

The Names

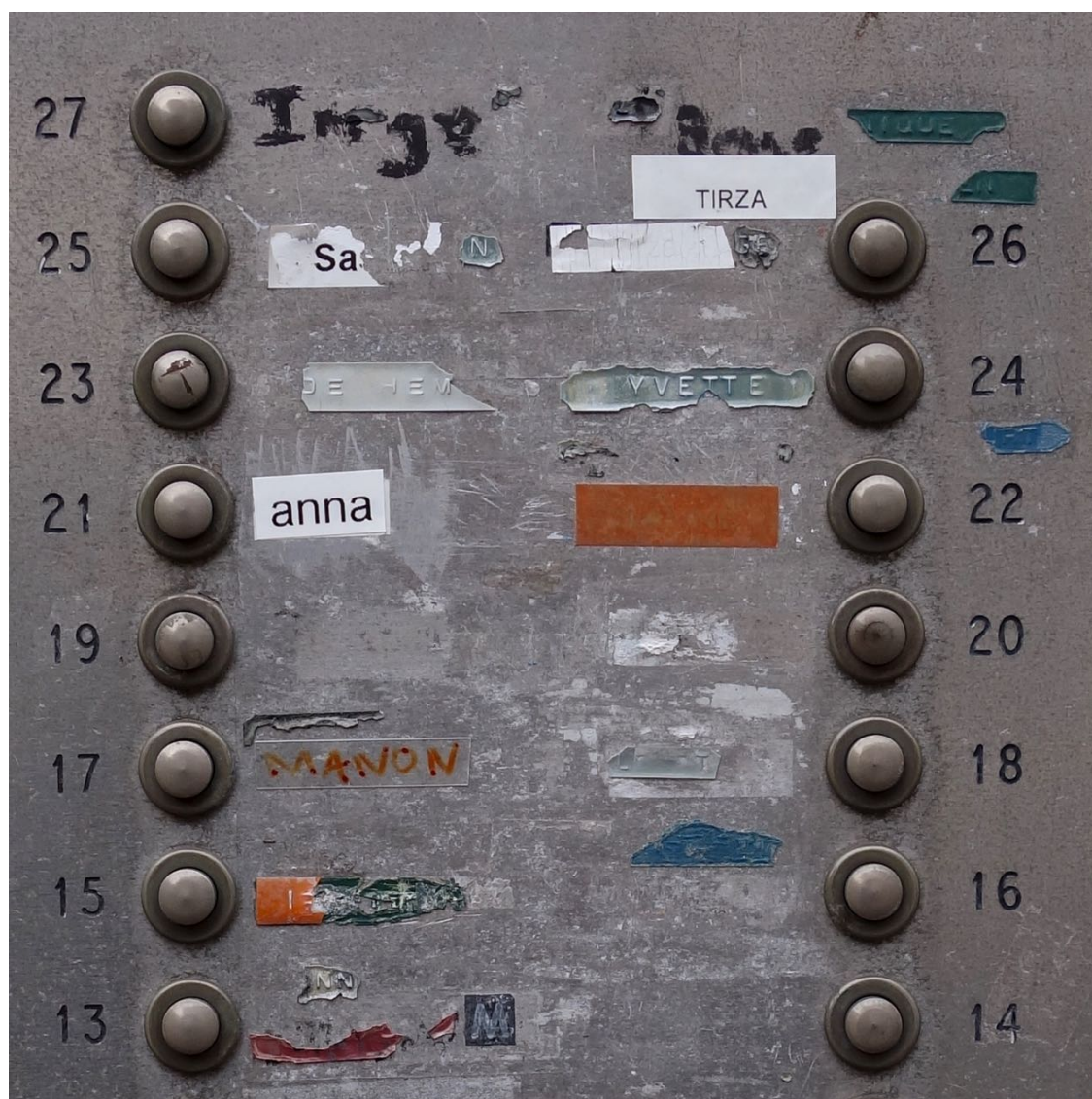


James Clifford

Leiden 2017

**Rejoice that heaven above us has such a bad memory
And cannot place
Either your name or your face.**

Bertolt Brecht, "Grand Hymn of Thanksgiving"























With time

taxonomies

turn to

palimpsests.

The names

come

and go.

Iris, Jasper, Linde

Blitterswijk,

Tuen.

Esther,

Koesveld,

Manon.

Here

comes

everybody.

Goodbye.

Method

I only wanted Uncle Vernon standing by his own car (a Hudson) on a clear day, I got him and the car. I also got a bit of Aunt Mary's laundry and Beau Jack, the dog, peeing on the fence, and a row of potted tuberous begonias on the porch and 78 trees and a million pebbles in the driveway and more. It's a generous medium, photography.

- Lee Friedlander

So why all those doorbells in the side-streets of Leiden? What was calling out for my attention? "Hey, take our picture." Now, having worked with the images, I've arrived at an answer. Something like a "method," satisfying to me at least.

Method/*methodos*: the way, the journey.

Marcel Granet: *La méthode, c'est le chemin, apres q'on l'a parcouru*. The path, *after* you've taken it.

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Ever since around 2000, when inexpensive digital cameras came into their own, I've been a point-and-shoot devotee. I like the quickness, the flexibility, and the physicality of the process. It's a mode of engagement with a world of beings (human and non-human), a kind of perceptual prosthesis. The camera offers a way of looking and feeling that translates presence into form, attraction into allegory.

Here's an image and a short text that tell the origin of my thinking about point-and-shoot research. (It is quoted from the introduction to a photo-essay, "Balancing Acts," that can be found at: <https://people.ucsc.edu/~jcliff/index.html>)



This picture was taken by my friend Don Rothman, in Central Park. He sent it to me, thinking I'd like it, and I did. New Yorkers in California, we recognized the style of the lamppost, the yellow call box (still working?), the winter light...

We wondered about the image. Does it tell a story? Of survival perhaps? Something must have pushed the lamppost off-center, perhaps violently. Or is its predicament just the result of gravity and time--life itself? Of course, it's not hard to identify with the figure—tipsy, Chaplinesque, intrepid. But there's also something other than human going on. The lamppost is leaning along with all the other living bodies in the picture. There's nothing level or vertical anywhere, nothing but balancing acts.

Don told me that he was just walking by and felt something there, almost as if (call and response) he was hearing it. He stopped and shot the picture without composing anything. And he found a gently comic, modestly heroic figure; a non-human soul mate, perhaps; and something interesting about time and all our different bodies in space. He turned, and took it all in.

Timing and receptivity seem more pertinent, here, than (aggressively) pointing and shooting. I've never liked that phrase. Alternatives: Sense-and-select? Stop-and-gather? Look-and-lasso?

*

The process reminds me of my first book: *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World*. A long-time evangelist and ethnographer in New Caledonia, Leenhardt developed a phenomenology of “lived myth” (*mythe vécu*) in the densely-meaningful landscapes he came to know. Myth was encountered, not as a story, but as “*une parole qui circonscrit un événement*.” *Parole*: the French approximates a vernacular word evoking expressive gestures—acts, speeches, songs, gifts, works of art. *Circonscrit* suggests the activity of grasping a relational ensemble or gestalt-- aesthetic apprehension prior to discursive representation. *Événement* denotes a happening, a presence that calls for attention, for embodied participation.

In New Caledonia, *mythe vécu* takes the form of affective relations with familiar mountains, rocks, streams, plants, animals, sounds, atmospheres. Of course, it’s a stretch to compare this localized being-in-the-world to modern experiences with a digital camera. Leenhardt insisted, however, that lived myth is not an archaic or non-Western practice destined to give way to new technologies and rationalities. It can be adapted to changing environments, urban landscapes. So, while something is lost in translation, I persist in thinking of my digital camera research as “expressive gestures that circumscribe events.”

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Compose (no ideas
but in things) invent

These are lines from William Carlos Williams’s poem, “A Sort of a Song.” “No ideas but in things” was the poet’s slogan--an exhortation to stay close to the material world, thinking and feeling *with* objects and creatures: stones, wheelbarrows, birds, flowers, cars, weeds, scraps of speech...

The multi-sensory immanence of this writing (brilliantly evoked by J. Hillis Miller in *Poets of Reality*) recalls the mythic/aesthetic practices I’ve translated from Melanesia. For present purposes, it’s enough to say that Williams’s poetry offers a kind of realism that isn’t based on sights, views, or pictures. Vision is simply one of the senses active in an engagement with “things:” relations, rhythms, material ensembles.

Compose, and *invent*. Camera-work, for me, isn’t primarily about recording scenes or capturing a decisive moment. It’s more like divination, exploratory manipulations of focus, framing, juxtaposition, and cropping. Lucien Hervé, the great Hungarian/French photographer, was asked how he discovered his art. “With scissors.”

What once took place in the occult space of the darkroom, is now blatant on our computers—not taking but *making* pictures. Work on the digital screen is where I

come to understand, retroactively, the event, the relations, circumscribed by my camera's quick glance. Why did I stop and turn? What was seen, felt, heard, touched? In the editing, I invent meanings: resonances, intertexts, contrasts, allegories that can sometimes be stabilized as a PDF, a form that travels well in the digital environment.

Don Rothman's intuitively-composed lamp-post ended up with other "balancing acts:" images of a struggle with gravity, how we hang together with objects and with each other.

*

Is my method "ethnographic?" No, because there's no attempt to describe or represent socio-cultural facts. Yes, because it begins from everyday reality, presenting the near-at-hand, without reducing phenomena to data or events to types.

The transience so clearly on display could be explained as a social fact: the pattern of student life in a university town. But what else is going on? What's the larger sense of these unstable signifiers--stuck on and falling off, wearing down, written over, effaced?

The doorbells in Leiden are framed by their boxes. But close up, the frame disappears into many little histories made visible by each scratch, smudge, and scrap of paint or tape. Temporality subverts spatial containment, revealing what Gilles Deleuze calls "multiplicity." Each doorbell tells a story, in its own way. The weathered glue left by torn-off tape makes tiny impressionist paintings. Layered compositions overwhelm spaces reserved for names. We discover the faint trace of a past script. Many blanks. Lost and found people.

Allegoresis, a process of adding, subtracting, and re-arranging meanings, amplifies the call of Leiden's doorbells. The names bear witness to a kind of entropic vitality: perpetual coming-and-going, living-in-dying and dying-in-living. . .

James Clifford, Emeritus Professor at UC Santa Cruz, is best known for his historical and literary critiques of ethnography, travel writing and museum practices. He co-edited (with George Marcus) *Writing Culture, the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) and is the author of *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century* (1997) and *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the 21st Century* (2013). Crossing the borders of genre, Clifford's books combine analytic scholarship, meditative essays, and poetic experimentation.