

*I'm with Stupid.*

*Notes on Another Form of Rock Photography*

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Once the image of the black-dyed banana hit the inbox of my email system, it seemed there was no longer any way to avoid the word: *Stupidity*. The gratuitous, go-with-the-flow stupidity of photographic images. The smug celebration of their unique ability to 'see', to 'frame', to pinpoint that extra special detail. Their dogged belief in the deep relevance of anything, whatever. And — along with this — their eternal aspiration to a surrealist faith in a reality stranger than fiction.

Here was the typical single banana object (think key rings, 'fun' plastic lamps, inflatable water toys, T-shirt imagery), the peel artfully pulled back, the protruding core painted a provocative, shiny, erotic black; a piece of in-your-face visuality with iconic aspirations somewhere along the lines of the Andy Warhol banana on the cover of the Velvet Underground LP and the lip/tongue icon of The Rolling Stones. If the word 'stupidity' had not quite reached articulation on earlier encounters with the photographs of Torbjørn Rødland, it was probably because I did not quite know what it could mean. Since we tend to parade our critical choices in front of us as flattering self-portrayals, I would have been generally inclined to ascribe intelligence or sophistication to things I somehow felt I liked. But at Air de Paris, the gallerist had pulled out from storage a series of pictures from a recent exhibition I had not seen, and there, among an array of alarmingly pale Baltic churches and intellectual-looking models studiously perching on rocks and amid branches, all in fashionably retro black and white print, was, again, the most single-mindedly thought-stopping of photographs. An image of a single cassette tape. A cassette tape, portrayed in black and white with a kind of flat, deadpan frontality, isomorphic with the flatness of the image, and filling up most of its space, it had a kind of cryptic typescript glued on in a frankly amateur manner, name of band and titles apparently. A shadow played with the black edges of the cassette, adding a bit of a poetic blur here and there. And then, after this photograph, the second hit: a *variation* on this motif. A whole series of cassette tapes, this time white with black print, was for some reason lying on a wooden floor: they had been shot from above and at a slight angle. These were the kind of images that, due to the numbing banality of their motifs, screamed of 'deeper meaning'. They were obviously marketing themselves as links to some kind of obscure sphere where they would provide a guiding light for those able to recognize their signification. For those who did not, they would only speak of refusal and exclusion.

To speak of the stupidity of photographic images is not, for all that, to follow a very original line of thought. It would initially seem to belong to the familiar rhetoric of an iconoclastic suspicion of images, a suspicion that is the habitual side effect of a media culture which, in its more paranoid moments, believes itself to be saturated — read involuntarily dominated — by images. Images seemingly unable or unwilling to properly account for their reason for being among us and thus all the more mysteriously powerful. A more subtle argument along this line of suspicion was represented by Susan Sontag when, in her book on photography, she equated

the compulsion to photograph — a compulsion precisely because no photograph can be the final exhaustive document of an event — to a depletion of reality. We cling to our photographs of the world at the expense of real knowledge of the world, because knowledge — defined by Sontag as historical and political knowledge based on analysis, contextualization and narrative — is precisely what the endless shots of this and that cannot deliver.

However, the context for this kind of argument is generally different from the one in which my confrontation with the notion of stupidity took place: not a cultural critique of photographic images in general, but a far more narrow or local attempt to find the right words with which to account for the affection for certain specific images, so as to be able to argue their relative degree of interest over other images. Also, it should be noted, there was no way in which the photographs in question could be said to even aspire to a knowledge-function of the order Sontag had in mind. In contrast to the masses of photographs that aim, in one way or another, to share glimpses of significant events, to bring back images of the outer reaches of culture, to zoom in on various aspects of the human condition, or even to critically mine the photographic image-world itself, these photographs seemed to literally wallow in their lack of moral significance, if not in a wholesale rejection of the humanistic sentiment that seems to justify so much of that incessant framing and shooting. The gallerist and I had congratulated each other on our mutual if unformulated love for the cassette tape image, the certainty of our feelings corroborated precisely by our lack of coherent terminology. So, in this case, dealing with stupidity was mainly a question of trying to more or less systematically insert the notion into an art critical discourse generally in love with a whole different set of criteria. It was, in particular, a question of inserting the notion of stupidity into a discourse on photography generally focused on the wider aesthetic significance of photographic contingency. For on the list of critical ideas set up to validate the photographic culmination of the movement, in the history of art, away from the general and schematic and towards the precise, the partial, the transient and the embodied view, 'stupidity' almost certainly can not be found.<sup>1</sup>

It would then seem that in order to account for stupidity in a positive sense, some kind of detour might be needed, a different view on the possible cultural affiliations of photography. An obvious premise here is the lack of identity of anything called 'the photographic'. For nothing simply emanates from photographic technology itself, only from the encounters between this technology and the different discursive frameworks that colonize, in various ways, the photograph's ability to produce some sort of visual evidence or momentary trace. The artistic validation of photographic traces responds, in particular, to modernist preoccupations with the weight of history and tradition. Since such traces seemed to catch a unique moment of presence in a material form that would simultaneously render it past and dead, they seemed to access a time wrung free from the ordinary temporal passage. Photographic time (paradox-time, event-time) could then be a figure for the desire to undermine all those authoritarian institutions that appeared to stake their claims on the idea of temporal continuity, i.e. on history, tradition and signification. Photographic contingency — seen by Rosalind Krauss among others as the very

1. The association of photography with a historical movement towards a preoccupation with the precise, partial, transient, and embodied is described by Peter Galassi in *Before Photography. Painting and the Invention of Photography*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981.

condition of surrealism — came to denote difference and escape, not least in relation to the imagined streamlining of capitalist production.<sup>2</sup>

In this particular discursive framework, photographic contingency is seen to carry a great deal of critical force. Countless analyses inform us of photographic practices that manage to somehow disrupt the smooth running of the capitalist spectacle — as if this spectacle were a piece of theatre that could simply be observed and then critiqued, as if from the outside. In modernist aesthetics, photographic contingency tends to be identified with subversive actions and oblique views: critical strategies that are vestiges of a time when the disciplining effects of production were still mainly identified with the obvious constraints and control mechanisms of the workplace.

Today a more intensive experience with what is known as ‘immaterial production’ or ‘cognitive capitalism’ has complicated the very notion of the disruptive event. In a form of production that creates value from leisure and work hours alike, and specifically from the way in which people simply pay attention to media output, time itself is at the basis of the creation of value in entirely new ways. To create value from attention is basically an effort to extract energy from basic thought processes. And the machines or apparatuses of production that do this most efficiently are those whose way of working resembles the type of complex temporal condensation and projection that characterize human thought processes.<sup>3</sup> This is why time-based media, event-producing media, emerge as the primary machines of this type of production and why the media event — the presentation of ‘live history’ through directly televised political ceremonies, sports games and stadium rock concerts — is the quintessential form of this mode of production.<sup>4</sup>

In this situation it becomes clear that the spectacle has no ideal outside: working on our thoughts and feelings, it is not a theatrical production but a disciplining mechanism. At this point, the type of artistic work that has some critical stake in the question of event production may at times choose to associate with cultural formations that have a different understanding of their place in spectacular production than what has traditionally marked the artistic avant-garde. Proximity is sought with practices that take it for granted that creative work necessarily takes place in the middle of the modern media machines, and not in some purported critical outside. In fact, the existential dimension of mediatic living may even be celebrated, romanticized, exaggerated — for the simple reason that such celebration can contain the potential for an uncontrollable creation of events, a ‘wild’ creation that throws the usual productivity of the media event off its normal course.

As it happens, one such formation evolves around a meaning-complex that we have so far just called — stupidity. And it is here one can start imagining a different photographic alliance — an alliance between photographic contingency and a discursive framework in which the notion of stupidity not only carries positive value but functions as a gold standard of sorts, an elusive ideal that is explicitly opposed to ‘sophistication’ and ‘knowledge’. The most general name for this framework is ‘rock’. And right from its early days of amplified guitars, increasingly demonstrative sound mixes and televisual appearances, rock has evoked, romanticized, celebrated and exaggerated its existence in the media machine. Immersion in the media machine

2. Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Photographic Condition of Surrealism’ in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. MIT Press 1986, pp. 87–119

3. Maurizio Lazzarato, *Videophilosophie. Zeitwahrnehmung im Postfordismus*. B-Books Verlag Berlin, 2002

4. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History*. Harvard University Press, 1992

is a theme that extends from the drone-like cascades of feedback noise to the depersonalized and quasi-automated loops and repeats of techno. At the same time, rock is that particular space in culture where key statements, celebrated for their upfront idiocy, read as follows:

- *We don't need no education*
- *Don't know much about history*
- *Here we are now. Entertain us. We are stupid. And contagious*
- *You say you want a revolution. Well, you know...*
- *I'm in love with my car. Got a feel for my automobile*
- *Pretty vacant*
- *I belong to a blank generation*
- *I wanna be sedated*
- *We're on the highway to hell.*

And so on, endlessly. Such statements gain legitimacy and authenticity as they are backed up by a sonic presentation avoiding all obvious traces of sophistication. Ideally everything must proceed as if music just happened accidentally or automatically, either through lucky mishap or dumb automatism. This is the kind of attitude that Robert Pattison, in his exploration of the romantic roots of rock, called *vulgarity*. Vulgarity here does not exactly signify 'bad taste', but rather no taste at all: a form of blankness that is primarily a refusal to recognize any of the hierarchies of value or distinctions that give meaning to most notions of knowledge, tradition or history. Such blankness can be associated with pantheist impulses in romanticism as well as with the genealogies of morals and value systems in Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean philosophies.<sup>5</sup> It is this blankness that underpins anything that aspires to the status of rock: the strength of Pattison's argument is grounded precisely in his refusal to see rock's endless production of new sub-genres as anything more than minor stylistic variations on this basic approach. In rock music and rock culture, vulgarity becomes the practical application of the principle of immediacy, an explicit celebration of a subject which is nothing but an effect of his or her momentary, fleeting passions and sensations — coupled with an equally explicit rejection of all transcendental principles that would threaten to fixate those sensations in a scheme of logic or reason.

Rock then easily stands accused of both narcissism and solipsism: its many voices seem utterly incapable of looking at the world beyond the confines of a subjective perception. Such solipsism is, however, connected to the larger life-world through the principles of pantheism, which emphasises process, flow and the endless transformation of one thing into another. In this scheme the highly profiled identities foregrounded by rock are not fixed but simply momentary twists in the stream of phenomena in which (to quote The Fugees' Lauryn Hill) 'everything is everything'.<sup>6</sup> It does not take a lot of argument to point to the many connections between this general scheme and various defining moments of late 20th Century art — from John Cage's systematic and philosophical-minded accessing of process and change, to Michael Fried's dictum

5. Robert Pattison, *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987

6. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Ruffhouse Records / Columbia, 1998

that 'presentness is grace', to Robert Smithson's displacement of the intellectual and linguistic barriers that separate concepts from matter. To the art system, rock aesthetics is then at once fascinatingly familiar — and too close for comfort. For whereas rock formulates a cult of pure immersion and participation, art may idealise certain notions of participation but also tends to understand itself as a space of judgement and critique. A Marxist critic like T.J. Clark senses the grandiose quest for blankness in some of the abstract expressionist painters he admires the most, and describes this, with dead precision, in terms of the concept of vulgarity. But in order to protect these painters from possible accusations of cultish celebration or bad immediacy, vulgarity has to be immediately transcribed as a conscious insight into the conditions of alienation and class contradiction. Blankness, or the luxurious option to refuse signification, says Clark, is primarily the symbolical form of the aristocracy. The great pathos of the paintings of Pollock *et al* is then, first and foremost, the pathos of their own impossible and untimely class aspirations, the essential vulgarity of the middle class wannabe aristocrat. Their paintings are simply hauntingly honest indexes of their own pathetic aspiration, marks of the unhappy consciousness of the self that sees itself as a contradictory being.<sup>7</sup>

What is so carefully omitted from this analysis is, in other words, the possibility that blankness — or stupidity — could somehow be valued for itself. That it could be understood as a strategic measure or mechanism that pursues a logic of its own, and not simply as the expression of the existential pain of a subject that *knows too much* about his own social condition. Put schematically, one could say that the art system tends to overvalue *knowing too much* and the rock system *knowing too little*, but there is in fact no symmetry between these two attitudes. For the possibility that must be considered is that rock's blankness or stupidity might serve an affirmative creation of events in the 'wild' or uncontrollable sense mentioned above — a process different from a dialectical negation or refusal of knowledge. In the name of such negation, sociologists tend to map rock's articulation of stupidity in terms of a class or power relationship — as a symbolical opposition to dominant culture. This may be true enough on one level, but it does not exclude the fact that the performance of stupidity may have an aesthetic and political significance exceeding the terms of existing social relationships. For stupidity might — quite simply — be *the* most significant strategic element in rock's attempt to unleash the forces of becoming so as to conjure up other possible realities.

Rock's strategic stupidity — which basically consists in hiding your aesthetic competence and sophistication behind a carefully cultivated veneer of dehumanised automatism and uncontrollable power surges — can, in other words be associated with the modern fascination for events and for contingency: this is where one can start to trace a possible complicity with the role photography has often been assigned in modern culture. This complicity can be read on different levels. Rock events (the crowds of crazy fans, rowdy press conferences, recording sessions, wild stage shows etc.) are of course archetypal photographic motifs, so much so that it is difficult to even imagine rock without photography. This relation is explored, as if from a distance, by highly reflexive art-photographers like Andreas Gursky or Bruno Serralongue. Serralongue has made

7. T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999

it his project to photograph the photographable i.e. the type of events already defined as media events, events that are so to speak inscribed in photographic practice in their very construction. On one typical occasion he travelled to Las Vegas to photograph the huge crowd of French fans who had crossed the Atlantic to see French rock idol Johnny Halliday give a unique Vegas performance. And when Andreas Gursky uses digital techniques to further expand the image of an immense techno rave crowd seen from above, photography emphasizes precisely that quality of momentary uniqueness and endless repetition that makes a rave into a true celebration of the media machinery. Both artists investigate a media logic that makes rock and photography into at least temporary allies. But the notion of an alliance should not be taken too far. For it is patently obvious that not all photography with a vested interest in the momentary, fleeting or ephemeral aspires to the status of rock. Rock is a particular cultural space or discursive framework from which an equally particular articulation of possible realities is launched. And a true photographic alliance with rock can only be thought in terms of the parameters of this space.

It might, in other words, have to be thought of in terms of the parameters of stupidity. And – contrary to what one would tend to think – a lot of what is generally known as rock photography does not really establish an alliance with rock on that level of articulation. The reason is simple. Most rock photography is produced according to the parameters of knowledge and responsibility: a responsibility towards the task of giving an accurate *representation* of an idealized object (rock). And the need to represent rock as an almost lexicographic object of knowledge, with all its various aspects – from star subjectivities to studio technology to fan behaviour – presented and made accessible. Whether this representation takes on a documentary or symbolical form, the responsibility to deliver a sort of minute morphology of the most obvious surfaces of rock fact is what counts. Hence the photography of Anton Corbijn tends to serve up rock star subjectivity in a sort of frozen monumentalized form. Through dramatic contrast and cutting and a highly reductive colouring, rock heroes always appear as introvert, solipsistic objects of style, brooding rather than reacting, insensitive to an outside world. The pieces of 'world' actually represented in the photos (back alleys, smoky restaurants) are just stuff that accumulates around the rock hero: *his* (or *her*) world, a private one-colour bubble. Taken together, Corbijn's images – along with the thousands of photographs that mimic the same hermetic and repetitive style – form one single articulation: a perpetual tribute to the high seriousness of rock as a bona fide art form. There are other visual representations of rock, of course – for instance the hysterically colourful genre that present rock heroes as funny, quirky, or plain 'crazy' chaos pilots – but the relationship between rock and its photography remains the same. It is always a question of accurate representation, with photography cast in the role of the always-faithful visual recorder of rock's own image.

Photographic documents of rock-related culture, in the wider sense of the term, play the same game of responsibility. Nan Goldin's extremely subjectivist and fleetingly diarist images of life on the outer reaches of the 1970's and 1980's New York downtown scene record, with an accuracy validated through intimacy, the existential condition of doomed rock & roll living, the

refusal to grow up. The basic humanism of her approach becomes clear as years go by and her characters — now in various states of despair — are portrayed as the tragic victims of their own passions. The images frame and emphasize what is already known about rock culture, and what is always reproduced as the essential thing to know about rock culture: the myth of Icaros, the history of inevitable burnout. For all their style, the basic impulse of these images is moralizing: other worlds are *not* possible.

If rock photography so often remains stuck in the role of the respectful recorder of rock's own image, it is perhaps because it is most of the time marginalized in relation to the idea of the 'real' object of rock and accepts this marginalization without questioning. There is never any doubt about what the real object of rock is: Music — sound itself — obviously. But given the fact that no other form of music has surrounded itself with such an extensive and impressive visual world, this assertion should actually sound a lot less obvious than it does. The relationship between rock sound and rock visuals has been discussed by John Corbett, who argues that if rock develops a fantasy about the supremacy of pure sound, this is an effect of the recording technology which gave birth to rock and which rock has internalized like no other contemporary musical form. Recording technology made it possible, for the first time in history, to radically separate sound and image — i.e. to distribute disembodied sounds and voices. This made sound into a quasi-autonomous object, a perfect, undivided 'sonic body'. Audiophilia and hi-fi culture are the symptoms of this process which could be described in terms of the psychoanalytic definition of fetishism, since in this tradition the fetish is seen as an object of unity set up to cover an imagined lack or absence (the lack presented by the threat of castration). Sound becomes fetish, or an autonomous object, the moment recording technology separates sound from image. For the message of the fetish is notably that 'nothing is lacking': in this case, that sound is doing fine all by itself.

But of course such assertions continually point to the lack itself: its own lack of visuals. The pure sonic object can only stand out against the supplementary production of lots and lots of 'less important' visuals: hence the immense visual and material culture of rock. This culture stretches from the emphasis on clothes, graphics and design in stage performances, record covers, films and videos to the fascination with all kinds of sound equipment to the desire to fill the world with the tactile products of rock (huge record collections).<sup>8</sup> And as sonic autonomy is all the time reinvented (DJ culture has notably taken the idea of the pure sound object to entirely new levels), its visual and material supplements are constantly reinvented as well, expanding and deepening along with the inventions of a sound technology literally spinning around its own axis.

As Corbett's analysis shows, marginalization of this sort is a fragile construct since what is officially deemed less important in fact takes on a supreme importance. One thing is that general culture is suffused with rock-related visuals of all kinds. But if the logic of marginalization contains the seeds of its own reversal, a space is also opened for a production of rock visuals that will take the utmost care to assert their own autonomy as 'real' rock objects. That is, as rock visuals that will not simply serve the need for more or less accurate representations of the sonic

8. John Corbett, 'Free, Single and Disengaged: Listening Pleasure and the Popular Music Object', in *Extended Play. Sounding Off From John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein*. Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 32–56

context of rock, but that will deploy the strategy of rock stupidity for their own purposes, their own creation of events. This type of independence can be found here and there in images and materials close to the production and distribution circuits of the musical object. Record covers are a case in point: since they have quasi-autonomy as objects (working in close parallel with the fetishized vinyl records) they often give independent interpretations of the impulses feeding the musical content.

However, the visual and material culture of rock obviously extends far beyond rock's immediate production apparatus. In fact, a position of relative independence from this apparatus might even be an ideal precondition for producing autonomous rock visuals. Such relative independence may perhaps be found within the art system, whose works depend on very different circuits of production and distribution even as elaborations on rock culture and rock visuals have infused this system for decades. But lately this elaboration seems to have taken a new turn. In a lot of recent art – in installations, actions, performances, videos, drawing, photographs – rock music emerges not simply as a source of inspiration, but as an object, a form or a social format that is observed and handled as if at a certain remove. And, interestingly, this newer way of dealing with rock has been marked by a distinct emphasis on the material culture of rock. What emerges is a sort of muted, estranged, displaced and strangely frozen focus on the material objects of rock as well as its social forms. Stages, instruments, equipment, clothes, poster and record cover imagery, music videos, rehearsals, studio situations, personnel, band formations and audiences all emerge as quasi-independent points of focus. It is as if the sonic context of rock has been placed at a distance and then somehow *reduced* to its objects and materials – an approach which is sometimes social investigation and sometimes a point of departure for a different creation of rock. And as an extension of this distancing, this emphatic separation between rock sound and rock's material culture, an opening may also appear for a different form of rock photography.

This is the type of photography produced by Torbjørn Rødland. Somehow the dumb, flat, black and white cassette tape image is emblematic of the distance established and the autonomy gained. 'Rock culture' is present here, but somehow it is as if its celebrated sonic vitality has been sucked out with force. Somehow there is a refusal to associate with the immediate musical context of the tape. For the tape does belong to a quite particular musical context, as anyone who can decipher its glued-on plastic lettering (*Veadtuck, Satanic Blood, Christ Fire, Von*) will know. It is a rare demo recording containing eight tracks made by the legendary and mythical Californian black metal band named Von. Created in the late 1980's as a send-up of the most extreme sonic concepts of the then popular death metal genre, Von nevertheless managed to break new ground for extreme noise. Through exaggeration and concentration, Von created a minimalist, drone-filled sound that stretched all normal concepts of metal songwriting and set the pace for the emergent black metal genre and bands like Burzum, Mayhem and Emperor. The Von recordings sounded like the essence of what satanic music was supposed to be like: ritualistic, trance-like, and (in opposition to death metal) very deliberately unsophisticated.



They are evocative of the whole symbolical universe conjured up by black metal fans and musicians alike — a universe that is also intensely visual. Black metal develops and intensifies the heavy metal taste for the ornamental and the dramatic, for heavy-handed mixes of gothic and art nouveau, filtered through romantic and symbolist preoccupations with the archaic, the timeless and the archetypal. Its visual sources stretch from William Blake to Odilon Redon, soaking up loads of folkloristic imagery along the way. In this sense it is modernist through and through, but representative of the other, regressive, side of modernism where noise and archetypes are used as weapons against all forms of progressive humanism. All that was retained from enlightenment and urbanism and industrialism was the sublime roar of machinery — a roar that could now be associated with the pre-logical din of an eternal nature (the touchstone of black metal mythology). But then black metal musicians notably tend to be countryside boys who reject both the moral confines of village life and the liberal pretensions of the urban context.

The stylistic signals of this particular visual universe are entirely absent from the cassette tape image. It appropriates a semi-sacred cult object of black metal music history as simply that ... an object, a dumb, flat thing. It looks like nothing much and for most people it reads exactly that way: hardly worth the trouble of looking. The photographic qualities of the image are of course highly questionable. No spontaneity, no subtle technical editing of the world, no real play of light and shading, no action, no point of interest: it simply does not do justice to any known versions of the art of photography. The closest analogy are the flat, deadpan and technically inept photographs Hans Peter Feldman made of single pieces of clothing or tools, photographs that were not so much 'images' as quasi-archival recordings of the material contents of somebody's banal everyday. One gets the sense that Feldman's camera records not because there is any sense to recording, any kind of archivist goal or point of view, but simply because this is what the camera can and will do. This is, in short, what mechanical recording media do: they record *whatever*, noise just as well as meaning, random stupidity as well as significant points of focus.

It is on the level of the essential stupidity of this 'whatever' that the structural resemblance between rock's event aesthetics and photographic contiguity emerges in Rødland's work. For, in his work, the autonomous photographic parallel to the rock event is not the snapshot moment. It is not the 'lively' aspect of rock that is reproduced, not the flash of action and instant burnout. What is reproduced is the ability to romanticize the brute and stupid principle of mechanical recording — an ability that has increasingly directed rock to the vast territories of pure noise. As Simon Reynolds has argued, the 1970's sexual liberation banalized sex by making it available: from this moment on it could no longer function as the transgressive kernel of rock. During the 1980's, pure noise — unspeakable, un-listenable and sublime — gradually took on the role previously held by sex.<sup>9</sup> Black metal is just one of the musical genres that could be seen as a symptom of this change. But, as it happens, it is also the genre that most explicitly links sublime noise to sublime nature, the genre that (unlike industrial rock or techno) wrings the noise of the media machinery free from the urban context. This nature — the Nordic nature of romantic painters and black metal musicians alike — is the endlessly repeated theme of Rødland's photographs.

9. Simon Reynolds, *Blissed Out. The Raptures of Rock*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1990, pp. 57–63

In terms of style and look, the cassette tape image is then not exactly representative of these photographs. Still, it functions as a guide to a more general logic running through a body of work in which rock references turn up again and again with almost systematic regularity. The dead, blunt, mute and flat cassette tape refusing to represent any ideas of musical 'life' is Rødland's visual take on the 'whatever' principle of mechanical recording. The precise musical reference in the image is simply what ties this particular articulation of 'whatever' to the cultural sphere of rock. The photograph is a self-reflexive object of rock culture that does not obey any other law than the desire for a visual production that creates its own reality based on the key terms of this cultural sphere. It is representative of a body of work that seems to avoid all traces of the snapshot aesthetic without for that matter entering into high-concept staging or image manipulation. The overall tendency is something far stranger: a mix of uneasy, patched-up construction and uncensored romanticism. A significant part of this mix is a nature lyricism that seems to stick to Rødland's films as if Nordic nature and photographic imagery was one and the same thing, parts of an indivisible pantheist *all* that only narrow-minded critical reason would attempt to break down into separate phenomena. The force of this notion is underscored on the occasions when Rødland shifts from photography to video-film. Nordic nature is as present in his films as in the photographs — in fact the films often read as a series of stuck-together landscape photographs. Every filmed image is kept in the same rectangular standing format as the photographic prints (the format that best suits representations of big trees), even though it is completely at odds with the format of the TV screens on which they are shown. Hence the TV screens have to be tilted sideways in order to accommodate the images of nature: the moral seems to be that the only proper medium of nature is Rødland's photographic images.

Somehow, in an odd way, this also comes to mean that a lot of already existing photographic images of nature are included in this big photographic/pantheist *all* as well. And this is the point where, for many viewers, Rødland's images start to spell trouble. For in his work there is a sliding scale from relatively — straight landscape renditions to more or less subtle appropriations of various overdetermined genres of photographic nature representation. There's the soft calendar-style erotica of pretty girls with small furry animals and sun in their hair. There is a dedicated National Geographic-style attention to the interesting detail, whether of natural or human construction (collapsing farm buildings, imaginative scarecrows, strange trees). There's pretty, patterned composition in the 'nature-as-artist' vein, as well as the bleak, disengaged renditions typical of old black and white postcards or illustrations in books (church buildings, overviews of Alpine villages). The unbridled sweetness, enthusiasm, gullibility, or dutifulness of all these image-genres are, in other words, soaked up into Rødland's photographs, apparently without distancing or commentary, and without the type of demarcations that would indicate some kind of tongue-in-cheek play with genres.

In fact, to speak of a play of genres in this case would be to ignore the spirit of innocence (feigned or real, but all the same worth striving for) in which all these different visual impulses are made to meet and merge. And to the extent that precise sources exist for some of the more

startling constellations, they are meticulously hidden, transformed, covered up. Such innocence (feigned or real) is an essential component in rock's strategy of stupidity, its all-embracing or indifferent pantheist vulgarity. This is why there is actually only a shade of coloring separating rock's lightest and most lyrical candyfloss confections from its darkest excesses of horror and noise. This lightness, which has received considerably less commentary than rock noise, is an almost equally important component in the rock universe, though less prevalent. For here as well rock cultivates a confrontational logic of extremes avoided by other forms of music. Innocence promotes the ecstatic sweetness of the beyond: beyond pop, beyond schmaltz, beyond musicals, beyond easy listening, beyond elevator music. It is this logic of in-your-face sweetness and light that informs so many of Rødland's images of nature. And it is an absolute and hermetic immunity to the 'critical' and 'knowing' point of view that connects these images, in a form of seamless play from one end of the scale to another, to their darker and more dramatic influences.

The darker backside of this innocence is a strange predilection for frozen, contrived arrangements – sometimes genuinely mysterious, sometimes hilarious, sometimes plain silly and sometimes too obviously loaded with heavy-handed symbolical meaning in the 'get-it?' spirit of pop politics and paranoid imagination. Despite occasional forays into political engagement of the more complicated, committed kind, this is actually the most prevalent form of political thinking in a rock culture where the projection of the big Them of imperialist world domination is just a few power chords away from imaginations of grand-scale UFO abduction and other folkloric inventions in the interstices between the animal, the machinic and the human. This is, after all, a world where suggestion is key, where the abrupt, elliptical statements on buttons and T-shirt slogans are used as a deliberate cover-up for more subtle nuances of personality and outlook.

Thus, a messed-up still life of some of the favorite things of President George W. Bush (Häagen Dazs Pralines & Cream ice cream, nachos chips, a video cassette of *Field of Dreams*, Diet Coke and the children's book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*) is an allegorical image that, unlike modern allegories in general, promises to say it all. Thus, an image of a towering building in New York is of course not just a piece of cityscape, but, for those in the know, the headquarters of the catholic organization Opus Dei, part of New York's conservative underground and known, among other things, for its cult of pain. It comes as no surprise that the particularly inexplicable image of a small, flat, white and blob-like plastic object – a figure of a happy cook with the numbers 1349 engraved on (where does one get these things?) – should be a veritable mine of significance. It references both the year the Black Death came to Norway, the name of a Norwegian band associated with black metal star Frost of Satyricon and the white fog formations in a related landscape photograph that represents the spirit of Burzum.

At this point we are plunged deep into the nerdy realms of specialty knowledge and goofy speculation – in the tradition that reads messages of Paul McCartney's death in every scratch on the surface of a record. These aspects of rock culture seem to make it a haven for those afflicted with the light adaptation problem known as Asperger's Syndrome – people of unevenly distributed talents and low social intelligence but capable of tremendous focus on one particular

interest. It is precisely in the spirit of Aspergerism to have the name of the syndrome made into a T-shirt logo — as Rødland did, for the sake of one poignant photograph. That the T-shirt in question was actually used to produce a strangely bleak wet-T-shirt image (the wording *Das Asperger Syndrom* straining across vaguely exposed breasts) just attests to the power of the idiotic, contrived constellation symptomatic of the suggestive logic. Rødland never exactly documents the cultural effects of this type of logic or imagination, as if a preliminary for ethnographic description, sociological analysis, or political critique. He simply exploits and expands its powers of projection by transposing it onto a format and a cultural context (contemporary art) in relation to which this type of logic is strange and not really all that welcome. But it would also be a mistake to read this act of transposition as artistic boundary breaking in the benevolent 'high meets low' mode of thinking. That would sound like a form of excuse and there is of course no excuse for stupidity. The strategy of stupidity means exactly that: to try to place yourself in a realm beyond excuses. What is performed with this gesture is quite simply, but also quite extraordinarily and perhaps impossibly, an attempt to recuperate, for images, the space in which the deeper politics of rock desire may be activated. This politics consists in a complex and contradictory way of handling the fate of sensuality in spectacular culture. Rock is that space where the subordination of the sensual to the spectacular is celebrated as a form of liberation. Yet, at the same time, the both corrupting and disciplining function of this subordination is seen for precisely what it is, and presented as such, without any hopes for redemption or resolution.

Stupidity is the trope that handles this contradiction with the greatest degree of dexterity. And Rødland's particular use of that trope may be seen as an attempt to import that contradiction into the redemptive and solution-oriented space of a contemporary art too often and too easily content with its own knowledge-discourse, its own politicizing certainties. Failure may be written all over such a project... but then there is of course no knowing what the terms of an eventual 'success' should be. I keep staring at the blackened banana, the cassette tape, the little happy cook, the Opus Dei building for an explanation, but it seems to refuse to come forth. All that can be known is that in this refusal lies their subterranean power.

*Letter from Gil Blank*

14 July 2005

Hello My Friend —

Freezing now, crouched under a heavy blanket with a single lamp. The cold of the last few nights has come as a shock, since the summer heat during daytime reaches up past ninety degrees. As soon as the sun disappears, I can feel the temperature drop in minutes, and scramble to shelter. It's nearly moonless tonight though, and utterly clear, so I've chosen a spot within sight of Cassiopeia to stay out and shoot from, and while I track the sky for the next several hours, I think this moment of isolation, shivering in a concentration that borders on delirium, is also the place I needed to find to write you a few lines.

I'm camped in a high meadow in central Oregon, just below ten thousand feet. I hiked in alone a few days ago to see if I could find a place sufficiently apart (from what? and whom?) that I might make a picture all my own, and make sense of these other pictures you've sent, as strange to me as alien transmissions, and write you a record of both.

I remember when I first saw your photographs — the nudist and the forest goth, and the policewomen and the priests and the goat — and couldn't for the life of me figure out where the hell you were going with them. I have yet to make any headway, and I don't doubt that's very much by your design, that by continually moving the target, you'd have me feel my way through them rather than rely strictly on seeing, or any trusted means of thinking. Struggling with these newer pictures now, I feel acclimated to their fugue state, if no more able to decode their diversion tactics: they strike me as being blatantly retarded in a consciously agile way.

The sun set pink behind the ridgeline tonight at about nine o'clock, later than I'm accustomed, but still what must be early to your Northern summer's eye. I'd spent too many hours fishing the afternoon and evening through, and had to hurry to gut all the trout before the light disappeared, and bears would start coming around. Their silver bellies resisted the knife the way balloons slip when you squeeze them, but once you sank the point, they unzipped with one motion of the wrist. It's definitive, a fact of rare clarity, to have a shiny flashing life in your hand one moment, and only just meat the next.

I've come here because I want to feel as close as possible both to the severity of this freezing night and the ambiguity of trying to recount it with anything like a semblance of meaning. What is this perverse language you're creating? I saw you here earlier today, standing in a clearing next to a National Forest Service sign (moronically marked 'Wilderness', in that 1950s *Yogi The Bear* cartoon font), holding a plastic shopping bag. I'm lying out alone tonight under a Milky Way so bright that it makes any thought of fixing my own relation to it instantaneously useless. I can't quite track whether you're immersed in the same sense of longing; whether you're intent upon exploding the figuration of that fever dream, or spinning a new one from salvaged cast-offs.

*If black and white blend, soften, and unite  
A thousand ways, are there no black and white?*

Out in the desert a few nights ago, trying to make the same picture under completely different conditions, I was continually dive-bombed by bats. They never touched me, just swooped in very close and fluttered around my head, so fast and erratic it was hard to distinguish them from what looked like shadows, a flickering veil. I presume they were only after the mosquitoes that had in fact been after me. Dark protecting angels, as you called them.

Almost dawn now. I'll pack out in a few days, and join you back in the smoking cities.

## *Letter from Hillary Raphael*

i keep walking through the snow. a deer darts by and one lies silently, its neck twisted into a dead painless arc. were it the same deer, before & after, a mortality make-over show, i might cry, a mascara-melted tear dragging soot down one freckled cheek. instead, i walk into a blonde wood church-house, the wooden sole of my shoes makes a new dragging sound on the painted-white floor boards.

once i saw a green ice cream sizzling on dry ice, another time, an octopus-on-a-stick reflected in a puddle. the many girls sliding by in printed tees and synthetic furs / boys in epaulettes and metallic clogs. an anonymity so severe, it's intimate, you glimpse someone behind a partition behind a swinging steel door.

i pull my collar up around my jaw and strengthen my resolve to wait for you. kinetic billboards and wireless access points between us. where are you? i send you a text message: YOU'RE SO LIMITLESS TO ME. an all-night supermarket specializing in fontina and regional sparklings. anti-cancer foods, scented hand soaps, an empty foto booth.

you render all the world into pretty little girls. (except the pretty little girls, who become colts and soldiers in your lens).

### **really excellent ice cream flavors**

strawberry shortcake (on a stick)

(in cups) peanut butter & jelly, honey sesame, cherry blossom, cassata siciliana, basil

(in cones) chocolate orange, hydrangea, pistachio halvah, yogurt nutella

### **locations of great sleeps**

the sleeping cabin on the night train between laos and thailand

my grandmother's terrace

the terracotta kitchen floor in roma

the sleeping mats outside the baths in pusan

the scary s&m love hotel in nishi-azabu

the borrowed courtyard house in the 7th arrondissement

the basement in haifa

on the couch in front of the a/c

an empty economy class all the way across the ocean

your blanket

i was alone in a rooftop bath in reykjavik on a black and soundless night, and the nearest person i could see was a stranger through several layers of glass panes who was totally absorbed in lifting weights.

**electronic bird calls to guide the blind, an early autumn, snow caked on eyelashes, a steel thermos of coffee. in my dreams, it's always this way: wooden steeples, clear rivers, flared nostrils, unvarnished finger nails, clinging leaves, monogrammed objects, collapsed cabins, steam rising, hands groping, boys and girls, fields, huge rocks, bells and rushing water.**