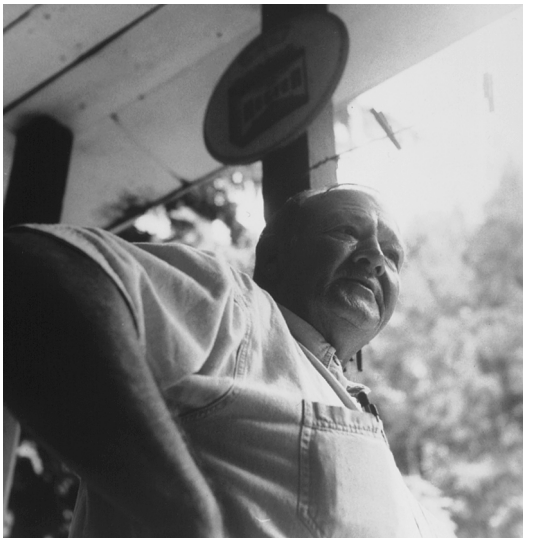
Scenes of Life/ Kentucky Mountains

Kathleen Stewart
Photographs by Anya E. Liftig



Uncle Glen in the Sunlight

The photograph documents the charged border between image and matter, the framed and the unframed, the seen and the noticed. The uncanny fullness of the photographic image points to the aesthetic acts of a photographic genre in social and political use and privileges discovered objects made vibrant in the moment they sink into the image and become impalpable. In its still life of framed matter, it enacts the generativity of cultural form and marks the moment of emergence in which the virtual becomes actual, the private becomes public, and the unmarked, discarded, or forgotten becomes newly and suddenly framed. As an act of cultural

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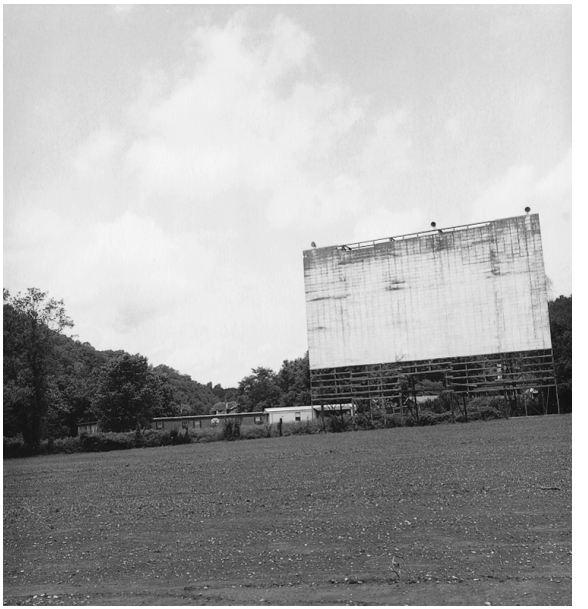
poesis—an aesthetic act that animates and literally makes sense of cultural forms and forces at the point of their affective, material, or imaginary emergence (Feldman 1994; Seremetakis 1994; Stewart 1996)—the photograph is not just a marker of a preexisting code or representation, but an active, transformative process that mimics the shifting practices of everyday life, the vitalities and exhaustions captured in a bodily gesture, the force fields and modes of agency resonating in a scene.

In this particular moment in the commodified hyperstimulation of the senses (Beller 1994), the cult of distraction (Gunning 1999), and the hypervigilant surveillance of spectacles (Dorst 1999), the power of cultural poesis is animated by the tactility of the common image (Taussig 1991). The still life fulfills a desire for respite from the fast-moving sensory stimuli in circulation (Stewart 2000a) and enacts a moment in which disparate elements come together in the density of a scene. The scene captured in a frame can grow luminous; its pictured objects can reach out and grab you; its very stillness can signify the capacity for elemental historical creation (Berger 1984; Seremetakis 1994; Stewart 2000a). The image becomes a fetish when it promises to house the enervated senses in a scene resonant with unplumbed meaning. Its charged particularity records the trajectory of an idée fixe in search of its material trace. Yet because it holds the gaze in desire's search for its object, the image presents the viewer with an ambivalent mix of pleasure and anxiety; it simultaneously attracts and repels precisely because its material insistence can be neither incorporated in a generality nor expelled (Shaviro 1993).

In looking at the photographs before us here, I suggest that the task of the critic is not simply to resist or admonish the fetish quality of modern culture but to acknowledge the very sensibilities of the fetish itself and attempt to channel them (Benjamin 1978). The critic's words can be deployed as captions that mimic, underscore, and complete the interpretive moves and generative forces emergent in the object of investigation (Buck-Morss 1991). By pushing the now standard critique of representation past the hermeneutics of suspicion in which a critic gazes across a critical divide to plumb its object for secrets decoded, we can craft a form of investigation that develops like the photograph itself, deepening the definition and contrast of an imprint to reveal its simultaneous eye-stopping force and transitoriness. The critic's effort to map the fetishized images that animate plays of power and resistance begins with a seduction in which the image displays its dual power to manipulate and subvert (Shaviro 1993).

The photographs presented here literally draw us into the fetish quality of contemporary scenes of life and incite labors of looking. As figures of Appalachia

surge into view in the tactile, weathered forms of bodies, porches, trucks, trees, and signs in varied states of use and seeming disuse, we are left not simply with the question of whether an order of representations is to be loved or hated but with the more profound question of cultural poesis, or generativity, itself. The photographs' fetish quality is not only represented (and subverted) by the content of the chosen images but also actively performed. The appearance and disappearance of objects within a frame is itself marked in the techniques of the crisp, sharply focused foreground displayed against the blurred, dreamy distance of solid things grown spectral. We see people sitting on porches and leaning against trucks and cars and posts. Their faces are sharply developed and distinctive; the individuation rebuffs stereotypes of the hillbilly. But beyond this, the faces themselves are cut by shadows and surrounded by plays of light. The young girl looks directly at the camera and smiles, but in the very near distance things are out of focus—the chair sitting empty next to her, the window reflecting blurred images of what is both inside the house and outside in the woods. The woman sitting on the porch leans forward and stares out intently, perhaps caught in the middle of a conversation or taking note of something behind us, beyond the view of the camera, while we are drawn to shift our gaze between the stripes of her shirt and the blurred objects on the floor by her feet or between the lines of her face and the surreal scene that starts just behind her partly turned back.



Old Route 22

In the play of the sharply visible and the blurry impression, the focused center and the incompletely captured surroundings, we witness both the force of photography and the active poesis of the people and objects it reproduces. The man on the porch is caught in the middle of an everyday act of expression, and his shirt pocket is stuffed with things in immediate use. But over his head a sign mounted on the porch post and blurred by the camera suggests the ephemeral yet lasting resonance of representations actively plucked out of commercial circulation to constitute a local scene of life. The scene of the weathered screen on the side of the road recalls past images through the abiding trace of the ruin. The empty screen suggests that bygone practices of representation and viewing still

The Greeting

affect the present, not despite their material absence but because of it (Benjamin 1977; Stewart 1996). In front of the ruin is a space starkly cleared while the inhabited houses and trailers emergent directly behind the screen mark the border of a landscape dense with hills, trees, and a present filled with a past.

In the photograph of the women talking, the arm of the woman with her back to the camera is blurred by the action of gesture itself, suggesting both a slice of life set in motion through the precise, everyday forms of local expression and the camera's own powers of suggestion through and despite its harsh gaze. The sun coming through the trees hits our eyes and interferes with our vision; it produces a glare that obscures. But at the same time, the mark of something unclear over the woman's left shoulder (the hair of another woman?) suggests that there is something more to a scene than what meets the eye; the excess promises a revelation for a distracted but fascinated spectator in search of cues and clues. Our view obscured by the sun, we try to look closer at the same moment that we want to turn away. The woman facing us wears an attentive expression, as if she is trying to act natural in a scene that asks her to show that she is present to a local form of sociality and simultaneously to pose for the camera seeking to capture that moment. Her T-shirt, only partly legible, appears to be from Las Vegas—again suggesting the active use of signs imported from an elsewhere—but her hairstyle is distinctly local, rural, and working class, prompting a question about the poesis of local styles in relation to the national and transnational culture industries.

Two men perch on a truck, another sits in a chair in the background. They are caught in a slow moment of sociality dense with body postures, work clothes, caps, cigarettes, and gazes shifted away from faces and toward the surrounding hills, a scene as familiar to them as it is strange/unknown to us. We gaze, trying to interpret their gaze—they have been caught by the camera, we by the photo. The sun strikes the side of one man's face. His eyes are closed or squinting, his face partly shadowed by the rim of his cap, but he stays put, dwelling in the

moment of men just sitting together, smoking cigarettes, gazing into the near distance. Their bodies are not just at rest but actively rooted to their places. To the viewer it may seem strange that one of the men sits apart from the other two in a chair in the middle of the road. But his body—hunkered down, leaning forward, cigarette in hand—suggests his active participation in the scene. The photograph asks us to recognize the local public culture that produces (gendered, racialized, and classed) styles, gestures, and forms of sociality. The chair placed in the road for immediate use articulates with the photograph of the empty chairs on the porch—chairs that instantiate and remember a local cultural space in which ruminative moments take place within the transient flow of everyday life.

The photograph of the empty rockers on the porch signals the solid ephemerality of an inhabited local space reeling from a heady mix of ghostly memories, marginality, loss, desire, and the ongoing or potential vibrancy of the ordinary. The chairs—located in a blurred foreground against the sharply focused view of the new car in the driveway and the surrounding trees—hold open a space of promise and memory. The collection of wind chimes in varying degrees of focus marks the synesthetic border of the real and the imaginary. Other shots of the same porch demonstrate the shifts in perspective of differing moments and faces. When the porch is blurred against the crisp face of the woman leaning forward

above *Dana and the Boys*
below *The Porch, 1998*

from her chair, the wind chimes and surrounding scene take on a surreal quality. The young woman sitting in the chair poses for the camera. Her chair is solid, but the chair next to her resonates with an absent presence and takes on her right shoulder as one of its vertical edges. Taken together, these views of the porch diffuse the binary code of inside and outside, reality and fantasy, present and past in a play of difference and resonating registers.

Mamaw

These photographs, like the built scene of porch, chairs, and chimes they picture, slow time for the engaged viewer. A passing moment in lived time is captured, a structure of feeling is given temporary form. Note the woman leaning a strong arm on a car so close it is both grainy and blurred, solid and only partly pictured. Her face is momentarily mirrored in the car's back window just as the photograph captures a scene of laundry hung out to dry on the porch and the yard art of birdbath and plastic flowers tucked into the corner of the frame. The trees fill the frame, traversing layered registers from the close and present to the misty expanse of what lies beyond. The photograph suggests a place actively, artfully, laboriously inhabited, yet marked as well by the transience of habitation.

Cookie at 17

These are photographs of an othered place—a place exploited by capitalist extractive industries, then deserted, then reinvented by an official public culture fascinated by signs of difference and the submerged sensibilities of populations

Cousin Addie and the Car

and life worlds excluded from the newly coined mainstream. Questions of the circulations and impacts of public culture have become pressing in the face of the dreamy exuberance, innovation, and risk taking of millennial capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), as well as neoliberalism's simultaneous depoliticization or naturalization of new modes of domination in a culture of laissez-faire detachment and its punitive policing of those outside the dream (O'Malley 1993). Millennial capitalism and neoliberalism articulate a new, directly acquisitive visual mode of consumption in which cultural capital is inseparable from the power to consume goods, and private accumulation is inseparable from the desire to mark

differences and to display identity (Dorst 1999). Everyday practices of reading images are newly charged with epistemophilia (the desire to know), scopophilia (the desire to see), and what Svetlana Boym (1994) calls graphomania—the incessant practice of recording the details of everyday life in order to gain access to it. Seduced by seeing forms and sensibilities emerge into public view, the cultural spectator brings the spectacular together with the grain of the real. Dreams and losses are lifted into circulation in concrete forms, promising the literal residue of dreaming practices that others might chance upon and recognize, rediscover, or attack. When we as cultural participants or cultural critics become fascinated with the eruption of hidden or private things into public view, we are tracking the cultural generativity of emergent forces and picturing scenes of their impacts on social spaces, publics, dreamworlds, and identities. They are emergent forces not only because they are embryonic and incompletely articulated, but also because they *cannot* be articulated within the resurgent American dream of the twenty-first century. Structures of feeling evoke "just those experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which . . . they do not recognize" (Williams 1977: 130).

The American dream of the twenty-first century is a fitful dreaming, continuously interrupted by odd moments of stillness when ears prick up and eyes scan the cultural horizon and by the rupture of its own mythic space. Yet its claims grow all the more luminous for the nightmares of inequality and abjection that haunt it. Ideals, hidden pathologies, and cultural differences are writ large on public stages as spectacles and scenes of impact to be plumbed for signs of life. The political finds itself twisted in the machinations of everyday experience and daydream while we watch for signs of a chafing—an unassimilated moment that brings something forgotten or unimagined almost to mind. Bits of information, powerful images that strike the senses, and news of the weird become objects of fascination for people seeking discernable signs that strange and inexplicable things are buried beneath the surface of business as usual, waiting to erupt. In these moments, as knowledges and practices now charged with the force of things private, or even secret and occult, build to points of counterpublic intensity, their emergence draws attention to the possibilities of public culture—the medium in which lines of power organize and propagate themselves through the circulation of ways of seeing, forms of publicity, and nascent orientations toward public life itself. As the claim to a normative order of ideals writ large on the world hunkers down like a claustrophobic glass ceiling on submerged pains and possibilities, a spectral, interstitial residue haunts it. Proliferating publics and counterpublics garner an emergent vitality not only from the charged identities of

gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion but also from the myriad and diffuse practices, interests, pleasures, traumas, and resentments that instantiate lifestyles, wild leaps of faith, and bitter disappointments (Berlant 1997; Calhoun 1992; Hansen 1993; Robbins 1993; Stewart 2000b; Warner 1993).

These photographs, following in the aesthetic tradition of the documentation of ordinary things established by Walker Evans, attempt to portray the sweet and cruel radiance of objects and bodies that secretly broadcast their histories of being built, lived in, discarded, and submerged. Concerned with not only the magical concreteness of the image but also the conditions of its legibility, they make visible the gap between sign and reference in order to hint at experiences that just might shine through the documented surface if you peer closely enough (Lane 2000). They move beyond the scandal of the cultural stereotype and the liberal humanist ideal of the transparent fusion of content and form to sing a wordless national anthem (Goldberg 2000) in the key of a vernacular intimate publicity (Berlant 2000). They draw us in and leave us reeling.

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