

**EILEEN NEFF**

Untitled Notes (towards a Supreme Fiction)

March 5–April 10, 2004

Essay by Thyrza Nichols Goodeve

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ABSTRACT

# To See is Neither in Nor of the Eye

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve

## Part 1

### The Poverty of the Visible (It Must Be Abstract)

Seeing has long been a metaphor for knowing. We see an image and say we understand. But how can vision lead to understanding? And why do we give the eye such mastery over our consciousness? Photography may be about the poetry of light but who is to say what it is we see within the light? Arthur Zajonc begins his book *Catching the Light* with a story from 1910 of an eight-year-old boy who was born blind with cataracts. After a successful surgery, the doctors asked the boy what he saw. "I do not know," he responded. Although he could see light, he had not learned yet how to see. A healthy eye was not enough. Furthermore, Oliver Sacks in "To See or Not to See" ([The New Yorker](#), May 10, 1993) tells of a middle age man who became disoriented and depressed after a similar operation. Rather than experience wonder and liberation he felt frustrated by his inability to understand the optical information before him. He still had to rely on touch in order to recognize his cat because the visual field made no sense to

him. Just as it takes more than the chemical combination of light and film to make a photograph, so does it take more than light and eye for us to see.

We see when we understand. But how empty this platitude has become in an age of image saturation, which begs the question: what do we really see? Though cable gives us 400 channels and global communication instantaneously brings contact with the world, in many ways we have never been less able to see what's around us. It is this poverty of the all too visible that Eileen Neff represents as a meditative wonderland of sight. She uses aesthetics as vision. Insight returns. Sight is made of mind and eye, not eye alone. She does not use photography to see but to breathe.

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## Part 2

### Synesthesia (It Must Change)

Charles Baudelaire, the great critic and poet of modernity, wrote one of his most enthusiastic essays on the painter Eugene Delacroix. What he loved about Delacroix's painting was that "with no other means but color and contour" he had interpreted better than anyone else, "the invisible, the impalpable, the dream, the nerves, the soul" of his age. But this is not surprising. In perhaps his most famous essay, "The Painter of Modern Life," (written about the illustrator Constantin Guy), Baudelaire invented the concept of the modern seer, the one who locates the transient but eternal quality or element that, like fashion, tells the story, soul or spirit of a time. Of particular interest to Baudelaire was that Delacroix's genius was not only the "perfection of a consummate painter," but also "the exactitude of a subtle writer." In fact, Baudelaire felt that Delacroix was better understood by the writers of his age than by the painters. "I would ask you Sir, to observe that amongst the crowd that assembled to pay him his last honors, you could count many more men of letters than painters. To tell the truth, these latter have never perfectly understood him." In other words, he painted the world through the poet's mind rather than the painter's eye. It was not the differences but the similarities which Baudelaire admired.

The poet Wallace Stevens, writing some sixty years after Baudelaire, agreed. Although the techniques may differ, the problems of the painter and the poet are the same. For this reason Stevens felt as close to painters as he did to poets. Such is the boundary Eileen Neff celebrates and inhabits, the line of aesthetic modernism where the poetic and the painterly, the literary and photographic are sister arts whose

genius need not be separated out between bookstores and art galleries. Her photographs tingle with the edges of poetry both metaphorically and literally: *Stevens, Millay, Beckett, Dickinson, Thoreau*. These discrete images are not so much illustrations of poetic imagery as synesthetic portraits wrought from the visible and physical world, reproducing and reminding us of the sensibility such writers bring forth from the world. In some ways they are acts of literary memory, no doubt accidental, unconscious choices, but resonant as a ghost story, when in the case of *Millay*, looking at the empty desk and soft illumination of the desk lamp through the rain-spattered window (the subtle effect of digital layering) one remembers "Renascence" (1917). In this poem the narrator lies deep in the earth; in fact she is buried six-feet-under. And from this perspective she speaks.

The rain, I said, is kind to come  
 And speak to me in my new home.  
 I would I were alive again  
 To kiss the fingers of the rain,  
 To drink into my eyes the shine  
 Of every slanting silver line,  
 To catch the freshened, fragrant breeze  
 From drenched and dripping apple-trees.

As poets use words to create images, Neff uses images to capture the poetic moment, a moment where sight enters into the real and works with it, as opposed to on it. Where from a place of "six-feet-under" we might contemplate what the rain feels like as it falls on our...perception.

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## Part 3

### The Seer of the Supreme Fiction (It Must Give Pleasure)

Neff utilizes the aesthetic to enhance the phenomenal world: a bubble of clouds hovers over a white worktable that is jammed into an anonymous corner where two white walls meet. Blank space filled with white and air, here creativity is palpable (*Stevens*). It seeps through matter creating a translucent image of nature (*Thoreau*). Again on a table. Again in a white bare corner of a room. Her photographs do not reflect a world back at the viewer but rather offer visions in the true romantic sense of aesthetic acts where the fine mist of imagination mixes with the light and mass of everyday matter. These are the supreme fictions that tower over Neff's remaking of photographic vision. Hers is a conversation with the poet as much as with the landscape. It is a world where, as Neff once commented, "the artist is the one who pays attention."

For Neff as for Baudelaire and Stevens, art is about encountering the rumblings and revelations of the real as we meet it. It is never a mimesis but rather, as Stevens wrote,

It must be visible or invisible,  
Invisible or visible or both:  
A seeing and unseeing in the eye.

For Neff a photograph is not an index, an imitation, nor even a resemblance. It is an encounter, a moment of transformation (*It Must Change*). She takes pictures of insight, not sight, of interiority as it whispers across a blank white table set against a corner: a foam of clouds appearing to rise from the blank surface or against a window dotted with

rain. Her artistic lineage draws as much from early spirit photography or the parapsychological "thoughtographs" of Ted Serios, as from Gertrude Kasebier or Imogen Cunningham. Ted Serios was said to make photographic images appear on Polaroid film by merely staring fixedly into the camera lens—a kind of psychic pictorialism.<sup>1</sup> The result: actual blurry, dreamy images of Serios' thoughts. Neff is not so literal, nor out to make a parapsychological point, but rather to offer a pictorialism of the mind, which becomes another way to describe her photographs. One is not looking at a picture but an experience, an act of imagination. Neff's photographs picture zones of the real where the world ripples in deep space or curls and exposes an unknown layer of sight, unseen, another world, like a fairy story. (*Deer, The Black-Capped Chickadee*). In other words, perception is never of a space, a simple forest scene, but of multiple points of view, hidden until captured.

Ironically, the photographs in *Untitled Notes (towards a Supreme Fiction)* are, by chance rather than plan, very much of a place and a time and yet have little to do with representing that place and time. The photographs of the landscapes and studios were taken while Neff was a resident at MacDowell in Peterborough, New Hampshire in 2002. She drove there from Philadelphia, traveling with her cameras, computer and books. On the way, she made an overnight stop in Hartford, Connecticut, wanting to see where Wallace Stevens, a favorite poet of hers, who spent his days as a vice-president of an insurance company, (and who was considered by many to be the finest, most luminous poet of

20th century America) inhabited the world. In this sense, not only was his poetry with her, but so, too, was a picture of his world. It wasn't until the work generated by this residency came together nearly two years later that Neff turned to Stevens to borrow one of his poems' title, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," for this exhibition. Even its subtitles have made their way into this work.<sup>2</sup> It's only in hindsight that the Stevens' visit seems telling. The idea of the artist and the artist's mind became, for Neff, part of the meaning of this new work.

It is clear she was not looking for Stevens with her eyes, nor was it with her eyes alone that she took the photographs at MacDowell. Neff is a photographer who knows that true sight comes not from the mere reflection of light off of objects but from how light, as the palette of the imagination — the chemical transfer of internal insight—comes into contact with the world and produces an image of the mind at work. These are her "supreme fictions" achieved with the

very instrument—the camera—whose ease with capturing the exterior world (particularly for those who travel) has made it the most aesthetically challenged, and yet challenging, of the arts.

Neff's images, combining photography and, occasionally, some digital manipulation, literally picture interiority, the kind of interiority Stevens shared with painters, and that which Baudelaire found buried in Delacroix's line. MacDowell is a retreat for artists. A place to go to live inside one's mind. In such an environment freedom is a white corner, freedom is an empty room, freedom is a road entering the darkness of the forest at night or the light on the other side of the trees. In other words, as Stevens himself put it, "In my room, the world is beyond understanding; But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and clouds." Here is a picture taken by Neff. It Must Be Abstract. It Must Change. It Must Give Pleasure.

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1. Jule Eisenbud, M.D. in the book, *The World of Ted Serios: "Thoughtographic" Studies of an Extraordinary Mind* (1989), goes to great lengths to demonstrate how such a process is not a fraud but the result of the energy of the mind mixing with the Polaroid emulsion.

2. Neff turned the three subtitles from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"—It Must Be Abstract, It Must Change, and It Must Give Pleasure—into images themselves, printed and framed, and part of the exhibition.

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve's writing on contemporary art and digital culture has appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *The Guggenheim Magazine*, and *Artbyte*. Formerly the senior instructor at the Whitney Independent Study Program (1997-1999), she is the author of *How Like a Leaf*, a book-length conversation with Donna J. Haraway (Routledge, 1999). Thyrza Nichols Goodeve lives in Brooklyn, NY.