

THE IMPERSONAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Draft—not for circulation

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If you fuck in front of an unobstructed window in the City of Philadelphia, you should pretty much assume that someone's going to take your picture and post it on the internet.¹

Finding a sense of self in a public setting has always been a tortured process. This process is part finding and part being found out. Giving birth to a version of oneself but also being bequeathed an unwanted inheritance. Existing in public, producing oneself for a public, one works within the frighteningly sui generis and, at the same time, in the cramped spaces of a governmentalized present. All too knowable; all too unknowable, impersonal, even anonymous. Impersonalized at the very moments we might imagine that we have become sensually embodied (try fucking in front of an open window and then waking to find a photo of the event in your school newspaper). Violently personalized when we want to be alone (why do they know my name in the grocery store?). When we step onto a bus, into a chat room, into the frame of someone else's photograph, we become knowable in ways we do not control; likewise, we become unknowable in ways we might want to resist through more active forms of expression, identification, disavowal. If you fuck in front of an unobstructed window in the City of Philadelphia, you should pretty much assume that someone's going to take your picture and post it on the internet.

It has never been easy to be or become public. To exist in the public sphere, as it was imagined by Jürgen Habermas, one had to be able (which is to say, to be endowed) to produce an

1 www.plastic.com/comments.html;sid=05/12/02/08120119;cid=3

alternate version of yourself, one which left behind the intimacies of home and self, which was stripped of emotion, leaving only a body's "rational-critical" faculties. Habermas' dream of transcendence. But a constitutive impossibility for some because people never quite wielded this power as a capacity or right, as Habermas might have wanted to claim. Rather, certain structural features of a public milieu—a scene for public action—granted those capacities through subtle and not at all subtle codings of class, race, gender, sexuality (what Michael Warner calls a body's positivity²). A rational-critical citizen no more controlled their successful publicity than they did their race; which is to say, the more unmarked you were, the more in control you were of the terms of your publicity.

What was there to know about the citizen who appeared in their body's rational-critical rendition? What is given to knowledge in the moment of public action? There was one's discourse: calm, reasoned, controlled—rather, ceded the possibility of control by virtue of one's unmarked body, or, alternatively, robbed of that control, one's speech rendered hysterical by their marked body, e.g. minority speech of almost any kind. Habermas' ideal public man could appear in public anonymized, stripped of bodily markings, of anything that could tie one to a place or a time, any site of contingency—impersonalized, so to speak—because behind the public face, there was the security of the family and the home, the so-called intimate sphere—ever present, but left behind as a condition of becoming public. Public man was relieved of any compromising positivity because he maintained a privileged sphere for the expression of one's intimate self, a safe space for self-revelation. What could be known about a person in the intimate sphere was the obverse of what could be known about a person in the public sphere, and this separation was constitutive of personhood on one side, and publicity on the other. Rather than talk about public/private or public sphere/intimate sphere as the conceptual binaries which grounded early theorizations of publics, it is just as accurate, and in certain situations, perhaps more to the point,

2 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).
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to talk about impersonality/personality or anonymity/intelligibility. Public space and public practice is distinguished by an intimate epistemology.

Of course, media mattered too. Habermas was thinking mainly about text. To the extent that his public man was a knowable subject, he was a print subject, a person given critical subjectivity through textual mediation. Habermas' reliance on print culture in the formulation of a critical public sphere is a reliance on a medium that could be controlled, almost totally, by the author—so it was made to appear. Without a theory of readership, Habermas' print media were instrumentalized possessions of the rational-critical subject. They presented to a public whatever it was possible to know about an author; and the author controlled his intelligibility through rhetorical mastery. Print never betrayed the author; knowability was a possession of the unmarked citizen, the majority citizen. The possibilities for being or becoming public have always been a factor of what the public is given to know—what they are given and what they feel entitled to take. This is obviously the case when we hear, for instance, that certain previously classified files have been “made public” (although what one is given to know isn't the same as what one is able to understand; and this is different yet again from what courses of action are made available to one as a consequence of the knowing). But my interest here is in the ways that knowability, which I discuss as impersonality, has been central to the constitution of publics and public persons, and how, in relation to recent photographic events, the place of impersonality in a scene of public action might be changing.

The history of photographs, like the history of publics, can be written as a history of the knowable subject, the subject made personal and impersonal. Early portrait photography, for example, presents the sitter to family and friends in the generality of social norms, the norms that

people disappear into (when they are allowed to): familial roles (father, wife, mother), generational roles, economic roles.³ To assume norms is to slip into a kind of generality, to become impersonal. Although the norms one disappears into are not always chosen:

What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) “self”; but it is the contrary that must be said: “myself” never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and “myself” which is light, divided, dispersed....

We can hear, voiced in Roland Barthes' lament, a concern over the way that photographs produce an uncertain but intimate epistemology. And later on the same page: “...the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”⁴ In a scene of public action (say, the circulation of a photograph), one always circulates as a *mere* image of oneself. Knowability is one of the stakes of publicity just as it is one of the stakes of photography (high stakes indeed for Barthes). In this sense, a photograph is a metapicture of a public.⁵ It presents us with a picture of how publics work, focusing attention most intensely on a public's intimate epistemologies.⁶

Photography's (or at least, photographic theory's) concern for the knowable subject is often smuggled into writing which expresses itself through a different concern: viz., the omnipresence of photographic images. "Omnipresence" is Susan Sontag's word, first used in *On Photography*. As she says in the epigraph: “It all started with one essay—about some of the problems, aesthetic and moral, posed by the omnipresence of photographed images; but the more

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle Brow Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965).

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 12 .

5 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Metapictures" in *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

6 Another resource for thinking about the epistemology of public space and public action is Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*.

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I thought about what photographs are, the more complex and suggestive they became.”⁷ The omnipresent photographs Sontag has especially in mind in that book are ordinary snapshot photos, tourist photos, photos which to Sontag’s ethical thinking, band together to produce a world less knowable, a world less knowing. “Taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events.”⁸ And later in the same essay: “Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks...Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph” (emphasis Sontag’s).⁹ Sontag is probably indulging in a mild bit of sophistry here (the distinction she relies on between seeing and understanding, surface and depth, is a hoary one) but her basic claim is this: photography’s capacity to imply anything at all (meaningful or not) about the world it pictures is attributable to its omnipresence, the characteristic of photographs which Sontag sets out to investigate, and which she identifies proleptically as a (if not *the*) cultural problem of the twentieth century. As photography proliferates into a world-blanketing generality (photos of every possible thing, in place of every possible thing—the vanishing point of Sontag’s photographic history), it produces a world-become-impersonal—a world we can no longer know. In the scene of an omnipresent photography, the Event loses its personality, its particularity, whatever Sontag hopes might goad us into action.

Fifty years before Sontag, Siegfried Kracauer issues the same warning in his essay “Photography”.¹⁰ He is thinking about photographs in illustrated magazines as well as snapshot photographs; the Tiller girl and a universalized grandmother are his examples. But the besieging forces are the same: a “contiguous” photography, the imagined spatial and temporal continuum of photographs whose representational coverage is total. Kracauer explains the problem of

7 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

8 *ibid.*, 11

9 *ibid.*, 23

10 Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (Spring, 1993), 421-436.
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photography with reference to the discipline of History, and a deluded historicism which believes (or implies) that to know all the facts, and put them in just the right order, would be to reconstitute history, totally—to know history totally. Photography in its imagined totality, in its world-blanketing contiguity, similarly implies that it presents its viewers with the world in total, the world in its full knowability. But what really happens through the mirror of the world photographed, Kracauer warns, is something else: “In a photograph, a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow” (p. 426). Under the impersonalizing influence of time re-membered in photographs, our own grandmother becomes an “archaeological manikin,” offering nothing more intimate than a lesson in period dress (p. 424). The photograph denies us grandma’s personality, her history, our own past. Blankets it, as if under a layer of snow.

The vector which spans these fifty years, from Kracauer to Sontag and through intervening points, is a shared anxiety. It can be stated this way: the more photographs there are in and of the world—that is, the more they come to mediate public life, the more photographs provide our only or most available picture *of* public life (the conditions of our togetherness)—the less knowable the world becomes, the less knowable are the conditions of our relations to the world. Photography-become-omnipresent renders the world unknowable, and the unknowable world is the impersonal world. The world without particularity. Impersonality is personality absented, the retraction of what was there to be known, and what should by rights be knowable, for the sake of propriety or secrecy or control.

I want to suggest that when we are talking about an omnipresent photography, we are also talking about a public photography, a photography which circulates, a photography which is widely visible, a photography which produces the conditions of its own circulation and reception.¹¹ But a public, for all of its “world-making” potential, is also the scene of traumatic

11 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 67
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forgetting¹², an inherent unknowability.¹³ In a public sphere, the world becomes impersonal at the very moment it is given to be known (through discourse, through circulation, through address): “Public speech can have great urgency and intimate import. Yet we know that it was addressed not exactly to us but to the stranger we were until the moment we happened to be addressed by it.”¹⁴ Publics, in their Habermasian lineage, also require the production of impersonality on the side of the speaker. Habermas gives us the public sphere as the scene of the individual made impersonal—*homme-become-citoyen*—so that he (or she, but Habermas means he) can appear in public unbiased by personal interests.¹⁵ In Habermas' public sphere, impersonality, and one's capacity to generate a version of oneself which is impersonal (given without the self-interested quiddity of a personality, a body with features) is the guarantee of an effective public sphere, which is to say an idealized rational-critical public sphere.

Impersonality is the active production of a stripped down personality; but not everyone can control the terms of their own impersonality. For those who can, it is possessed as a form of privilege. Some can choose to make themselves impersonal by withholding from public circulation certain unwanted or unseemly traits; others are relentlessly produced and reproduced in the particularity of their gender, their race, their sexuality—are violently personalized. In the context of public sphere theory, a definition of marginality or sub-alterity is: the condition of subjectivity in which one is refused the power to become impersonal, disenfranchised from the capacity to become general on their own terms. This is why in a minor literature, everything is political: “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a

12 *ibid.*, 114

13 Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (Spring, 1997), 3-26.

14 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 77

15 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

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whole other story is vibrating within it.”¹⁶ The subject of a minor literature is trapped in her or his individuality by the persistence with which their intrigues stay linked to their (presumed) political needs: the spaces they inhabit are cramped because these links hold firm. To be able to produce oneself as impersonal is to exist in a “large space,” where individual intrigues become lost and cease to matter, where one is free to move around in a spacious generality.

Sontag and Kracauer both argue that public life, as refracted by an omnipresent photography, founders when it runs up against impersonality (a certain unknowability), but historically publics have demanded of their majority subjects the active production of impersonality; impersonality is the guarantee of rational-criticality, or successful publicity. I have tried to suggest that this aporia, this crossroads—the problem of impersonality in a scene of public action—is constitutive both of photographic theory and public sphere theory, photographs and publics. And this connection between publics and photography, I think, helps us to gain some critical purchase on recent, and often disturbing, eruptions of photographs into public life. Call it photography's *new* omnipresence.

16 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "What is a Minor Literature?" in *Out there: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson and others (New York, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 59 .
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fig. 1

The Bush administration and its standing army initially restricted the photo you see here (fig. 1), and many photos like it, citing as justification the privacy of the families of soldiers who had died in Iraq.¹⁷ It is interesting, then, to note that the photograph was taken by official military photographers during a ceremony held at Dover Air Force Base (AFB) for soldiers killed in Iraq. In April of 2005, this photograph and 360 strikingly similar photographs of returning dead, all in identical coffins, draped with American flags, were eventually released under pressure of the Freedom of Information Act to one Russ Kick, who runs the website www.thememoryhole.org. But before the U.S. military begrudgingly¹⁸ handed over the photographs, they were “redacted,” as seen above. “Redaction” is the military’s word for the process whereby a photography is stripped of all identifying signs and insignia, anything that could tie a soldier to an identity: a face, a name, a rank, a troop. In the redacted photo, soldiers are made anonymous, hence unknowable except in their generality *as* soldiers (in which there appear to be only two sub-categories: alive and dead). The chaplain, however, is both impersonal and personal: given to be

17 As originally reported in *The New York Times* article of June 22, 2004, now archived here: <http://foi.missouri.edu/federalfoia/senbksban.html>

18 “In late July, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard Myers argued to a federal judge that release of abuse imagery from the Abu Ghraib case would spark a firestorm of protest that would result in more dead civilians and military forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the Middle East.” Quoted here: <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/IraqCoverage/story?id=1166772&page=2>

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known here both as a particular man, as well as in his generality as spiritual officiant. In the photo, he sits outside the forms of generality which enfold and define the soldiers, alive and dead, and so he does not earn their anonymizing black bars. The army says that it redacts the identities of soldiers to guard that information against enemies; we might also understand the redaction as the government's attempt to commodify their property. Like the hood which covers the face of the condemned, the black anonymizing bars prevent the American public from knowing the soldier who, in his own way, has been condemned to die.

It is clear that the Bush government wants these photos kept out of the public eye as part of a larger effort to sanitize the image of war. And concealing (images of) the dead has been part of the government's official strategic policy ever since Bush I. A single precipitating event motivated the formalization of this strategy into policy. In December of 1989, during the U.S. Invasion of Panama, three major American television stations (ABC, CBS, CNN) chose to broadcast a national presidential address in split screen: the one half showing Bush I, the other showing coffins arriving at Dover AFB. Here was an ideal setting for some somber but dignified PR, the president's earnest piety and tough optimism nobly justifying the sacrifice of death. Except that Bush I hadn't planned this media event (a warning to all future PR presidents). The split screen was the networks' collective decision, and what the viewing public saw was Bush I joking lightheartedly, carefree, next to images of the returning dead, a contrast which must have returned the generalized soldiers, quite wrenchingly for the American public, to their specificity as war dead, as dead (in contrast to Bush' liveliness). Bush I was not pleased, of course, and issued forth a policy, active today and very much reinvigorated by Bush II, restricting all images of returning American war dead. The American government has continued, however, to produce these images (Army photographers had, until recently, documented every military funeral); but they also produce the law which restricts them from public view. This seems to me alive with import. The act of restricting, forbidding anything, is of course a brutish exercise of power; but it

is also, in this case, subtly productive. What it produces is an impersonal public sphere; a public sphere which actively produces itself as unknowable in certain respects. Impersonality is the withholding of knowledge that is, notwithstanding the withholding, there to be known. Impersonality performs the world as less knowable than it is or appears to be. By producing photos which are then actively withheld, the State, from Bush I to Bush II, produces the American public sphere as an impersonal one.

In an impersonal public sphere, spaces of intimacy or personality become a threat. This provides the rationale behind the otherwise entirely in-credible claim on the part of Bush II to be protecting the privacy of the families of the returning dead. What could possibly be meant by this rendition of privacy? It is certainly not the privacy we think we know. First, the army's own redactions, as well as the visual grammar of the photos (e.g. the perfect homology of the coffins), render the photographs anonymous: they are perfectly retentive of identity. No mother's son; only anonymous, impersonal, dead soldiers. So it is far from clear what is being preserved as private here, as sacred and protected. Second, and more important, privacy, in its common sense usage as well as in Habermas' sense, has tended to designate the space that people (as *homme*) control against the activities of citizens and government in the public sphere. With respect to the coffin photos, the State first defines privacy on their own terms (but does so surreptitiously), and then claims to protect it (and does so quite publicly).

This sets the stage for a public protest which must have looked very strange indeed to anyone sympathetic to the government's claims on behalf of citizens' privacy. Nadia McCaffrey's desire to have a public ceremony for her dead son, to photograph it, televise it, make it widely available as public, and to do so against the wishes of a government who says they only want to protect her privacy, begins to look either like a protest for a different kind of privacy, or a claim that citizens' privacy (if that is, in fact, a term we retain for designating some space apart, some

space of movement and action—and I'm not sure it is) should include the right to go public with some things, e.g., a family death, personal grief, political opposition. In other words—and in opposition to Habermas' fears about partisan politics tainting publics—some versions of privacy might look very public, even publicized.¹⁹

The *LA Times* article quotes McCaffrey as saying: “Patrick 'did not die for nothing' ... 'The way he lived needs to be talked about. Patrick was not a fighter, he was a peacemaker.’” Far more, then, than just a protest over definitionally unstable terms like public and private, McCaffrey here refuses the terms of her son's forced impersonality: as soldier, as fighter, as part of a great military generality (the only generality, and therefore the only publicity, a soldier is commonly allowed²⁰). As the redacted images make graphically clear, and as is literally inscribed on the surface of the photo, American soldiers may only become public as impersonal (in fact, anonymous) representatives of the military, which is to say, they cannot become public in a meaningfully self-determined sense. Nadia McCaffrey's protest was an effective attempt to produce photographic images (as well as video footage) of her dead son which did not disappear into a faceless impersonality, an imposed privacy, which instead produce the individual as simultaneously personal (knowable in name, in deed, in the “way he lived”) *and* public.

Seen in an historical perspective, it is not surprising that, should the relationship between impersonality (or generality) and publicity be changing (as I have hinted, but only thus far hinted), this might happen within the space of photographic representation. As Alan Sekula has

19 Regine Labossiere and Eric Slater, "Mother Encourages Photos of Coffin: To Protest Pentagon Policy, Nadia McCaffrey Invites the Media to Disseminate Images of Her Slain Son's Return from Iraq." *Los Angeles Times* Monday June 28, 2004.

20 Unless, like American pro football player Pat Tillman, you are a celebrity by other means who later dies in battle—then video of your soldierly activities will be everywhere.

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documented, photographs have long been caught up in the production of impersonality, have long been used to alter the conditions under which it is possible to associate oneself with others.²¹ Sekula describes the ways that photographs were first used to produce the body and embodied subjectivity of the criminal (I have just been discussing how they have been used more recently to produce the soldier). In his Foucauldian account of the photograph, the archive, and the criminal, Sekula apprehends the way that photographs were both singular (Barthes' *punctum*, Benjamin's magical value²²) and general (Barthes' *studium*, Benjamin's mechanical reproducibility). That is, photographs have always been both personal and impersonal, served both personalizing and impersonalizing ends. For every Atget (a Paris street, a single light), an August Sander (the orders of society, the farmer); for every Man Ray, an Alfonse Bertillon.

Sekula points out that Bertillon himself embodied both sides of this bi-polarity: "One curious aspect of Bertillon's reputation lies in the ways in which his method, which runs counter to any metaphysical or essentialist doctrine of the self, could be regarded as a triumph of humanism."²³ Bertillon's system for criminal identification, called Bertillonage or the signaletic notice, produced a species-view via the archive (the collective archive of all photographs or, more specifically, an archive of ear portraits), but it did so in order to "extract" the individual-as-criminal from the species..²⁴ Bertillon: "In prison practice the signaletic notice accompanies every reception and every delivery of a human individuality; this register guards the trace of the real, actual presence of the person sought by the administrative or judicial document....[The] task is always the same: to preserve a sufficient record of a personality to be able to identify the present description with one which may be presented at some future time."²⁵ Here, the photograph is described as an instrument which prevents the criminal from escaping into impersonality. The

21 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter, 1986), 3-64.

22 Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980).

23 Sekula, *The Body and the Archive*, 34

24 *ibid.*, 27

25 *ibid.*, 25

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photograph produces the record of a personality from out of a species impersonality and for the purposes of a future identification.

Today, a structurally if not politically similar process—the generation of personality from conditions of impersonality—seems to be playing out on a massive scale with the eruption of personal photographs out of photo albums and onto the Internet.²⁶ If we consider Flickr.com alone, the numbers are impressive (Flickr is one of the most popular photo sharing sites). A *Wired* article from August 2005 tells us this about it: “Launched in 2002, Flickr has grown along with digital camera sales and has helped popularize tagging. Named 'Breakout of the Year' at the 2005 Webby Awards, the community now numbers 37 million photos and 1.2 million members, many of whom are considered to be among the web's most creative image makers.”²⁷ In December 2005, a *Business 2.0* article reported that Flickr had 1.5 millions users, that it hosted 60 million photographs, and that there were “14,000 or so images uploaded to Flickr every hour.”²⁸ Omnipresence indeed, although when we leave the world of rhetorical omnipresence and enter something that starts to look far more literal, we have grounds for wondering if there hasn't been a qualitative shift in omnipresence, if not in photography itself.

But the numbers, however impressive, only provide empirical language, cocktail party language for what everyone who has ever once had access to the Internet has already experienced first-hand: the staggering number of personal photographs now available to public view. And like

26 By “personal photographs,” as I use it here and elsewhere, I refer quite broadly and somewhat loosely to photographs which are not primarily or originally created for commercial use. That is, the photographs I'm talking about are ones that are produced with the expectation that nobody would get paid for them, even if the photograph eventually gets sold somewhere, even if the larger website of which it is a part (e.g. Flickr.com) is worth an awful lot of money (the figure was never made public; unofficial guesses put the figure at \$20 million U.S.). I also use the term to refer to the various ways in which this type of photograph retains links to the person of the photographer: e.g., the domain name, biographic details, photographic details of a particular life, etc.

27 Robert Andrews, "Flickr Fans to Yahoo: Flick Off!" *Wired News* (2005), <http://www.wired.com/news/ebiz/0,1272,68654,00.html?tw=rss>.TOP

28 Erick Schonfeld, "The Flickrization of Yahoo," *Business 2.0* (2005), <http://www.business2.com/b2/web/articles/print/0,17925,1129448,00.html>

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empirical language, the language of technological discourse (in which discussions of online photographs have been so intractably caught up) can be distracting to the extent that it encourages us to think that the significant action takes place in or around the technology (e.g. we count the number of photoblogs, we enumerate their features, we discuss people as “users”) rather than in what the technologies make possible at the level of personal desire and public circulation.

Technologies have often been caught up in the fantasy of the versioned self: the self made creatively impersonal in order to circulate in a public (e.g. media celebrities), or the self violently remanded to a bodily specificity which prevents such circulation—circulation as anything, that is, other than a figure of marginality itself (e.g. the biological science of gender or sexuality). As discussed, photographs have long been forces in both of these directions. Bertillon’s anthropometrics entrap the accused in the body of the criminal; Galton’s composites jettison criminals to the far reaches of a marginalized generality.²⁹ The quiddity of an individual photograph—its vaunted indexicality, its ostensible evidentiary nature, its naturalism, its *punctum*—abetted the smuggling of criminal traits into an individual body: an *intensive* movement, the production of bodily positivity, resident in traits, physical features, gestures, habits. The systematicity of photographs—their capacity to be archived, sorted, cross-referenced; their indexicality, structural homology, reliability—abetted the opposite, *extensive* movement, the production of a bodily negativity, the enslavement of personality to a mobilized, governmentalized generality.

In its amenability to these two very different exertions of power (loosely aligned with Foucault’s disciplinarity and biopower), in its capacity to produce both personality and impersonality, photography is a grotesquerie of Habermas’ public sphere, which pretends that these two versions of selfhood are 1. separable and 2. controlled by the individual who is assumed

29 Sekula, *The Body and the Archive*, 3-64
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to possess them. In the history of the photographic public sphere, the body with identifiable, positive traits isn't so much hidden from public sight (nestled in the intimate sphere) as paraded quietly within it, circulated as a type, a knowledge, a warning: the prostitute, the criminal, the poor. While the negative body, the body without traits, isn't granted a public voice through his new impersonalized body so much as remanded to the absolute silence of a generalized and marginalized subgroup: that of the criminal type, who is thereby rendered voiceless—"a silence that silences," in Sekula's words.³⁰ Although in neither case is the subject—whether personalized or impersonalized, identified or typed—any less public. This history of photography shows quite graphically how there is no space apart from the public, only spaces of forced obscurity.³¹ At no time has this seemed clearer than in the context of today's photographic culture. But before returning to the present, I want to make a brief detour through the story of a strange early twentieth century technology which highlights some of the specific ways that photographs, and technologies more generally, operate with respect to publics and impersonality.

Discussions of technology-as-such—of the sort which have so dominated the conversations about online and digital photography, photoblogs, etc.—often get caught up in their own problems of generality, of impersonality. What is a technology? And if we can identify one, does that mean we understand anything about how it functions technologically, in league with its sister technologies? Better, perhaps, to talk about a technological imagination, the circulation of certain forms, in public, *as* technologies and within a set of technological discourses. I want to talk briefly about one technology, contemporary with many of the photographic inventions chronicled by Sekula, which I think does some useful work for the story of photography,

³⁰ *ibid.*, 6

³¹ This is part of what I take to be the intent or the implication of the various theorists of the public sphere today who assert the public sphere's fictitiousness. See, for instance: Jodi Dean (*Publicity's Secret*, p. 13), Slavoj Žižek, and Lauren Berlant (*The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, p. 3).

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publicity and personhood that I am telling: 1. it illustrates this sense of a technological imagination and the role it plays in and for publics (not least because my primary source here is a novel); 2. it helps us to see more clearly the role that photography (in contrast to painting or television or print culture) has played in the mediation of personal and impersonal selves—which is to say, in the mediation of publics; and 3. it emphasizes the way that public discourse requires the circulation, in one form or another, of the impersonal within the public—in other words, it exemplifies the mechanisms of public impersonality that I am trying to sketch here.

In association with the early twentieth century suffrage movement, there emerged a device called The Voiceless Speech. It appears that the history of this device has not been written, but its life can be traced through media reports about the suffrage movement and through one novel in particular. *The Sturdy Oak*, conceived in 1916, is a “composite novel of American politics,” written collectively by some of the most famous writers in early twentieth century America.³² *The Sturdy Oak* tells the story of how a young conservative lawyer, George Remington, in the course of his campaign for public office, is eventually converted to the suffragist cause. Employing satire, and satire's reliance on social types (here, centrally, gender types), *The Sturdy Oak* presented itself as an unapologetic suffragist tract—proceeds from the sale of the novel to benefit the movement. The novel gives us one of the more detailed physical descriptions of The Voiceless Speech:

From the low, old-fashioned brick building on the northeast corner of Fountain Square, whose boarded eyes had stared blindly across toward the glittering orbs of its towering neighbor, the Jaffry Building, for six months, a series of great placards flared.

Planks had been removed from the windows, plate glass restored, and behind it he [Candidate Remington] read in damnable irritation:

32 Each author wrote one chapter. Listed in the order of their appearance, they were: Samuel Merwin, Harry Leon Wilson, Fannie Hurst, Dorothy Canfield, Kathleen Norris, Henry Kitchell Webster, Anne O'Hagan, Mary Heaton Vorse, Alice Duer Miller, Ethel Watts Mumford, Marjorie Benton Cooke, William Allen White, Mary Austin, and Leroy Scott.

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“SOME QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATE REMINGTON”

A foot high, an inch broad, black as Erebus, the letters shouted at him against an orange background.”

Every window of the second story contained a placard....On the first story...stood a woman.

She was turning backward, for the benefit of onlookers who pressed close to the glass, the leaves of a mammoth pad resting upon an easel.

...The whole population of Whitewater, it seemed to George [Candidate Remington], was crowded around that corner.³³

Essentially an easel and a large pad of paper, the Voiceless Speech is referred to in *The Sturdy Oak* as a “contrivance”³⁴ and exercised the kind of hold on the popular imagination of early twentieth century America that is unique to new technologies. One of many such newspaper articles from 1912 announces: “Now the ‘Voiceless Speech:’ Suffragists Have New Way to Best Anti-talking Rules.”³⁵ Another from Dec. 13, 1912: “Advertising Suffrage Ball: ‘Voiceless Speeches’ to be Ground Out at 5th Avenue Milliner’s.”³⁶ Clearly the main attraction in this and many such articles, the Voiceless Speech garnered media attention for itself, regardless of the content of its speeches (which were often condescendingly assumed to be the same). Indeed, its value to the suffragist cause seems to have been at least as much for the press it garnered as for anything that might be communicated through the device. Public relations is, after all, a spatial politics, a contest over who gets to use public space and how, and the Voiceless Speech took up space in the city—physical as well as media space . More specifically, we could say that public relations is a contest over space *and* circulation; this is why the Voiceless Speech frequently appeared in two of the newest and most intensely circulatory spaces in the early twentieth century city: store windows (commodity circulation) and automobiles (people, commodities, circulation

33 Elizabeth Jordan, ed., *The Sturdy Oak* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1916), 74 .

34 *ibid.*, 167

35 Unattributed, "Now the Voiceless Speech: Suffragists have a New Way to Beat Anti-Talking Rules," *New York Times*. November 19, 1912.

36 Unattributed, "Advertising Suffrage Ball: "Voiceless Speeches" to be Ground Out at 5th Avenue Milliner's," *New York Times*. December 13, 1912.

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as such). The Voiceless Speech also jammed circulation, as *The New York Times* reported when Ms. Anna Constable of the Women's Political Union was arrested for "obstructing traffic" with her "operation" of the Voiceless Speech in a storefront window.³⁷

Voicelessness here names both a tactic and a social condition. Socially, publicly, women in turn of the century America were quite literally voiceless. The suffragist movement was a struggle to win a voice in the (highly circumscribed) form of the vote. Voiceless speech, in this sense, names the only kind of voice women had in the public sphere. Not a tactic at all, then, but a necessity, a condition for speaking at all. But tactics are often born of necessity, and the tactical work of the Voiceless Speech was to invent forms of speech and forms of public-ness, both of which required the invention of new forms of self. New voicings, so to speak. *The Sturdy Oak* describes this scene of self-invention:

...and George, too, glanced through his window across the crowded street into the shattered window whence issued the Voiceless Speech. In that jagged frame in the raw November air still stood Mrs. Harvey Herrington, turning the giant leaves of her soundless oratory. The heckling request which then struck George's eyes began: "*Will Candidate Remington answer—*"

George Remington read no more. His already tense figure suddenly stiffened; he caught a sharp breath. Then, without a word to the two men with him, he [sic] seized his hat and dashed from his office.³⁸

...dashed from his office and straight to the stage where he delivers the speech which consummates his transformation from a social conservative to a suffragist. So the Voiceless Speech has its intended effect here. It speaks publicly; finds a voice and grants a voice; it thereby convinces, transforms.

If we resist the temptation to conflate voice with sound, in what sense is this oratory

37 Unattributed, "Call Suffragist to Court: "Voiceless Speech" Obstructs Traffic, is the Complaint," *New York Times* December 29, 1912.; Unattributed, "Voiceless Speech Too Loud: Judge Tells Ms. Constable She must Not "Talk" again," *New York Times*. December 31, 1912.

38 Jordan, *The Sturdy Oak*, 165
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voiceless? One way to read it is to notice the positioning of the body which is associated with this speech, if not directly productive of it: that of Mrs. Harvey Herrington. She is given in the passage quoted above by her married name, her husband's name, and is thereby wedded—narratively, textually, and personally—to the relation which prevented women from having a voice in the public sphere. The husband's name, like the clothing which marks a woman's gender, like the body which stamps a gender on the person, is the condition of particularity—what I have been calling personality—which bars women from public speech, even from meaningful public existence. So Mrs. Harvey Herrington's positioning here, standing just next to the Voiceless Speech, is a way of removing those conditions of bodily positivity from the scene of speech, of producing an oratory which might escape those conditions, as indeed it does in this scene. The Voiceless Speech is a kind of prosthetic for the form of speech with which Habermas endows all bourgeois men: speech which stands outside of the body, of particularity. Of course, this is a fictional scene, so the Voiceless Speech's efficacy here is imaginative, worked through the imaginative politics of the *as if*: as if such conditions might one day exist, or come to exist in the act of imagining them. What we learn here is not what the Voiceless Speech did or could do, but what the hopes were for it.

So the Voiceless Speech, in this imaginative, tactical sense, is less a speech without voice than a speech which transcends voice—which transcends, to be specific, the gendered, particularized public existence of women AS women (and therefore voiceless). What the Voiceless Speech effects, in short, is a transcendence of the conditions of particularity (corporeality, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, etc.) which prevent a body from existing meaningfully in public. Another turn-of-the-century connotation for the phrase “voiceless speech” affirms that voicelessness was understood as a kind of technology for the production of impersonality, for negotiating a public sphere which only honored certain forms of impersonality and which forcefully excluded all forms of manifest positive personality (intimate voices). “Voiceless

speech” also referred to fingerprinting as a new form of criminal technology...³⁹. The voice absented here is that of the criminal; that is, of the potential criminal, the body subjectivized as criminal. And here too, the effect is an imagined one, a hopeful one: that fingerprinting technology will finally banish all particularized, subjective, untrustworthy forms of speech from the courtroom, leaving only the impersonal, the impartial, the empirical, the scientifically trustworthy voice of the fingerprint. It is the perfect juridical fantasy: where all evidence is impartial, and where the accused plays no role, other than to be accused and eventually sentenced. The fingerprint speaks beside, or around the criminal; the body of the accused is rendered powerless in the face of this new impersonalizing interrogative.

In juridical as well as political Voiceless Speech, the voice which is absented by the technology is that part of a person which cannot be trusted in the public sphere, which is marked, minoritized, personal, intimate. In this sense, photographs too have served as forms of voiceless speech. The photograph in Sekula's history—the disciplinary as well as the biopolitical photograph, the anthropometric as well as the composited photograph—produces voiceless speech in the way that it imaginatively circumvents the suspect parts of a person, the parts which neither the law nor the public will trust coming from (potential) criminals, the parts which define the *homme* in contrast to the *citoyen*. And it is a kind of voicelessness that Sontag worries about when she imagines the photograph-become-omnipresent: the world, or knowable world, rendered voiceless.

But toward the end of her life, Sontag began a careful reassessment of her earlier position on photography and omnipresence. Here she is talking in a *New York Times* article about the Abu

39 Jennifer L. Mnookin, "Fingerprints: Not a Gold Standard," *Issues in Science and Technology Online* (2003), <http://www.issues.org/issues/20.1/mnookin.html>
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Ghraib photographs, to which I will now turn to bring us back to the present:

The pictures taken by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib...reflect a shift in the use made of pictures—less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated. A digital camera is a common possession among soldiers. Where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers—recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities—and swapping images among themselves and e-mailing them around the globe.⁴⁰

Perhaps this reflects “a shift in the use made of pictures,” but Sontag is still talking here about omnipresence as the threat of photography. I think, however, that the digital age of photographs gives us a new and more appropriate word for this feature. “Networked” refers, in its vernacular, Internet-related connotation, to pure circulation. Things which are “networked” are “less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated.” Sontag, like the author of the percipient epigraph with which I began this essay, is here talking about the networked photograph, the photograph which seems to have become pure circulation.⁴¹

The shift that I am trying to suggest by moving from “omnipresent” to “networked”⁴² is one that also appears in the comparison of the Abu Ghraib photos with *Voiceless Speech*. The *Voiceless Speech* is hopeful speech; it embodies the hope that the

40 Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *The New York Times*, sec. New York Times Magazine, May 23, 2004.

41 Interestingly, this seems always to have been a potential resident in the photograph. Sekula hints at it in relation to late nineteenth century photography:

Photography subverted the privileges inherent in portraiture, but without any more extensive leveling of social relationships, these privileges could be reconstructed on a new basis. That is, photography could be assigned a proper role within a new hierarchy of taste. Honorific conventions were thus able to proliferate downward. At the same time, photographic portraiture began to perform a role no painted portrait could have performed in the same thorough and rigorous fashion. This role derived, not from any honorific tradition, but from the imperatives of medical and anatomical illustration (p. 6).

Honorific conventions could proliferate downward because photographs here are assumed to circulate downward, as signs if not as material objects. Pierre Bourdieu, in *Photography: A Middle Brow Art*, discusses a similar circulatory logic at work in photography with regard to 1960's French photographic portraiture.

42 And I do not mean to imply that agency now resides in the network or the machine or the Internet; rather, I am trying to emphasize the importance of circulation over presence.

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speech produced can find a public voice despite the partiality (meaning: particular + invested) of its speaker (or “operator” as *The Sturdy Oak* has it). Its circulation, in other words, is a political strategy of acting *as if*: as if the public sphere worked differently, as if women's speech could matter. It is an active politics. In order to circulate, voiceless speech had to be actively mobilized. Conceived, operated, put into circulation. Likewise with Bertillon's uses for photography: Bertillon himself, in association with the Law and eventually the State, was the circulatory force for this type of photograph.

But the networked photograph seems to need no motive force in order to become public in this way; the very existence of a photograph seems to guarantee that it will find its way into circulation, into publicity. Abu Ghraib appears to confirm this. In hindsight, doesn't the fact that those photographs were taken in the first place seem to guarantee that they would be leaked and circulated? Of course, seen from a certain materialist perspective, this cannot be true. With the Abu Ghraib photos as with any of the coffin photos as with any given photoblog photo, we can eventually trace our way back to the source, to the photographer.⁴³ But more and more, the world is acting *as if* it were true, as if all photographs were networked photographs, circulatory and public almost by definition. In the wake of the coffin photos being released, the military stopped documenting military ceremonies for slain soldiers. In the case of the photographs which American soldiers in Iraq exchanged for access to porn on the website www.nowthatsfuckedup.com, the government shut down the site, despite whatever PR danger there was in a first amendment violation.⁴⁴ And photoblogs encourage this belief

43 Specialist Joseph Darby eventually alerted higher “authorities” to the existence of the photos by delivering a CD containing the photos so much in circulation now.

44 Little, as it turns out; few people in American culture garner less sympathy than pornographers. As of December 30, 2005, a note on the website read: “NTFU - The Government Censored Amateur Adult Site Turned Political Resource Forum Index: It is with some regret that we must inform our users that this website has been forced to remove all sexually explicit content at this time. The owner of the site is being threatened with jail by Polk County, Florida, authorities if any "obscene" images appear on the site.

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to the extent that they seem to collectively represent all photographs of everything; as if everything in the world were now rushing to find its way into a photograph and onto the Internet. "...you should pretty much assume that someone's going to take your picture and post it on the internet."

Sontag's recent reassessment of the political implications of photographic omnipresence emerges from a reckoning with this very idea:

In our digital hall of mirrors, the pictures aren't going to go away. Yes, it seems that one picture is worth a thousand words. And even if our leaders choose not to look at them, there will be thousands more snapshots and videos. Unstoppable.⁴⁵

This is how Sontag concludes the essays she wrote for *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* (UK).⁴⁶ She feels no need or no ability to generalize about the perpetrators of these photos; it is simply the case that "there will be" photographs produced. Sontag's optimism here is very closely guarded, but I think it is perceptible. And I think it resides in the fact the new passive tense of photography, the "there will be" of our present photographic milieu, implies something important about the public for photography, and thereby, about the various publics we inhabit now.

The horizon here, I think, is not a revitalized Democratic era, where the People take control of the Media (although such accounts abound). Most photos that we could talk about as having become, in some sense, public were not taken with any revolutionary intent; most were not taken to be or become public at all. Some even, in the case of the

Since nobody can tell, in advance, whether an image might be found obscene by some judge or jury, we have chosen to remove all explicit content at this time. However, we will maintain the soldier's images as well as the chat and sex question forum. WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT NOW!!" Please maintain your membership during this difficult time. All membership fees will go towards the owner's legal defense fund. Help us stop Internet Censorship!!!"

45 *ibid.*

46 With one extra line appended to the end of the shorter *Guardian* version, a quip she borrowed from the *NY Times* version. After the line above, this version ends: "Can the video game, 'Hazing at Abu Ghraib' or 'Interrogating the Terrorists,' be far behind?"

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Abu Ghraib photographs, are themselves part of the horror of that event: we are almost as shocked that the photos exist as that the event happened. The political value of the Abu Ghraib photographs, in and of themselves—to the degree that they have had any—comes from their circulation first; the fact that they got out, that they came to be seen by people who, in contrast to their photographers, might think that something was wrong. The political shift that I have been discussing lies neither in what photographs show (Sontag's primary concern in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, her last book), nor in the circulation of particular photos. There have always been revealing photographs and photographs have always circulated. My sense is that the changes we see happening in and around photography hint at a contemporary public wherein the conditions for public action, and therefore for public personhood are subtle transformed. The basis for the transformation lies in an associative chain: as I've tried to show by drawing on a diverse set of cases—the origins of fingerprinting, the operation of the Voiceless Speech, photoblogs, photographs of torture and photographs of coffins containing dead U.S. soldiers—the conditions for personhood are bound up with publics, and publics, in turn, are bound up with the existence and circulation of photographs.⁴⁷

The shift that I have been adumbrating, and that I will try in what follows to more clearly specify, registers in the U.S. Government's response to the Abu Ghraib photographs.⁴⁸ The following statement is from Donald Rumsfeld's official testimony on May 7, 2004 before the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the treatment of Iraqi Prisoners:

We're functioning in a— with peacetime restraints, with legal

47 And some of the events to come in the wake of this shift will be wretched, to be sure. One is hard pressed to imagine a more disconcerting set of images than either the Abu Ghraib photographs or the porn-for-gore trades made possible on www.nowthatsfuckedup.com. In other words, mine is not a Utopian story.

48 And indeed, as the quote to follow illustrates, the U.S. Government's response to Abu Ghraib was in many ways far more of a response to the photographs than to the events they depict.

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requirements in a war-time situation, in the information age, where people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise, when they had not even arrived in the Pentagon.⁴⁹

An unbelievable statement, to be sure, whatever one thinks about the credibility of the photographs. Rumsfeld offers it as an excuse, an account of all that the government is up against, in trying to...do what exactly?⁵⁰ It's not clear. But we can see clearly an administration which is accustomed to controlling information (e.g. photographs) here seemingly disconcerted by the lack of control that a well-meaning government has over all those digital photographers of "the information age."⁵¹ Rumsfeld is talking, we should remind ourselves, about his own soldiers. And if the U.S. Government can't control U.S. soldiers with digital cameras...well, one can almost hear Rumsfeld failing to complete this thought. Again, this is not the scene (in the Hollywood film that is the contemporary United States) where the machines take over, where digital cameras run amok documenting everything, bringing down the government, or exchanging porn for anything that moves: each and every photograph has its photographer and the person or persons who put that photograph into circulation. But Rumsfeld here reacts *as if* all digital photographs in the information age are now destined to reach a public. This is the source of his lament in the testimony. When he all but cries "...so you see what we're up against here?!" I think this is what he means.

These channels of photographic circulation, both imagined and realized (feared and

49 The full transcript is available here: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A8575-2004May7_4.html

50 Senator Collins had just made this comment, prompting the Rumsfeld reply quoted above: "And I think that rather than calling CBS and asking for a delay in the airing of the pictures, it would have been far better if you, Mr. Secretary, with all respect, had come forward and told the world about these pictures..." Lucky for "the world," he didn't have to come forward for the world to find out about them.

51 Isn't this the most striking thing about the passage, its apparent honesty, the way Rumsfeld seems genuinely frustrated? If this is a PR move on Rumsfeld's part, if he is faking frustration, it is an unnervingly canny tactic.

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hoped for, but also merely lived with) have been opened up primarily on the Internet, but they have been created, motivated and populated by the activities of ordinary photographers, everyone from amateur pornographers to web designers to unpaid documentary photographers. The force of the *as if* which seems to torment Rumsfeld comes from them. It is as if public action—e.g. the eruption of photographs into the public eye—doesn't need a motive force any longer, a protest or protester or radical wing or rally or even a public sphere as Habermas conceived it. In any case, the U.S. Government and others are beginning to act as if it doesn't.

In one regard, publicness seems finally to have come unstuck from the intimate, particularized, self-interested lives which produce and circulate it—just as Habermas idealized it happening, just as the Voiceless Speech strategized it happening (both of which were imaginative acts, ways of acting *as if*). Which, unexpectedly, makes those intimate, ordinary lives—the parts of ourselves we once had to shed before becoming public, the parts that technologies like the Voiceless Speech imaginatively set aside—newly important.⁵² This is what Deleuze and Guattari mean when they say, speaking of minor literatures (as quoted earlier): “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus

52 In terms of the history of the public sphere, especially insofar as I've traced it from Habermas' work (not the only possible genealogy, to be sure), I'm saying little more here than that the newly configured public sphere removes the hypocrisy from Habermas' theory. I'm not saying that impersonality, impartiality, bodily negativity, disembodiment, etc. are not still operative in or relevant to public life. Nor am I saying that intimacy, personality, positivity, embodiment, etc. do not still define certain constitutive outsides to some forms of public life. I am saying that the public sphere, as it is refracted through and operative within a photographic public sphere, no longer seems to so stridently require its participants to pretend to an impersonality that they do not or cannot possess. In fact (and this is closer to the heart of my claim here), people hardly need to make a conscious claim on publicity as a condition of their photographs potentially becoming public. This, I think, is what lends the public sphere today a wildness, an unpredictability, because the sources of public information have proliferated wildly, and the cause or trigger, to the extent that it is rarely obvious, seems to be something like photography itself—or photography's networked situation. This is why Rumsfeld is probably right to be nervous; perhaps we should all be a little nervous. Because I'm only describing a new potential resident in publics; I've said nothing about checks or controls or ethics or politics or anything that might set limits. Then again, perhaps now is not the time to think about limits.

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becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.”⁵³ We might not want to say that every digital (or digitized) photograph has become public, or equally public or effectively public. But I, for one, *would* want to say—and I think recent events have confirmed—that digital photographs all have the potential to erupt into publicity, that collections of photographs (e.g. Abu Ghraib, Hurricane Katrina, the 2004 Tsunami), which often escape the control of their individual photographers, can unexpectedly erupt into public view, and that this eruption itself appears to be less the product of individual agency or collective strategizing than it is a kind of expected, albeit unpredictably eventuated, outcome of the fact that photographs now exist in such numbers, and circulate so freely. In Philadelphia or anywhere, in front of an unobstructed window or an obstructed one, whether you are fucking or torturing, “you should pretty much assume that someone's going to take your picture and post it on the internet.” I'm not saying that this is good or bad, right or wrong, I'm saying that it is more powerful than being right or wrong: it's what people believe to be the case. And believing it, it is what they act upon and thereby enact.⁵⁴

If this is the case, then the implications for publics and personhood are significant. It leaves individuals free to take photographs, post their photographs online, leave comments about other people's photographs, share links to photographs they love, sign up to new photo sharing services, make contacts in those environments, and all without consciously assuming the burden or requirements or normal entry fees of publicity. And this is true for pornographers and soldiers and bloggers and soldiers who blog pornography. They need not produce a version of themselves which suits the age's sense of public sphere propriety; they need not even address a public in any conscious or

53 Delueze and Guattari, *What is a Minor Literature?*, 59

54 Here is where my use of the phrase “as if” comes closest to the meaning Zizek gives it in his reconceptualization of ideology: Slavoj Zizek, “The Spectre of Ideology” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London: Verso, 1994).; Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).
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explicit sense; they can just take photographs. So we are not talking about Habermas' feared partisan politics, the eruption of the personal into the public which signaled for him the collapse of the oppositional distance that once (in his idealization) insulated the public from the State.⁵⁵ People normally conceive of the activity of taking and posting photographs as a private activity, or at least, an intensely personal one—in any case, they rarely consider it a partisan activity.⁵⁶

In a sense, the ability for something or someone to become public, seems to hang less heavily on normative comportment than it once did, on the careful balancing of personality and impersonality. The fear that this might be true, and that if so, it would render the public sphere far less controllable, is I think what noticeably disconcerts Rumsfeld in his testimony on the Abu Ghraib photographs.⁵⁷ It also explains why the government would decide to stop documenting the ceremonies for returning war dead. The risk must appear too great; the stakes of publicity now too high; controlling the public sphere seems no longer to consist in controlling the bodies and voices of the people who inhabit it, or of controlling the populations which are addressed by publics. “[E]ven if our leaders choose not to look at them, there will be thousands more snapshots and videos. Unstoppable.” Networked photographs themselves seem to have assumed some role or responsibility in the public sphere, to have become actors in it. Perhaps another balance has been upset: that between production and reproduction.

55 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 133

56 I am relying here on the approximately 80 interviews I've done with photobloggers over the past three years. I would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for their support of the final year of this research (Small Grant Award RES-000-22-0869).

57 Perhaps this is because neither disciplinary nor biopower, neither the control of bodies nor the control of populations, seems quite adequate to controlling some of the actions or effects of this form of publicness, which itself seems to have less to do either with bodies or populations than it ever has. Perhaps this is why Brian Massumi, in a recent talk delivered at the University of Chicago, entitled “Going Kinetic: Beyond Biopower,” proposes that the Bush administration is, indeed, operating within a new form of power, one which goes beyond biopower, towards something that Massumi calls “pre-accelerative” or “kinetic.”

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Perhaps ordinary photographs now produce more than they reproduce (life, reality, publics, persons, Events), and in so doing, escape the problems of knowledge and knowability that worried Sontag, and Kracauer before her, and so many others in between and after. Of course, it isn't true that photographs are acting alone—or, it isn't simply true. But many people, not least the U.S. Government, are acting *as if* it is. And this changes the stakes and mechanisms of public life.

In imagination and in reality, photography is today's voiceless speech: a dream of transcendence.

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