



Thinking with One's Feet

By Juli Carson

We think we think with our brains; personally, I think with my feet. That's the only way I really come into contact with anything solid. I do occasionally think with my forehead, when I bang into something. But I've seen enough electroencephalograms to know there's not the slightest trace of thought in the brain.

– Jacques Lacan

As a means of entering *Between the Blinds*, I'll begin with three *mises en scène*:

In 1975, before a group of MIT philosophers, linguists and mathematicians gathered to hear him speak, Lacan responded to a question from Noam Chomsky on the subject of thought. He said simply: *I think with my feet*. With that single utterance a scandal erupted. Everyone assumed Lacan wanted to convert Americans to another "obscurantist plague."¹ For this group of intellectuals – trained on logical positivism – it was just *unthinkable* that he was speaking metaphorically. And yet, Lacan was right. We do think with our feet. In phenomenological terms, our ability to distinguish figure from ground is the primordial condition through which *we find ourselves* in thought. Such is the spatial scheme behind Lacan's famous Mirror Stage, that moment when a fledgling infant manages to pull its body upright, gaze into a mirror and instantaneously grasp the fact of his or her discrete physical presence among objects in the world. From there begins the subject's initiation into language and the stage is set for cognitive thought. Should the subject subsequently lose his or her sense of figure in relation to ground, the result would be the disorienting feeling of falling outside of language. Hence the operation of *thinking* with one's feet.

In 1981, when Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* debuted, structuralists devoted to his early analytic model dismissed the book as merely a "story of a boy and his mother," a return to what Marxists called "privatization."² But the theoretical groundwork for *Camera Lucida* had already been laid by Barthes in his earlier essay "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers," where he argued that the analytic study of a given object must simultaneously include the critic's subjective construction in the scene of his analysis. Fast forward to *Camera Lucida*. Barthes argued



that to *know* photography's essence the critic must *step* into the space between critical distance and complicit proximity. Simply put, he must know the photograph through the sensorial effect it produces on him. Barthes thus decided to look only at those photographs that "pricked" him in a way he couldn't explain with analytic language. From there he analyzed the "essence" of a given photograph through a first-person narrative of this "pricking" effect, which included reminiscences about his mother's recent death. As a result, many skeptics tossed *Camera Lucida* into the dustbin of melancholic memoirs – until they discovered the "Science" of the text in what Barthes called the *punctum*: that temporal paradox underlying all photographs in their condition of being simultaneously here (in our hands) and there (in history). Like Lacan before him, Barthes' intellectual legitimacy was a question of what constituted good Science, whereby "Science" is code for the negation of subjectivity, and the subjectivity of science is conveniently ignored.

Describing the genesis of his current project, Kelly Barrie recalls: "The piece began with a chance event, both profound and humorous to me. I came across a photograph of *The Lonely Tree of Ténéré*, a thorny acacia standing alone in the vast, hostile expanse of the Sahara Desert. I discovered that in 1973 this tree met an improbable end when a Libyan truck driver drove into it even though there were no other trees within 250 miles. The tree perished from the collision. I tried to size up the tree by walking around it in my mind, imagining the sand radiating between my toes under the wiry silhouettes of the branches overhead. I did this while pacing back and forth in the studio, holding the image in my hand. Because I had isolated the tree from its background and reprinted it on a transparent sheet, I could simultaneously see my studio while studying the image. There was a 10 ft. roll of black seamless hanging on the wall from a previous shoot, about four feet of which had curled out onto the floor. I gazed past the transparent tree image to my feet below, positioned on the black seamless amidst a bunch of other dusty footprints. The floor, which belonged to my feet, then became the background to the transparent vertical image I held in my hand. I pulled more of the seamless down to cover the floor, scattered the seamless with glo-powder, and began to replicate the image, held in my hand, onto the floor below with my feet. The condition of replicating the image thus occurred between the vertical and horizontal focal points or planes."

Like Barthes before him, Barrie contemplates the photographic image by putting himself *into* the picture, for the glo-powder beneath Barrie's



feet echoes the sand of the Sahara Desert that once covered the acacia's roots. His feet move through the powder/sand as an image of the tree surfaces on black seamless laying on the floor of his studio, a canvas baring the mark of time's passage. The tiny cat paw prints, stray bugs and natural light itself (which enters between the blinds of his study and activates the glo-powder) are all collaborators in the final image. Barrie then re-photographs the horizontal image in a grid of 50 sections, mindful to shoot in low light so that the glo-powder's stored illumination can be released. However, since the powder's glow is barely perceptible to the human eye, even in low light, Barrie further manipulates the "stitched"-together image on the computer so that the invisible luminescence becomes visible as a *re-presentation*. At last the final image of the since-fallen tree, produced between the horizontal and vertical planes, returns to its proper figure/ground glory by way of its repositioned status on the gallery wall.

And yet, even before Barrie *literally* stepped into the picture, he was already there. For the year of the tree's death – as if by chance – was the year of Barrie's birth, 1973, a year in which a range of events occurred that still reverberate today. Because the tree fell and thereby became pure "ground" the same year Barrie was born, he could have no actual consciousness of the moment of its falling. Still, the seemingly unrelated global events surrounding the event – from aesthetics to politics – are ones that Barrie would later inherit as the "figure" marking his generation. 1973. The US engagement in Vietnam ends. The Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* repeals state bans on abortions. The Watergate scandal unfolds. The World Trade Center in NYC opens. A US-backed military junta overturns Chile's democratically-elected government. The Energy Crisis begins. The APA removes homosexuality from its DSM-II. The conceptual artist Robert Smithson dies. And a tree that stood in the Sahara Desert for millennia falls. But if 1973 is the year of Barrie's birth, it more broadly marks the moment of a generation's cultural birth – one born in the 40-year span *between* the 60s (a decade that we are currently working through) and 2008. For Barrie's generation then, the 70s is a heterogeneous moment of total historical experience, but not one of cognitive perception. Much like the glo-powder in Barrie's studio, the events of the 70s would only come "to light" through subsequent

Left: Tree of Ténéré, Circa 1970s
Center: Artist in his studio, 2008
Right: Kelly Barrie, *Tree of Ténéré*, Digital C-print, 84 x 74 inches, 2008

reflection and representation, a clear case of the collapse between Barthes' "then" and "now".

Given that photography is a trusted medium of historical representation, it's interesting to consider this question of temporal collapse, metaphorically, through the lens of an actual camera *lucida*. Patented in 1807 by William Hyde Wollaston, the camera *lucida* is a mechanical device that projects onto a drawing surface the optical superimposition of the object being viewed. This means that the artist sees both the scene and drawing surface simultaneously, as in a photographic double exposure. What stands vertically before the subject appears horizontally beneath his or her gaze. The camera obscura, on the other hand, enacts a very different operation. As Jonathon Crary describes it: "It's been known for at least two thousand years that when light passes through a small hole into a dark, enclosed interior, an inverted image will appear on the wall opposite the hole."³ Henceforth the camera obscura became the double metaphoric referent of photography and the positivist human eye, and stood "...as a model, in both rationalist and empiricist thought, of how observation leads to [absolute] truthful inferences about the world."⁴ For contemporary artists interested in aesthetics and historical consciousness, the world seems divided between realists who view history through the model of the camera obscura and non-realists who view it through the camera *lucida*.

Moreover, for a group of artists born between the culture of the 60s and today, the *lucida* model of photographic time is apt because it metaphorically enacts an allegorical collapse between what was then and what is now. In Lacanian terms, the camera *lucida*'s horizontal axis stands for a past "ground" upon which history is played out, though we can't see it when we're in it; while its vertical axis stands for a contemporary "figure" of a given historical event about which we can *think* because we are no longer living it. This poetic deferral of the moment describes the work of Barrie's fellow artists – Dorit Margreiter, Florian Pumhösl, Mathias Poledna, Sharon Hayes, Ken Gonzales-Day, Andrea Geyer – whose "history-based" projects can be thought of as Conceptualism *after* Lacan. Intervening in the contemporary cultural landscape, one in which historical consciousness is either fading away or being reconstructed as myth in the hands of political pundits and governmental figures, these artists "document" our desirous *relation* to a given historical and aesthetic event. In their hands we can no more return to the event than we can readily dismiss it. This isn't because the artists don't know their history. Nor is it because they are sentimental romantics. Rather, they reject out of hand any empirical, didactic attempt to *grasp* an historical event in the space of aesthetic experience. Instead, they induce a *crisis* of historical consciousness based upon the disorienting recognition of how memory paradoxically operates upon our psyches as being at once "there" and "not there."

In 1973 a lonely tree falls in the Sahara. Known for centuries as a "living lighthouse" for travelers, it is the last landmark for the Azalai people leaving Agadez for Bilma or returning again across a barren inhospitable piece of land. Is this a singular event that enters our historical consciousness through the discrete hole of dialectical representation? Or does our recollection of the event initiate a palimpsest of memories we must struggle through to find our historical footing? Stepping *into* the space of historical memory, a

swirl of events collide; caught in a dance between figure/ground-figure/ground, I pull myself up to look in the mirror of historical reflection and realize the image I see is both true and not true. Paradoxically, my real self is lived in the moment of history's unfolding, located in the fictional direction of an image that is endlessly inflected by – and related to – other images of the past. Though it's hard to maintain my footing because I'm so *close* to all this history – a feeling of critical distance follows. For a moment, I am skeptical of a mass media that tries to define for me the meaning of every historical event the moment it happens. For a second, I establish a figure to my ground until this figure collapses. In a heartbeat, I fall back into my mediated identity and I must negotiate the operation all over again.

In 2008 a stage is set. The morning light streams through a wall of vertical blinds into the artist's studio, charging the glo-powder on a darkened dance floor. The artist enters. He walks, runs, jumps, slides, does a heel spin, sweeps with his right foot, drags his left foot back to center, snake-walks off the canvas... and begins again. The event of the fallen tree lies behind him, while the event that is taking place in his own studio still lies ahead. Though the studio event is happening all around him, he can't yet picture it. Later, in the final act, when the trace of a lonely tree hangs on a gallery wall, the event of the picture's making lies behind the viewer, while the meaning of the act of looking at the image – an event in itself – still lies ahead...

- 1 Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, (New York: Columbia Press, 1997), p. 379.
- 2 Juli Carson, *Exile of the Imaginary: Politics / Aesthetics / Love*, (Köln: Walter König Press, 2007), p. 16.
- 3 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 27.
- 4 Crary, p. 29.

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