

WAVE MUSIC

Hegel in the Hamptons

Clifford Ross's Meditation on Photography and the World

by Arthur C. Danto

It is testimony to the power of cold that one can drive out from Reykjavik on a February day and see the mighty waterfall, Gofuss, frozen solid, its fluid majesty trumped by temperature. It is testimony to the power of photography that one can contemplate one of Clifford Ross's "Hurricane" images and see a thundering wave stopped cold, spray and spume arrested in mid-flight, its fluid power trumped without so much as a molecule deflected from its path. The project Ross designates "Wave Music" is, in his view, "a meditation on the medium of photography as much as a photographic reflection of our world." It is commonplace to think of photographs as pictorial records of the visible world, but what Ross shows us in the "Hurricane" photographs is visible only in the photographs: waves don't stand still long enough for the eye to register and transmit to the brain's visual region an image at all like what his photographs fix on paper—a transient stage in the wave's irresistible shoreward surge, its power overcome by speeds the eye is incapable of, stilled into a sculptural beauty the hand is powerless to copy. The best the draftsman or painter is capable of is some schematic equivalent to the ferocity of the sea under high wind—dabs of white paint to simulate its fury, or undular scribbles to give an "impression" of the wildness of storm-toss'd water. But any one of Ross's pictures implies the presence of the camera, for there is no other instrument that can capture the visual truth of stilled power. In a famous episode in the history of the medium, Muybridge found a way of answering certain questions about the disposition of a horse's legs in full canter, relative to the ground. But the wave has "limbs" too various and innumerable to enable a comparable question to be so much as raised.

In water up to his waist, Ross writes, "I managed to take 250 photographs of the unending metamorphosis in front of me ... It was a spectacular display, and I was an ecstatic but soggy photographic witness." But there is a difference between the witnessing of the photographer and the witnessing of the camera. The camera witnesses only under one modality of sense: it is deaf to the booms and whistles of water and wind, and certainly knows nothing of ecstasy or sublimity. The world it witnesses is twice over inaccessible to the human eye except through the images the speed and acuity of photochemistry make available. In their own way, what the camera witnessed in Ross's photographs are like the otherwise inaccessible planetary visions transmitted lately from outer space. The world of the camera is, of course, our world—but it is a world we would have no way of knowing was ours were it not for the mediation of photographic intervention. "Nature's Pencil," which Fox Talbot invented as a prosthetic to remedy his own graphic ineptitude, does not in the end merely give us for our albums souvenirs of things seen. It brings us postcards of the invisible beauties beneath and behind the visual world. It stops the movement of the sea, for example, long enough to record the traces of a beauty that would take the breath away if we could actually have seen it.

Ross speaks, in reference to the "Hurricane" images, of "Photography's astonishing capacity to present reality and enable us to relive past experience." That is really the voice of Fox Talbot, looking at a photograph taken off the coast of France, where his incapacity to

draw the scene prompted his great invention. But the reality Hurricane I, for example, presents was not something the artist experienced. His eyes, however sharp, would never have taken in and retained what the picture shows us. It is like a still, cut from a moving picture, which, projected, would show a wave rushing toward the viewer, throwing drops of foam into the air, but would never, could never, have been seen nor remembered as we see it here. It may bring back the experience that would have required the technology of cinematography to be represented and relived, but it cannot be more than an aide-mémoire for Ross's experience of that sublime day, confronting the seething surge with his wetsuit and his camera. The picture is really almost abstract, even if the act of photographing it and the other "Hurricane" pictures was what he describes as "the least abstract experience of my life," showing us something the eye cannot have espied nor the memory retained. It has the glory and beauty of art, but an art that only nature's pencil could have drawn with a thousand hands, moving all at once with nearly the speed of light, and that the human imagination is too impoverished to have invented. What moves me is the stark Caravaggesque black of the sky that makes incredibly intense the stark white of the wave's incredibly delicate, incredibly varied crest. It seems sculpted out of some material we are entirely unfamiliar with, which Ross felicitously characterizes as "liquid granite."

To borrow and immediately distort a word that Alexander Calder invented to designate his moving sculptures, the "Hurricane" photographs are *Immobiles*. They exploit photography's capacity to immobilize what we know is unarrestibly mobile in reality. That is what gives them their baroque drama. The waves have that immobilized mobility of the whipped and fluttering garments Bernini carved for his angels, that testify to some supernatural force that serves him as a metaphor for the holy spirit that "bloweth where it listeth." By contrast with the *Immobiles*, the small photographs Ross calls "*Horizons*" are static enough to be *Stabiles*. They are pictures of horizons—"what seemed to be their true subject"—than which nothing can be more static, as long as one stands still; and really abstract, consisting of a line drawn "horizontally" across the field of vision, dividing it in two. They possess almost the null degree of visual excitement, by contrast with the "Hurricane" images, than which anything more visually exciting can hardly be imagined. Their purpose in "*Wave Music*" is to serve as a meditation on the power of artistic invention. They serve as the fulcrum on which the project is moved from the invisible reality of "Hurricane" to the visible abstraction of the "*Grain*" monotone rectangles in black, white, and gray, which conclude and complete the project.

What struck Ross was the "serenity" of these small images, which resisted the enlargement they were intended for, insisting on remaining the size they are. And beyond that, serendipitously, he began to ponder "the pure gray tone representing the blue sky." He found the gray tone "very abstract." I think I can see what he discovered. It was something that was made available to him by the history of modern painting after 1915, when the idea of monochrome was all at once viable to the avant avant-garde. One can see the typical "Horizon" image not as sea and sky, but as a composite, in which a gray square sits on what would have been the horizon if it were sky, beneath which is a rectangle filled entirely with a picture of the surface of the sea. It could be made to seem as if it has the aesthetic of a collage. It must have been with the force of revelation that Ross realized that the photograph of the sky—an image, after all—could be seen as a gray abstraction—not a picture of nothing, but simply not a picture, marked by the entire absence of image. It is like

a famous passage in Hegel's Logic, in which Pure Being and Pure Nothing turn out to be identical:

"This mere Being, as it is mere abstraction, is therefore the absolute negative: which, in a similarly immediate aspect, is just Nothing."

It is somewhat irresistible to play Hegel's logic against Ross's three photographic absolutes—black, white, and gray. Ross writes: "One of the most surprising and important things that I discovered about black-and-white photography was that in spite of its original purpose of depicting the world around us, it has a natural tendency toward abstraction ... I had realized extreme amounts of light resulted in an abstract black object. If I did nothing to the paper except develop it, I could make an abstract white object." Juxtapose the pure gray that derives from the sky in certain of the "Horizon" pictures with the triad of Being, Nothing, and Becoming:

Nothing, if it be thus immediate and equal to itself, is also conversely the same as Being is. The truth of Being and Nothing is accordingly the unity of the two: and this unity is Becoming.

Forgive me if I indulge myself with one more citation from Logic:

In Becoming, the Being which is one with Nothing, and the Nothing which is one with Being, are only vanishing factors; they are and they are not. Thus by its inherent contradiction Becoming collapses into the unity in which the two elements are absorbed. The result is Being Determinate.

The Determinate Being of the sky is a metaphysical composition of Being and Nothing—as Gray approaches Black when and as we add light during the printing process, or approaches White as we subtract it. Gray is Becoming—on its way from or to White or Black. Ross noticed in his ecstatic session during Hurricane Bonnie that "The sky went from white to black, and finally to a strange blue"—which of course registers as gray in black and white photography. Nature was executing a passage of Hegelian thought before the photographer's eyes!

There is, however, another transition, internal to the practice of photography, that has to be registered here. Consider once again the gray monotone, which is midway between an image (of the sky) and an object (a piece of photographic paper exposed to light and developed—so not white and not black). It hovers between two states—the image state and the object state. In the latter, certain properties of the paper become salient, in particular the paper's grain. The white abstraction is developed paper to which nothing photographic, in the sense of registering an image, has been done. It is nothing but a granular surface. The black abstraction is so full of the being of light that, as with a blinding flash, the possibility of an image has vanished. Again the grain is salient. In the gray abstraction, grain comes and goes depending on whether we see it as an image (of the sky) or an object (paper). It perfectly exemplifies Becoming.

There is of course a difficulty in reproducing these abstractions. There is a difference between the grain of the original print and the grain as it appears in this book. A photographic reproduction of bronze is not made of bronze. But a tritone photographic reproduction of a "Grain" print has its own grain as well as the grain it reproduces. That

gives the pages of this book dedicated to the “Grain” prints a philosophical dimension missing from the “Hurricane” reproductions, and ambiguously present in the “Horizon” prints. The book thus becomes a meditation on itself.

All art aspires to the condition of philosophy.