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Artist Assaf Shaham (b. 1983) works with – or against – the photographic image by subjecting it to various trials and experiments, operations that place him at the multifarious position of consumer, producer, reader, editor, technician, scientist, and surgeon vis-à-vis the image. In what is a daily practice for him, these experiments lead to series of photographs informed more by the process of their making – that is, by the specific actions through which they came into being – than by the object they appear to represent. Such actions may involve intentionally tampering with a postcard's scanning process (*American Dream*, 2011) or tinkering with photographic filters to achieve a play color gradations (*Time After Time and Again*, 2011); in another instance Shaham choreographed a duo of scanners to mutually scan each other – a process that, while doing away with the photographer's own function, generated compositions of multicolored stripes and surfaces reminiscent of abstract expressionism, albeit in a vibrating, digitalized form (*Full Reflection*, 2012).

Common to all of Shaham's works is their internal exploration of the photographic medium. This exploration, whether taken on a conceptual or meta-photographic level, inscribes him in a long tradition of photographers who had repeatedly sought, since high-modernism up to the present, to detach the medium from its documentary capacities. No longer viewing the camera as a privileged tool for capturing reality, they had directed their main efforts to the darkroom. Instead of venturing outside equipped with a camera, they preferred this 'torture chamber' of the image, producing their work without the outside world as reference, or the camera. The image would then result from series of technical trials and experimentations that embodied their own threshold of possibilities. In contemporary photography, artists such as Walead Beshty and Wolfgang Tillmans are among those who place production at the fore, thereby asking to reexamine the ontology of the photographic process. By collapsing the traditional triade of camera-photographer-world, such photographers make way for the subversive operations of the darkroom, often without resorting to any filmic data. As to Shaham, he renounces even the darkroom, preferring instead to work with a desktop printer – this somewhat bureaucratic yet essentially truthful office appliance, which provides him the means for recording the workings of the image at the time of their unfolding. And as he largely refrains from using direct photographs, he derives his imagistic repertoire from secondary sources, at times specifically linked to the history of the medium. This is the case with Shaham's *Writer, Storyteller* (2011), a work based on the photographic archive of August Sander. One of the most important portrait photographers of the first half of the 20th century, Sander is known mainly through his *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* ('People of the 20th Century'), a documentary corpus of monumental proportions now held as canonical. In it, he attempted a broad typology of the German people of his time, grouped in categories according to profession, vocation, social status, ethnic origin, gender, age and more.<sup>1</sup> This encyclopedic documentary endeavor, where each group and sub-category is typified by individuals characteristic of their group, was meant for Sander to paint a comprehensive and faithful portrait of his time: "to see things as they are and not as they should or could be".<sup>2</sup> Striving at unmediated observation and truthful portrayal, his black-and-white renderings were qualified as works of "unprejudiced observation, bold and at the same time

delicate” by his contemporary, philosopher Walter Benjamin. Innately objectivist, these renderings attained their representational ideal thanks to an exquisite printing technique, which endowed them with unparalleled clarity and sharpness.<sup>3</sup>

Shaham’s homage to the great German photographer consists of intentionally sabotaging his famed corpus. Using one of the many book editions of *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Shaham cut through several pages of reproductions; chirurgically extracting one figure after another, he left them as empty shells, hollowed-out of any previous characteristics or individual traits. Thus, stripped-off of both facial and corporeal markers, these vacuous silhouettes were superimposed like the pages of a book, their cavities joined together to form a new, unified entity. However, in its restless contours, this generalized entity rather recalls the outlines of a body in a murder scene; a solitary and forlorn figure, seemingly forged out of its own shadows, it is spread-out on a white, pristine background, floating as though outside time and space. And indeed, time and space were banished from these photographic representations, to leave only the generalized marks of an empty figure – a figure that, precisely, seems made to denounce the Barthesian assertion that photographs attest to *that-has-been* (*ça a été*),<sup>4</sup> that is, that they certify empirically to the presence of their subject in a former time and space (come as this subject may to haunt us in the present).

For Barthes, “the photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest shared hallucination (on the one hand ‘it is not there,’ on the other ‘but it has indeed been’): a mad image, chafed by reality.”<sup>5</sup> Yet in Shaham’s case, as we see, the photograph has rather divorced itself from reality; and it is thus, in its state of blatant nakedness, that it appears before us. After having cleansed itself from the traces of time, history and concreteness, it offers itself as a frenzied image, a maddening, disturbing white fantasy in which only one certitude remains: that of a ‘it is not there’. All that remains, then, is an absence, a white pit to devour the types and individuals of the 20th century, like a mass burial site.

Now, one cannot but wonder what brought Shaham to subvert Sander’s grand ambition of capturing the spirit of his age; why does he so contests, in an act of radical abstraction, the German master’s typology of portraits. What is behind his deconstructive deed, postmodern in spirit, of undermining the values of ‘truth’ and ‘subjectivity’ that stood at the basis of Sander’s modernist project? Are we witnessing here the attempted parricide of one’s own spiritual father, an act revelatory of ambivalent relations of passion and revolt? Or yet, is this an attempt on the part of Shaham’s to wreak a deletion in the history of photography, to hollow a puzzled cavity in it, all the better to inseminate it anew?

Lyle Rexer, writing in a catalogue dedicated to the recent phenomenon of abstraction in contemporary photography, contends that “beyond appearance – the lure of the unseen and a recognition of the profoundly unstable, dynamic nature of reality provoked photographers, shackled with an epistemological ball and chain called the visible, to attack the constraints of the image with a vengeance.”<sup>6</sup> Shaham, when unleashing Sander’s likenesses from the shackles of the visible so as to re-inseminate with the unseen, is likewise determined. Hence

this photograph of his can no longer be considered as a 'drawing in light', but rather as a 'drawing in shadows': here the shadows are what inscribes the image in the field of visibility, giving it the same illusionistic depth and materiality as the actual book where it came from.

Sander's aim of attaining veracity through an objectivistic contemplation of the visible is overturned by Shaham, who instead champions subjectivity and the manual operations of artful deceit. If in Sander's photographs the 'hand' of the artist is camouflaged in the semblance of a transparency, a mechanism that appears to mediate the sitter without the trace of a subjective interference, then Shaham seems to crown the 'artist's hand' anew in the deed of image-making – a hand that, by inflicting invisibility, re-emerges to fight back against the superior eye of the camera. We may now try and speculate why this silhouette, looming at us from Shaham's photograph, has its arm amputated: this may be a metaphorical hint to Sander himself, who by having relinquished his subjective stance in favor of the objectivistic eye of the camera had withdrawn his own hand, so to speak, from the artistic process.

The title of the work, *Writer, Storyteller*, suggests that these missing, incisioned portraits were originally those of authors – an occupation that Sander classified under the larger category of 'artists'. Unlike most of Sander's vast project, this portfolio of 12 portraits was shot in a studio setting, with most subjects seen sitting against their even backdrop. This minimalist setting, devoid of any peripheral narrative or anecdote, brings out the contours of the writers' figures, which seem cut and pasted over the light-grey, neutral and indifferent background. Their defined contours seem to invite further cutting, of the sort that Shaham indeed performed. Nonetheless, the question persists: Why has Shaham selected the group of writers in particular? And why turn their images into a burial site for authors and storytellers?

As we ponder this, the closing words of Barthes' *Death of the Author* inevitably come to mind: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."<sup>7</sup> Barthes would have the author replaced with a new figure, which he terms the 'modern scriptor'. Contrary to the author who invariably precedes his book, "the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text". For Barthes, the meaning of a text cannot be ascribed to the perceived antecedence of the author, since "there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*". To him, "*writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' [...]; rather, it designates exactly what the linguists [...] call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content [...] than the act by which it is uttered – something like the *I declare* of kings". He proceeds: "The hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription [...], traces a field without origin".<sup>8</sup> Shaham's *Writer, Storyteller* appear to commemorate this Barthesian view, as while it buries the author it goes on to constitute the image-maker as a 'modern scriptor', one who would etch his own body of works with the saying: "The king is dead, long live the king!"<sup>9</sup> This is then the result of a purely performative act, one that puts both the image and the medium to death.<sup>10</sup> In contrast with Sander's photographs, which were produced using the traditional means of recording and transparent representation, we may see that Shaham's *Writer, Storyteller* crowns the *here and now* of the act of sabotage. And if for Barthes

photography cannot but produce a 'flat death,'<sup>11</sup> here we may observe – thanks to manually performed incisions and a desktop scanner – a three-dimensional death where the photographic image, the medium and author all share one and the same fate.

1. Sander applied the following seven categories: The Peasant, The Craftsman, The Woman, The Socio-professional categories, The Big City, The Artists and finally The Last Men. [[↵](#)]
2. August Sander, "Remarks on my Exhibition at the Cologne Art Union" (1927), trans. Joel Agee, in Christopher Phillips (ed.), *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), p. 107. [[↵](#)]
3. Sander was among the photographers lined with *die Neue Sachlichkeit* (the 'New Objectivity'), an avant-garde current in art and literature that emerged during the Weimar Republic in Germany. [[↵](#)]
4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 96. [[↵](#)]
5. Barthes, op. cit., p. 115. [[↵](#)]
6. Lyle Rexer, *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography* (New York, Aperture, 2009), p. 79. [[↵](#)]
7. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in: *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148. [[↵](#)]
8. Barthes, op. cit., pp. 145–146. [[↵](#)]
9. As the title of Shaham's first solo exhibition, shown in 2012. [[↵](#)]
10. The situation addressed in *Death of the Author* is strongly echoed also in Shaham's Full Reflection, mentioned above. The work's 'official' author withdraws his hand from the production process, letting the duo of scanners burst in an intimate dance of autonomous mutual scanning which alone breeds the resulting image. [[↵](#)]
11. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 92.