



UNFOLD  
JOHN DI STEFANO

## *The Elliptical Return*

In the ineffable act of looking at a family photograph, what is it that we seek? Looking at an old photograph, we turn progressively more inward, scrutinizing it in search of particular references, for hidden meanings. We gaze at photographs of one’s own childhood, of family members, of the house we once inhabited, of the things that surrounded us, all with a concomitant sense of familiarity and strangeness. The cosmology of a family that once coexisted, and seemed everlasting, is now demise. Its transience astounds us. Photography is an elegiac act, and photographs, observes Susan Sontag, “state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction”.<sup>1</sup>

A photograph of John Di Stefano as a two year old child at the airport facing the blinding sun is one of the opening shots of his autobiographical essay film *You Are Here*<sup>2</sup> (and the closing image of this book, *Unfold*).

It is one of a sequence of stills that strikes a reference (and dedication) to Chris Marker’s film *La Jetée* (1962). Here the child stands alone facing the camera; his feet are caught in his father’s long shadow, the photographer. He wears a faint, ordinary smile. Oblivious to this intimate filial moment, a line of strangers behind him lean on the railing looking out at the arrival and departure of planes. The right side of the photograph dissolves into the white flair of overexposed light and evocatively mirrors this faded memory, creating a ghostlike image that confers pathos to this scene. The fragility and bearing of an ordinary moment like this takes on significance only later in life. Di Stefano’s voiceover in the film states that “nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments. Later on they claim remembrance when they show their scars.”<sup>3</sup>

Around old photographs, other memories come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, in an attempt to give sense and order under the intentionality of the discursive thought that imposes its logic. Searching for memories and meanings behind the historical traces of his family photographs and home videos, John Di Stefano’s historical record of his family and their migrant condition serves as his mode of inquiry and for a critical reflection on the shifting notions of home and belonging at present. This process of visual evocation, a voluntary act of remembrance, in search of epiphanies, is for the artist a way of attaining knowledge, a journey of self-discovery and affirmation. The title *Unfold* refers to Deleuze’s concept of the ‘fold’ which is Di Stefano’s theoretical framework of examining the production of new kinds of subjectivity by ‘folding’ the world ‘into’ the self, and where multiple varieties of modalities of ‘folds’ coexist — from the fold of our material selves, our bodies, to the folding of time, or of memory.

The point of departure and the point of arrival are established; Di Stefano is both the subject and object of inquiry. Yet in the realm of one’s memory and imaginary, there are infinite possibilities. Different stories, different memories can be told around a single photograph. Images themselves can develop their implicit potentialities; the stories they carry for themselves are kaleidoscopic, a repertoire of what is possible for a single individual, and strikingly different for each member of the family portrayed in the photograph. Avant-garde literature and cinema of the 1960s examined and experimented with new forms of subjectivation and fictional narratives that challenged the assumptions we bring to both narrative fiction and reality itself, offering new

forms where time and space were fragmented, and memory and imagination interchangeable. Lawrence Durrell’s *The Alexandria Quartet*, Alain Renais’ *Last Year at Marienbad*—based on a novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet—, and Renais’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour*—written by Marguerite Duras, are some examples that come to my mind.

Di Stefano incisively searches for the photographic image that strikes him as charged with meaning, for those random juxtapositions of diverse spatial and temporal elements, that even whose initial meanings he cannot formulate in discursive or conceptual ways, evoke an interior process of involuntary associations. What draws us to one particular photograph with awe and fascination is often unknown to us. Victor Burgin refers to this by recalling Roland Barthes’ sense of being struck by a homology between the cacophony of the bar and his involuntary thoughts, “where the phenomena of everyday life form an amalgamated field of broadly isomorphic endogenous and exogenous impressions”.<sup>4</sup> External stimuli, noises, bits of conversations and internal thoughts form a unitary field that leave a residue of images and other non-visual traces, auditory, tactile, olfactory, enactive or kinesthetic. In addition to what Barthes refers to as the ‘already read’ and ‘already seen’, “personal memories and fantasies will provide the narrative kernels and principles of organization of any more or less coherent structures that emerge within this field”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, what we ‘remember’ in looking at photographs derives from (and fuses with) external sources, stories that were told along side them. Burgin recognizes that the telling of a memory betrays it, as there is something private in a memory that requires it to remain untold in order not to be misrepresented. That which has been recorded in a photograph is subject to be remembered in a synthesis of family recollections narrated around the photograph, along with our own more idiosyncratic field of internal thoughts, desires, projections and images, visual and otherwise. Memories are selective, and we remember those that conform to our narrative and personal identity.

The still photograph is the one recorded instant in the continuum of time that has been registered for posterity to be looked at, to be shared, to memorialize one’s own life. There is an implicit arbitrariness; a fraction of a second dramatically changes the expression of the poser and might encapsulate and reveal a very different mood. In one of *You Are Here*’s central scenes the artist, as a five year old child, strikes an effeminate pose that alludes to, and predates his gay sexual orientation. The original sequence of ten seconds has been stretched to ninety seconds by a slow motion technique that dissects the moving image into stills, a reversed device to Marker’s *La Jettée*. The fleetingness of this gesture is magnified by the break down into its manifold of stills, one that could have been missed by a single still. This incident that would have passed unnoticed to the relatives gathering in the backyard of the artist’s home is, for Di Stefano, the Proustian Madeleine, that which triggers and is the source of a constellation of memories that makes up the narrative of his life.

Taking photographs of the family bear the sense of home and belonging. Home is more resonant when it is in jeopardy, when it is in a condition to disappear. The imperative to belong is most significant for an immigrant family, and even more for an Italian Catholic one where family ties are so fundamental. Yet the utopic image of the family gathered for a photograph, emblematic of this sense of home and belonging and which the family album memorializes and engenders, is one inexorably doomed to perish. We take pictures to take hold of (the memory of) the moment when we congregate, to record what ineludibly will disappear. A family group gathers for the picture and then dismantles and disperses to resume their activities; some are no longer here, have grown, aged, died, married, had children, moved away and scarcely seen anymore. What was once *status quo*, today is lost, and thus photographs also bear impermanence, disappearance and death. Di Stefano notes that disappearance can evoke death of family members but can also signify a refusal to appear definitively and singularly.<sup>6</sup>

In our time we have experienced how the extended family has progressively been reduced to the nuclear family, and today has taken alternative forms of more personal ‘familial’ ties, reflecting our current secular times, individualism and greater mobility. As Sontag notes, “As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family’s photograph album is generally about the extended family—and, often, is all that remains of it”.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, the family home where one grew up may no longer exist or might have changed, refuting its physical photographic reference. “Like the dead relatives and friends preserved in the family album, whose presence in photographs exorcises some of the anxiety and remorse prompted by their disappearance, so the photograph of neighborhoods now torn down, rural places disfigured and made barren, supply our pocket relation to the past.”<sup>8</sup> Di Stefano’s ancestral home in Italy was destroyed during WWII and rebuilt by his grandparents during the 1970s, joining the fate of a construction boom that left behind only solemn memories of the familial homes kept in their photographs. The artist’s home of his childhood, in Montreal, was also barely saved from being torn down by the construction of a motorway that cut through their neighborhood, causing the displacement of many other immigrant Italian families.

The physical breach created by the motorway —a symbolic open void— was often a favorite spot and appears prominently as the backdrop to his family pictures. That the photographs incorporate the motorway, rationalized possibly as a sign of progress, may serve to exorcise the traumatic memories of displacement among the immigrant community. Sontag notes, “As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure. [...] People robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers, at home and abroad”.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Return Project*, Di Stefano examines the role of still and moving images in the construction of narratives of belonging within the family (nuclear and extended), and within our cultural milieu, social class and sexual orientation. The poses of people, a particular piece of clothing, the floral pattern of the curtains, the model of a car (his father was a panel beater), a piece of furniture, a favorite toy, the gap in the room between a father and a child, or the way a grandmother proudly holds her first grandson, all reveal aspects of one’s character, of filial relations, as well as a set of values and social conventions. What matters is capturing the extraordinary and happy moments for future remembrance, to memorialize and cherish, and to share with those family members and friends that could not be there: the first steps of a child, family reunions and celebrations, vacations, the communion day of the only son. These photos construct a portrait that chronicles the family. They were taken by the photographer with an unconscious but tacit set of values, taste and social codes that represent who they were. What Di Stefano looks at is a world that belonged to his parents, the first generation for which still cameras and super-8 film were readily available, and which offered them the opportunity to make their own records of their lives. Today digital cameras, and even more ubiquitous means of recording such as mobile phones, offer a more casual and less revered

## UNFOLD JOHN DI STEFANO

relation to the photographic record, and can easily be shared by email, facebook and the like. The photographic print has rapidly become obsolete and fetished. We revere the natural signs of the inexorable passage of time and of the many times these photos were passed around different hands — the faded colors and stains, torn edges and the folded corners. What does it mean to a person (an artist, a filmmaker) today inundated by a flow of images to look at those that are essential to his biography?

*Unfold* gathers images of Di Stefano as a child and teenager

with his family leaving or arriving at the airport in a state of flux, between their split ‘home(s)’, proudly posing in front of their houses in Montreal and in the ancestral village in Italy where the family often visited. Notions of identity and belonging become articulated through mobility. His parents’ generation struggled with the old monolithic sense of home and were torn between two countries. Rather, Di Stefano suggests the possibility of multiple trajectories of being and becoming, which may represent a more relevant way of embodying a sense of home and belonging today, perhaps now best understood as a sense of being between places. Or perhaps “being at home”, writes Di Stefano, “may have more to do with how people get along with each other –how they understand and are understood by others, as opposed to being in an actual place– so that feeling included and accounted for becomes a means of defining a sense of belonging, providing a means of (re) orientation.”<sup>10</sup> His fascinating indeterminacy might have clashed with his family’s strong Italian traditions and ties, and yet his displacement mirrors the recurrent displacements of his parents and grandparents’ generations as immigrants. If Di Stefano’s family have experienced the dislocation of moving to Canada from Italy, his displacement is greater –nomadic in comparison, as his personal trajectory comprises his ancestral home in Italy, his native Canada where he grew up and the several cities around the world where he has lived —a (re)orientation also conditioned by being an artist and an academic, and because of his sexual orientation.

Di Stefano has examined the issue of translation as an embodiment of this state of ‘betweenness’ to shed some light onto the complexities

and articulations of ideas of ‘home’ and displacement.<sup>11</sup> Translation serves thus as a useful analogy in discussing the characterized multi-positionality of the multilingual and displaced subject, and one that is based on difference and changing and hybridizing identities, which are not essentialist. In translation, there is a space of commensurability, an interstitial zone of displacement that shapes space out of its very deterritorialization. Walter Benjamin speaks of the *process* of translation rather than the *product* of translation. He understands it as a *reciprocating* relationship, a relational system and one that must consider difference, because it is through difference that languages relate. This idea involves an ontology of becoming, not of fixity or stasis of being and it is this position that might perhaps offer another context from which to understand Di Stefano’s project.

*Mercedes Vicente, 2011*

- Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London, UK: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 70.
- You Are Here* (2009), 62 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank (Chicago) www.vdb.org
- This voiceover text in Di Stefano’s film is appropriated from the first narration in Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*.
- Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (Reaktion Books Ltd: London, UK, 2004), p.15.
- Ibid.*, p.15.
- Di Stefano, “Moving Images of Home”, in Art Journal (College Art Association: New York, 2002) Vol. 61, no.4, p. 39
- Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 9.
- Ibid.*, p. 16.
- Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- Di Stefano, “Moving Images of Home”, p. 38.
- Di Stefano’s doctoral thesis, “Moving Images of Home” (2010) includes a chapter on expanded notions of translation as a means of unpacking the complexities of transnational identity.

*Mercedes Vicente is Curator of Contemporary Art at the Govett-Brewster Gallery (New Plymouth, New Zealand)*

*Published in conjunction with the exhibition The Return at Enjoy Gallery (Wellington, New Zealand) February 23 – March 19, 2011*