

## Can the photographic image constitute a common space between you and me? Jessica Potter

In order to think about this question I am writing about a photograph of a man walking away. I ask you to read a description of it and later to listen to a voice narrating the description you have read. In photographing a man walking away I am wondering about the position of the photograph between you and me and him. Is he taking the image with him? Does it remain in the moment of its making or is it taking shape between us? I am doing this in order to think about what it means to encounter a photographic image and what the significance of that encounter is. I will turn to Jean-Luc Nancy's writing on community, particularly his notion of the *clinamen* as an important influence on my thinking about the photograph. I hope this will provoke ideas around the role on the photographic image in encountering and describing relationships and the meaning of them.

Now look at the photograph and read the description of it.



(Man walking away)

A man is walking away. He has his back turned and is heading towards the entrance of the supermarket, Iceland. Another man is crossing in the foreground and a lady in a white sun hat is walking out of the frame towards the right. A woman is walking towards the man who is walking away. The man is centrally located, with a large bollard to the left and a traffic cone to the right. His ears protrude slightly from each side of his head and his hair is thick and dark. There is a lightness on the top and patches above the neck that suggest grey. The collar of a mid-grey shirt curves down and touches the sloping and equally proportioned downwards curve of his shoulders. This momentum continues through to the arms. The left arm hangs down by the side just separate from the top of the left thigh. The sleeve is rolled up to the elbow. The right arm is tucked under holding a black jacket, which is bulky and falls downwards. There is a crease under the right arm that starts at a convergent point between the upper arm and the torso. The crease folds outwards, fanning slightly with a lightening tone and gives way to a muffled surface of fabric that follows the shape of the arm. From the darkest point inside and underneath the armpit a crease of fabric falls above the folded and tucked coat. The shape of his back is defined by the shirt that sticks to it in places due to large patches of sweat, particularly down the centre. This distorts the fall of the fabric causing it to sway sideways in deep swathes towards the base of the back; creases fold away from damp patches billowing out slightly before being tucked into his jeans. The jeans are black, they absorb the light; only the stitching can be seen on the back trouser pocket. The left leg is slightly bent and the foot raised backwards with the leather shoe hovering in the air above a small misshapen shadow.

This image comes from an ongoing series of photographs of passersby that I have made over the past few years. They are influenced by Walker Evans, particularly by his series of photographs shot in 1946 for *Fortune Magazine*, entitled *Labour Anonymous*.<sup>1</sup> Evans said 'Fine Photography is literature', and in following the footsteps of Gustave Flaubert and Charles Baudelaire their descriptive tones echo in the economy and precision of his images.<sup>2</sup> As Evans aspired to literature, I too am drawn to the relation between the photograph and the written word.

In taking these photographs I am interested in the experience of passing – or being passed by – which calls to account an essential relation in space and time with others. I am asking what it means to encounter an image, and how an image can structure and determine that encounter. It seems to me that there is always another in relation to the photographic image, be that the subject, the viewer, or the photographer, and that the relationship between them is uncertain. We each potentially occupy other positions: the viewer almost occupies the position of the photographer, who almost becomes a subject; the subject becomes a potential viewer as the photographer views the subject. Therefore the possibility of adopting another position is invoked through looking at a photograph. I want to draw out these relationships and uncertainties through thinking about the image as a marker of phenomenological experience. In taking photographs I feel that the relationship between beings, things, and images become equivalences that draw from each other and are in a state of tension. I propose that the photograph can draw us out of our usual positions and ask whether in doing so it could constitute a common space.

In order to make these photographs I work with an analogue camera in series. I separate myself from my camera, either by holding it at waist height, or by identifying an object in space that will act as a shutter release. There is a relation between myself, an object, a camera, and a passerby and the coming together of these relations form a photograph. Once made, I project the photographs and look at them. This re-projection relates them back to their inception. It invokes the moment of their making. By viewing a projection I can spend time with the photograph, *looking*. I start to *describe*, writing down extensive descriptions of what I can see, drawing out details. I then make recordings of these descriptions and present them in place of the photograph. Through this I am attempting to exhaust the image, to see whether anything can be left of it.

The photograph I have asked you to look at was made outside the entrance to Iceland Supermarket on Brixton High Street. I return to this location because it is a space I pass through regularly. In a sense it is a space where I could pass by myself. I stand on the corner of the street, near a bus stop and the entrance to the tube, near the entrance to the supermarket Iceland, beyond which is a street market. I spend time working out what the photographs will be. I am concerned that I may become an obstruction, yet I also do not want to be a voyeur, I want to be visible. I find a position in the space, sometimes I step back and fix on a bollard or patch on the pavement and wait for people to pass in front. Sometimes I stand in the space waiting for people to pass me by, taking a photograph when it feels like they are just on the point of receding and no longer being subjects.

Now listen to the description you have just read.

*Man walking away*<sup>3</sup>

**'Community is at least the *clinamen* of the individual'.<sup>4</sup>**

In order to theorise my intuition of the photographic image as a common space, I turn to Jean-Luc Nancy's writing, in particular his notion of the *clinamen* as a defining characteristic of community. Although Nancy speaks about it as a philosopher I find his thinking helpful in trying to articulate my questions about the photographic image. His thinking also informs my method and approach to making photographs. I draw this towards my practice and through it, enact a response. In *The Inoperative Community* Nancy re-thinks the idea of community in the light of its loss. In various ways he reconstructs community in place of its absence; supposing that if a common ground between beings and things has disappeared that we need to think about that absence as something common, that our common sense of meaning is constructed through separation. I am interested in what the photographic image might contribute to this enquiry, if there is a common space of the image.

*Clinamen* is a Latin name given by Lucretius to the unpredictable swerve of atoms drawn from the atomic doctrine of Epicurus:

When the atoms are travelling straight down through empty space by their own weight, at quite indeterminate times and places they swerve ever so little from their course, just so much that you can call it a change of direction. If it were not for this swerve, everything would fall downwards like raindrops through the abyss of space. No collision would take place and no impact of atom on atom would be created. Thus nature would never have created anything.<sup>5</sup>

*Clinamen* as a term describes elemental production and has been used in various different contemporary contexts. Gilles Deleuze reflects on its nature in *Difference and Repetition*.<sup>6</sup> Francis Ponge builds on Lucretius's metaphor of raindrops and enacts its possibility through detailed observation: 'In the courtyard where I watch it fall / the rain is coming down in widely varied measure / A film's discontinuous screen (or tracery) at the centre / it's an unrelenting shower / relatively slow but rather sparse'.<sup>7</sup> Nancy uses the term to describe an essential being in common of things: 'Still, one cannot make a world with simple atoms. There has to be a *clinamen*. There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other'.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense Nancy uses the *clinamen* to suggest a movement; turning, reaching, inclining: a relation. This does not enable union; rather it exposes separation and I understand it to be this dynamic that Nancy claims as the basis of community. It is here that Nancy situates and characterises community. I feel that through the paradigm of the *clinamen* he depicts community. He aims to move beyond the metaphor of its interpretation towards an exposure of its movement. This brings into question a thinking of positions and relationships that can be related to the photographic process and leads me to ask if the photographic image could be conceived as a *clinamen*.

The analogue photograph exposes the edges of one singularity to another, through space, time, and light. It sets up a three-way dynamic between subject, viewer, and photographer. This effects an ocular reaching that is constantly frustrated by its awkwardness of relations. Elements incline towards each other. I incline towards my subject. The viewer inclines towards the photograph. Yet, through the experience of viewing one is constantly separated: from the photographic moment, from the subject as viewer, from the viewer as subject, the photographer as viewer, the photographer as subject... The still image presents an abundance of visual characteristics and connections that act as a barrier exposing the limits of visual comprehension. In doing so the photographic image presents excess and uncertainty. It presents limits.

In this uncertainty the *clinamen* is an important fissure; an element that connects these separate components of the image. Nancy claims it has never been thought. He writes that no one has ever done anything more than paste over the individual/subject relation: 'They never inclined it, outside itself, over that edge that opens up its being in common'.<sup>9</sup> I am not quite sure what this means or whether it is possible, but I am drawn to it, to the idea of inclining relations. The edge that Nancy is delineating is the space of community: inclination, a characteristic of the individual. I wonder whether the *clinamen* as inclination could be thought of in terms of a photograph. Is it possible to identify processes that enable this inclination and exposure to occur? Is it possible for the photographic image to articulate these relations? Can looking, writing, and marking the photographic image touch on elements of them? Can the photograph invoke exposure and separation, and through them, community?

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I do not propose to offer any conclusion. However, in bringing together these ideas I am attempting to bring together thinking about relations between beings and between beings and images. In doing so I am thinking about what it is to be with an image.

## NOTES

1. Walker Evans, from the series *Labour Anonymous*, studies of pedestrians in Detroit, Michigan, commissioned by *Fortune Magazine*, 1946.
2. James R. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, New York, Basic Books, 1999, p. 75.
3. See sound file. Narrator: John Greswell.
4. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*; ed. and tr. by Peter Connor, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 4.
5. Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, tr. by Ronald Melville, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 42.
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, London: Athlone Press, 1997.
7. Francis Ponge, *The Nature of Things*, tr. by Lee Fahnestock, New York: Red Dust Press, 2000.
8. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 3.
9. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 4.