tourist #5 disappearing project 1- 40

text by Stuart Koop

Nicola Loder told me she felt like she was disappearing teaching blind kids photography. Not surprising, I guess, when you try to describe the camera, the lens, optics, focus, framing, composition. When your identity or your role as a photographer dissipates along with the explanatory power of these foundation terms and concepts. And practical demonstrations must seem frustratingly pointless.

That profound experience seems to have led Loder to use photography in reverse, as the means to de-compose images; to utilize Photoshop's algorithms, not to augment or highlight certain attributes in her portraits she ultimately took of these kids, but return images to an undifferentiated field of static, the digital correlate to the original photochemical chaos, the entropy of raw silver halides, which the 'irrefutable sun' miraculously sorts into resemblance. In short, to *un*photograph the kids somehow, commensurate with their disability and her own disappearance in the workshops.

But it's not just Loder who has had the experience of disappearing. It's a profound sensation shared by many and for different reasons, and Loder has collected different accounts of the experience which illus-trate the further registers in which one may 'disappear'; from spiritual attainment in transcending physical reality to out of body transcendental near-death experiences, from relief at escaping a difficult situation, to feelings of terror as a child abandoned, or worse, abducted, from the social isolation and alienation of teenagers and adults, to a freedom or liberation from social constraint and physical containment, wanting to leave behind an unhappy circumstance or just wanting to be magically, wonderfully invisible.

Practically speaking, there's considerable interest in - and information on - how to disappear, especially in America. In 2008 artist Seth Price published 'How to Disappear from America', excerpted text from found sectarian tracts, paranoid rants and helpful DIY tips to assist anyone wishing to get off the grid without a trace (burn your credit cards, dump your car, hide your tracks, grow your own, etc) including great sug-gestions about where to go (motorcycle hangouts, punk rocks groups, new age dance studios, soup kitchens, churches, and homeless shelters).

But Loder's more interested ***in*** the personal, individual experience of disappearing. She asked for photo-portraits to accompany people's descriptions of disappearing, from which she has seemingly ex-cised each subject, using Photoshop as she did before with the blind kids, leaving a whorl of digital effect in the vacant space within their outline, set in high relief against a lounge-room, or a yard, or other family

members. Yet on closer inspection this is perhaps a matter of transformation, since 'disappearing' may be very different from 'deletion'.

In Photoshop we are each just so much *chroma*, *luma* and shape. A touch of the magic wand and we are separated from the rest of our lives, 'lassooed', a godly power to designate liberated from special-effects cinema by the Knoll brothers in 1988 and given to every geek with a Mac II. Since when it's just too easy to be deleted; two clicks and we're in the trash.

But in Loder's work our data is recast, colour intensified, details blurred, outlines softened, curves modified, screens •••••overlaid•••• and so it seems Photoshop's myriad algorithms - set against their intended technical imperative to optimise appearances – might provide a metaphor for our disappearing, which is indeed not a removal or deletion but a reconfiguration beyond verisimilitude, beyond our appearance to others and ourselves. And while we might lose visual coherence as an image, we are inscribed upon another plane altogether, one at odds with photographic realism, and which Loder describes as a "deconstructed non-space somewhere between image, imagination, identity, language and being." Like the shimmering dissipation of Kirk on the teleporter's deck in Star Trek, these subjects are transported to another realm, different orders of reality merging into a new volatile blend. Perhaps it's a higher plane too where all souls mingle and coalesce as either zeros or ones, a digital afterlife in which everything is equivalent and a new digital equanimity prevails.

It certainly feels like something hallucinatory is irrupting from the picture plane, that we are inside the machine, or the software, or the pigment of the print, in amongst the data flows, the dotscreen, adrift in the fluvial *moire*. It can be a bit of a shock like watching a film when the stock gets caught in the projector-gate and starts melting and then bursts into flames. Or the effect is at the very least disjunctive, like the blurry, wavy images in film that signal a transition from cinematic or photographic realism to a dream state. Just as cinema (or any medium) develops the means or tropes for self-reflection, so too Loder has found a way to visualize experiences or sensations that are ostensibly resistant or contrary to visualization. In which sense, Photoshop eats itself.

But these ethereal things land with a thud in Murshidabad, near Calcutta. The obliterated, atomized, reconfigured portraits 're-materialise' as tapestries executed by homeless, 'at risk' women who have been abandoned, who have fled grave danger, who have largely 'disappeared' in another sense from the view of friends, families and communities, who are invisible to police, politicians, as well as their castes.

Of course, Loder has paid these women, a means of recognizing and honouring their work, a means of bringing them into view, at the margins of economy, welfare and community. Indeed, she has taken their portraits and documented them at work, and it's a startling contrast. Our middle-class stories, anxieties

and interests ending up in the careful hands of these destitute women in colourful saris, sitting and working together in one of the hallways at the ••••refuge••••, our (largely) passing concerns darned into the muslin cloth in their laps, our own saturated photographic hues indistinguishable from the bright chaos of folded cloth and pleated skirts, with their nimble fingers tracing our desires and cares in bright lurid threads.

I can't help thinking Loder's long 'apprenticeship of silence' - from its origins as a •••••post-grad••••• student in 1992 to its conclusion here in India - is also an expurgation of personal loss. Loder lived for a while in Calcutta as a baby and her family's ayah may have come from the same servant classes in dirt-poor West Bengal. That woman could be dead or alive, Loder doesn't know. She 'disappeared' from Loder's life (although Loder retains a fond and vivid memory of the texture of her sari and her smell?). While she is still there in photos of Loder's family, these images simply trace her absence, just as all photographs can only remind us of what is gone.

And it's precisely Loder's personal experience of loss and disappearance, reconciled to the countervailing proliferation and ubiquity of images – reconciled to her role as a photographer and image-maker and especially the dilemma about what to represent or what to add to this image repertoire - which has led Loder to render these portraits in tribute to disappearance. Through this kind of controlled, purposeful feedback, Loder has rendered non-visible visible where the specter of her ayah alongside her family and friends may reappear in patterned relief.