through this swamp, simply accepting that photography as a component of cinema is a coherent situation, is not adequate. Roland Barthes reflects much of Badiou's opinions on cinema in *Camera Lucida*. In a minor portion of his meditation on photography, Barthes says the cinematic image is "the photograph, taken in flux, ... impelled, ceaselessly drawn toward other views; in the cinema, no doubt, there is always a photographic referent, but this referent shifts, it does not make a claim in favor of its reality, it does not protest its former existence; it does not cling to me; it is not a specter" (89). Photography, in contrast, "breaks the 'constitutive style'" of cinema, "it is without future ...; in it, no protensity, whereas the cinema is protensive" (90). Ling and other film scholars assault this view of film merely passing from view and thought, "like life" as Barthes says (89). At the other end of the indeterminacy of situations, Barthes suggests photography seeks precisely to efface itself as a situation by reflecting pure reality. Barthes says photography "is unclassifiable because there is no reason to *mark* this or that of its occurrences; it aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language" (6). Barthes sees photographs as potentially marks of pure being, the void itself. Barthes emphasizes, however, that this is an imminent, material inscription particular to photography. "A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed," Barthes says (81). A complete, true photograph is in this way concomitant with the void, a "guarantee of Being" (113).

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Benjamin similarly identifies photography as paving the way for new, egalitarian artistic practices: “To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (22). The abolition of the aura, the “unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” in space and time, through photographic capture would bring the once haloed artistic fetish into reach (22). , Benjamin offers an elaboration of this photographic collapse of history in the form of the dialectical image he develops in *The Arcades Project*. Such an image, in Benjamin’s terms, “emerges suddenly, in a flash.... What once adhered in the now of its recognizability becomes irre recognizable within the situation” (473). Through such photographic exposures of life, Benjamin seeks how “[t]he past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption,” as he says in “On the Concept of History” (390). Benjamin hopes the breakdown of history into fragmented moments will reveal this latent promise. This shattering appearance will come to be understood as an event in the later portion of this introduction.

To return this discussion to Badiou’s method and begin to understand how photographic material is given shape by its situation, I bring back the idea of the situation building up from the void. Hallward characterizes this transition best when he says “[t]here is nothing prior to the count, but this inconsistent nothing is nevertheless ‘what’ is counted” (101). These elements collect into countable parts, the largest of which is the set of the situation itself. In photographic terms, the silver-nitrate crystals or digital pixels of a photograph shape an area of shading and coloration as well as the entire image. The fundamental particles also shape the people captured, who may be formed into couples or groups, foreground and background. The photographic scene

as a whole may be a component in the life narrative of a photo album, which in turn can be reduced into any of those smaller parts. The question of micro and macro scale thus becomes a question of the focal length measured from infinity. “The elements ... are always themselves sets, however far down the scale we go toward infinitely small,” as Hallward says (*Badiou* 83). This “apparently nondecomposable term,” here the photographic surface, “figures as the most elementary of basic elements of the situation, the term upon which all recognizable or situated belonging is based: as far as the situation is concerned, it cannot be broken up into still more fundamental constituent parts” (87). Beneath that ontological plane there is only incompleteness, segmented parts, limbs, organs, perhaps even nothing, purely nothing at all if nothing else. The void courses through all such situations, and can potentially take shape as such conspicuously empty or fragmentary parts. I may turn to a familiar photograph in which I have much invested and in the torrent of intertextual connections find something else there, a relationship I did not know about manifesting itself through a hand being out of place, a scowl on a face where there should be a smile, or another conspicuous detail.

The *punctum*, for Barthes, is precisely such a “partial object” of photography that attracts and holds the viewer’s gaze (43). Reflecting in many ways the sundered Polaroid which opens this study, the *punctum* for Barthes is a “sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). The empty and disruptive character of such a part is ardently proclaimed by Barthes. “A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; ... A trick of vocabulary: we say ‘to develop a photograph’; but what the chemical action develops is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound)” (49).



Benjamin too seeks the conspicuous detail in the workings of the optical unconscious. Elaborated in “Little History of Photography,” this mark on the photographic psyche is the repressed truth of the image. It manifests itself in an uncertainty about the portrait:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject. (510)

The punctum and the optical unconscious conceptually exemplify the void given a photographic form. Barthes’ concept is the uncertain, unnameable, incomplete “something, within presentation,” that “escapes the count” (*Being* 93). His “haunting presentation” affects an “anxiety of the void” (*Being* 94). This sense of danger elicits a metastructure in the form of the state of the situation. The state, “the second regime,” works to keep the punctum, the unconscious, the inexistent but included void, from manifesting by publicly auditing the original count of the situation (*Being* 278). “This veracity is literally the fictionalizing of the count via the imaginary being conferred upon it by it undergoing, in turn, the operation of a count” (*Being* 94-5). The state rounds up to round off and include the wandering decimals that might betray the fiction of counting things individually. The state in this way locks in place the nomadic parts that could lend appearance to the void, verifying their denigrated status in the situation and providing the world with a sense of wholeness and oneness.

For Barthes, this stratified domain of knowledge defines the *stadium* of the photograph. Barthes describes the stadium in terms amenable to Badiou’s notion of the excessively inclusive counting of the structure and the state. The stadium “is an extant, it has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture (25).

The aura occupies a similar though immensely more complex position in Benjamin's theory of photography. To expand on my original gloss of the concept, the aura is less firm and ready-to-hand than my earlier definition and its common usage in media studies would suggest. Carolin Duttlinger's article "Imaginary Encounters" draws on a variety of Benjamin's works to show the plastic trace of the aura. Duttlinger says the aura, "[r]ather than providing a neat shorthand for the transition from traditional to modern culture ... provokes, in its very ambiguity and multivalence, supplementary elaboration and analysis" (80). This liminal element causes photography in Benjamin's thought to occupy "both sides of an apparently irreconcilable divide," emerging "not only as the tool of aura's destruction but also...as the site of its last appearance" (83). I will develop this conflicted concept throughout this writing.

The successful function of the state in these domains can be intuited. "It is the immediate world, the world of appearances, that is always given as solid, linked, consistent. This is a world of relation and cohesion, one in which we have our habits and reference points," as Badiou says (*Theoretical* 176). The family portrait, the landscape, and the bar snapshot all figure clearly in the workings of the state. In his introduction to *Photography*, Pierre Bourdieu records the practiced banality of amateur photography: "Nothing is more directly opposed to the ordinary image of artistic creation than the activity of the amateur photographer" (5). Via the state even the most peculiar examples of the family portrait becomes merely an absurdity in the scrapbook or online profile, included seamlessly in the photographic situation precisely as an oddity or spectacle.

In his notion of the state as a metastructure, Badiou acknowledges the place of ideology and the worksite of an ideological critique. Žižek presents this as well in *The Plague of Fantasies*. "At its most elementary level, ideology exploits the minimal distance between a

simple collection of elements and the different sets one can form out of this collection” Žižek says (82). Echoing Badiou, Žižek here defines the excesses of the state as empty, extensive structures – constructs of vacant, baseless power. Hallward emphasizes the excessiveness of this cloud-like bureaucracy, saying “under normal or ‘natural’ circumstances there is literally ‘immeasurable excess of state power’ over the individuals it governs” (96). For Badiou, the controlling demeanor of the state demonstrates:

a central insight of the Marxist analysis of the state; the state’s business relates not to individuals per se (to elements) but rather to groups or classes of individuals, and this insofar as the elements of these classes are already presented by the situation itself. That the state is always the state of the ruling class means that it re-presents, or arranges, the existing elements of its situation in such a way as to reinforce the position of its dominant parts. (qtd. in *Badiou* 121-3)

As a result of this opportunistic orientation, “[t]he degree of connection between the native structure of a situation and its statist metastructure is variable” (*Being* 99). And so, Badiou says, the “question of a *gap* is the key to the analysis of being” (*Being* 99). Through this acknowledgement the concepts meant to measure such a gap – alienation, reification, psychoses, and, particularly valuable here, the fetish – all become valuable tools for analysis without attributing some particular, inherent, normative thing to judge against. This approach “does not introduce a special operation, nor any primitive relation other than that of belonging” to the void (*Being* 83). Absolute indifference, pure equality, the void and its promise is included in each situation. In this way the punctum and the optical unconscious are included in the situation of photography as the localized part of the void. They are made part of the stadium and the aura, but are not readily ordered within those contextual and fetishistic parameters. Looking for the truth of the photograph as palimpsest, the shortcoming of photographic knowledge, I seek these gaps in existence, the blind spots in appearance.

## Appearance

Being, ever in retreat, is not knowable. Yet being elicits structures accessible to situated knowledge. And so being-as-being is only ever approachable as an appearance of being-there. “A crucial consequence of this property is that every ontological investigation is irredeemably *local* ... Being is exposed to thought only as a local site of its own untotalizable deployment,” as Badiou works it out (*Theoretical* 174). Being then, while not shaped by its relations, enters into these associations and, through this relativity, becomes knowable.

The insights of the previously detailed ontology of the photograph can only logically extend, not be made entirely visible. While set theory writes being as such, the appearance of that being is offered by category theory. To return to the cursory description I offer at the outset of this study, category theory, as a series of relations between objects “excludes that there may be, strictly speaking, a being of relation. Being ... is subtracted from any bond” (*Theoretical* 175-6). A world in this sense is the localization of a situation, the appearance of being under a particular set of logical relationships. Only through the pure univocity of the void as base, the acknowledgment that everything properly belongs to the equality of the void while the void is wrongly included in every situation, can it be understood “how it is possible for a situation of being to be at once a pure multiplicity on the edge of inconsistency, and the solid and intrinsic binding of its appearance” (*Theoretical* 180).

Badiou’s local transcendental permits this translocation. The transcendental is the tool by which can be thought “difference according to appearance, over and above the fact that this difference may be phenomenologically obvious” (*Theoretical* 187). The transcendental provides a basic ordering of a situation, a logical relation stemming from a series of measures that determines the balance or imbalance between elements in their local appearance. It is important

to note that the transcendental is itself a multiple that orders and self-regulates. As Badiou emphasizes, “[s]aying that the transcendental is a relation of order means that it is a multiple endowed with a structure of order. Order is not a structure of the situation. Within the situation there is an ordered set; the situation is not itself ordered” (*Theoretical* 188). The transcendental appears “more or less” in a world, configuring logical orientations toward a minimum or maximum level of appearance (*Theoretical* 189). The transcendental in this way says something of how the state seeks to totalize its worlds.

How this operates, and what Badiou’s configuration lends to my interrogations of the the Polaroid and other media, can be best approached through a methodological comparison. Arjun Appadurai’s oft-cited “methodological fetishism” as he articulates it in his introduction to *The Social Life of Things* presents many of the characteristics of a modern phenomenological approach to media (5). Appadurai speaks of this fetishism in generally Marxist terms. In *Capital*, Karl Marx describes fetishism as the reason

the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. In the same way, the impressions made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. (165)

Adapting this perspective, Appadurai in turn defines his phenomenological fetishism as necessary to

follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. ... Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. (5)

In this way, objects always exist for individuals (particularly the phenomenologist). Badiou's framework contributes an invaluable approach to the fetish, closer to the emanation of light Marx articulates. The lack of a mediating phenomenological relationship enables a consideration of such complex objects "without inflicting the violence of determining the being of any of those who suffered this inapprehensible experience," as Hair says (281). While Hair here speaks of Alain Resnais' approach to the object world of the Holocaust in his documentary *Night and Fog*, this presumption of indeterminacy is similarly valuable in my consideration of memorial publications and mailed confessions. It is precisely such determining violence that is meant to wring out the intentionality meant to drip from Appadurai's method.

Marx anticipates the value of Badiou's philosophical contribution when he says:

[T]he exchange of commodities implies contradictory and mutually exclusive conditions. The further development of the commodity does not abolish these contradictions, but rather provides the form within which they have room to move. This is, in general, the way in which real contradictions are resolved. (198)

Appadurai's methodological fetishism foregrounds one dimension of the fetish to the detriment of others. This neglects the possibility for contradiction, which Badiou's concept of being and logics of worlds permits. Through Badiou I am able to say an object appears this way without ever saying that it is or was this way *alone*. This is to say the subjective decision does not speak to an object's being-as-such, it cannot address every facet of its multiplicity, but only with the being-there, being as it situated by the working of the logics of a finite world, never as a totality.

Badiou says the transcendental permits onlookers to

see the inessential side of phenomenality (existence as pure external diversity) enter into contradiction with the essence whose phenomenon is existence, the immanent unity of this diversity. Thus the negation of the phenomenon will be its subsisting-as-one within existential diversity." (*Theoretical* 149-50)

To begin to map the significance of Badiou's thought in relation to the media I address in this study, it serves well to return to the dialectical image taken up by Benjamin. "This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish" (*Arcades* 10). As Benjamin says:

What distinguishes images from the "essences" of phenomenology is their historical index. ... For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding "to legibility" constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. (*Arcades* 462)

The utopia of the photograph promises to capture being, demystify it, and return the fetish to common ground. It thus aspires to fulfill "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" ("Work of Art" 22). Yet this claim to truth is made a lie in appearance, the object captured is but the latent thought of the photographic exposure, locked in the structure of the dialectical dream image, imprisoned by the fetish. The photograph develops an appearance only within the concepts of the aura and the stadium, existence historicized and made accessible to knowledge.

Acknowledging the in-existent or void of a situation as I do above means there must be something the transcendental does not index. "It is this element that we call the proper in-existent of the object" (*Logics* 341). This brings us back to the punctum Barthes seeks and the optical unconscious Benjamin invokes, both intensely immobile, concealed, and particular reorganizing parts of the photographic world. If Barthes seeks the punctum itself as the hidden truth of the photograph, it is not itself the transcendental. If Benjamin seeks the optical unconscious as the site of contingency, it is not recorded in the ordering of the situation. Valuable in identifying the

transcendental of photography, Barthes finds there is another, obscuring punctum. He admits this in a confession of a certain failure in his work:

[W]hen I was inquiring into my attachment to certain photographs, I thought I could separate... the stadium ... from that unexpected flash which sometimes crosses this field and which I called the punctum. I now know that there exists another *punctum* ... than the "detail." This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("that-has-been"), its pure representation. ... I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. ... What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence. ... This punctum, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: that is dead and that is going to die. (94-6)

The apparent notion of an intensity here suggests this second punctum as an ideal candidate for the transcendental of photography. Elsewhere Barthes is further suggestive in this regard. "The only way I can transform the Photograph is into refuse: either the drawer or the wastebasket," he says (93). His single range of variation speaks to an essential classifying character in photographic collections. To expand on this, Benjamin's characterization of collecting phrases it in the precise terms of the transcendental:

[T]he object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness... It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system; the collection. ... Collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestations of "nearness" it is the most binding. (*Arcades* 204-5)

The elevation of an object so it is out of reach no matter how near it may be is the work of the aura. Taken together, these facets mark the aura and the second punctum interwoven as the transcendental of photography. How memorial, collectible, and historical a photograph appears, how well it preserves and is preserved, these are the conditional values of the appearance of the



photograph. The transcendental of the photographic world, then, is precisely the diachronic multiplicity of the palimpsest; it is recognized by its visual integrity.

The transcendental, so named, demarcates the envelope of appearance, which is to say the local totality behind which the truth of the photographic palimpsest must reside. It obscures for Barthes the real punctum he seeks, for Benjamin the contingency of life sought as the optical unconscious. There is more than the range of degrees the transcendental offers. The truth is something beneath this transcendental – not outside of its envelope but rather foundational to its structure.

### **Event, Subject, and Truth**

I am not merely interested in describing a localized situation. The ordered world primes the antagonism it stages. The event, the subject, and truth are intricately interwoven in a single movement, each implicating the others in its procedure in the flash of the dialectical image. As Hair says, “[t]he questions of origins in this process is tricky in Badiou’s thought and not only because the temporality of a truth procedure is that of the future anterior” (247-8). Elaborating how this time of truth contrasts with the anterior future Barthes identifies as the second punctum, time in appearance, will occupy the closing of this introduction and prepare this thesis for the studies that follows.

It may be no coincidence that photography itself provides a site for an event. Photography inspires the imagistic concept of a collapsing singularity in Benjamin’s writing as I cite above. Further, the photographs’ relation to the transformative truths of modernity have been well explored. Early photography influenced the work of Freud, Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Camera Obscura* Sarah Kofman works through the works of each of these thinkers to emphasize the photographic character of their depictions of reality. Thought, being photogenic,

“resists the evolution of science,” Kofman says (53). The photographic mindset works “above all through its mythical significations, and through its impact on the unconscious” (53). The significance of this may be made explicit through a return to Marx’s definition of fetish:

This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events, an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from the external object to the eye. (163)

In photographic terms, the inscription of light, the objects it archives, and the photosensitive substrate, all haunt in their incomplete presence. To pick this apart is to share in Benjamin’s drive to produce “lightning flashes” of knowledge, to dissect the composite rendering of historical progress and technological change frame by frame (*Arcades* 456). This method of capture opens up the fetish form, the dream-image of the photographic freeze-frame, providing the opportunity to burrow through the stratified layers of history and fantasy.

In Badiou’s system there are only four conditions for real thought. Through the disciplined extraction of these absolutes, Badiou says:

Philosophy has subtracted from the truth procedures that condition it all *aura* of sense, all trembling and all pathos, to seize *truth’s proving of itself* as such. But there is a moment where it falls on the radical underside of all sense, the void of all possible presentation, the hollowing of truth as a hole *without borders*. This moment is that in which the void ab-sense – such as philosophy ineluctably encounters them at the point of truth’s proving of itself – must be themselves presented and transmitted. (*Infinite* 79)

This is the non-place, non-sense, of art as a condition for thought. If ontology belongs to mathematics, art concerns itself with the site of the event. As Badiou says, “[a] work is a situated *inquiry* about the truth that it locally actualizes or of which it is a finite fragment” (*Inaesthetics* 12). In art, “the world exhibits a singular form of tension between the intensity of the sensible

and the tranquility of form. The event is a break in the established regime of this tension (*Logics* 73). In an artistic event, an artist contorts media to “arrange the forms of knowledge in such a way that some truth may come to pierce a hole in them” (*Inaesthetics* 9). Such a constellation lends shape to what the world says is not formally or logically possible – the void of the situation. Hair is helpful in relating this concept when he says “the truth of a work of art is an imminent, but anonymous aspect of its material presentations, retrospectively readable as the operation that formed its finite consistency” (277). This can be made clear through a return to my Polaroid. What grabs me about the image has nothing to do with the now near-faceless people the photograph once captured. While this is made obvious by my demolished example, this is not a coherent contention in the carefree world of snapshots – all that normally matters is that the people pictured are smiling and not blinking. This inaesthetic approach concerns exclusively the relation between a work of art and truth as immanent (“rigorously coextensive with the truths that it generates”) and singular (“these truths are given nowhere else than in art”) (*Inaesthetics* 9).

A subject interpellated by the truth of an event is removed from everyday concerns and individualistic concepts. The subject in Badiou’s philosophy is “the only known form of a conceivable ‘compromise’ between the phenomenal persistence of a world and its eventual rearrangement,” as Hallward says (79). Existence seems to have shrunk in the wash for the subject of an event. The subject is all too aware of their posture, the vulgarity of their language, the weight of their things, and the mislabeling of their identity. The subject’s discomfit manifests itself in renaming and reshaping the world around them, processes meant to give shape and significance to these newly recognized parts. Barthes punctum demands this new comportment, being

what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (the insistent gaze). ... In both cases we might (we must) speak of an *intense immobility*: linked to a detail (to a detonator), an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph. (49)

The subject pares down the characteristics of the event to find the true kernel of the situation through subtraction and destruction. In “Destruction, Negation, Subtraction,” Badiou relates the process to art. The subject finds “this new coherence is not new because it achieves the process of disintegration of the system. The new coherence is new to the extent that” it “becomes indifferent to these laws” (“Destruction” para. 4). In *The Century*, Badiou refers to subtraction in terms seemingly distinguishing it entirely from my Polaroid. There he says the subject subtracts “[t]o purify reality, not in order to annihilate it at its surface, but to subtract it from its apparent unity so as to detect within it the minuscule difference, the vanishing term which constitutes it” (65). By contrast, destruction articulates a definite affinity with my inspiring image. Destruction works to burn, cut, or dissolve the cloying surface the subject finds too constrictive. Destruction is “the eventual concentration of a process through which is achieved the complete disintegration of an old world” (“Destruction” para. 3). To be certain, this is the step enacted upon the Polaroid by the time I came upon the photograph. But this does not mean subtraction has not taken place. Destruction, properly executed, is the “evental concentration which realizes the negative power of negation, the negativity of negation” (“Destruction” para. 3). Subtraction and destruction are the double movements of negation. One without the aid of the other as a supporting operation, subtractive precision or destructive finality working in isolation, yields different flavors of nihilism. As Badiou says, “If subtraction is separated from destruction, we have as result Hate and Despair. ... But if destruction is separated from subtraction, we have as result ... collective suicide, which is without thinking and destination” (“Destruction” para.

35). If I take the truth of the Polaroid seriously I must surmise that it was chosen with subtractive care, pulled out of a photo album or a shoebox of pictures, before the artistic instigator put a torch to its glossy surface.

To contrast truth with the transcendental in such timely matters, Badiou's concern with evental time is valuable. "[T]ime – if not coextensive with structure, if not the sensible form of the Law – is intervention itself, thought as the gap between two events" (*Being* 210). If I take this sensible form of the law, of time, to construct the transcendental as I have above, the other form, the punctum as the partial object that wounds Barthes, that fails to appear, is the event in time. This, too, points in the direction of the truth of the palimpsest. In "Psychoanalysis in Post-Marxism," Žižek draws a distinction in Badiou's thought

between historicism and historicity proper: historicism refers to the set of circumstances (economic, political, cultural, etc.) whose complex interactions allow us to account for a given event, while historicity proper involves the specific temporality of the Event and its aftermath, the span between the Event and its ultimate End. (240)

If the transcendental of photography concerns historicism, the truth of the palimpsest must be concerned with the interval of the photograph, its historicity. Photography itself risks collapsing into a black hole of uncertainty when the break between the past and the present is no longer discernible or durable. Such a singularity takes shape when images that, to reiterate Benjamin, "attain to legibility only at a particular time" fail to attain such temporal clarity, when its situated place in a timeline of images is uncertain, as with the crossed purposes and periods of the palimpsest (*Arcades* 462).

The ageless, faceless, nameless figures in the Polaroid require new names. These must not be new proper names, new identities. The name a subject of truth decides upon instead "seeks to endow the element with a kind of eternity," as Badiou describes it in *Ethics* (82). This

reflects back to the names I mention at the outset of this chapter. There is an arrangement around *Solve* and *PostSecret*, a collectivized, public naming of the illegal artwork, the taboo confession. To understand these names in a consumable, quotidian sense is to denude the name of its significance. The truth of the Polaroid has nothing to do with the person who discarded it, the people it once portrayed, or the corporation that produced the film and camera that captured the image. It names the event that awoke me to the palimpsest. Yet “[t]he trace ... of this break,” Badiou says, “is to be found in the fact that what seemed to partake of the formless is grasped as form, whether globally ... or through a local excess,” (*Logics* 73). And so the name Polaroid and its claim to truth is not something apart from the snapshot either. The truth, the void of the situation, is not otherworldly but the repressed foundation of existence. The name Polaroid is based on the common photographic material disfigured by being made palimpsestic. The Polaroid is an abused material given a misused corporate name, recognized by its everyday nomination so this misrecognition can be understood. *Solve* is nothing without the walls he tagged and *PostSecret* is nothing without postcards. The truth of the palimpsest is nothing without the Polaroid.

Though Barthes contends that “[i]n front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory,” it may still be difficult to imagine a tale told through such nostalgic forms as the photograph to be a truth procedure (85). In his landmark “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson does well in resigning most lingering in the past to a white-washed “‘nostalgia’ mode of reception” that elides “most of the signals that normally convey the contemporaneity” of the referenced time and place (496). To oppose the event in its tracing truth across time with this conception of nostalgia, Badiou says:

When something truly New emerges, one cannot go on as if it did not happen, since the very fact of this innovation changes all the coordinates. ... More precisely: of course, one can do it, but if one does it, these old forms are no longer the same. They have lost their innocence and now look like a nostalgic fake.  
(*Logics* 175)

It is through an acknowledgment of the historicity noted above that a certain strand of tarrying with the negative of the past is able to be separated from the dominant, revisionist nostalgia mode Jameson confronts. The truth of the palimpsest is then precisely concerned with “the pain of a ... nostalgia with a past beyond all but aesthetic retrieval” (495). This is nostalgia for truth, a seeking for the heart of the event I experienced last year not to fondly reminisce on Chicago winters, but to seek and project an understanding only available through an anterior future orientation.

Speaking of collecting and memory in different but related terms, Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever* charts the unconscious anxiety given form in the practice of collecting. For Derrida, the archive is a memory prosthesis taking shape in response to the threat of forgetting. This conflicted practice “takes place at the place of the originary and structural breakdown of said memory” (34). The palimpsest shapes a break with Derrida’s negotiation of memorializing and decaying thought. It indicates the potential to shape new memories through forgetting. While this is the task requiring the entirety of this thesis, Badiou suggests my direction by saying:

We might put it like this: “Never forget what you have encountered.” But we can say this only if we understand that not-forgetting is not a memory ... Not-forgetting consists of thinking and practicing the arrangement of my multiple-being according to the Immortal which it holds, and which the piercing through ... of an encounter has composed as subject. (52)

As much as it indexes so many of the concerns here, I wish in this quote to draw out an affinity between this understanding of a reawakened truth and the return of the experience of magical thinking in media articulated by Tom Gunning in his “Re-Newing Old Technologies.” In

Gunning's formulation, a "discourse of wonder" re-exposes technology "not simply as a tool, but precisely as a spectacle, less as something that performs a useful task than as something that astounds us by performing in a way that seemed unlikely or magical before" (45). The uncanny serves as the analytical undercurrent of this process. As Gunning says, the uncanny in technology emerges less as "a new perception...than an overriding uncertainty, not the end of a cycle of habitualization than permeating the cycle" (46). To embrace the uncanny sensation I speak of in my encounter with the Polaroid is to make the simple, apparent truth of the photograph, the seeming veracity of the image, into a problem – a dilemma enacted in the distorted surface and time of the palimpsest.

Badiou terms this operation, "which reactivates a subject in another logic of its appearing-in-truth" a subjective resurrection (*Logics* 65). As he says, "a resurrection presupposes a new world, which generates the context for a new event, a new trace, a new body – in short, a truth-procedure under whose rule the occulted fragment places itself after having been extracted from its occultation" (*Logics* 65). I mean, then, to follow in the footsteps of Oliver Feltham's work in "An Explosive Geneology." Feltham attempts the "mapping of a generic truth procedure" across multiple situations (257). "To sketch a generic procedure one can either identify a sequence of enquiries via a proper name or indicate forcings to which proper names may be attached," Feltham instructs (257-8). My pursuit of the truth of the photograph as palimpsest through associated media suggests the latter. This shapes a twist on Badiou's set-up that Feltham encounters in theater. "Not only do we have multiple historical situations ..., but we may even have multiple events," he says (260). While I will assess the works explored herein on their own terms and within their own situations (as I must to situate the photographic transcendental by way of what may be in-appearance within the situation), I am in the scope of



this entire thesis functioning more along the lines of Badiou and poetry. I am extending the existing work I examine as a truth procedure already in process. In *Alain Badiou*, Feltham identifies how this is carried out. “Badiou attempts to add his signifiers onto a metaphorical sequence that is already constituted in the poem: he attempts to extend and expand the work of the poem” (132). This operation “mirrors the work of incompleteness,” taking up my own resurrection of the dormant truth procedure through the texts I explore (132). And so, in this opening enfilade, I have begun by showing the rips and tatters of the palimpsest, continuing the labor enacted upon the bodies of work I will examine. “This presence ‘unbeknownst to their authors’ allows us fully to recapitulate the birth of the body ... – a body that depends on the trace of a site in the world instituted [by the authors]. . . .” (*Logics* 465). I will then be extending the partial erasures and overwriting of the media I examine, not to wrap them up in a tidy envelope, but to make them more evidently incomplete.

Gordon’s notion of “complex personhood” expresses this in terms amenable to this study of overwriting and erasure, and akin to the description of the fetish above. Gordon’s concept speaks of a complex in which

all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. (4)

The complex photograph invites a further reconsideration of how truths may be forgotten in remembering or remembered in forgetting, Gordon’s concept may be usefully reconfigured here as a conceptualization of complex objecthood. Gordon offers the idea of the palimpsest as the result of such a practice where an object, “[a]s it retells one story and in this way summons another, it remembers some of what [it] forgot (146).

In the zines addressed in the next chapter, I am looking at each of these promising components in a more expanded albeit not completely differentiated pair of examples. I am trying here to further identify the precise coordinates of the truth at the intersection of the old, deprecated, and photographic, the two zines providing more points from which I can triangulate the course of the transcendental slashing through the mediascape. Once this reading for similarity is complete, a reading of the *PostSecret* examples will seek to push these logics further, testing the boundaries of the truth. In this way, the forthcoming chapter may be seen as a proof of concept. In *The Zine*, erasure sacrifices a residual form. In *Forever Solve*, photographs and childhood drawings are salvaged. Loss in the form of death clearly grounds both efforts. The erasure of context is a natural accomplice after the fact to murder; the tethers of memory and matter succumb to entropy, evidence is lost. What makes these works significant is their forcing of minimal differences that make forgetting unnatural. This is an estranging gesture, marking a work with a fleeting and unintelligible component that only those looking for an escape route may see. I will develop the concepts of faithful and obscure subjects, the significance of naming, and the application of subtraction and destruction through an examination of these dreams of moving on and remembering.

## Recollecting Scanlon, Remaking Solve: Art and Death in *The Zine* and *Forever Solve*

*And then, said Austerlitz, Vera told me how in autumn we would often stand by the upper enclosure wall of the Schönberg Garden to watch the squirrels burying their treasures. Whenever we came home afterwards, I had to read aloud from your favorite book about the changing seasons, said Vera, even though you knew it by heart from the first line to the last, and she added that I never tired of the winter pictures in particular, scenes showing hares, deer, and partridges transfixed by astonishment as they stared at the ground covered with newly fallen snow, and Vera said that every time we reached the page which described the snow falling through the branches of the trees, soon to shroud the entire forest floor, I would look up at her and ask: But if it's all white, how do the squirrels know where they've buried their hoard? ... Those were your very words, the question which constantly troubled you. How indeed do the squirrels know, what do we know ourselves, how do we remember, and what is it we find in the end? (W.G. Sebald, Austerlitz 204)*

In July 2008, a man murdered Scanlon, a young artist who went by the graffiti tag Solve among the Chicago underground art community, as Scanlon was breaking up a fight at a party. Members of the community marked his death in their respective media, descending into the streets to assemble spontaneous collections of their own street art designs into memorial sites, stenciling the emblematic Solve logo superimposed over Scanlon's face on walls and clothing, and pasting up his emblematic figures – a confused looking alien, a cockeyed pigeon, and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. Soon after they presented an array of Scanlon's work at a cafe and posthumously published a zine Scanlon composed. And then, in January 2009, they reassembled and did it all again, bigger and newer. They assembled a multi-media installation featuring tribute videos, created an official t-shirt, and pieced together a memorial zine.

The Chicago underground art community during these separate periods represents valuable examples of two of Badiou's subjective responses; first embodying a faithful response and later adopting the qualities of obscure artistic subjects. I will trace the particular nature of these subjective characteristics in the shape of the two zines produced during these respective periods, *The Zine* and *Forever Solve*. I am particularly interested in the respectively mutilated

and photographic qualities of these subcultural old-media productions. I will draw out the particulars of such photographic reconstructions through considerations raised by *Camera Lucida* and Sebald's *Austerlitz*. In both writings, as with *Forever Solve*, the seeking of images of dead loved ones is at the heart of the text. These works foreground the work involved in relocating the dead. The disfigurative qualities of *The Zine* will in particular draw out a fuller consideration of the workings of subtraction and destruction as the negating movements of Badiou's philosophical process. Taken together, these case studies will augment my approach to the concerns with photography and ephemera taken together in the form of the palimpsest.

To reiterate, the subject is born when, "[t]hrough their commensurability with a truth, anonymous individuals are ... transformed into vectors of humanity as a whole," as Badiou puts it in *Saint Paul* (20). Such a consecrated subject, which can be at the scale of a person, a movement, a body of work, or an entire nation, shapes its truth in the situation by naming precisely what previously unrecognizable elements have been exposed by an event and including those stray parts in its new body of work. "An intervention consists," Badiou says, "in identifying that there has been some undecidability, and in deciding its belonging to the situation" (*Being* 202). This fresh body of understanding a subject of truth shapes is constituted through two forms of negation, destruction and subtraction. Roberts concisely weighs how the two forms of negation figure in this process: "Destruction is ... the process whereby one thing is destroyed and replaced by another. Subtraction ... is the process whereby the real is not destroyed, but purified or refigured in order to break or undermine its surface unity" (271-2).

The faithful subject of truth, shaping a new body to overthrow or replace the complacent ordering of the world it occupies, elicits reactive and obscuring subjects. The latter is important to this study. As much as the thought of the faithful subject is the "active and identifiable form"

of the process of seeking out a truth, the obscure subject is the shape of an effort that “annuls this production” (*Logics* 50). The obscure subject seeks to bury or destroy the artistic works “that comprise the body of the faithful artistic subject, which it perceives as a formless abomination and wishes to destroy in the name of its fiction of the sublime Body, the Body of the divine or of purity” (*Logics* 73). The holistic, occulting labors of the obscure subject aspires to return the world to a previous, sensible state – to return the certainty of established forms and cultural legibility. Badiou characterizes this in ways that reflect my considerations here, terming the different subjective trajectories “as erased body (faithful form) and as full body (obscure form)” (*Logics* 67).

The clash between erasure and completion can be readily grounded in the Chicago underground art community as brought to a head by the death of Scanlon. The horizon of an exhaustive gathering of the body of work created during the first period, a full collection of all creative forms spawned by Scanlon’s death, is particularly unreachable in these subcultural circumstances. It is impossible to examine most of the physical memorial sites that rose up in response to his murder. The traces of these efforts, as with most of Scanlon’s original works, have been largely erased by the Chicago Street Department or tagged over by successive artists. The loss of these vulnerable dialogic works speaks something to the character of the artistic community being given to such ephemerality, something addressed in quite different ways by the two zines.

Scholars have taken up zines from a variety of perspectives. The only book-length scholarly investigation of zines, Stephen Duncombe’s *Notes from Underground*, does much to survey the cultural contemporary and historical and material landscape. Duncombe says zines are

assembled from “common materials and technology” (14). Expanding briefly on that suggestive description, Duncombe describes zines as

somewhere between a personal letter and a magazine. Printed on a standard copy machine, folded widthwise to form a folio and stapled in the crease, zines typically run from ten to forty pages. ... As zines are put together by hand using common materials and technology (do-it-yourself is the prime directive of the zine world) they consequently look the part, with unruly cut-and-paste layout, barely legible type, and uneven production. (14)

Anna Leventhal’s “Imperfect Bound,” though largely concerned with the work of library classification of zines, is particularly concerned with the material conditions of zines. The zine, in Leventhal’s words, is “a cultural form whose very materiality is both its strength and its potential limitation” (1). Leventhal attends to the particular ephemerality of the zines, how the fragile and amateur binding and design imparts the publications with particular characteristics that can be seen as assets or deficits, and how the institutionalization and digitization of zines influences the material existences and cultural intelligibility of such works.

The modern American zine is in many ways the heir apparent to Thomas Paine and other revolutionary pamphleteers, Duncombe insists (32). “And before the reader thinks that such a comparison between the high and mighty pamphlet and the lowly zine sullies the reputation of the former,” Duncombe says, “they should be aware that many pamphlets *were* scurrilous, abusive, and seditious” (32, emphasis in original). More contemporary ties can be gleaned from the cultural fringe throughout the twentieth-century. Duncombe traces the genealogy of the modern Western zine from 1930s science-fiction fan publications through the riotous punk-inflected small presses of the 1970s. These two strands converged in the last decades of the century:

In the early 1980s ... smaller streams of publications created by fans of other cultural genres, disgruntled self-publishers, and the remnants of printed political

dissent from the sixties and seventies, were brought together and crossfertilized through listings and reviews in network zines.... [T]he “fan” was by and large dropped off “zine,” and their number increased exponentially, a culture of zines developed. (11)

The modern zine is then the offspring of two particularly tumultuous periods of artistic activity, the interwar period and the Vietnam War era. Scanlon and his cohorts manifest a significant degree of fidelity to the practices and politics of this historical inheritance despite the morphing cultural milieu. In line with the tropes of the surrealist and situationist art movements of those times, Scanlon’s works, as with many of the Chicago underground art community and zine makers at large, borrow heavily from mainstream symbols and slogans, appropriating and disfiguring them to suit their political and artistic purposes, from griping about work, to advertising music, or agitating for political unrest, and beyond. This is shown most readily in Scanlon’s use of the grinning image of the mayor of Chicago. This heritage of poaching from the mainstream shares much with the ready-made streams of mail art that are in many ways historical precursors to *PostSecret* as I will touch upon in the next chapter. In *Subculture* Dick Hebdige (via Stuart Hall) contends “each subculture represents a different handling of the ‘raw material of social ... existence’” (80). Further, “[e]ach subcultural ‘instance’ represents a ‘solution’ to a specific set of circumstances, to particular problems and contradictions” (81). The works of the artistic community I here examine embody persistent variables in their subcultural formula, forms where the content has changed but the shape remains persistent:

There have been few, very few, crucial changes .... But, on the basis of some truth-procedures that unfold subjectivizable bodies, point by point, one reconstitutes a different past, a history of achievements, discoveries, breakthroughs, which is by no means a cultural monumentality but a legible succession of fragments of eternity. (*Logics* 509 n5)

As a modern incarnation of such an artistic milieu, zines are haunted by the legacy of successes and failures among those artistic and political movements. The embattled terrain is between a separatist independence and an intervening autonomy, between taking on the role of outsiders for the dominant culture and living on the edge of the void. It is, in terms of Badiou's philosophy, a choice between a reactionary retreat or a revolutionary place on the barricades. Either case involves an orientation to living among cultural wreckage. Duncombe places zines in the trenches between "purity and danger," at the "separation from ... dominant society – its very existence stems from this negation" and amidst "the threat posed by living in a commercialized society in which all culture – especially rebellious culture – is ... used as an affirmation of the very thing it was opposed to" (148-9). Zines in this way present a trashy authenticity that indicates subcultural autonomy and appears ripe for mainstream commodification. The small publications reflect in this way the focus of Evan Watkins work in *Throwaways*. Watkins traces how 'survivals,' his term for "relics, throwaways, isolated groups of the population who haven't moved with the times, and who now litter the social landscape" are ideologically encoded ('technoideologically' in his terminology) as "no longer integrally productive components of the present, and so must be cleaned up or thrown away" (3). This handling of subcultural eyesores leads the old form to be locked away in obscure book stores or, increasingly commonly, remediated by the dominant culture. Duncombe highlights the corporate zines of Warner Records (*Dirt*) and Urban Outfitters (*Slant*) as particularly direct manifestations of the mainstreaming of zines (140-41). It is perhaps only coincidental but poignant to note that David Renard's *The Last Magazine*, a self-



congratulating book on his pet industry, the niche-marketed style press of which *Slant* is a more mainstream variant, is inside and out an enormous glossy simulacrum of *The Zine*.

Faced with such forces, and an eternity of historical manifestations against which to weigh the stakes of their choice, the artistic subject is torn between anxiety and courage, a compulsion to repeat history or recover truth from the past. These survival decisions manifest the antagonism between an obscure subject's archival tomb and the faithful, resurrecting subject's scapery approach to history. Benjamin poses these tense sites as a locus for artistic interventions needing such "properly problematic" components (*Arcades* 463). Such investments manifest:

the refusal to renounce anything that would demonstrate the materialist presentation of history as imagistic ... in a higher sense than in the traditional presentation. ... in a form that is to say, in which the whole of primal history groups itself anew in images appropriate to that century. (*Arcades* 463)

This rag picker's revolutionary sensibility seeks out such dialectical images in the most unlikely places, and "in a moment of danger" as Benjamin says, not purity ("History" 391). To understand this potential, Duncombe follows Benjamin's directive in "The Author as Producer." Benjamin instructs the materialist thinker to turn away from focusing on "the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time" and toward questioning "its position within them" (qtd. in Duncombe 133). In lieu of the community of artists and the other artistic forms that swarm around Scanlon and Solve, and above the themes of their work, I consider the configuration of the zines within a constellation of media practices.

It is vital to posit the form of zines as key to the Chicago underground art community's cultural significance, the medium as key to their subcultural message, so as to associate the

findings here with the larger questions of ephemeral materiality I consider throughout this thesis.

The scene of purity and danger is reflected in these material components. As Leventhal says:

It seems unlikely that creators of early zines ... could have imagined that their cheap and dirty style...would one day be the hallmark of 'DIY Chic' – viewed not as a condemnation of consumerism but as an easily co-opted and reproduced aesthetic. (1)

Duncombe too notes these formal parameters. Again, he uses Benjamin's "The Author as Producer," as an illustration. Benjamin is concerned in that essay with photographs of poverty intended to raise awareness of the victims of modernization. Benjamin instead finds the photographs make the people depicted into mere ornaments, reifying their conditions, making them a matter of gallery-style contemplation rather than provoking empathy and action.

Benjamin notes that through photography "the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes, indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence ... seriously into question" (qtd. in 132). Badiou echoes this in his concern with the popular valuing of communication for the sake of communication from which his philosophy departs. "If an artistic creation is not surprising, incalculable, unanticipatable, it merely reiterates knowledge, rather than exposing a truth. Repetition is the mechanism by which the state regenerates" (*Logics* 266). Keyed to the operations of this subculture and the concerns of my study, Badiou excludes a certain formal domain:

From a subjective point of view, it is not because there is reaction that there is revolution, it is because there is revolution that there is reaction. We thereby eliminate ... a certain modernist tradition which believes that the criterion for art is the 'subversion' of established forms. (*Logics* 62)

The promises and impediments photography poses for the remixing of cultural commodity forms into new creations rather than mainstream repetitions is manifest in Kathleen Kelley's "Camera Obscura." Kelley, when she was "young and callow," once composed collages of found

photographs. She confesses her once callous approach to those photographs as a since-abandoned belief that “not everyone can understand your hard-won excellence, and thus you hold it close, revealing your expertise only to those who can recognize it” (10). This speaks the determination necessary and the challenge posed in my seeking to unlock the photographic palimpsest.

Kelley is made doubtful of her convictions by the questing after images of mothers taken up in Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* and Sebald’s *Austerlitz*. Her newfound humility leads her to decry her youthful exuberance. The excess of the photograph she once aspired to unlock is now beyond understanding for her. “Do I lack talent? Yes – but only as I lack the ability to walk through walls. I don’t do it, for it can’t be done” (10). Kelley is instructive of the event necessary to perceive the truth of the palimpsest in her newfound apprehension. “I find in [photographs] the loneliness of carrying something whose significance cannot easily be conveyed, the possession of which locks you in a solitude that would take an extraordinary meeting to transcend,” she says (10).

Similarly concerned with *Austerlitz* and the excesses of memory in photography, Eric Santner valuably locates the intersection between these concerns in the photographic body in *On Creaturely Life*. Photographs, Santner emphasizes, “function both iconically and indexically; they not only ‘resemble’ their referent but also bear a trace of its being, a bit of the real conveyed by light and preserved by photochemical process” (154). He implicates the thought of Benjamin and Barthes here, noting the punctum and the optical unconscious nestled in the image, the capturing of pure chance and light lending it to such apparitional appearances. This appeal to such repressed witnessing of the excesses of the state attenuates the concept for the pursuit of

occulted truths, for the recovery of the blindfolded and gagged subjects whose looks and words can be made again to call attention to the void.

Duncombe attenuates this ghost hunting in the form of zines. Duncombe says, “it is exactly the position within the conditions of the production of culture that constitutes an essential component of their politics” (133). Constituting a media ecology where readers swap publications or provide editorial responses in exchange for materials and stamps, zines erode “boundaries between producer and consumer,” challenging “the dichotomy between active creator and passive spectator” (127). His words here are reflective of some of the most positive aspects of the sociability of new media. Duncombe particularizes and extends the measures of this erosion in zines. “Zines, whether as a result of conscious design – using jagged cut-and-paste layout ... – or merely as the sloppy and scruffy side effect of being amateur and handmade, don’t allow the reader to be sucked in. ... Zines are dissonant,” he says (134). Zine are able to allow and/or demand readers probe the creative act by seeing the seams, glue, paste, and imperfections of the amateur processes at work, inviting the audience to work through the process of creation.

Time being out of joint is then a key feature of the artistic subculture and the material composition and consumption of a zine itself. This is well presented in the materials surrounding Scanlon’s murder. The zines give shape to the points in the path of an artistic truth traced in the wake of the names Scanlon and Solve. Their forms represent a traumatic reconfiguration and a later reflection that mark reorienting choices made by the subjects of the Chicago underground art movement. It is what they enact in relation to the artistic truth of those names that marks their subjective orientation as obscurantist or faithful during these periods, not their denial or acceptance of Scanlon’s death but what additional signifiers they tack onto his body of work.

I begin with the photographic forms presented in the later *Forever Solve*. *Forever Solve* is a 48-page, half-sheet, twice stapled, grayscale photocopied zine. The zine is largely composed of photographs of Scanlon and his works with accompanying narratives. Expressing succinctly what is at work throughout the pages of photos, Dan Flanagan, Scanlon's cousin, pleads: "I ask that we may stop, and look at Brendan's life in its entirety and for its entirety, not to find some silver lining to the end, to unspeakable tragedy, but to recognize a gift, to recognize the fullness of his shortened life" (22). But the photograph-laden zine cannot seize upon his work as it functions, as unsolved crimes that must in their artistic maneuvering evade capture.

This photographic reconstruction and the totalizing virtues it appeals to returns the considerations of *Camera Lucida* and *Austerlitz* taken up by Kelley. In both writings, as with *Forever Solve*, images of a dead person are foundational to the text. As Kelley frames it: "Barthes ... remembers his mother well and seeks an image to anchor his teeming memories .... Jacques Austerlitz, Sebald's protagonist ... cannot remember his mother Agáta at all, and he seeks merely to find any image of her – a photograph, not *the* photograph that Barthes demands" (10). The contributors to *Forever Solve* too gather their photographic tokens by which to remember their lost loved one, though they seem at first to confront a more practical dilemma than both men. Like Austerlitz, the friends and family of Scanlon seek to merely recollect him and his work rather than isolate him in a lone all-encompassing image as does Barthes. As Kelley draws out, however, Austerlitz's search is all the same fraught with challenges. She says the eponymous protagonist's "quest is more difficult than Barthes's, for he goes on it some fifty years after the war that not only scattered him and his memories but destroyed a good deal of the evidence that might have restored his lost past" (10). Though only half a year has passed between Scanlon's death and the publication of *Forever Solve*, and war has not come to the

Midwest, Scanlon's survivors share certain challenges with Austerlitz. The difficulty of their task is magnified as it involves recollecting the work of a murdered street artist, a life suddenly shattered by violence with work wiped out by Chicago Street Department workers, the elements, and other artists. It is the burden of this demand that forces their search to turn to photographs.

The photograph, of course, offers its own challenges. As Kelley says, channeling Barthes, "death is always present in the photograph. It can be found there even before the photograph is developed, for at the moment the shutter snaps, multiplicity and movement disappear" (13). I have spoken at length in my introduction of the kinship between photography and death. I here wish to develop from this characteristic a particular understanding that can be activated in my analysis. This scission of life cuts a space forever out of time, and time forever out of frame. This totalized fetish is the shared site of operations for the collector and the obscure subject. "Without question," Badiou says, "the obscure subject crucially calls upon an atemporal fetish: the incorruptible and indivisible over-body.... [T]he goal of the obscure subject is to make this fetish the contemporary of the present that demands to be occulted" (*Logics* 60).

It is sensible that Scanlon's family and friends, given their preservationist bent, would go seeking Scanlon's ghost in photographs precisely because of its fetishistic promise – the potential punctum or photographic unconscious offering contact with something more than it promises – as do Barthes and Austerlitz. Pertinent to their pictorial yearning, Benjamin says "[t]he cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face" ("Work of Art" 24). Against this cultish aura, Benjamin specifically values a certain stark category of photos, vacant streets and unoccupied rooms, precisely for their breaking down of the fetish. These photographs "acquire a hidden political significance. They

demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way” (“Work of Art” 24). Most of the photographs *Forever Solve* exhibits are of this type, not of Scanlon exhibiting his gaze back at those who live on, but instead representing his objects, his works and belongings – in many cases his crimes. A viewer peers at the image, seeking the contingency of his life and work.

A particular narrated photograph in *Forever Solve* is illustrative of the ill-fit between the auratic demand of the memorial and the evidentiary claims the photograph embodies. In an annotated image, Mirian, a friend of Scanlon, shares and captions an image of Scanlon’s bike, locked before studio doors awaiting his return. “This bike, just as Brendan was, had a presence that was bigger than life” (19). The language, the photograph, and their object are suggestive. In a similar theme, for Austerlitz, Santner notes, a set of vacant bicycle racks “generated a sense ‘of being on the scene of some unexpiated crime’” (57). As I said at the outset, Austerlitz’s dilemma is different but related to that of Scanlon’s friends and family. *Forever Solve* is a labor against the fleeting character of his works rather than the evacuated city centers of Austerlitz’s youth. Both labor against loss, however. As Austerlitz strains to gather his childhood Scanlon’s survivors work to gather the fragmented remnants of his work. *Forever Solve* acutely demonstrates the impossibility of this task. In the photograph Mirian contributes, a different criminal element than the murder that prompts *Forever Solve* animates the sense of Scanlon’s “larger than life” excess that lingers in the photo of his abandoned bike. This excess is the illegal artwork that bears his mark. The objects *Forever Solve* exhibits are not indicative of his work – of Solve. His family turns to childhood drawings, his friends turn to his bike and the scenes of his misdemeanors, all foregrounding Scanlon contra Solve. The snapshot of the bike attests in its permanence the absent evidence, like the purloined childhood that haunts Austerlitz as he looks

at the vacant racks. Scanlon's bike is too permanent, locked in place and time at the threshold between the studio and the street, the vehicle shuttling between Scanlon and Solve.

Even where they show his graffiti and paste-ups, captured in mid-decay or archived since the time of their creation, the photograph is too still and precise, Scanlon's work too fleeting and temporary. The contributors are well aware of this predicament. "[T]he buff went over the front of that red box you did in front of the apartment," says M in one example of many that detail the steady disappearance of his works from the streets they walk (18). *Forever Solve's* photographic response to this crisis typifies the persistence of what Benjamin identifies as "the unresolved tension between" works of art and photography "introduced by the photography of works of art" ("Little History" 523). This is a complication of the conflict between originals and copies rehearsed in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The aura of the work of street art, Solve's signature, is written in erasable ink. It is an aura that ensures its own demise. The photograph makes the work and its attendant self-deprecating aura indelible – transmuting it into something else entirely.

It is useful for my overarching purposes to approach this antagonism from the side of photography. As Kelley puts it, "the photograph does not seem to hold elapsed time, or have ties to its passing. ... It is in fact the photograph's precision that makes it insufficient to return depth to the past" (21). Of course, even the longer-term "double or multiple exposure" technique of "spirit photography" meant to convey survivors "surrounded or sometimes embraced by spirits" John Durham Peters documents in *Speaking into the Air*, is a fiction and may not return the past to the visible spectrum (97-8). Yet the photograph insists on this metaphysical potential. In "Photography and Fetish," Christian Metz expands on the draw of such photographic ghost stories. As Metz says:



The photographic take is immediate and definitive, like death and like the constitution of the fetish in the unconscious, fixed by a glance . . . , unchanged and always active later. Photography is a cut inside the referent, it cuts off a piece of it, a fragment, a part object, for a long immobile travel of no return. (84)

This framed permanence, “the abducted part-space, the place of presence and fullness,” Metz shows, lends photography its strange fetish character, a commodity configuration contrary to the hopes of Benjamin and the technical reproducibility of the image. The photograph of the work of art creates a simulacrum of the aura in the timeless, totalized, and historicized photograph.

The photograph, however, is not necessarily inexhaustible or reproducible. The Polaroid I discovered and *Forever Solve*'s fragile copy paper crypt both speak to this complex. Photographs in these structures are shown to sometimes demonstrate the chronotopic multiplicity of the palimpsest. Foremost here, in terms of *Forever Solve*, they articulate another side to the evidential inadequacy of the photographic mementos for Scanlon's survivors. The conflicted workings of photographs as the mediator between the ephemeral street art they capture in turn being folded up within a second order of ephemera in the shape of the fragile zine complicates the preservation efforts they undertake. What may reveal the void of photography, what is possible to confess only at the edge of forgetting – these are concerns that Scanlon's family and friends seek to repress within the photographs they collect, the fetishes of his work. The infinite process of a subject, of a truth, cannot be encompassed within the finite shape of an artistic form – the artistic material is only a localization, a site. Solve, unlike Scanlon, cannot be captured by the lens or the law. The camera has too brief an exposure time to capture Solve but snaps up enough evidence to incriminate and enshrine Scanlon.

*Forever Solve* demonstrates an effort to understand Scanlon in retrospect, through the sudden conclusion of his work brought about by his traumatic death. Allen Meek in *Trauma and*

*Media* elaborates a trend in media studies seeking to catch glimpses of reality through such circumscribed lives. The lure of trauma is that such a scar “often appears to serve as our only remaining guarantee of the reality of the past in a new era of technologically mediated memory,” Meek says (7). Sympathetically, the photograph considered as a wound per Barthes becomes an injury that refuses to heal properly in the shape of the palimpsest, demonstrating such a sensible form of time. According to a deconstructive approach to trauma, which Meek summarizes by citing the work of Shoshana Feldman on Benjamin, “the reality of history is that of those traumatized by history” (qtd. in 44). Such a perspective would see the truth of Benjamin’s work in the war-torn shape of *The Arcades Project*, and the significance of Scanlon’s art manifest in the sudden cessation of his work brought about by his murder. This understanding “imagines the subjects of history only as victims rather than active agents of change,” Meek says. (44).

Badiou’s philosophical mission works to escape this pathos. Certainly, the event in Badiou’s system is an upheaval for those individuals it transforms into subjects, but this new life born from the void is characterized by an immutable verve rather than the unspeakable testimony of death. Benjamin too is instructive in this mission. Meek draws out of the Marxist component of Benjamin’s thought an opposition to the resignation of a deconstructive reading of his life, showing “the experience of the oppressed ... not only in terms of traumatized silence but also ... ‘confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude’” (45). In terms importantly related to the stillness and death of the photograph that the palimpsest exceeds, in *Saint Paul* Badiou shows the eponymous figure to be emblematic of the subject due to his willingness to say that burial is not the end of the body of truth, that the idea of death as the totalization of life shows “the Law has become a figure of death” (27). The subject of truth for Badiou obeys a commandment to persist:

Is there renunciation when a truth seizes me? Certainly not, since this seizure manifests itself by unequalled intensities of existence. We can name them: in love, there is happiness; in science, there is joy ...; in politics, there is enthusiasm; and in art, there is pleasure. These 'affects of truth,' at the same moment that they signal the entry of some-one into a subjective composition, render empty all considerations of renunciation. (*Ethics* 53)

For Badiou the decisive, impassioned subject, not the silence of a victim of trauma, provides the only guarantee of reality.

Faithful and occulting subjectivities are determined on the basis of these orientations toward existence. A contrast with a faithful subject will illuminate where *Forever Solve* falters toward obscurantism. The process is always open for amending or abandonment and thus intelligible only upon reflection. The retrospective component is evident in Barthes' admission of defeat in his effort to find the truth of photographs that concludes the first portion of his study. There he casts aside his findings into the everyday measure of mediated mortality worked out in his second punctum, which I here translate into the transcendental of photographs, the scale of pictorial clarity and corruption. There remains for Barthes, however, the original punctum he goes on to seek, a truth rising from beneath, denaturing the etching of time. This persistent, inexistent, impossible thing is found, against all of his previous contentions, in an image collecting all of the significance of his recently deceased mother in a single photograph – the Winter Garden photograph. The image of his mother as a child, a portrait from before Barthes was alive, returns her to him completely. This demonstrates one example of the unexpected forms in which a “resurrected truth ... must leap the gap between heterogeneous worlds” (*Logics* 140). Such truths, “occulted” in Badiou's terms, appear in the strangest and most denigrated places and may always be reinvigorated, never permanently muffled by death. This decision gives Barthes the second sight through which to reflect and subtract from his archive the

photographs of mere existence. Through what he finds against all the knowledge he accumulates in his study, all previous photographs of his mother are retrospectively seen as “merely analogical, provoking only her identity, not her truth” (70-1). His finding the Winter Garden photograph changes his work entirely, making it the work of a faithful subject. This makes his effort confounding from the perspective of a stuffy phenomenology or a deconstructive academicism.

It is significant in this regard that Barthes withholds the Winter Garden photograph. In a parenthetical disclosure he notes “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’” (73). I do not share my Polaroid for opposite reasons. The photograph appeared to me as trash, and I thoughtlessly treated it as such by throwing it away. In retrospect, it is that trashy appearance that has informed much of my work. Conversely, Barthes’ conservatism with his photograph is not key to his being a faithful subject of photography; it has everything to do with him being a loving child. The Winter Garden photograph returns the being of Barthes mother, it is not itself the being of photography. This affirms the Winter Garden photograph as a “mediator for all Photography,” a finite opening onto the truth of photography Barthes says he seeks to become. But Barthes, as a subject of truth, exceeds this singularity and the truth of his filial love in his decisions on the portrait. The photograph is only a part of the new body of artistic truth Barthes composes. The demands of two conditions, the love of a son and the appearance of being in photography, are in this way mutually demonstrated and intimately interwoven but not inseparable in the Winter Garden photograph.

Austerlitz, in contrast with Barthes, shares his photograph readily. As Kelley suggests, this is because, for Austerlitz, the photograph of Agáta “stands not for her being but for the

irretrievable loss of it” (21). Austerlitz shares the photograph he finds emptied of motherly love. The image he finds in the end is only, and profoundly, a photograph.

The contributors to *Forever Solve* are not as honest as either author. It may be thought that *Forever Solve*, like Barthes photograph, returns the being of Scanlon, some loved fragment of his heart. But *Forever Solve* must pursue this sentiment in contradiction with Scanlon’s artistic forms, a complication which Barthes’ memorial photograph need not reconcile. In that regard, the zine is, in its very sentimentality, a betrayal. *Forever Solve*, seeking to collect and multiply Scanlon so he may persevere in death, is sold to people who have never met Scanlon. Scanlon’s family and friends include sentiments from those who admit to not knowing him well. They are they not as reserved as Barthes or as honest with themselves as Austerlitz because they are concerned with historical and cultural solvency. As Badiou says, for the obscure subject:

[T]he past is charged with the task of endowing these instants with a fictive horizon, with a cultural density. This also explains why the fetishism of history is accompanied by an unrelenting discourse on novelty, perpetual change and the imperative of modernization. ... Everything changes at every instant, which is why one is left to contemplate the majestic historical horizon of what does not change. (*Logics* 509n5)

*Forever Solve* aspires to make of Solve a permanent, proper name, a brand. Solve is a name that is not meant to stand the test of time; it is a paste up, a sticker, a tag. The proper name of Scanlon transfixes the works of Solve. As with the problem of photographic permanence, his full name is a death mask pressed on the images of his work, frozen and displayed in *Forever Solve*. It seeks to make the name the event, rather than the event a process of naming – the obscurantist simulacrum of a truth procedure. As Hallward puts it, “[e]ffective untiming for Badiou depends ... on an evental singularity that cuts truth from the situation; thereby nominalizing the event without essentializing its name” (79). The reproductions, laden with Scanlon’s life as a mortal

man invests Solve with the same mortality, divesting it of the immortality proper to a subjective body of artistic work. How a fleeting body of work as produced by Scanlon may present a more lasting truth than such archiving efforts can be suggested by the ephemerality of the event being traced into the opening of a body only slightly more long for the world. I will flesh this out more completely in the pursuing chapter, but I will ground this operation here by way of *The Zine*.

*The Zine*, in contrast with the later *Forever Solve*, embodies change. A quite generic name for a zine, *The Zine* appears a month after Scanlon's death by way of a friend of his named Rachel Doelling. However, it was originally shaped by Scanlon to be his first foray into zine production. In a short introduction to the colorful half-sheet sized 40-page zine, eminently typical in its dimensions, Doelling notes her limited contributions to the work to be "the title, front and back covers, screen-printed insert (which contains Solve designs), and this note" (1).

The design of *The Zine* plays with traditional publishing standards. Vibrating colors, those shades which, when adjacent, cause a blurring effect, occupy the first four pages. That space is shifted in this superficial way expressed readily, the surface is visibly unsettled. The outside of the blue, cardstock, screen-printed centerfold betrays the lines along the ink bleeding around the edges of the stencil of Daley used to apply the design. *The Zine* can be seen then to foreground its surface noise. At the same time *The Zine* elsewhere presents a clean, professional character. Identical blurbs of text are sampled in different fonts like a advertising design proposal. There is no attempt to smooth away the textural discrepancy between the ripped sheets, the smudged ink, and the clean-cut, professional remainder of the text. *The Zine* places itself and its style in danger, readily formatted in the terms of the commercial simulacra of zines. Scanlon here challenges the circulating reference of viral marketing selling a subculture back to itself and the notion of the authentic amateur in an age of computer design templates.

Hebdige identifies a key signal modulating throughout these deformed and deforming subcultural design processes. He says subcultures themselves “represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media” (90). From this, Hebdige contends “[w]e should therefore not underestimate the signifying power of spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy ‘out there’, but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder” (90). *The Zine* must be considered and configured in cultural and temporal terms to understand how this noise not only shows the subculture to be out of synch with the contemporary mainstream, but how this noise shows them to be, in the here and now of *The Zine*, out of alignment with their own untimely truth procedure.

The surface noise attained through the methods manifest in *The Zine* unsettles the established mainstream modes of representative practice and semantic order in at least two ways. First, temporally, evidence such as the bleeding of ink emphasizes *The Zine* to be still a technologically imprecise and outmoded medium. Second, by placing the technical frame in view, the typically unwitnessed material preconditions of publication are elevated to the level of content. This enacts the first key surrealist gesture Badiou presents in “Some Remarks on Marcel Duchamp.” This first of five tenets says, “[a]rt has to become the trace of its own action. Art must be the place of its taking place” (para. 11). Badiou here speaks to a key component of Solve’s art in general which *Forever Solve* must suppress in its consolidating efforts. Construction and breakdown are visibly present throughout *The Zine*. This is Scanlon’s intent, not a consequence of the inherent incompleteness of the zine. In four short paragraphs commenting largely on how he wrote the zine while drunk, Scanlon says, “[t]he whole concept of this thing is to create a piece that people can, you know, interact with in a level beyond reading” (17). This is

to speak precisely to my goal and Badiou's prescriptions. "We must have art without any artist," says Badiou (para. 11). Such a subject of art "dreams of being totally absent from creation .... [H]e gives detailed explanations of the process of the work. Fundamentally, he accompanies the object by the something like a user's manual, that is, of its modes of fabrication (para. 11). Even where Doelling asserts herself, this is at the core of *The Zine*. Inside the centerfold, a hand-written note from Doelling above a black print of a revolver notes "Brendan used to draw a flower coming out of this gun. What do you want to draw?" (21-2).

More prominently, Scanlon, on a scanned and tattered sheet, invites the reader to ascribe colors and patterns to numbers to be applied to later pages containing his work. As to Duchamp's similar art-by-number efforts, Badiou says:

This point is critical in a dual sense. In the ordinary sense, because it criticizes in thought the idolatrous theory of art, ... But the point is critical in another sense, the sense it has in mathematics and physics: a point at which there is a qualitative discontinuity, such that at this same point, there is indiscernibility between one state and another, which however differ absolutely every place else. Creating the locus at which anyone can reproduce the experience of such a critical point, and so of such an indiscernibility, would be the fundamental aim of art. ("Some Remarks" para. 8)

*The Zine* is a mold from the start, a prefigured participatory outlet. The incompleteness it demonstrates precedes Scanlon's demise. The gaps and slips are the starting point of the zine, not a result of its half-finished status. It demands to be purified, to be overturned, to be filled in. A subject must act upon the text to begin to create and think again. In *The Zine*, this entails a subject attaching themselves to an extant truth, to Solve, by filling in the pages of his art on their own terms. The subject activates the potential of the zine by deciding upon colors and patterns.

There are two components this decision awakens. First, the evental trace reappears, resurrecting the truth procedure potentially orphaned by the death of Scanlon. *The Zine* is



exhausted in its very act, it is not able to be repeated, it “neither communicates nor enters into general circulation” (*Theoretical* 234). *The Zine* affirms overwriting as a productive process. It is the using up of Scanlon’s work that is the creative force behind it, the demand that artistic subjects write his name out of existence, not again. His work, always dialogic, is all that remains, and it remains to be done. *The Zine*, so worked over, leaves the impression that the truth of his art is not gone, the event is not lost. It is instead hidden among the new works being made, buried within the new subjective inscription. This overwriting of the surface serves to intensify the truth of what may lurk behind it as it abolishes the possibility of submitting it to veracity. *The Zine*, Scanlon, Solve, are all transformed into a once glimpsed surface that cannot now be seen or touched but only intuited, remembered or, more pertinently, remade dialogically. The real does not reside on the page, and it never did, but the impossible space for it to appear is created through the overwriting of patterns and colors, a subtractive marking of where Scanlon is not, not any longer – an artistic coup that affirms the possibility of a new truth in the act of its decision.

And so it is Scanlon’s posthumous message that he means to be buried, to be incorporated. This is a process of subtraction to be clear; it lacks the accompaniment of a destructive gesture. “[S]ubtraction figures the vanishing of the supposed eventual term under the foam that re-traces it,” Badiou says in *Conditions* (52). Filling in *The Zine* separates the past from the present, creating a space for the new, exhibiting the subjective demand to keep going after Scanlon’s death without abandoning the tenets of his work. Acknowledging this is crucial else I could seem to assert that Scanlon is creating new works from beyond the grave. “[I]f we want to avoid lapsing into an obscurantist theory of creation *ex nihilo*, we must accept that an event is nothing but a part of a given situation, nothing but a *fragment of being*” (*Theoretical*

100-1, emphasis in original). The eventual trace I identify in *The Zine* is in the zine, beneath the paint, pencil, pen, or marker used to fill in the pages just as the punctum or optical unconscious are located within the photograph. Badiou cites Samuel Beckett evocatively in this regard, asking:

Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved ... so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abuses of silence? (*The Century* ix)

There is a need articulated here for destruction. This is called upon in the form of *The Zine* because the subtractive approach it realizes, while subjectively and decisively different, is itself formally reflective of much that is planned obsolescence. If I could be certain that Scanlon's survivors would not produce more of *The Zine* this would not be an issue. As *Forever Solve* and its accompanying gallery efforts show, however, this is no certain thing. Planned demolition and disfiguring decisions, a certain extraction and subtraction, are easily conflated. This is a concern for which *The Zine* and my Polaroid must be made accountable (184). The danger is clear and present. Keri Smith's *Wreck This Journal* is a mass-published material mockery of *The Zine* as much as Renard's book is a copy of its design. Urban Outfitters, the clothing retailer and publisher of the corporate zine *Slant*, have bought out the last runs of Polaroid instant film and refurbished instant cameras for sale in their stores. I cannot trust the technology of the photograph or ephemerality of certain artistic forms to fulfill their promise on their own. A greater offense must be enacted in the form of destruction.

## **Secrets and Snapshots: The Photographic Confessions of *PostSecret***

*Secrets have stories; they can also offer truths (PostSecret 2).*

A postcard displayed in Frank Warren's *PostSecret* community art project shares the intimate message "I used to be pretty" in an upper-case scrawl (*PostSecret* 176). This unattributed statement on a white sliver of paper is taped over the eyes of a portrait of a brightly lit face, a flare of light glaring in contrast to the surrounding darkness. Just who is this person? Any melanin codes of race are washed out by the overblown glare of the reflected flash. The essentialized signals of gender and sexuality are buried beneath clothing and darkness, the collar of a white shirt frames the neck like the base of a classical bust. A dark shirt obscures the frame of the body, its shade bleeding the person's shape into the shadowy background surrounding the figure.

The gaps dominating the person's identity shape an uncertain figure. I find in such images the denial of established identities and the potential for shared secrets to penetrate differences – for the confessed anxieties and taboo desires to awaken a sense of sameness at the most private part of our being. And so, my eventual determination finds purchase in the fissures proliferating in these confessional photographic postcards. This secret, mailed to a stranger for all to see, defaces and desecrates complacent readings of the person in the photo. The mail art collected by Warren presents such complicated forms, scissors and markers disfiguring words and images to profess modern anxieties through technologically outmoded and textually anonymous forms of transmission. The messages leave readers in a state of suspense, in their encouraged brevity ("be brief" is the first tip Warren listed in his original request for submissions to the project) they disclose identity subtracted from being (*PostSecret* x). Through examples of these compositions, this chapter will proceed toward an understanding of how the photographic

postcard may press beyond the subtractive, into witnessing a destructive mode of forcing the truth of their secret.

*PostSecret* here refers to Warren's project in all its multifaceted iterations. Warren has been gathering mailed confessions since 2004. The public face of this collection includes a traveling exhibit, a blog, and five published books, *PostSecret*, *My Secret*, *A Lifetime of Secrets*, *The Secret Lives of Men and Women*, and *PostSecret: Confessions on Life, Death, and God*. While the postcards typically make their inaugural debut on the website during a weekly Sunday update, they are taken down and replaced the next week, leaving only the books as a full archive of the confessional works. Due to this, I here draw on the published collections. The confessions take myriad forms, from plain writing on an index card to elaborately decorated collages. The photograph is by far the most common base material through which these confessions are shared.

Weighing heavily on what labels adhere to the person in the photo confession above is the question of who the person in the photograph is in relation to the "I" of the confession. How is this striking statement addressing the photograph? Is the person here the one who no longer feels pretty, the one that once felt pretty, or someone else entirely? It is the photographic uncertainty, a contradiction in modern terms, that confounds these inquiries. Continuing with my citation of Beckett near the close of the last chapter, Badiou draws out of Beckett's prose the thought that "more and more ... language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. ... To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through" (*The Century* ix).

What may bleed through depends on the time, the place, and the depth of the cut. The weight of the commodity form is emphasized in the shape of the souvenir medium that conveys

the photographic confession. The postcard suggests a trace of better times, holiday getaways, “wish you were here.” This collaborates with the ambiguity of the figure to weigh heavily on the mailed statement. The postcard appears heavier somehow than should any trivial piece of paper, laden with an overabundance of claims in a material that cannot and would not normally bear the burdens foisted upon it – extra postage is required. The image gathers weight, not by holding any evidence to solve the mysteries swarming around the lost identity of the person sharing the secret, but through the new questions it raises about its gaps.

Derrida made a book of such ambiguous missives titled appropriately *The Post Card*. He there works to turn the postal system away from its assuring place in society – a faith in clear addresses and delivery confirmations. Gregory Ulmer explains in his review of the book, “The Post-Age,” what makes the postal system and letters representative of the rational order such deconstructive texts oppose. “The feature that makes the letter exemplary of the logocentric era...is that it is addressed and signed, directed or destined (41). Derrida, then, reflects much of the intent of the surrealist and situationist-inspired art movements I briefly note in the previous chapter.

To move beyond a deconstructive approach requires a stronger assertion, one that understands the postcard in its historical material context. I will contend here that the forms of the shared secrets in *PostSecret* provide a particularly focused material basis for this sort of general address through the subtractive and destructive workings of the confessors operating upon the photographs conveyed by postcard.

Concerning the souvenir form of the medium, for Benjamin:

“The Souvenir is the complement to ‘isolated experience’ .... In it is precipitated the increasing self-estrangement of human beings, whose past is inventoried as dead effects. ... The relic comes from the cadaver; the souvenir comes from the

defunct experience which thinks of itself, euphemistically, as living. (qtd. in Santner, 80)

As Santner draws out from Benjamin, souvenirs like the photograph and postcard impinge on spaces, both material and psychological. Life itself “becomes crowded with such enigmatic signifiers, these new source-objects of drive in everyday life under capitalism” (80). The postcard in this way detaches people from one another even as it spans distances, concentrating mass monuments like museums, galleries, and, for Benjamin, the Paris arcades, into individual vacation memorabilia, personalizing and internalizing the shapes of modern capitalist society.

Speaking to monumental societies and postcards, Bernhard Siegert in “The Fall of the Roman Empire” maps the being of the empire, metonymically the emperor, onto postcards. “All correspondence by Roman emperors was a writing of postcards,” Siegert says (311). Each letter written by the emperor was an open declaration, elaborating the binding terms of the state. While the unsealed letters of the emperors were far from the peacock displays of souvenirs snagged from Las Vegas gift shops or the most embellished works of *PostSecret*, the mode of address bears interesting similarities.

For Badiou, true art must violate the structural limits of such imperial decrees. His concept of an imperial state, dually characterized by him as ancient Rome and the contemporary United States, prescribes two principles in his “Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art”:

[W]e may say, all is possible. We may create new forms, we may speak of everything ... everything is possible. Yet, we also have another maxim, everything is impossible, because there is nothing else to have, the empire is the only possible existence, the only political possibility. (para. 14)

The postcard structure of the Roman Empire, Siegert explains, demonstrates “some of the great motifs of the historiography of decline, for example, corruption and usurpation” (311). The postcard is a vulnerable but fundamental part of the empire, one singularly disposed to voyeurs,

vandals, or vanishing. What this means for Siegert is that the empire, so formed, “only exists in the mode of decline (311). The examples of such picturesque decay are scattered throughout the *PostSecret* collection. Secrets are partly blotted with dirty footprints, messages are abbreviated by scuffs or tears, or the postcard is otherwise seemingly maimed in transit. In one example, the corner is torn from a black and white family photo and the postcard to which it is attached (*My Secret* 89). Postcards in this way have long invested the postal circuitry of the state with a material contingency, and so the form names a prime site for artistic intervention in Badiou’s system. To Derrida’s attempt to smudge his addresses, Badiou poses instead a new delivery route. “Art has become a question of movement, of what we get to rather than the abolition of this ‘getting to’,” says Badiou (“Some Remarks” para. 5). The track of this artistic movement must begin at the edge of an empire – where the state risks slipping and showing its excesses. This has often been marked, in the souvenir and sovereign forms I illustrate, and contrary to its trifle appearance, by the postcard. The history of the postcard suggests a trace of its potential. This antagonism is buried in the souvenir commodity today.

As I indicate in the introduction, Duttlinger shows the aura of such media, “[r]ather than providing a neat shorthand for the transition from traditional to modern culture, ... [the aura] provokes, in its very ambiguity and multivalence, supplementary elaboration and analysis” (80). Valuable for the historically locating and dislocating understanding I take up here, Duttlinger draws out the particularly untimely characteristic of the aura:

In literary, visual, and cultural studies, aura has become synonymous with the traditional work of art, whose contemplative experience is progressively eroded with the advent of modern media technology. Even in Benjamin’s time, then, aura described a state which had already become obsolete. (80)

Theodor Adorno shows the persistence of the aura in obsolescence as key to the workings of the state in *The Culture Industry*:

[T]he culture industry is defined by the fact that it does not strictly counterpose another principle to that of aura, but rather by the fact that it conserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist. By this means the culture industry betrays its own ideological abuses. (102)

*PostSecret* mixes this potential through the similarly complex history of the photograph I develop in the previous chapters. The aura, itself untimely, operates complexly in castoff objects like postcards. I mention in my introduction Straw's examination of websites and collections such as *Found Magazine*, a site featuring media in many ways similar to the *PostSecret* project. Straw finds the found media gathered in such projects shaping the fetish character of obsolete forms in the age of new media. This fresh aura is birthed by "a culture whose abundance of accumulated and discarded artifacts allowed the passage of time to be noted in deeply sedimented and richly resonating clusters of objects" (13-14). This provides found photographs, tattered notes, and all obsolete, ready-made media with their spectral weight – the material inscription of a specific time and place, a past-ness, that gives significance to the collections.

Taken together, this describes the transcendental of the photograph. The transcendental of the photographic world is precisely the diachronic multiplicity of the palimpsest; it is recognized by its memorializing integrity through the gathering mechanism Straw describes. As Badiou puts it by addressing painting in particularly useful terms:

In every case, the temporal construction as the amassing of artistic decisions is ultimately recapitulated as the transcendental of a closed visibility. In this regard, it can only be recognized, from painting to painting, as the painter's particular style. Style is understood here as something like the family resemblance of the transcendental. (*Logics* 204)



In *PostSecret* the family resemblance Badiou refers to is that of the collection as I identify through Straw. The time of the photographic capture, its means of production, are obscured by the fetishistic character of the collection. Yet it is the act of collecting itself that inscribes a fresh sense of historicity, marking the object with a fictional auratic time and place. This false historical consciousness is the time structure the palimpsest collapses in its conflation of past and present. To return to an introductory statement I made with added clarification now: If the transcendental concerns historicism, the event of the photograph must be concerned with the interval of the photograph and the present, its historicity. This shapes the gap between distant worlds a resurrected truth must leap.

The envelope of appearance here, in this manifestly open-face form, is both marked and contradicted by the misplaced aura of photography in the ephemeral photographic postcard. *PostSecret* contributors take up the problem I show plaguing the memorial *Forever Solve* as a positive rather than a negative characteristic. *PostSecret* presents a constellation of these situations formally privileging the photographic, engaging the strange double-sided properties of the photograph “not only as the tool of aura’s destruction but also...as the site of its last appearance” (Duttlinger 83). This shape explores the limits of the aura, the “unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” driven to new places, perhaps new ends (“Work of Art” 22).

The mailing of postcards by both the Roman emperor and the teeming faceless and nameless mass on *PostSecret* possess a destabilizing, untimely element recursively based on the very act of their collection meant to repress their flighty and fragile characteristics. The photographic postcard is a fragment of the state, a piece of its sovereignty invested in the ephemeral commodity form. This phylactery is coherent only as fetish – the word of the

emperor, the conveyance of a secret, both convey particularity, a signature, the aura. The first is an embodiment of the excess of the state, the other a subtraction of identity, a purifying expurgation of knowledge. This is not to cleanly separate these appeals. Siegert draws out the difficulty in distinguishing the emperor's private correspondence from legal proclamations and the problems this posed for the ancient Romans. In the same way, a *PostSecret* postcard may express a desire for simple understanding, a normal love life, or a stable mind. They both convey their strength through the particularity of the aura that says that this announcement came from somewhere, someone specifically. One is the "I" as royal "we," the other a "we" finding expression in the finite artistic form of "I."

In the example above, as with nearly all examples in *PostSecret*, such material presences outstrip symbolic representation. The scene overflows with more than typeface, bodies, and set pieces can portray. This leaves a sense that as I peer harder at the image I will spot something unsettling in the inky darkness beyond the threshold of the cracked door, a manifestation of the anxious suspension of any ready determinations in the image. The confession demands I pursue Barthes by interrogating the image "not as a question (a theme) but as a wound" (21). I scan for signs of the health and happiness that is presumed to come with being attractive or the misery that supposedly follows the plain and the ugly, but the blindfolded figure seems kidnapped from these everyday concerns. The photo, as proof of such purloined life, speaks to Benjamin's notion of "deserted" photographs as eliciting an aura penetrating gaze, seeking the contingency of its original capture, a chance gathering of light and shadow ("Work of Art" 54). Neither frowning nor smiling, the figure presents a haunting poker face aided by the obscuring of any of the affective inflection of the eyes by the problematic confession itself. The person represented, and the witness through them, is reconfigured as a small "I" in the discourse, a shared, subjective "I"

that, in light of Badiou's theory of the subject, complicates the very notion of being capitalized. This being is intimately and imminently generic. The postcard and its attendant secret, mailed to a stranger for all to see, hijacks the notion of secrecy, defacing and desecrating a complacent, careful reading of the person whispering their deepest thoughts from the recesses of the photo. The mail art collected by Warren presents a complicated aesthetic, scissors and markers disfiguring words and images to confess and profess modern anxieties through technologically outmoded and materially anonymous forms of transmission. Where the problem of a proper name plagues *Forever Solve*, here the name invariably recedes entirely behind the art, as in *The Zine*.

It is this fundamental openness to naming that shows the photograph as unfinished and overflowing, unfixed and open to strange associations. To continue to lay work on the already labored body that opens this chapter, the emptiness of the scene, the vacancy of the room and the figure's expression all point toward the material substrate beneath the image. I seek signs accompanying beauty in the vacant shadowy space around the figure, context clues to make sense of this scene, but barely discernable in the background are only a part of a wall, a light switch, and an open door. The absences make clear the photograph and the postcard are mechanically insufficient. Its frame is too narrow, its development process too sensitive or not sensitive enough; they fail to illustrate the fullness of the spectrum. The medium is obsolete, ancient even. This grounding suggests that this secret can be encountered, that this being, despite its anonymity, can be located, confronted, forced to take on a body.

Shaping this body, however, can be demanding. In another confession, two faces, one masculine and framed with short blond hair and the other, feminine and framed with long brown hair, are blotted with Wite-Out or some similar correction solution, making room for the message

written over them: “I forgive you even though you don’t think I do – I could never hold it against you and I miss you more when you think I’m mad at you” (*PostSecret* 204). Yet that message is itself covered up, barely discernable under the erasure of a purple marker. Another message, messily written in the surplus whitened space beneath the two faces, says “I still pray for you every night – and I probably always will.”

Going directly against the second commandment of Warren’s *PostSecret* submission tips, “be legible,” the becoming illegible exhibited here speaks to a process toward being and against a process of development in a properly photographic sense (*PostSecret* x). Amelia Jones’ “The ‘Eternal Return’” explores the inviting nature in the practice of self-portraiture. This practice, the camera held at arm’s length and turned back on the shooter or couple as in the case above, is a common feature in *PostSecret*. Jones sees this practice as configuring a site where the blurring of boundaries between performer and reader takes place. This is a site of a subjective exchange where the viewer “maps himself in the imaginary capture” of their own gaze (957). This speaks to the punctum and optical unconscious, peering through the image rather than at the photographic surface – demanding a materializing of the subject in the object. In the transference between subject and object, desire and identification, the subject, Jones argues, “gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin” (960). While the postcard’s open nature does away with a physical envelope, a figurative one nevertheless covers its surface. The veil acknowledges the distance between the present and the photographic capture and postal delivery, a gap in time and space – the aura. Badiou suggests something of what this may entail in terms of an artistic truth in his consideration of Duchamp’s complex works of art. In these elaborate pieces, Duchamp operates “by learned recollection but with the same objective” as his ready-made pieces, objects he chooses and displays largely

materially unaltered (“Some Remarks” para. 16). As Badiou says of the works, “[w]e have in them a sort of maniacal craftsmanship. ... in order to exhibit a complexity whose exterior focal point is the point of the gaze. ... The complexity is here the capture of the seeing” (“Some Remarks” para. 16).

The illegibility of the secret shared above poses a question and demands an answer, seizing upon my gaze and demanding a decision be made – look away or look deeper. The double-erasure does not deflect readers from seeking the sub-dermal secret, but raises awareness instead of what could not be fully said nor go entirely unsaid within the confines of the situation. The faces that are buried, while far from having nothing to do with the newly inscribed body, are not sufficient to bear this subjective investment. The secret, the truth, needs space that the photograph must be made to provide through the purification of its surface. The partial subtractive practice here leaves the residual cause evident; the faces, the surface of the photo is intact beneath the correcting residue. This reflects much in common with the overwriting art of *The Zine* engaging Scanlon’s demand to be buried. There is an emphasis here on showing the work of identity, the excessive labor needed to keep up the show even in an anonymous confession. The confessor, as in *The Zine*, colors within the lines, albeit here those of the brow and jaw rather than an artist’s designs. These lines and the form of inscription, as opposed to Scanlon’s dialogic works, are filled in contrary to the permanence of photographic capture. The correction fluid-smothered faces expose identities in a process of correcting for their fixity. I am left with no choice but to approach the text through memory and context clues, neither adequate to the task. The idea of this presentation as a palimpsest, always leaving some imprint of the original, and originally permanent, inscription for rediscovery begins to subvert the notion of preservation in favor of a truth more permanent than the surface of the image. As the screen

reflexively transposes viewer into producer, thinking subject into material object, the privacy of that exchange is opened, its channels exposed, through this inscribed noise.

Different forms of noise elicit different perspectives on the palimpsest and its material incarnations. For example, another confession features a shadow jagged with digital artifacts, a commonly emphasized photographic characteristic in *PostSecret*. The shadow is projected in place of the photographer's presence, the shade of a head perched on a wide upturned collar, a hand perched aloft holding the camera – all shown in their flat grey projection. In this distinct take on the theme of self-shooters Jones examines, the photographer gazes down upon their shadow self cast upon two worn concrete steps leading to a landing bearing a hammer. Just beneath the tool is a purple marker-drawn broken heart in the lower right hand corner of the card. The postcard expresses the secret: "Three years ago my dad died. One year ago I lost my virginity to a guy I dated for a month. If my dad was still alive that wouldn't have happened." The sentiment is printed in a black lower-case serif font on an orange speech bubble, an oval piece of paper overlaying a small triangle that traces the spoken word from the shade (*PostSecret* 182-3).

This photographic image occupies a particularly focused intersection of loss – of self and others. The dead in such vacant forms do not rest peacefully. Instead, they assert themselves in the physical markers of their absence, their haunting semi-presences suggesting the contingency of the photographic capture and the particularity of their being. The camera-bearing shadow in this example is distinctly open to this transpositional process. The eye-level view of only the echo of a presence invites the reader readily into the scene, looking down at their own silhouette. This appearance in inappearance, being-there in absentia, is indicative of the void in the photographic situation – what remains beyond comprehension between the polar commandments

to remember or forget, collect or discard, represent or deny. This forever incomplete return of the gaze remarks upon Badiou's idea of artistic works as an exchange with the infinite that cannot be completed or totalized, but nevertheless is witnessed and pursued. Speaking to Hubert Robert's painting *The Bathing Pool*, Badiou says in comparable terms "the masculine sex inexists for the painting" (*Logics* 209). "[W]ere this eye to be included, a different world would be at stake, another regime of appearing than the one enclosed by the edges of the canvas" (*Logics* 209). The stated loss of the father in the example above does not return a missing paternal discipline or the tender-eyed innocence of a feminine object but instead gives permission to decide to regret or revel in lost order without the dominating gaze of the photographer or the sympathetic eyes of the photographed.

The plainly digitized character in this example raises questions of secrecy. I do not mean the questions of privacy that dominate many discussions of the ethics of new media, but the way the digital interacts with the demand made by the inscription of a secret in terms of the decisional, truthful qualities I have been considering. It is vital I address this concern due to the prominent online presence of *PostSecret*.

Rubenstein and Sluis note that through the growing abundance of digital images "the value of a single photograph is being diminished and replaced by the notion of a stream of data in which both images and their significances are in a state of flux" (22). The teleology of this digital reductionism is confronted by the pixilated appearance of the postcard above. This raises a sense, on one side, of the quest for ever greater resolution, of an image density beyond photorealism. Such a flawless image is the dream maximal of the transcendental ordering of photography, to capture a complete and infallible image of reality. This is the fantasy exhibited in every modern crime drama where the detectives solve crimes in part or in whole by zooming

into an infinitely complex image. If only the camera captured more megapixels, the dream holds, we may in fact be able to know the real identity of the shadowy figure in the confession I cite above, picking out details reflected in the head of the hammer, perhaps. Vilém Flusser in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* speaks something to the ideological compulsion toward beyond-picture-perfect representations at the heart of this fantasy. “[I]n the case of such advanced images, the material basis of information has completely disappeared and electromagnetic photographs can be created artificially at will and processed by the receiver as pure information (i.e. the ‘pure information society’)” (52). Such an immaterial, infinitely replicable photograph, as Rubenstein and Sluis, emphasize “can function as a highly versatile vessel for ideological narratives from news reports to fine art installations to programming experiments” (23). Negotiating these perspectives and attenuating my approach to digital objects to the perception of the fetish character I have taken up here, it is useful to return to Straw. He balances his perspective carefully:

Arguably, new media diminish the fetishistic properties of the old, through the simultaneous and ongoing availability that they permit and through the pacifying forms of annotation and commentary that have come to surround even the most lurid or passionate of cultural artifacts. At the same time however, new media forms train us to make the connections through which the coherence of historical styles comes to be recognized. It is in the congealing of such styles that fetishism makes its return. (13)

The *PostSecret* books enact this to no less effect. Warren collecting images, and in my own taking up of the zines in the last chapter, conveys a fresh fetishistic property upon these outcast media objects. Yet, as I lay out in the introduction to this chapter, such archival historicity also provides ammunition for the antagonistic inscription of secrets upon photographs in palimpsests. History records how the consolidation of such fetishes risks betraying the indeterminacy of the



state. As Siegert writes of the Theodosian Code, which binds together all of the scattered postcard edicts of the Roman emperors:

The possibility of leafing through the pages of a codex quickly brought to light contradictions between the edicts of various emperors. Consequently, it became necessary to distinguish between decrees that had time limitations and were personally addressed and laws that were to be valid for all subjects and for all time. (311)

Such inconsistency, the very contingency of photographic capture itself, is conveyed through the *PostSecret* collection. This subtractive characteristic is conveyed in some ways through and in others despite the digital character emphasized by some confessions.

Hallward puts it in a characteristically striking and valuable way:

The subtractive approach understands that the operations that consolidate “reality” – representation, appearing, semblance: the state of the situation – are not simply external to the real as a cover that might be removed, but are organized as its ontologically irreducible repression. (163)

In the digital, the subtraction of the possibility of complete visibility from the photograph is performed through the emphasis of the digital grid-like materiality of the image. This zooming in or filtering the image foregrounds the means of capture rather than offering immediate and direct access to the scene depicted. This is, in Gunning’s terms regarding media technology, the faltering of the photograph leading “the repressed material to return with a vengeance” (46). In such examples, as well as in cases where the digital nature of a photograph may not be so caricatured as in the work I describe above, it is the artistic signature inscribed upon the digital field. In the previous example, this is the purple heart, the speech bubbles, all that relays the secret that exerts a distinguishing mark, a signature, removing something of the photograph from common knowledge. The stake here, the absolute, minimal, distinguishing act is the sharing of

the secret, an utterance that once it takes shape becomes invaluable. The photograph is anonymously but absolutely bound to this subjective work of confession.

Jones finds in “the paradoxical ‘death’ and ‘life’ of the photographic image ... the inexorable passage of time rendering all seeming presence as absence – giving shape to the profound paradox of being human“ (958-9). Jones, as is true of Barthes and Benjamin, is fixated on the image outlasting the person captured – the experience of getting older relative to the eternal youth of the carefully curated portrait. In the previous chapter I explore how the evidential photograph fails to convey ephemeral art, paralyzing it, and how the auratic photograph is conflicted by the ephemeral shape of the zine – how the aura and ephemera conflict with one another. So far in this chapter the same assertions hold. This sense of uncertainty is here augmented by the subtraction of identifying characteristics relaying that even when the photograph was whole it was not quite right; there was something fake about the smiles, something deceitful in the eyes.

There are limits to this humble distinguishing mark. In subtraction “truth is subtracted from knowledge, but it does not contradict it” (*Being* 406). Destruction, the second act of antagonism for which subtraction provides a target, is hard to imagine in the contemporary media ecology. Media are advancing in many ways toward a culture of total recall. Against this rote memorization, the anonymous secret takes a small stand. Subtracting from the surface of a photograph excavates and rehabilitates images, making room for new developments in the wreckage of history. But a sacrificial pyre may go further than this salvage operation, as it does in the case of my flame-scorched Polaroid. In a useful characterization of destruction, Badiou terms the operation “the ancient effect of ... new supplementation amidst the ancient” (*Being* 407). Taking this terminology to heart prescribes turning to distinctively old media forms and an

appreciation of the permanently transfiguring effects of new work laid upon such antiquated figures.

An example of such media forms, as the inspiration for my study suggests, is presented by Polaroid instant photographs. The sacrificed Polaroid I found is not alone in its destruction, though it is a particularly emphatic example. In one such confessional image collected by Warren a crucifix and rosary beads hang from the drawn blinds of a window looking into the hazy sunlit boughs of a tree. Across the image, rather than written in the iconic white margin, someone has inscribed in black marker “I’m scared I may never have real faith” (*A Lifetime* 167).

In the finite, obsolete form of the Polaroid, the photograph itself may be put into motion, the image made to mark its own death. These forms are in many ways amenable to the ready-made. As Badiou puts it, “the ready-made is the capture of the indifferent decision” (para. 16). Utterly indistinguishable from those like it, the ready-made is different from other like objects in name only – the subjective decision to nominate the object is the only and absolute difference. exposing “the choice of the choice as a cut out of the commonplace. That is why its title is itself, its common name, and its situation a signature” (“Some Remarks” para. 13).

The inscription exerted upon the Polaroid above, as with other such examples in *PostSecret*, in kind with Duchamp’s ready-mades, is a minimal effort, particularly as compared to the more frenzied defacement of the other examples. The anonymous secret alone is necessary as a minimal but absolute subtraction of a part of the moment, of the image, from the circuits of commodification and repetition. In the radical finitude of the Polaroid, however, this destroys some small part of the order of time itself. This is opposed to the solely subtractive efforts which need to purify the surface of the image of any possible remains of any untrue elements that could

keep the secret quiet, personal, contextualized. The postcard of the couple I cite above are a particularly overwrought example of this phenomenon. It is possible to see these frantic efforts as manifestations of the hatred or despair that takes shape when subtraction is the lone form of negation employed.

As Badiou says, “[t]he first subtraction figures the vanishing of the supposed evental term under the foam that re-traces it. The second [destruction] cancels out this vanishing itself. And, on the basis of this canceling-out, the second and final vanishing term ... springs up (*Conditions* 52). When the past and the present are no longer shown to be fragile terms but are actually undone – as when the memorial character of the most particular photographs, the absolutely finite images I consider here, are written over – the archive risks collapsing into a disarray, a singularity. In such moments, fleeting and rare, “[w]e can verify that the differences in degree of appearance are not prescribed by the exteriority of the gaze” but by the repressed material conditions of the photographs themselves (*Logics* 205). As I said above, in the case of digital photograph a foregrounding of the materiality of the photograph emphasizes what slips between the pixels. In the case of obsolete analog forms like the Polaroid, however, the gaze is not replaced with such further deferrals of the gaze, but with an awareness of the photograph as a finite resource. As with earlier examples, the secret told awakens the photograph from its slumber in attic scrapbooks or musty closets. But in the case of the Polaroid this resurrection, the enunciation of a secret, exhausts the Polaroid, determining for eternity the only possible use of the image and marking it as dead. Each small subtractive effort, miniscule compared to the wild erasures of the subtractive examples, is a precise murder of a moment of history. Each stroke of a marker on the field of the image must be deliberate and certain of its secret as its taking shape

destroys some small part of time, forever barring the possibility of sharing this moment as it was, returning through nostalgia to that day, redoing the past.

The destruction of media demands such manifestations of scarcity, of finite material and symbolic resources. The Polaroid is not isolated in manifesting these conditions. Elsewhere in *PostSecret*, a person confesses through an arrangement of pictures from a photo booth. “I’m scared I’ll always go into photo booths alone,” the confessor conveys through slips of paper held over their eyes while the sequence of photographs was taken (*My Secret* 91). Secrets are also told through other people’s old photographs. In one example readily admitting to propagating the creatively destructive practice, on a yellowed, colorized early photograph of a young woman someone writes along the contours of her head and shoulders “I buy antique pictures because it makes me feel like I have a family” (*PostSecret* 246). Such sentiments are shared elsewhere, in other non-photographic but no less materially finite forms. In a photograph of a dissected VHS tape a person writes “I destroy videos of myself as a child because it pains me to see a time before I ruined my innocence” (*A Lifetime* 17). Above a taped-on note that has been torn to pieces with red dye bleeding along the edges another person confesses “[a]fter all this time I am finally ready to let go” (*PostSecret* 71).

These examples reflect Badiou’s idea there being “a sort of ‘fragility’ peculiar to the site, which disposes it to be in some sense ‘wrested’ from the situation” (*Theoretical* 101). It is contrary to their appearance, and indeed due to that very impoverished character, that in such sites an insoluble truth may not only emerge but take hold. For Barthes, this epitomizes the analog photographic material as the “ectoplasm of what-had-been” (87). In such images, “[t]he loved body is immortalized by the mediation of a precious metal (monument and luxury); to which we might add the notion that this metal, like all the metals of Alchemy, is alive” (81). This

statement becomes gripping when taken alongside Austerlitz's statement that all monuments "cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins" (qtd. in Santner 108). Confronting photographs of people photographed only a handful of times, Santner emphasizes "the element of chance in relation to photographs" of those captured by a limited number of exposures (152). Such an exchange with chance, a close encounter between scarcity and contingency, causes the optical unconscious to find purchase in the failure of mechanical reproduction, priming an exchange between the aura and the infinite, the particular and the eternal. This exchange is what must be demanded of artistic works in Badiou's system. As he says in no uncertain terms, "[e]verything hinges on knowing whether an ordinary existence, breaking with time's cruel routine, encounters the material chance of serving a truth, thereby becoming, through subjective division and beyond the human animal's survival imperatives, an immortal" (*Logics* 66).

In addition to these clearly finite forms, it should be said that potentially every photograph on *PostSecret* may be a lone copy, have no known negative, a last known photograph. The lack of the iconic Polaroid border or other indexical material signals does not convey this in the forms available to me, the reflections of the books or the blog. All the same, the willingness to make of the individual image a singularity in the ways demonstrated by these examples measures the courage that may be manifest everywhere in the *PostSecret* project and beyond.

## The Truth of Photographs as Palimpsests

Through a form of destruction that makes real the subtraction of identity from appearance and knowledge, the truth of the photographic palimpsest manifests itself in the material base of the image. Working through the process of stripping away visual fidelity maintains a subjective fidelity to the truth of the photograph, a freedom from representative capture. What lurks within the cratered surfaces of these no longer representational works is not only a sacrificed past but a salvageable future. As I conclude this thesis, I briefly wish to draw together the insights of my analyses to wager on naming the truth of the Polaroid that opens this study, a truth that can be universalized as the palimpsest.

My movement toward this claim can be traced through a return to Barthes. It seems clear that the Winter Garden photograph I spoke of earlier is the beloved photo Barthes seeks – he attests to as much in his writing. But, as I suggest, his relocated love for his mother does not exhaust the truth of the photograph his discovery unlocks. To follow the undercurrent of the truth of the photographic palimpsest flowing beneath the surface of Barthes' cherished image requires turning to a different picture in *Camera Lucida*. A Polaroid snapshot at the front of the book, a picture Barthes never brings himself to address in writing, reflects my truth of the palimpsest. Further, I would argue the Polaroid brings Barthes to his Winter Garden photograph.

Geoffrey Batchen's "Palinode," an introduction to a volume of critical essays on *Camera Lucida*, draws out the history of the Polaroid and its potential significance. The Polaroid, titled generically *Polaroid*, is a picture by Daniel Boudinet. The photograph is dominated by drawn curtains. Whereas Barthes narrates the Winter Garden photograph, he plainly and wordlessly illustrates his affection for the *Polaroid*. As Batchen says, the photograph is "the most recent and only color (printed a monochrome blue-green) image to appear in the book. Barthes gives it

further emphasis by having it printed on a special glossy paper stock and surrounding it with a line; it thus comes to us already framed, like an artwork” (11). I am not alone in my suspicions concerning the significance of the *Polaroid*. Batchen surveys the field of scholarship on Barthes to find “[a] number of scholars have argued that Boudinet's *Polaroid* is a central, perhaps even the central, image in Barthes's argument, despite never being mentioned by him” (16). These other writers have emphasized the melancholy tone of the image, a photographic malaise I labor to avoid contracting here. Writers have also concerned themselves with the psychological symbolism in the *Polaroid*, remarking on the motherly enclosure of curtains as it relates to the death of Barthes' mother.

I see the significance of *Polaroid* in the Polaroid film stock itself. Speaking of the manifest finitude of the Polaroid that closes my consideration of *PostSecret*, the death of Barthes' mother and the fleeting, singular exposure of the snapshot collaborate to reveal the scarcity of people and photographs alike. The *Polaroid* expresses Barthes' awareness that his mother, even in portraiture, is thoroughly mortal and will become nothing. Similarly, to return to a topic set aside since my discussion of *Forever Solve*, the near complete destruction of Austerlitz's world makes a lone photograph of Agáta devoid of memorial attachments an accurate memento. The image Austerlitz finds of his mother conveys to him that she is gone, completely lost to all but Agáta's friend Vera, his childhood babysitter. Contrasting Barthes' Winter Garden photograph to Austerlitz's portrait, Kelley says Barthes' picture

is, for a little while in time and a little longer through his writing of it, the negative of Austerlitz's ..., reminding us that to be no longer is never the same as not having been, that forgetting may avalanche over the past but does not for all that undo it completely. (22)



The *Polaroid* is Barthes' own photonegative of the Winter Garden photograph, acknowledging the inevitable loss of all mere bodies and language. Like the Polaroids and similar photographic forms in *PostSecret*, the *Polaroid's* negation is an overriding and proliferating idea, a truth of photographs. No matter how many copies I make of a picture, despite how carefully I tend a portrait, and even if I record in a lossless image format, the potential for destruction by war, wear, or water damage haunts each of photograph. The *Polaroid* demonstrates this potential for loss at the outset of *Camera Lucida*, its emulsifying effects bleeding through the later pages of Barthes' writing. Barthes fights the future by clinging to a single, precious, defensible photograph rather than an attic full of vulnerable images. The Winter Garden photograph is a unary fetish, an image invested with a sense of individual significance and immaterial permanence. Despite Barthes' fetishistic precautions, the *Polaroid* is victorious. All that survives of the Winter Garden photograph is Barthes' subjective labor recorded in *Camera Lucida*, a work permeated by the threatening ephemerality of the *Polaroid*.

My Polaroid has awoken in me a similar sensitivity to the fragile materiality and fleeting potential of these finite photographic forms. In seeking what is lost and finding the persistent possibility of loss not yet banished by archival technology, a single photograph most profoundly attests the labor of sustaining a moment, a life, or an event against impossible odds and the hopeless madness of obsessive collecting. The fugitive potential of the past is affirmed in such photographs. This is a past promise conveyed and subsumed by the fetish character of the photograph, the historicism of the stadium offering an anamorphic view of the aura. The possibility of the destruction of the aura, Benjamin's utopic vision of media, is shown to persist in certain photographs. The aura lingers senselessly in these sensible forms. In this way, as Metz suggests, the fetish may be "undermined and haunted by the feeling of its exterior, of its

borderlines, which are the past, the left, the lost: the far away even if very close by” (87). The aura, the past-ness of the photograph, is salvaged from its fetish character by the subtraction of the surface of the image. This reawakens the challenge Benjamin articulates, the possibility of art without originals and the potential to face the catastrophe of history. The photographic palimpsest poses a decisive and creative act of forgetting against instinctual archiving and absentminded repression.

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